YESTERDAY WE WERE GIRLS

by

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ABSTRACT

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Yesterday We Were Girls is a body of work which includes photographs selected from family albums and current images I create based in and around my childhood and adolescent memories. The photographs are accompanied by porcelain recreations of precious girlhood treasures, handwritten poetic prose, and an installation which also includes found furniture and a large open book form. Focused on my lived experience of the tension between intimacy and distance, acceptance and rejection, as well as the hidden and that which is laid bare, this body of work is an exploration of identity, female life cycles, family history, and mother – daughter relationships.

YESTERDAY WE WERE GIRLS

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF PLATES

Too deep to see

A tree dies long before you see it fall.

Infected cells steadily divide,
breeding quiet death in all directions.
For years, the damage slowly seeps
threading from ring to ring to ring.

Long afterwards, it rises.
Subtle filaments seeking the sun
stretching towards the surface, blooming,
breaking anything in their way.

Once you see the rot, raw, exposed, and aching still
it's too late, the scent of decay already in the wind.

INTRODUCTION

The phrase "growing up" belies the painful struggle inherent in living through the actual process. Psychologist Carol Gilligan discovered that "girls use images of violent rupture, death, and drowning in describing the transition between childhood and adolescence."[1] The progression to adulthood is often difficult, but it is an especially punishing experience for girls. My adolescence took place within the context of a strict Mennonite community and was further complicated by a family history of stigmatized and concealed mental illness. My own struggles with depression and anxiety, along with leaving the faith traditions of my family, during adolescence have continued to affect me well into adulthood. As a photographer, I explore my own past, the lost innocence of girlhood, and the ramifications of this loss.

My thesis work, *Yesterday We Were Girls* includes photographs selected from family albums and current images I create based in my childhood memories. The family photographs

[1] Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 221.

reduce multiple perspectives into a single, fixed narrative which reinforces patriarchal values. Repeated retelling of the accompanying stories, often mythic in proportion, have shaped both the relationships within my family and the identities of the individual members. The recent photographs of myself, my female relatives, and our domestic environments add my perspective on my own history. In this intimate body of work, I alter the photographs by adding and removing visual and written information—fragmenting, tearing, and sewing back together as a means to reveal the disjointed sensations and selectivity of memory.

In order to rewrite my own history after leaving the faith tradition of my family, the recent photos are accompanied by collected pieces of my past in the form of collage and porcelain recreations of precious girlhood treasures. The visual pieces serve as prompts for poetic prose which I handwrite on the surface of the objects, collaged pieces, and the walls of the gallery. Specifically focusing on mother-daughter relationships and ancestral female bonds, this body of work invites reexamination of the cheerful veneer depicted in traditional images of girls, families, and domestic life. Simultaneously, it articulates a fracturing of self, the pressure to conform, and the compromises which often occur during female adolescence.

A haiku

I am two people
and I am okay with that.
At least, I'm trying.

Not a haiku

I am two people and I'm okay
with that. At least,

I am trying to be.

HISTORY AND CONTEXT

In order to understand the art historical context in which my work resides, it is first necessary to understand the psychological harm inflicted on women by dualist thinking which lies at the heart of Western thought. Art historian Lynda Nead addressed the consequences of strict dualism as applied to depictions of the female body in her book *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity, and Sexuality*. Nead posits that the female nude is not merely an artistic subject, but that it is *the* artistic subject. Adam and Eve, the original dualist subjects of Western philosophy, set the stage for value oppositions including evil vs. good and death vs. life.[2] Many of the depictions of female bodies, nude or otherwise, are centered around the male ideal of submissive femininity and frame the female body as a site for the unknown, the sinister, and the amoral.

Paintings associating women with death have so long been central to the Western art historical canon that the ideas they embody have become naturalized. During the Middle Ages, Christianity supplanted pagan and polytheistic mythologies and incorporated morality into the

[2] Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity, and Sexuality,* (London: Routledge, 1992): 18.

trope which became known as *death and the maiden*.[3] In two paintings by the German painter Hans Baldung, completed in 1510 and 1517 respectively, the complex relationship between the feminine, morality, and death is made evident. In Baldung's *Three Ages of Woman and Death* (fig. 1.1) the same woman as a girl, a maiden, and an old woman are confronted by death in the form of a wizened skeleton. Death grasps a diaphanous cloth which wraps around the maiden's waist suggesting that he will take her first. Both her older and younger selves seem aware of Death and are distressed by his intentions. However, Baldung has portrayed the maiden as unaware as she gazes fixedly into a hand mirror. In *Death and the Maiden*, alternately titled *Death and Lust,* (fig. 1.2) painted just seven years later, Baldung makes Lust aware of her impending demise. In this image she pleads with Death, again skeletal and decaying, to spare her. In both paintings Lust and/or the maiden will be taken by Death. Her beauty is punishable, and her vanity blinds her to the danger she poses to herself and to the men who desire her by linking them to death.

Figure 1.1. Hans Baldung, *Three Ages of the Woman and Death*, 1510, oil on linden wood, 48 x 32.5 cm
Figure 1.2. Hans Baldung, *Death and the Maiden,* 1515, tempura on lime, 30.3 x 14.7 cm

[3] Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic* (New York: Routledge, 1992): 67.

While the relationship between women, death, and morality has been present throughout art history, the way in which the topic is addressed in painting has shifted over time. Morality lessons were central to depictions of women and death during the Middle Ages, but it was not until the early 19th century that the dead bodies of young women came to be regarded as "the most poetical topic in the world."[4] Edgar Allan Poe included this sentiment in his influential book, *The Philosophy of Composition* and it would go on to inform the work of many visual artists.[5]

One such group of artists, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, took Poe's famous words to heart. The most favored subject of the group was the tragic young heroine either dead or about to die.[6] In the paintings that made them famous John Everett Millais, Dante Gabriel Rosetti, and the other members of the Brotherhood represented female subjects as "pale, passive, sickly, sexually objectified, broken, bereft, dying, dead – or a combination thereof."[7] During the heyday of the Brotherhood (1848-1854), society was changing rapidly and traditional patriarchal values which had dominated in the Victorian era were under stress. The "independent and strong-willed New Woman"[8] threatened the central role of woman in the home as caretaker and moral compass of the family.[9] These colliding cultural currents have made the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood a popular topic of study among art historians.

Until recently, the Brotherhood has been shown in a positive light as a group of innovative and talented artists. But in 1984 the thought surrounding the Pre-Raphaelites shifted with the publication of Deborah Cherry and Griselda Pollock's article, "Women as Sign in Pre-Raphaelite Literature: A Study of the Representation of Elizabeth Siddall." The co-authors, both

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[4] Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body*, 59.
[5] Emily J. Orlando, "'That I May Not Faint, or Die, or Swoon': Reviving Pre-Raphaelite Women," *Women's Studies* 38, no. 6 (September 2009): 611.
[6] Tama Lea Engelking, "Renee Vivien and the Ladies of the Lake," *Nineteenth-Century French Studies 30*, no. 3&4 (Spring-Summer 2002): 363.
[7] Orlando, "'That I May Not Faint," 617.
[8] Engelking, "Renee Vivien," 363-364.
[9] Engelking, "Renee Vivien," 363-364.

art historians, took on the task of deconstructing the literature surrounding the Brotherhood's unofficial female member, Elizabeth Siddall. Siddall was in her own right a talented artist and poet, but the historical record of her life has reduced her role to that of muse to the Brotherhood and especially to her husband Rosetti.[10] By examining primary source texts including letters, journals, sketches, and finished paintings, Cherry and Pollock make the case that,

> "Knowledge is related to and enmeshed in the workings of power. The production of truth is linked to the systems of power operative in society which produce and maintain regimes of truth. 'Truths' circulated about female artists and femininity are produced for, and maintain, simultaneously produced 'truths' about male artists and masculinity."[11]

Highlighting the way in which the Pre-Raphaelites controlled the historical image of Elizabeth Siddall, Cherry and Pollock point out how 'Siddal'—the altered spelling of her name preferred by Rosetti which has supplanted the original spelling—is constructed as a figure only in relation to her male counterparts.[12] Cherry and Pollock's work, like many other feminist art historical writings of this time period, began the work of examining art history not as unbiased and factual but rather, as mitigated, constructed, and a living thing to be investigated and questioned.

While the efforts of feminist scholars have been vital in unveiling these insidious associations throughout history, their work can hardly be expected to reverse centuries of damaging imagery. The broadening of perspectives has only cemented the necessity of intersectional deconstruction of art historical imagery associating women with overarching concepts, specifically death. Across the history of images, white women have been depicted as fragile, dead, and dying while women of color have been portrayed as the antithesis to desirable white femininity. Acknowledging this has not undone the cumulative psychological effects these images have on women.

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[10] Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body*, 170.
[11] Deborah Cherry and Griselda Pollock, "Woman as sign in Pre-Raphaelite Literature: A Study of the Representation of Elizabeth Siddall," *Art History* 7, no. 2 (June 1984): 212.
[12] Ibid, 207.

Scholars have begun to think critically about the specific effects of this association on young women in particular. Women are particularly vulnerable to cultural, psychological, and physical violence during adolescence. In 1990 psychologist Carol Gilligan and her colleagues conducted field research with adolescent girls at the Emma Willard School in New York State. Gilligan theorized that women's development cannot be studied and diagnosed by the same criteria as men's development. Through her extensive work, she noted that women's developmental sequence looked like "a response to crisis, and the crisis seemed to be adolescence."[13] Gilligan writes,

> Perhaps adolescence is an especially critical time in women's development because it poses a problem of connection that is not easily resolved. As the river of a girl's life flows into the sea of Western culture, she is in danger of drowning or disappearing. To take on the problem of appearance, which is the problem of her development, and to connect her life with history on a cultural scale, she must enter – and by entering disrupt – a tradition in which "human" has for the most part meant male. Thus a struggle often breaks out in girls' lives at the edge of adolescence, and the fate of this struggle becomes key to girls' development and to Western civilization.[14]

Gilligan's pioneering field work makes clear the fact that young women have internalized the messages contained within images of dead and dying young women. In her examination of the topic, renowned author and performance artist Magda Romanska pointed back to Ophelia as the original tortured adolescent female.[15] In her 2005 essay, "Ontology and Eroticism: Two Bodies of Ophelia," Romanska argues that over time the repeated portrayals of Ophelia as mentally fragile and/or a "glamorized corpse"[16] have gradually established the idea of the self-destructive female consciousness. "Represented as irrationally killing herself, she becomes a symptom and symbol of the "natural law" of female self-driven self-destruction. She is the embodiment of the male death-drive, his nemesis, and the dark side of his psyche."[17] Romanska finds it small wonder that

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[13] Carol Gilligan and Nona P. Lyons, and Trudy J. Hanmer, ed., *Making Connections: The Relational Worlds of Adolescent Girls at Emma Willard School* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990), 9.
[14] Ibid, 4.
[15] Magda Romanska, "Ontology and Eroticism: Two Bodies of Ophelia." *Women's Studies* 34, no. 6 (September 2005): 485–513.
[16] Ibid, 486.
[17] Romanska, "Ontology and Eroticism," 501.

contemporary image makers, including advertisers, continue to paint the same picture of the adolescent woman as a "silent and suicidal question mark." [18]

Also in 2005, film theorist Felicity Coleman theorized female adolescence not as a state of being but as a state of change, variation, and of becoming.[19] Focusing specifically on the way that female adolescent suicide is posited as solution in contemporary film, she discusses Sofia Coppola's film interpretation of *The Virgin Suicides.* Describing the film, Coleman notes, "The girls' movement towards and within those passages [of adolescence] are stilled, made dysfunctional, and their only lucid movements are the ones towards death, the suicide of becoming-woman." Coleman's work points to the dangerous way that female adolescence is proffered as an alternative to the self-sacrifice required of young women to proceed into adulthood—as the choice to conform or to abdicate altogether. In this light, an adolescent female suicide becomes preservative, protecting youthful freedom.

Contemporary advertisers and fashion image makers have seized on the mystique surrounding the poetical death. Through ad campaigns styled after Ophelia's and other suicides and slogans like "be caught dead in it" advertisers continue to naturalize the young dead female bodies as a site of visual pleasure (see fig. 2). Image culture has had a profound effect on the way we view the death of young female subjects. Repeated exposure to the beautiful death of young women has prepared adolescent girls to die either literally or metaphorically. The struggle between conforming to societally approved gender roles or the forever girlhood of an early death leaves little to be desired. Images of dead and dying female bodies have become ubiquitous in popular culture despite effort to deconstruct the sinister message they carry. As a result, adolescence has become a harrowing ordeal that few women survive unscathed.

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[18] Ibid, 487.
[19] Felicity Colman, "Hit Me Harder: The Transversality of Becoming-Adolescent." *Women: A Cultural Review* 16, no. 3 (2005): 362-363.

Figure 2. Photographed by Charles Howells and designed by DDB Advertising*, Be Caught Dead in It,* Superette High Fashion, November 2009

Artists in Response

Female artists throughout history have fought to depict themselves through their own eyes rather than be defined by cultural ideas of what they should be. This struggle is particularly evident in the body focused and biographical work of second wave feminist artists. The 1960's were a decade of upheaval not only within the United States but worldwide. An uncertain political landscape as well as the rising threats of nuclear warfare and ecological collapse contributed to a generation of young adults who felt betrayed by their government and were determined to rewrite the future according to their own beliefs and values with little regard for the status quo. Artists found themselves at the center of political movements as well as artistic movements dedicated to pushing boundaries and pioneering new modes of thinking and creating.

During these uncertain times, the emergence of video art presented a unique opportunity for female artists. Offering a form of visual expression and exploration free of the male

dominated history associated with traditional media such as painting and sculpture, video beckoned to female artists emboldened by the rebellion in the air to begin the project of self-authorship and reclaiming their own representation. Feminist artists of the 1960's and 70's seized the unique opportunities afforded to them by video art and created work exploring their own identities.

At its inception, video art was considered a tool for activism, so it is no surprise that a few years later the women's movement adopted video as a vehicle for feminist ideas. The community and exuberance of the women's movement gave birth to feminist film and video as well as motivating its vast body of work.[20] In 1972, a milestone year for the women's movement marked by both the passing of the Equal Rights Amendment and Title IX of the Education Amendments, the first New York Women's Video festival was held, confirming the increasing reach of both feminism and video art as well as firmly enmeshing their respective histories.[21]

In his comprehensive text, *A History of Video Art*, video artist and writer Chris Meigh-Andrews characterizes the dual attraction of video art for feminist artists:

> Women artists' use of video and other media practices was not simply because of the medium's freedom from male-dominated aesthetic codes, but also because women and other disenfranchised groups denied the right to represent themselves and their subjective experience found video and time-based media could provide a method of representing subjectivity and transforming a sense of self-hood from previously fixed notions of race, sexual orientation, gender and class which had been imposed by the dominant culture.[22]

As Meigh-Andrews makes clear, video presented as a medium of untapped potential in which women could explore their need for self-representation and self-authorship.[23]

An emphasis on biography characterized by structural simplicity, intimacy, and candor typified these early video works. The burgeoning medium allowed women to begin experiencing and defining themselves as subjects rather than objects in a medium with no established history of

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[20] Alexandra Juhasz, ed., *Women of Vision Histories in Feminist Film and Video* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001): 25.
[21] Melinda Barlow, "Editor's Note on 'Dossier on Women and Video: Histories and Practices,'" *Camera Obscura*, no. 54 (Dec. 2003): 1-2.
[22] Chris Meigh-Andrews, *A History of Video Art* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014): 238.
[23] Barlow, "Editor's Note," 2.

female as muse and male as creator. This increasing agency empowered female practitioners to move from their fixed place in front of the camera to an active role both in front of the lens and behind it, guiding and controlling every aspect of the way they represented themselves.[24]

Joan Jonas is a particularly influential early feminist video artist. She began her work as a sculptor but was influenced early on by happenings orchestrated by Robert Rauschenberg and others which sparked in her a desire to perform her own sculptural work.[25] In whatever form Jonas' work takes, she layers and merges symbolic visuals and evocative image fragments, creating nonlinear narratives through sculpture and performance and capturing this combination with single channel video.[26] Describing her process she says, "I have been making a kind of sculpture all along. In dealing with the three-dimensional space of the stage, there is sometimes a sculptural object that represents the text. It's a three-dimensional construction, and only exists in the moment. I do consider my work partly conceptual; the sculpture doesn't have to exist after the moment it is created."[27]

In her early video pieces such as *Vertical Roll* and *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy,* both made in 1972*,* Jonas explores her body and constructs of femininity.[28] In *Vertical Roll,* Jonas bangs a metal spoon against the screen creating a relentless beat that becomes oppressive after only a few strikes but continues throughout the entire piece at various levels of volume. Mirroring the sound, a rolling black band continually divides the screen horizontally creating visual confusion. [29] Jonas performs repetitive tasks associated with femininity such as applying mascara and slowly explores her body with close up shots of her hands, feet, thighs, and torso before she

[24] Melinda Barlow, "Feminism 101: The New York Women's Video Festival, 1972-1980," *Camera Obscura*, 54 (Dec. 2003): 2-4.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Joan Simon, "Imagist," *Art in America* 98, no. 10 (Nov. 2010): 159.
[27] Simon, "Imagist," 164.
[28] Meigh-Andrews, *A History of Video Art*, 109-110.
[29] Deborah Garwood, "The Early Show: Video from 1969-1979." *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 28, no. 3 (Sept. 2006): 43, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4140010.

hauntingly stares straight into the lens as her face moves slowly through the final seconds of the video.[30]

In *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy,* Jonas explores the construction of femininity and self-surveillance. Performing as her alter ego Organic Honey, Jonas dons an expressionless plastic mask and examines herself in a shard of mirror while wearing an elaborate feathered headdress and humming to herself. The piece continues as Organic Honey drops coins into a large jar of water and traces common domestic objects on paper. All the while, the piece builds unease through the increasing urgency of the tasks and the intermittent punctuations of a loud electronic buzzer. Jonas transitions back to gazing into a mirror, but this time the viewer sees her unmasked face, and she is beating the mirror with a hammer, eventually shattering it. Next Organic Honey examines herself in another mirror, draws on a chalk board, and rolls a ball slowly across her face. Jonas appears as herself yet again for the final minutes of the video, first as a reflection in a small hand mirror and then staring straight into the lens with a face as blank as Organic Honey's mask before she ends the piece.[31]

Both *Vertical Roll* and *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* employ the camera as mirror, reflecting both Jonas's perception of herself and traditional perceptions of female bodies and female roles. The intimacy and candor of Jonas's early video work still resonate with artists working in the medium today.[32]

In contrast to Joan Jonas, Carolee Schneemann's work deals much more explicitly with female sexuality. While Jonas has received numerous accolades and solo exhibitions, Schneemann's work has never been the subject of rigorous scholarly effort and, in the entirety of her career, has only resulted in two sold pieces within the United States.[33] This disparity is due at

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[30] "Joan Jonas – Vertical Roll 1972," YouTube video, 19:42, "Tedoré," August 28, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jpstpzBDJ7s.
[31] Johanna Fateman, "Notes on Vamp: Johanna Fateman on Joan Jonas's Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy," *Artforum International* 53, no. 10 (June 2015): 316.
[32] Garwood, "The Early Show," 46.
[33] Juhasz, *Women of Vision*, 73.

least in part to Schneemann's unblushing and unfiltered portrayal of female sexuality which is not expressed so overtly in the work of Jonas. Schneemann's video work began as a way for her to speed up her paintings and encapsulate both time and action.[34] As she began experimenting with video, her work became more and more performance- based and video would soon become the sole focus of her art practice. Schneemann used video to explore female sexuality (her own) in its rawest form. She filmed herself naked, often dirty, and writhing, performing consciously for the camera. Her primary medium became her own body, and at the core of all her work was an insistent claim for sexual autonomy, control over her own body, and full personhood.[35]

Her first video piece, *Fuses* (1964-67), was an exploration of sexuality depicted from a female perspective. The film, featuring Schneemann as both actor and director, includes footage of Schneemann and her partner James Tenney having sex, Scheemann's cat Kitch watching, Schneemann running alone and naked across a beach, and images of nature overlaid across the other footage. Schneemann then altered the celluloid itself with painting, colored paper, and collage, emphasizing her absolute control over her own image and her authorship of video. Experimental film maker Shana MacDonald describes *Fuses,* stating, "Schneemann's filmic language opposes the spectatorial male gaze by providing a polyvalent unidentifiably gendered gaze of her and her partner. This opposition is further reinforced by the uncertainty of who or what you are viewing when watching the film." *Fuses* was the first installment of what Schneemann would later term her autobiographical trilogy of films which also included *Plumb Line* and *Kitch's Last Meal*.[36]

Schneemann's career spans the transition between isolated feminist artists working without a community of support and the period of time when female artists and activists began to join together to form the women's movement. Pioneering feminist video artists, Schneemann

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[34] Ibid, 64-69.
[35] Alexandra Juhasz, "It's about Autonomy, Stupid: Sexuality in Feminist Video." *Sexualities* 2, no. 3 (Aug. 1999): 335.
[36] Shana MacDonald, "Carolee Schneemann's Fuses as Erotic Self-Portraiture." *CineAction,* no. 71 (Winter 2007): 70.

included, were often criticism by other feminists for contributing to the objectification of women by appearing nude and or performing sexual acts within their videos.[37] Art critic Lucy Lippard summed up this fractious debate in the following words: "…a woman using her own face and body has a right to do what she will with them, but it is a subtle abyss that separates men's use of women for sexual titillation from women's use of women to expose the insult."[38] Regardless of criticism, Schneemann refused to remain invisible and fought for self-representation on her own terms.[39]

The political activism of the 1970's sparked broader support for and acceptance of works of art which critiqued sexism and patriarchy while emphasizing female self-authorship. This allowed for community among women activists and artists, creating a more supportive atmosphere in which to create video and other types of feminist art which emphasized the female body and perspective.[40]

One such artist, Janine Antoni, began her work in the late 1980's. Antoni's work lies at the intersection of sculpture, performance, and photography and focuses on the female body as its primary subject.[41] Her pieces *Gnaw, Lick and Lather*, and *Loving Care* investigate her body as a tool with which to shape materials like lard, chocolate, soap, and dye. Later in her oeuvre, the body becomes visible in the work itself. Her piece *to compose*, part of a series of polyurethane resin sculptures, depicts a skeletal leg crossed over its fully fleshed counterpart (fig. 3.1). Antoni says, "The common gesture of learned femininity, crossing one leg over another, is an act of modesty and grace. In this work the interior bone of the right leg has been embedded into the

[37] Catherine Elwes, "In Video Veritas: A Feminist Perspective on Women's Video Across Two Decades." *MAKE: The Magazine of Women's Art*, 81 (Sept/Nov 1998): 9.
[38] Lucy R. Lippard, "The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: Women's Body Art," *Art in America* 100, no. 11 (Dec. 2012): 133.
[39] Elwes, "In Video Veritas," 9.
[40] Juhasz, *Women of Vision,* 62.
[41] Robert Enright and Meeka Walsh. "The Beautiful Trap: Janine Antoni's Body Art." *Border Crossings Magazine* 29 – Performance, no. 113 (March 2010).

flesh of the left leg. The successful fusion makes it impossible to unlearn this act of femininity." [42] The work describes a sense of being trapped by cultural expectations of femininity. Another piece in which Antoni is literally trapped, *Inhabit*, explores the complexities of motherhood and domesticity (fig. 3.2). In a singular photograph, Antoni is depicted standing with her legs, hips, and the lower part of her pregnant belly inside of a dollhouse. Perhaps suspended, perhaps ascending, she remains frozen in the center of the frame, the ropes which hold her radiating out from her like the rays of the halo on a Catholic saint. While the piece remains ambiguous, it can be interpreted as a comment on domesticity and motherhood shaping female identity since Antoni is merged with a literal house and is housing her child within her body.

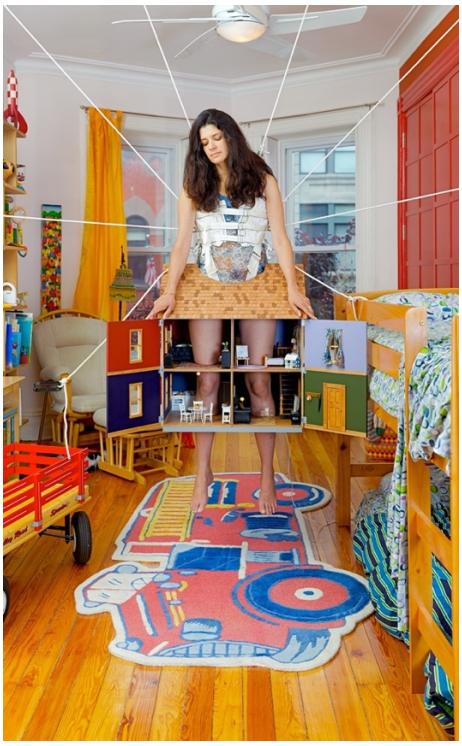

Figure 3.1. Janine Antoni, *to compose*, 2015, Polyurethane resin, 35 x 20 x 24 inches
Figure 3.2. Janine Antoni, *Inhabit*, 2009, Digital C-Print, approximately 119 x 75 x 3 inches

The work of Antoni and other feminist artists has challenged and problematized broad cultural assumptions about what it means to be female. Taking inspiration from Antoni and

[42] Janine Antoni, *to compose*, 2015, http://www.janineantoni.net/#/to-compose/.

pioneers like her, my work continues the conversation surrounding the female body and the effects of living within one in a patriarchal society. *Yesterday We Were Girls* explores the psychic effects of girlhood and adolescence as they are connected to and manifest within the body itself. Images depicting early socialization through body language and ritual—my mother holding my hands in my lap for a portrait of us in dresses of the same shade of blue, my grandmother standing alone as a young girl with bows in her hair, my cousin and I practicing for our expected weddings as flower girls in a family wedding, and my grandmother standing in a neat row with her sisters—all show girls being trained, prepared to be pretty and pliable. Contrasting this training with images of my adult body—scratched, underwater, and defiantly facing the camera—demonstrates both the difficulties of and my commitment to undoing years of socialization which keep me in line with societal expectations of femininity.

The work of video artists like Jonas and Schneemann is particularly influential in helping me understand the role of sexuality in my work. Much of the socialization of girls within conservative religious contexts revolves around purity. My adolescence took place within a Mennonite faith community which requires sexual abstinence until marriage and portrays premarital sex as a first step toward a life ending in eternal punishment in hell. Images such as a white dress with a stain and wilted flowers were used to describe the decline in value of a women no longer a virgin. Within *Yesterday We Were Girls,* stains are used to reference impurity and sexuality. Beds, blankets, and mattresses are also used to hint at the subject. The balance between what is revealed and what is concealed mirrors my persistent struggles with my own sexuality.

Photographic Context

Contemporary photographic theory informs the work included in my thesis exhibition in three main areas. Materiality, memory, and vernacular family photography shape the way I engage with photography as a medium.

The materiality of photographic images is an area of interest for artists, theorists, anthropologists, and historians alike. Some prize the image content over the physical form of photographs, while others argue that the meaning of a photograph cannot be fully realized until materiality and image content are analyzed in tandem.

This debate reaches far back into the history of photography. Roland Barthes' text *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography,* written in 1981, reignited contemporary interest in the topic of photographic materiality. Published after the death of Barthes' mother and just two months before his own death, *Camera Lucida* is the French philosopher's sole work devoted entirely to the medium of photography. Barthes vacillates between an inability to ignore the material presence of the photograph and his conviction that photography is a transparent medium in which meaning is primarily derived from image content.[43] In discussing the winter garden photo, which depicts his late mother as a young girl, Barthes begins by describing the material condition of the photo. "The photograph was very old. The corners were blunted from having been pasted into an album, the sepia print had faded, and the picture just managed to show two children standing together at the end of a little wooden bridge in a glassed-in conservatory, what was called a Winter Garden in those days."[44] While Barthes does not examine the implications of the physicality of the winter garden photo in depth, it is clear that he, perhaps unconsciously, views materiality as an important aspect of the photographic print. His writing on the subject of photographic materiality laid the groundwork for later more careful examination of the topic.

Over two decades later, Elizabeth Edwards, a photographic anthropologist, expanded on Barthes' comments on the materiality of the photographic image in an anthology entitled *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images*. In her introduction to the book, Edwards argues that photographs are inseparable from their material and presentational features and that their physical characteristics have a profound impact on the meanings that can be derived

[43] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 45-50.
[44] Ibid, 67.

from images.[45] One particularly relevant chapter, entitled "Making Meaning: Displaced Materiality in the Library and Art Museum" by art historian Glenn Willumson, holds this statement on the underestimated importance of materiality:

> Moving through time and across our cultural horizon, manifesting themselves as different movements and in diverse places, photographs are marked by their trajectory. In using this term I am thinking not of the sharp, straight lines of geometry, but of the incomplete, soft-edged outline of a vapor trail. This ephemeral trace is difficult to track in some places, more clear in others and obvious at its intersection with the object. It delineates not only the biography of the photograph but also the histories of the persons and places that house it. Until recently, scholarship had been so dazzled by the luminescence of the image that it ignored the photograph's physicality and the evanescent trail that it had left in its wake.[46]

Willumson reveals how the meandering of a photographic object throughout its history can be inferred by the physical marks of events such as creases, dents, or stains. He also highlights the recent trend in scholarship that has begun to require engagement with this materiality. Another key idea presented in Willumson's essay is the intersection between photographic history and cultural shifts, specifically the advent of digital photographic technology. Edwards brings up similar thoughts in her introduction essay, stating that regardless of the physical form an image takes, whether that is ancient paper crumbling at the edges or digital ones and zeros, that form still provides information necessary to the interpretation of a photographic image. While the consideration of the material elements of a photograph can complicate its possible meanings, Edwards suggests that these complications are necessary and that any image interpretation is incomplete that fails to consider the materiality and traces of history left upon the physical form of a photograph.[47]

Edwards and all the other contributors to *Photographs Objects Histories* brought up crucial points about the necessity of analyzing images in terms of both content and their physical forms. However, as Willumson says in the quote above, the authors in that volume were of the

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[45] Elizabeth Edwards, and Janice Hart, ed., *Photographs Objects Histories: on the materiality of images* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 1-5.
[46] Ibid, 63.
[47] Edwards, and Hart, ed., *Photographs Objects Histories*, 14-15.

opinion that the trend towards full consideration of the materiality of photographs is a recent development corresponding, either intentionally or unintentionally, with the onset of digital technologies in photography. Contrary to that idea, a 2012 essay titled "Photography's New Materiality?" by Harriet Riches, Sandra Plummer, and Duncan Wooldridge asserts that materiality has been a constant companion of the photographic image since the inception of the medium. The three authors suggest that contemporary photographic work which emphasizes the materiality of photography is not simply a reaction against the anxiety caused by technological advances in the medium but is a continuation of photography's long history of engagement with materiality.[48] As stated in the essay, "The materialist turn in contemporary practice is one that seeks to both look back to analogue processes and go beyond those limitations. Rather than being motivated by a nostalgic longing for the analogue, this work confronts the materiality inherent in photography from its earliest manifestations." Riches and her coauthors point as far back as the invention of the heliograph and the daguerreotype to assert that in its earliest days, photography was rooted in the production of physical objects.[49] They reject Bathes' original notion of photography as a transparent medium in favor of photography's ability to be self-referential and explore the properties of photographic material itself.[50] This essay makes room for photographic artists to both appreciate the accumulated materiality of older photographic images as well as to emphasize photography's inherent materiality for their own conceptual purposes.

My thesis work connects with the contemporary discourse surrounding the material nature of photography. The photographic prints included in my thesis exhibition are newly made and therefore lacking in the type of material traces addressed by Barthes, Edwards, and Willumson. However, it is by consciously emulating the language of the materiality they speak of that I am able to communicate to viewers through more than just the content of the images. In

[48] Harriet Riches, Sandra Plummer, and Duncan Woolridge, "Photography's New Materiality?", *Photoworks* 18 (Spring/Summer 2012): 31, EBSCOHost.
[49] Riches, Plummer, and Woolridge, "Photography's New Materiality?", 26.
[50] Ibid, 29.

order to denote which images are from my family's albums, I chose to print all of those photographs in the same way. Each original image is digitally scanned and then reprinted at commercially available sizes such as 4 x 6 inches or 3.5 x 2.5 inches. The material qualities of the images I created, specifically their increased clarity and larger scale, clearly mark them as a separate type outside of the family images.

Materiality is most relevant to the open book piece *A Blue Hand Reaches Towards the Moon* (fig. 4). The piece combines the images from my family albums and the new images through collage. By using similar techniques to print and or transfer both types of images they begin to appear as if they could all be from the same time. By adding signs of wear such as creases, tears, and stains, images made only months ago become synonymous with images from my childhood. There is no intent to deceive the viewer in any way but rather to emphasize objecthood and imbue the images with a sense of history. As Riches says, "the *stuff* and *matter* of the photograph" makes the viewer aware of the importance of the material qualities of the print to the way in which we have always drawn meaning from images and their materiality.[51]

Figure 4. Katie Prock, *A Blue Hand Reaches Towards the Moon*, 2021, found furniture, mixed media collage, porcelain, and pine, 66 x 209 inches

[51] Ibid.

Photography's effect on memory is another fundamental debate seemingly embedded within the medium. Contrasted with painting's ability to record visual scenes since the day of its' invention,[52] photography has been seen by some as the perfect preservation of what human memory could record if it was able to take in every detail of a scene.[53] Others question the objectivity of photographs and view their factual preservation of visual information with skepticism.

Photography's connection to memory is one of the key topics addressed by Barthes in *Camera Lucida*. For Barthes the very essence of photography is its ability to overlay past realities onto the present moment. As he looks through old family photographs, he is presented with the visual memories of people and places they contain. He also notices the associative power of photography to bring to mind objects and events that are not pictured.[54] Barthes creates his own vocabulary to deal with these two dimensions of memory, he uses the word *studium* to refer to the setting of a photograph as a whole or the cultural meanings and associations carried within the visual image. The *studium* refers to nonspecific meanings that most viewers would draw out from looking at a photograph. His second term, *punctum,* refers to the types of associative memories and meanings that spring from the emotions of a specific viewer. In his own words:

> It is by *studium* that I am interested in so many photographs, whether I receive them as political testimony or enjoy them as good historical scenes: for it is culturally (…) that I participate in the figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings, the action. The second element will break (or punctuate) the *studium*.…This second element which will disturb the *studium* I shall therefore call *punctum*; for *punctum* is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole -and also a cast of the dice. A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).[55]

It is clear from the significant time Barthes spends defining these two elements of photographic memory that he views photography as a significant influence on human memory. However, later

[52] Riches, Plummer, and Woolridge, "Photography's New Materiality?", 26.
[53] Alan Trachtenberg, "Through a Glass, Darkly: Photography and Cultural Memory," *Social Research* 75, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 118.
[54] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 64-82.
[55] Ibid, 26-27.

on in *Camera Lucida* he cautions that photographs can also block memory because they fail to depict the entirety of any given scene. Photographs can take the place of memory by claiming certainty and completeness that removes all else but what is depicted within the frame. They become as Barthes says, "counter memories" relying on sight during a fraction of a second and erasing all other forms of emotional or sense memory. Barthes refers to the photograph as violent because of this forcible exclusion of memory's other dimensions.[56]

While Barthes was clearly wary of the photograph's ability to displace or overwrite lived human experiences, he did not take into account photography's potential to shape collective memory. In her book *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory,* published in 1997, theorist Marianne Hirsch expands the concept of memory to include the way we reference photographs in constructing cultural and familial narratives. She says, "Because the photograph gives the illusion of being a simple translation of the real, a trace touched directly by the event it records, it has the effect of naturalizing cultural practices and of disguising their stereotyped and coded characteristics."[57] Hirsch includes her term *postmemory*, referring to memories and/or stories of events happening before the birth of an individual which come to play a defining role in the life of that individual, in her discussion of photographs' role within collective memory. She argues that photographs can not only come to stand as symbols of individual memory but can over time support the generation of myths and lore which eventually supersede accurate portrayals of past events.

Just two years after Hirsh published *Family Frames,* Elizabeth Edwards (mentioned above) published an essay entitled "Photographs as Objects of Memory" in which she also responds to and expands on Barthes' ideas about photographs and memory.[58] She points out that

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[56] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 91.
[57] Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 7.
[58] Elizabeth Edwards, "Photographs as Objects of Memory," in *Material Memories* ed. Marius Kwint, Christopher Breward, and Jeremy Aynsley (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1999), 221.

photographs are objects made primarily to preserve memories, and however else they may function, that purpose defines them. Edwards says:

> For photographs belong to that class of objects formed specifically to remember, rather than being objects around which remembrance accrues through contextual association … photographs express desire for memory and the act of keeping a photograph is, like other souvenirs, an act of faith in the future. They are made to hold the fleeting, to still time, to create memory.[59]

While Edwards, like Hirsch, acknowledges that photographs can be used to construct and perpetuate false memories and histories, she still views them as significant cultural objects which can yield rich meanings and aid in forming connections between the past and the present.[60]

When Edwards first published "Photographs as Objects of Memory" in 1999, digital photographic technologies were still being outstripped by the high image quality offered by their analogue counterparts. It is little wonder that Edwards only briefly touches on the ramifications of the digitization of photography.

In "The Memory of Photography," professor of photography David Bate examines photography's effect on human memory before and after digital technologies. Bate acknowledges that the invention of photography initially extended and reinforced the human capacity for memory.[61] Photographs functioned as place holders for memory before the current ubiquity of the digital image. Bate posits that the invention of the digital image and the ensuing massive digital archives have increased the overall capacity for recorded memory. However, the human mind can still only contain a fixed amount of actual remembrance.[62] This incongruity leads to a certain amount of trust being extended to photographic images despite the knowledge that dominant groups can distort images to produce cultural memories and histories which most benefit themselves. Bate continues on to discuss individual memory, returning to the Barthian idea of the

[59] Edwards, "Photographs as Objects of Memory," 222.
[60] Ibid, 223-230.
[61] David Bate, "The Memory of Photography," *Photographies* 3, no.2 Photography Archive and Memory (September 2010): 244, doi.org/10.1080/17540763.2010.499609.
[62] Ibid, 246.

s*tudium* and the *punctum*. Bate argues that the *studium* refers to conscious or voluntary memory while the *punctum* refers to the unconscious or involuntary. In this way photographs can become vehicles for human memory without suppressing it. Viewers take in the *studium* of an image voluntarily and are then pricked by their own associated memories or the *punctum*. According to Bate the conscious and unconscious memories interact in complex ways and lead to a chain of associations:

> With photographs, memory is both fixed and fluid: social and personal. There is nothing neutral here. As sites of memory, photographic images (whether digital or analogue) offer not a view on history but, as mnemic devices, are perceptual phenomena upon which a historical representation may be constructed. Social memory is interfered with by photography precisely because of its affective and subjective status.[63]

My work relies on photography's inherent connection to memory but also its subjective status. For me the images are all connected to memories of childhood, even the current photographs. Barthes' concept of the *punctum,* the personal memory or association that pricks us emotionally as we view an image, is echoed in the fragmentation of images in the large collage piece *A Blue Hand Reaches Towards the Moon*. By isolating specific parts of images or placing them in combination with discrete elements from other photographs, I direct viewer attention to the parts of the images that prick me. The piece functions as a subjective view of my own history. Emphasizing the incomplete and fragmented nature of memory itself, *A Blue Hand Reaches Towards the Moon* goes beyond the narrative possibilities of a single photographic image.

Vernacular family photos are closely connected to almost all discussions of photography and memory. Family photographs are perhaps the most commonly made type of photographic images and have become in recent years a fertile site of investigation for theorists and visual artists.[64]

Beginning with Barthes, it becomes apparent that photography and the family are deeply enmeshed. Barthes' begins *Camera Lucida* by addressing images found in books, magazines, or

[63] Bate, "The Memory of Photography,"255-256.
[64] Hirsh, *Family Frames,* 7-8.

newspapers. However, his most fruitful examination of images comes later in the book when he turns to investigating his own family photographs. Barthes states that photographs have revealed "the truth of lineage" and links the invention of photography to the ability to identify one's self within a larger familial group due to physical resemblances evident in photos of previous generations.[65] Though he does not connect the two topics directly, Barthes also brings up the idea of posing for photographs. He states that the camera creates him, meaning that the image made of him is an alternative version of himself because it fails to contain his living variety or his essence.

Later writing on the topic, such as the book *Family Frames* by Hirsch, (mentioned previously) connects Barthes' two ideas to investigate the way family photographs can create an alternative, often idealized, version of a family. Hirsch responds to Barthes directly in the introduction of the book stating,

> This is the familial story we can read in Barthes' description - the mother's death and the son's mourning, his anticipation of his own death, the multiple and mutual looks through which mother and son are constituted as subjects in relation to each other. Family is structured by desire and disappointment, love and loss. Photographs, as the only material traces of an irrecoverable past, derive their power and their important cultural role from their embeddedness in the fundamental rites of family life, the rites Barthes performs in *Camera Lucida* and buttresses with his fundamental belief in photographic reference.[66]

Hirsch goes on to discuss a variety of distinct yet interrelated concepts as well as specific works of visual and literary art. She contends that photographs, especially those taken of and by family members, play a significant role in both the transmission of *postmemory* and the formation of familial narratives. Hirsch explains her views as follows, "Photographs offer a prism through which to study the postmodern space of cultural memory composed of leftovers, debris, single items that are left to be collected and assembled in many ways, to tell a variety of stories, from a variety of often competing perspectives."[67] Hirsch uses *Family Frames* as a chapters-long

[65] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 103-105.
[66] Hirsch, *Family Frames,* 5.
[67] Ibid*,* 13.

argument for deeper and often antagonistic interrogation of vernacular family photography to reveal conventions which in turn reveal deeper truths about familial and societal structures.

Fifteen years later, in an article entitled "Photography as Family Ritual: Visual Narratives in a Finnish Family Photo Album," Mari Mäkiranta pushes Hirsch's ideas even further and examines two specific family photos and the impacts they have had on the three sisters pictured in each image. Citing Hirsch's contention that family photography's main purpose is to present and foster unity within the family, Mäkiranta makes the argument that photographs can also shape the memories, family relations, and the identities of those within the frame.[68] She confronts the way women are often represented in vernacular family photography and how that representation guides women towards specific identities and practices which are socially and societally acceptable for their gender. The three sisters depicted in the images Mäkiranta uses as examples are arranged in birth order. In an interview included in the essay, one sister recalls being instructed by their father to sit and pose for the camera despite having been fighting at the dinner table moments before.[69] Says Mäkiranta, "When taking photos of children, one attaches (parents') future expectations to them (Eedelman, 2004): One projects into the figure of a child the honor of the family, ideas of a prosperous future worth pursuing, and the continuity of the family and kin."[70] Family expectations are communicated through the process of making photographs of children, and girls especially learn what constitutes acceptable behavior. Photographs serve as the necessary proof to prop up familial lore and the image of an ideal family. Mäkiranta ends her essay with an admonishment to remain aware of the constructed nature of seemingly candid family photographs and to increase scrutiny of the way in which the construction and preservation of these photographs affects the lives of individuals, especially daughters, pictured.[71]

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[68] Mari Mäkiranta, "Photography as Family Ritual: visual narratives in a Finnish family photo album," *Visual Culture & Gender* 7 (January 2012): 37.
[69] Mäkiranta, "Photography as Family Ritual," 42-44.
[70] Ibid, 45.
[71] Ibid, 45-46.

The family photographs included in *Yesterday We Were Girls* serve as examples of the type of socialization and familial expectations that Mäkiranta speaks of. I have many memories of posing for family photographs, being praised for my appearance and composure in front of the camera. However, I look back at the images from my childhood with an undercurrent of resentment. Due to the patriarchal nature of the community in which I was raised, it is difficult to see these images in a positive light. Through the creation of this body of work, I have been confronted with the bitter and the sweet of my photographic family history. As Hirsch points out, photographs are containers for memory but also influence familial narratives and individual identities. By altering the family photographs included in the collaged piece, I disrupt the idealized familial narratives that spring to mind when viewing old family photographs and replace that version of events with a complexified portrayal of my visual history.

From The bluestone house

She wanted to love our bluestone house,
full of magic and moonlight, she sometimes said.
She suspected there were answers there
that couldn't be found anywhere else.
Things you could only know in the dark.

But sound travels easily across silver nights.
I could hear her unraveling shadows, muttering
about lost things; marbles, minutes, and memories.

...

Creeks became rivers, the ground seething with rain.
The rush carried her to places she did not know.
It took her such a long time to find her way back.

The bluestone house is long gone now;
the carpet was too old, the staircase unsafe,
the roof blown open to the stars.

PROCESS AND INFLUENCES

I am deeply troubled by the biases and internal limitations that I have absorbed while living within a patriarchal, capitalistic, and deeply flawed society. As an artist, I lay these powerful structures bare by exposing their impact at the individual level. I emphasize photography's ability to find strength in vulnerability and provoke a change that begins within myself.

Intersectional feminism shapes explorations of themes such as family history, gender roles, domesticity, girlhood, and identity. Working primarily through photography, I take inspiration from the history of image making while expanding the possibilities of the photographic object through digitally augmented printing processes. Images meet poetic prose in artist books, collages, and three-dimensional photographic objects. Through processes that allow

for chance occurrences and imperfections—cutting, layering, bleaching, dyeing, stitching, writing on—imperfect pieces are imbued with my presence.

In order to arrive at the end results described above, I move through several phases in my creative process. These phases are not tied to a specific order or rhythm and often bleed into one another. They often occur simultaneously as I layer the creation of specific pieces with the work on longer term projects. In order to best explain the way this process functioned in the creation of my thesis work; I will begin by examining each phase discretely.

Making and Finding

During the image gathering stage of my process, I am heavily influenced by constructed image makers such as photographers Cindy Sherman, Jeff Wall, Susan Worsham, and Hannah Altman. While these photographers vary greatly in their chosen subject matter, they all direct, construct, and control their photographic frame to a certain extent. Wall is known to refer to his shoots as sets and to continue shooting for months at a time to capture just one image that perfectly executes the vision he holds in his mind.[72] Sherman works in a similarly hypercontrolled environment, though in her case that mostly takes the form of a photographic studio. In all her work Sherman is experimenting with identity, trying on new and different characters, becoming new people. Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* series is a longtime favorite of mine, and I often refer to the expert way she uses body language and facial expression to embody the specific emotions she wishes to convey (see fig. 5). The work of established artists such as Wall and Sherman has played a key role in making constructed photographic imagery an influential part of the contemporary photographic conversation. Worsham and Altman continue the legacy of constructed imagery in their work.

[72] Art 21, "Vancouver," *Art21.org*, 55:16, September 23, 2016, https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s8/vancouver/.

In *Bittersweet on Bostwick Lane,* Worsham weaves together the pain of lost family members and the sweetness of memories from her childhood. With the help of her neighbor and long-term photographic subject, she recreates these memories as her photographic subject matter. By combining images sourced from memory with current self-portraiture, contemplative still lives, and scans of samples akin to those from the collection of an avid naturalist, Worsham begins to create a family album that explores death, decay, healing, and regeneration in equal measure. Altman's series' *Indoor Voices* and *Kavana* explore her relationship with her mother and to her Jewish heritage through portraiture. Both these photographers use objects, light, body language, and expression to intentionally communicate internal states through their photographs (see fig. 5-6).

Figure 5. Susan Worsham, Image from *Bittersweet on Bostwick Lane*
Figure 6. Hannah Altman, *Thanksgiving 2016* from *Indoor Voices,* a series of the artist and her mother

As I make the images for *Yesterday We Were Girls*, I borrow Jeff Wall's patience and commitment to matching the vision he holds in his mind. I follow in Cindy Sherman's footsteps through self-portraiture as a means of investigating identity. I aspire to the way Susan Worsham balances pain and beauty in photographs of seemingly mundane objects and events. I lean into Hannah Altman's explorations of heritage and relationship through portraiture. While a few of the images in the final body of work have been shot quickly with no additional staging, the majority of the photographs are constructed through the creation of photographic events or direction of the

subjects. For example, the images of a red popsicle whole and later melted onto a white mattress (see fig. 7.1-2), developed from a desire to express the way I was educated about sex. As a young girl, I was told in the form of many analogies about how I would be less valuable after having sex. The formerly beautiful rose wilted and thrown away, the wasted toothpaste squeezed out of the tube before it's time to brush your teeth, and the white dress stained and ruined are all images I hold in my mind. The white mattress which serves as the backdrop for this image could be another one of these analogies demonstrating how value diminishes after a girl or woman loses her virginity. The red color and the staining are repeated motifs throughout the series of images I've created as a reminder of the repeated messages to girls and women in conservative religious contexts about abstinence and purity.

Figure 7.1. Katie Prock, Image from *Yesterday We Were Girls*, 2020, archival pigment print, 11.5 x 18 inches
Figure 7.2. Katie Prock, Image from *Yesterday We Were Girls*, 2020, archival pigment print, 4 x 6 inches

The image collecting process for this specific project also included gathering images from my family's albums to include. Though the sequence traces my own developing identity, I included these older images alongside the current images I make. A current image of my grandmother clasping her hands is placed next to an image of her great grandmother making a similar gesture, implying that family history repeats itself. However, earlier in the sequence my mother and I, wearing similar red bathing suits, gaze out at the viewer with starkly different expressions. This series marks a decided break from the traditional images of my female relatives.

While some of the images in the sequence could be read as nostalgic it becomes clear that the series addresses the pain as well as the pleasure of memory. The images that depict decay—the burning house moquette, the tree stump, the headless stature, the dead ants in the jar, and the melted popsicle smashed onto the mattress—denote the grief and loss lurking below the surface.

Movement and Materiality

Once I had a significant archive of images, made and found, I began to think about how this body of work would inhabit a gallery space and my practice moved into a studio-based phase.

Physical movement has always been vital to my visual problem-solving abilities, so I printed multiple versions of each image on photo paper and transfer film in several different sizes. The prints allowed me to easily change the images around, cut them up, and recombine them in different configurations. This portion of my practice borrows heavily from that of collage and photomontage artists, including Hannah Höch and Claudia Ruiz Gustafson.

Höch, a German artist active for much of the twentieth century, helped established photomontage as a part of contemporary photographic practice. In order to express her views on the cultural issues of her time, Höch appropriated advertising and media imagery as the bedrock of her collage pieces. Höch's piece *Modenschau (Fashion Show)*, captures the bold style that characterizes much of her work (fig. 8). Throughout the course of her career, she engaged issues such as objectification of the female body, racism, and colonialism, paving the way for contemporary artists in terms of technique but also in terms of politically charged subject matter. Claudia Ruiz Gustafson's work follows in Höch's footsteps using photomontage but breaks from the focus on found imagery alone. Gustafson incorporates images she makes with family photographs, string, flower petals, handwritten recipes, and other bits of ephemera, creating multidimensional pieces that reflect on her Peruvian heritage (fig. 9).

Figure 8. Hannah Höch, *Modenschau (Fashion Show)*, 1925-1935, photomontage, 10 x 9 inches
Figure 9. Claudia Ruiz Gustafson, *Mi abuelo y yo (My Grandfather and I)*

Taking inspiration from artists such as Höch and Gustafson, I began to think of the images I had as raw ingredients to be put to use in crafting a final result rather than finished pieces within their own right. Using the physical prints of my images I had already created; I began to explore collage and photomontage pieces which incorporated words as well as images.

Final Forms

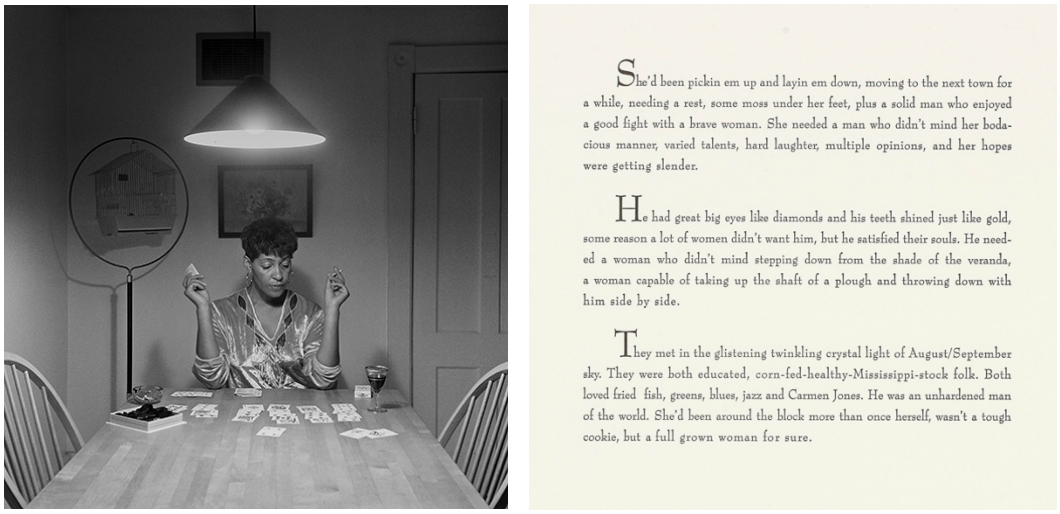
The first words to become part of my pieces were handwritten names and dates taken from scans of the back of family photographs. I found myself captivated by the handwriting, the places where mistakes had been made and later crossed out, as well as the odd notes and symbols that had meaning only for the original owner of the images. This handwritten text not only strengthened the reference to vernacular family photography but reminded the viewer of the way photographs are handled and used as receptacles for memory and personal history. However, I became dissatisfied with only the words of others to use in my pieces. In addition to carefully constructing my own images to live alongside the family photographs, I began crafting my own prose to accompany the handwritten text taken from them (see fig. 10). I have maintained a

creative writing practice in addition to my studio practice and the two began to merge in terms of subject matter. As I worked and wrote, it became my intention to make pieces in which the images and the text inform each other, creating dialogue between the separate elements.

Figure 10. Katie Prock, Detail of *A Blue Hand Reaches Towards the Moon*

During this time, I looked to the work of Carrie Mae Weems in her *Kitchen Table Series* (fig. 11.1-2). In twenty photographs and fourteen text panels Weems tells the story of a woman's daily life. Each image is made from the same perspective and includes the same kitchen table and hanging light fixture. However, the subjects of the photographs vary to include children, a male lover, and friends. The text panels tell an overarching story about relationships rather than corresponding to specific images. Weems said of the series, "… I've always thought that both the photographs and text operate quite independently, and together they form yet a third thing, something that is dynamic and complex and allows you to read something else about the photographs. I don't think of them as being necessarily dependent on one another. Rather, they

exist side by side, in tandem."[73] I hold this in my mind when creating a piece that combines text and image. Like Weems, I want the images and texts I create to be strong enough to stand on their own but even stronger when woven together to create a third, hybrid thing.



She'd been pickin em up and layin em down, moving to the next town for a while, needing a rest, some moss under her feet, plus a solid man who enjoyed a good fight with a brave woman. She needed a man who didn't mind her bodacious manner, varied talents, hard laughter, multiple opinions, and her hopes were getting slender.

He had great big eyes like diamonds and his teeth shined just like gold, some reason a lot of women didn't want him, but he satisfied their souls. He needed a woman who didn't mind stepping down from the shade of the veranda, a woman capable of taking up the shaft of a plough and throwing down with him side by side.

They met in the glistening twinkling crystal light of August/September sky. They were both educated, corn-fed-healthy-Mississippi-stock folk. Both loved fried fish, greens, blues, jazz and Carmen Jones. He was an unhardened man of the world. She'd been around the block more than once herself, wasn't a tough cookie, but a full grown woman for sure.

Figure 11.1-2. Carrie Mae Weems, Image and text sheet from *The Kitchen Table Series*, 2003

As I continued to explore the combination of images and text in the work of contemporary artists, I repeatedly encountered the book form as a common meeting place for words and photographs. The work of bookmaker Clarissa Sligh relies heavily on text and dives into her personal history as a source of subject matter. Her artist book, *What's Happening With Momma*, includes silk-screen printed photographs and unfolds to tell an autobiographical story from Sligh's own childhood. In *I Love You, I'm Leaving*, a book that also explores personal life events, photographer Matt Eich uses a single poem in combination with his primarily photographic project. Books like these confirmed for me the benefits of combining text and images but also inspired me to embrace the book form as an outlet for the body of work taking shape in my studio.

[73] Stephanie Eckardt, "Carrie Mae Weems Refelcts on Her Seminal, Enduring Kitchen Table Series," *W Magazine*, April 7, 2016, https://www.wmagazine.com/story/carrie-mae-weems-kitchen-table-series-today-interview

In this family

This is what a good girl looks like:
clean,
and rosy,
and soft.
All angelic curls and white ruffles.

This is what a good girl knows:
be seen not heard,
smile - just not too often,
say your prayers,
eat what's on your plate without complaint.

This is what a young lady looks like:
tall,
and straight,
and eager.
All the curves in all the right places.

This is what a young lady knows:
her body holds a sin
waiting to happen,
pray you are found by a man who wants to keep you close.

This is what a mother looks like:
low to the ground,
and bending sweetly over
tiny curling leaves.
She breathes life
into her children
until

it's all empty walls and empty plates
whispering the word Mother. not Mama!

This is what a mother knows:
Faith first, family second,
there is no third.
Be grateful for the pain.
Hold on strong, just not too tight,
your work isn't done until you're alone.

The goal is not to want, not to need,
to become invisible.

MOTIVATIONS AND BACKGROUND

My thesis work began as a broad exploration of vernacular family photography and ended up as a specific look at my own family history and how it has shaped my identity. The shift

in framing is partly a result of the specificity which results from intense research and partly due to my own realization of the complex feelings I still hold in relation to my own upbringing. My background, particularly my experience of adolescence within a Mennonite community, serves as a case study for larger trends coming to light through psychological research. *Yesterday We Were Girls* functions as a part of my own healing but also functions as a window into the experience of female adolescence in a patriarchal culture.

An Origin Story

I spent the first eighteen years of my life in what I thought of as a fairly normal household as part of a typical community. In actuality, I was raised within a conservative Mennonite faith community consisting almost entirely of white lower middle-class families. My grandmothers wore cape dresses and head coverings well into their adulthood, and it was only in my parents' generation that conservative dress became optional. My parents are each the first members of their families to attend college and move outside the state of Pennsylvania, though they have since returned. The insular nature of the community felt safe when I was young. I have rose colored memories of evenings spent on my grandfather's lawn, popping the heads of the biggest dandelions I have ever seen (still true) and rolling down the steepest hill (no longer true).

But as I matured, I became increasingly unsatisfied within the limits of the community. I learned that the Mennonite church did not allow queer people to become official members and that women were only not allowed to hold positions as pastors. While there have been some inclusive changes to these policies in recent years, there are still many groups and congregations holding firmly to ideas rooted in compulsory heterosexuality and patriarchal value systems. I was also confronted with irreconcilable parts of the Bible. I remember vividly the night at church where I first learned that those who have never heard of Jesus would go to hell. "**8** He will punish those who do not know god and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. **9** They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the

glory of his might."[74] I could not trust a god who punished people for disobeying rules they were unaware of. I lost my faith in god and simultaneously my faith in the foundations of my identity. Clinging to the shards of my fractured identity, I began the process of ruthlessly excising the internalized patriarchy and Mennonite views I had previously viewed as unshakeable truths. I struggled between the guilt and fear of turning away from a system that had shaped every aspect of my life, and the dizzying freedom of choice I faced as an unmoored almost adult. This massive shift in my thinking brought on my first major bout with depression and anxiety, two forces that I still struggle with today.

Soon after, I left my parents' home for the first time to pursue higher education and continued to grow away from my roots. I struggled against the life that my family history predicted for me; I focused on what I wanted instead of prioritizing marriage and starting a family. I took great pleasure in defining my own beliefs and opinion outside of the rigid scaffolding of rules I had grown up in. After over a decade outside of the Mennonite community, I have come to understand that while the particulars of my situation are certainly my own, the process of adolescence, or transitioning from a childlike view of the world to an adult understanding of its complexities, is equally painful for many people, particularly other women.

Peril and Possibilities

Turning again to the research of psychologist Carol Gilligan, female adolescence seems to be located at the beginning of resistance. Or the moment in the life of a girl where she begins to sense the disconnect between her own inner voice and the pressures of society on her behaviors, her thoughts, and her body. As "resisters," adolescent females are faced with the difficult choice between the fullness of a self-determined life and the security of belonging and conforming. Gilligan turns to the work of female novelists to express the morass of adolescence:

> In novels of education written by women, the astute and outspoken and clear-eyed resister often gets lost in a sudden disjunction or chasm as she approaches adolescence, as

[74] The Holy Bible, *New International Version*, 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9.

> if the world that she knows from experience in childhood suddenly comes to an end and divides from the world she is to enter as a young woman, a world that is governed by different rules. And the novelists' suggestion that a girl's education hinges on the strength of her knowledge and the fate of her resistance finds an echo in women poets' description of a journey to retrieve their twelve-year-old self – a journey linked with the recovery of voice and therefore with psychological survival. [75]

This struggle for psychological survival is the primary focus of another psychologist, Mary Pipher, who builds on Gilligan's work. She draws her conclusions from years of empirical research working as a counselor to adolescent girls. Pipher describes adolescence as a borderland between childhood and adulthood, a troubled terrain we all face. Pointing to Ophelia as an example of an adolescent torn between the desires of Hamlet and her father Polonius, Pipher speaks of adolescence as the time during which young girls must dissect their childhood selves, bringing into adulthood only those parts which allow them to fit into the small, cramped spaces afforded to women in patriarchal society.[76]

Female adolescence is a time of psychological peril, but it is also a time of possibility. It is the time in a girl's life when she becomes aware enough of her inner self and the outside world to choose between them. While that choice is often difficult, the results can be beautiful as well as painful.

Beyond a Single Story

It is from within this context of damaging female adolescence that women emerge, each bearing their particular scars, finding their own way of surviving in the adult world. Exploring and expressing the pain of this process through the visual and written work of *Yesterday We Were Girls* is my survival.

It is my sincere belief that through honest and vulnerable storytelling, psychological healing can be achieved. I believe this because I see it in the work of other artists and creative

[75] Gilligan *Making Connections*, 2-4.
[76] Mary Pipher and Sara Pipher Gilliam, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*, New York: Riverhead Books, 2019.

people, specifically poets and musicians. Yrsa Daley-Ward speaks of how poetry and the process of creating it saved her.[77] Expressing the depths of her emotional distress brought her back from the brink of despair, and through her words I have recognized my own pain. Speaking of the night she remembered poetry in her memoir *The Terrible*:

> You like poetry? You remember poetry?
> There is something underneath your seams; you remember
> poetry. They say write your thoughts out. So you do, and you do
> and you do. They say write a poem about discord in the family,
> if you can. Next Monday, if you can.
> Come read it,
> if you can.
> You laugh. You say, Yeah. Yeah I think I could do that.[78]

Though our circumstances are vastly different, reading her words I experience catharsis through her journey of expression and restoration.

Another expression of powerful vulnerability can be found in the work of musician Janelle Monáe. In discussion of her song *So Afraid*, Monáe explains that the song stemmed from an overwhelming sense of anxiety and pressure she faced growing up as a girl. She speaks of needing to put on armor to deal with the realities of adolescence and how that has permanently shaped her identity. However, recording the song made her feel lighter. Monáe says, "I started to realize that there was power in vulnerability. … I realized the times that I connected most and that I was encouraged and inspired most was by the vulnerabilities of others. The way that they were able to talk about their insecurities did something remarkable."[79]

This sharing of vulnerabilities brings to mind a quote from photographer Diane Arbus. She says, "…the more specific you are, the more general it'll be. You really have to face that thing. And there are certain evasions, certain nicenesses[sic] that I think you have to get out of."[80] This willingness to embrace the specific and lay bare individual struggles is necessary for the

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[77] Yrsa Daley-Ward, *The Terrible: A Storyteller's Memoir*, New York: Penguin House, 2018.
[78] Ibid, 203 [ii] lines 9-16.
[79] Hrishikesh Hirway, "Janelle Monáe 'So Afraid,'" *Song Exploder*. Podcast audio, October 15, 2018, 08:01-08:36.
[80] Diane Arbus, edited by Doon Arbus, and Israel Marvin, *Diane Arbus: An Aperture Monograph*. New York: Aperture Foundation, Inc., 1997, 2.

type of healing I seek not only for myself but for those who encounter the work in *Yesterday We Were Girls*. By exploring the unpleasant parts of my personal history, I will be able to see clearly and accept the parts of myself and my past that have brought me pain in order to rejoin the split pieces of my identity. Sharing my own specific experience of female adolescence will validate and name the emotional struggle faced by many other women.

There are mirrors on the surface of the moon

It began so strange
and subtle. I, her daughter,
Enticed by a flicker of myself
but greeted by her eyes.

My mother within my own face grown,
melded with round memories of moonrise.

I was so sure I remembered
a photograph where
I could read mysteries shimmering
just under her skin,
mother and them wearing thin,
nearly translucent. I
knew too young that people will
talk about anything but the problem.

Tides drift strange with two moons in the sky,
waning and waxing she and I
quick-collide. Decades expand and contract
rending time from reason as confessions tumble
in waves, swift and eager, reaching parallel shores.

Bending bedlam into our own curious order,
standing side by side luminescent.

For such a long time I thought our secrets
were what was keeping us alive.

There are too many nameless women in our past.
Grandmothers shrouded, shouting warnings far away.

Those matriarchs, my mother, and I
now a congregation of spirits
woven together, spreading out thin and soft,
gathering up years,
singing celestial in moonmad thrall.

RESEARCH OUTCOMES

The culmination of my research is a thesis exhibition which combines photographic prints, collage, ceramic objects, a chair, and poetic prose. Contrasting images from my family's albums with current self-portraiture and images of the women and domestic environments of my

childhood, this body of work complexifies traditional portrayals of women and domestic life. Highlighting the damage inflicted by established gender roles, the work articulates a fracturing of self, the pressure to conform, and the compromises which often occur during female adolescence. Taking inspiration from *Kindred* (fig. 12-13), a photographic installation featuring the work of Lori Vrba, Tobia Makover, Dawn Surratt, and Sal Taylor Kydd, my exhibition seeks to create a unique photographic experience. The artists featured in *Kindred* achieved this through site specific installations including photographic prints traditional and otherwise, objects, furniture, books, and handwritten wall text. Another key feature of the *Kindred* exhibition is the way in which the artists embraced negative wall space as a part of their installation. My exhibition will echo the sensibilities of *Kindred* through the combination of a variety of different photographic elements and intentional use of negative wall space.

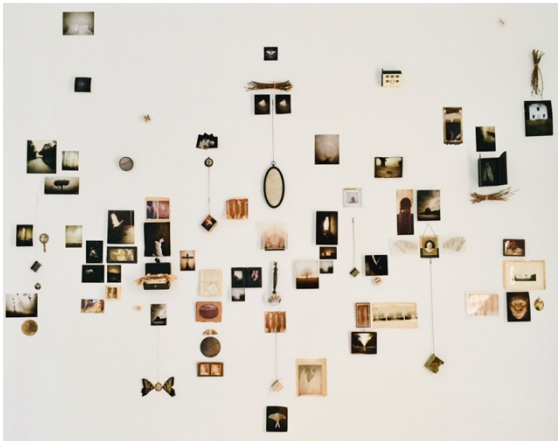

Figure 12. Dawn Surratt, Photographic installation from the *Kindred* Exhibition, 2019
Figure 13. Sal Taylor Kydd, Poetry installation from the *Kindred* Exhibition, 2019

Photographic Prints

The title of the exhibition, *Yesterday We Were Girls*, evokes a shared past, a sweet yet temporary state of being. Three generations of women shape the arc of this story. My grandmothers, Lois Jean Landis and Elizabeth Weaver Martin, my mother, Nita Joy Landis, and me.

Images taken from family albums mix with current photographs I have made of myself, my female relatives, the domestic spaces we inhabit, and symbolic objects or environments (see fig. 14). The exhibition creates a shared space in time, a pocket world, populated primarily by the four of us. We move through time not in a line but in cycles from childhood to adulthood. The photographic prints begin with childhood and pregnancy and move towards old age; however, this orderly procession is disjointed by temporal interruptions such as a current portrait of my grandmother coming before photos of both my mother and me as younger women. The impossibility of the temporal space created in this series suggests that time moves strangely here. Women of different generations experience their lives simultaneously. This is an expression of my own longing to defy linear time and return us to our girlhoods but also a manifestation of the many similarities between my adolescent experiences and those of my mother and grandmothers. We are separated by years, but the cycles of family, domestic life, and womanhood keep repeating, drawing us closer together in time.

Figure 14. Katie Prock, Photographic installation, *Yesterday We Were Girls*, 2021

Shifts in scale present the viewer with another type of impossibility. Some images seem unable to contain their human subjects within the frame. Heads and bodies are cut off, seemingly

too large to be pictured, while in other images the human element is dwarfed by its environment. A glass jar in one image takes up more room than an entire house in another (see fig. 15.1-2). This shifting visual scale echoes for the viewer the ever-shifting psychic landscape of adolescence. Arts theorist Felicity Coleman describes a similar technique at work in the films of artist Sadie Benning:

> In Sadie Benning's early experimental films made during her own adolescence she experiments with dramatic shifts and manipulations of scale. According to Laura U. Marks, this "uncanny loss of proportion in which big things slip beyond the horizon of my awareness while small events are arenas for a universe of feeling" contributes to the film's sense of reactionary sensitivity. This is connected to the experience of Lewis Carroll's Alice and seems to connect the dramatic shifts in awareness and preference that oftenbeset teenaged girls.[81]

Coleman connects Benning's films with Lewis Caroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. Alice's scale shifts are literal, brought on by eating and drinking from mysterious bottles, and shape her interactions with the environment around her. The constantly changing size of her body, akin to the physical changes brought on by adolescence, means that Alice must puzzle out new rules of engagement with each shift. Within *Yesterday We Were Girls*, the shifting scale symbolizes the fragility and easily altered nature of identity and relationships through the process of growing up.

Figure 15.1. Katie Prock, Image from *Yesterday We Were Girls*, 2020, Archival pigment print, 21 x 32 inches
Figure 15.2. Katie Prock, Image from *Yesterday We Were Girls,* 2021, Archival pigment print, 8 x 12.5 inches

[81] Colman, "Hit Me Harder," 363.

A pivotal moment in the series occurs between two images of women in red bathing suites (see fig. 16.1-2). I am one of those women and my mother Nita is the other. It was after mistaking the image of my mother for an image of myself that I created a self-portrait in a red bathing suit and began working on this series. The two photos are taken of us at around the same age and we look very similar, but our facial expressions betray our differences. My mother is sitting sedately on a rock smiling out at the photographer, my father, while I stand gazing levelly at the camera with a challenging expression. As close as I feel to the women of my family, the images also acknowledge the distance and the differences between us. Much of what they taught me to cherish—faith, childbearing, and domesticity—felt like a cage to me when I reached adolescence. I acknowledge the pain their expectations have brought me in images of broken circles, wilted flowers, and a stained mattress. Other images physically reflect the distance I feel between us, such as an image of two small white flowers floating on the surface of a pool and a portrait of my mother shot through a window. The series symbolizes the paradoxical connections between cycles and their endings, intimacy and distance, and expectation versus experience.

Figure 16.1. Karl Landis, Photo of my mother before they were married, 1982
Figure 16.2. Katie Prock, *Lesser Sun Roses (self-portrait in red bathing suit)*, 2020

Many of the prints are affixed to the wall without frames, sharing the space as a single, undisturbed canvas. However, some of the photographs are housed within shadow box frames. The unframed images are wholly revealed to the viewer while those displayed in the shadow boxes represent parts of my history and identity that I am still coming to terms with. The shadow boxes also symbolize the fate of family photographs that don't fit within the tidy presentation of the album. These images, full of flyaway hair, closed eyes, and odd facial expressions, are often tucked away in boxes or concealed inside drawers instead of displayed with their more perfect counterparts framed or enshrined within leather bound albums. The idea of the album itself as a kind of container for the idea of the ideal family comes from Martha Langford in her book *Suspended Conversations*. Langford addresses the work of artists dealing with the family album: "The framework of the amateur album serves the artist's album as a pretext (a container or a disguise) for the discourse embedded in its contents. The exegesis is thus performative: the shared story, a meta-story about the ideal album, is a starting point for re-creation."[82] If the family album is a starting point for re-creation, what more can be discovered by delving deeper into the visual history kept out of the album. By using the box or drawer which contains these rejected parts of the story as framing devices, I am symbolically revealing their contents, adding them back into my story. This same negotiation between what is hidden, or held separate, and what is revealed plays out within the photographs through hidden faces, turned backs, and partially framed subjects.

Open Book Form

In addition to the photographic prints, the exhibition includes a large-scale collage piece, *A Blue Hand Reaches Towards the Moon*. Functioning as a reconstructed book, the piece

[82] Martha Langford, *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums,* Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001, 29.

produces the sensation of experiencing every single page or spread of a book simultaneously. The effect is achieved by creating book spreads and then partially overlapping and sewing them together like a quilt instead of binding them in traditional book form. This simultaneity echoes the collapsing of time which is evident in the photographs themselves and the inability to close this book signals my desire for transparency and vulnerability. The phrase "I'm an open book" comes to mind. *A Blue Hand Reaches Towards the Moon* incorporates many of the images that are displayed on the wall but reinterprets their discrete elements; people, flowers, and houses, by removing them from their photographic context and physically combining them. This piece takes the process which is begun in the photographs one step further. By reproducing my memories of the women and domestic environments of my childhood through photography, I preserve my own account of them. Reinterpreting these same memories again in collage form reflects the malleability of memory but also highlights for the viewer my physical authorship of the version of events I'm choosing to preserve.

The techniques used to realize the open book form continue the work's engagement with revealing and concealing as well as distance and intimacy. The fragmentation of images through cutting and tearing removes identities and symbolizes the lost selves and lost innocence of adolescence. Seeking to shrink the distance I feel looking back at my own family photographs, I often isolate patterns, shapes, and fractions of images that hold sweet, if partial, sensation of memory (see fig. 17). The inclusion of the handwriting found on the back of the family images serves as a reminder of the touch of my female relatives acting as family historians and memory keepers shaping family lore through generations. While the photographs are often taken by male family members, photographic theory maintains that female members of the family are most often tasked with the preservation and maintenance of albums and written histories of the family.[83] My

[83] Langford, *Suspended Conversations,* 26-27.

hands join in the process of memory keeping through the physical act of constructing *A Blue Hand Reaches Towards the Moon,* but with revisionist intentions.

Figure 17. Katie Prock, Detail of *A Blue Hand Reaches Towards the Moon*

Hands themselves are another consistent element emphasized throughout the piece and in the prints as well. Hands can betray the emotion kept off faces and out of the eyes. Family photographs often takes place amidst complex family dynamics. However, when the camera comes out, everyone stops, smiles, and for a fraction of a second the perfect family emerges. Whether it is a hand grasping a shoulder a little too tightly or reaching in the direction of a disobedient child, these hands are often the only hint that the photograph may not represent the full and complex reality of family life. In addition to communicating otherwise unseen emotion, hands are a reminder of connections, either maintained or lost, firmly grasped or out of reach.

The final act of stitching the book spreads together represents the ties of family and tradition as well as providing me a way to connect people and events throughout time in new ways. Traditionally, arts such as sewing and embroidery were considered "women's work." This notion has long since been challenged by feminist artists who used fiber arts to create pieces

which contest ideas about femininity and the domestic.[84] It is only after their efforts to reclaim these media, formerly relegated to the private sphere and shunned in fine art circles, that I am able to use the threads in my work as an homage to the long history of female creative expression through needle and thread. Quilting and sewing are a large part of the craft traditions of my family and of broader Mennonite culture. By creating my own stitched piece, I am both continuing this legacy and redefining it in a way that feels authentic to the ways I have grown away from my family.

The long trailing threads from the piece represent the passing down of attitudes, expectations, behaviors, and beliefs. Beneath the piece and connected to it by those trailing threads is a small wooden chair. The chair serves as a reminder of how decedents are expected to carry on the legacy of a family. This chair is empty and tilted uncomfortably symbolizing the uneasiness and for me, impossibility, of remaining within the role encouraged by the culture in which I was raised.

Ceramic Objects

The third visual component of the exhibition is a series of porcelain objects. Assorted childhood trinkets–hairbows, seashells, keys, a tiny dog, a virgin Mary pendant, a tiny doll waving goodbye, a set of nesting dolls, flowers, and petals–all reproduced in bone white porcelain (fig. 18.1-2.).

Figure 18.1-2. Katie Prock, Assorted porcelain objects, 2021, dimensions varied

[84] Anna M.Fariello, and Paula Owen, *Objects and Meaning: New Perspectives on Art and Craft*, Lanham, Maryland, Toronto, and Oxford: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2005, 117-129.

The trinkets are reproductions of objects I have kept over the years. Some are from girlhood, enduring through many houses, dorm rooms, and apartments, some from adolescence, and some I only collected recently. Regardless of the amount of time these small things have been in my possession, I treasure them. Speaking of her own art objects, Dawn Surratt, a featured artist from the previously mentioned exhibition, *Kindred*, said, "The empathy of objects and their powerful ability to comfort and connect us to memory and emotion is something that resonates with each of us."[85] Each of the objects remind me of girlhood, of parts of myself that in adulthood have become equally small, precious, and fragile. Rather than display the things themselves, I offer these recreations in their blank state as vessels to hold new associations, to have new stories inscribed upon them. The white color of the porcelain, reminiscent of whitewashing and erasure, indicates a clean page. Not a loss or replacement of memory but rather acknowledgement of the chance to leave behind the dark or painful parts of each individual memory represented by the objects.

In contrast, the set of nesting dolls retains some of the darker undertones of the painful experiences of my adolescence. The dolls claim to show themselves again and again, only to reveal yet another doll within the hollow. Similarly, I have developed a many-layered identity designed to hide and protect parts of myself. This is a learned behavior shared by many members of my family, and it is only after peeling back layers of performed perfection and stubborn silence that I have begun to discover the full story of my family history, which includes mental illness, addiction, and discord. By displaying the dolls closed, I signify my ongoing inability to confront certain difficult parts of my family and my own identity.

The porcelain flowers function similarly to the flowers depicted within the photographs as symbols of youth, innocence, and purity which are quick to fade and easily damaged. The

[85] Sal Taylor Kydd, "Kindred: Lori Vrba, Tobia Makover, Dawn Surratt and Sal Taylor Kydd," *Lenscratch.com*, September 6, 2019, http://lenscratch.com/2019/09/kindred-lori-vrba-tobia-makover-dawn-surratt-and-sal-taylor-kydd/.

fragile nature of porcelain characterizes the fragility of flowers but also of the precarious nature of female adolescence. Young women are often compared to flowers or described as blooming during adolescence. However, by making these flowers out of clay they have been preserved, instead of fading and decaying with age, as popular culture would have us believe women do. These flowers endure despite their fragility.

Poetry

Poetry is a theme and a way of thinking that runs throughout the entire exhibition. In a description of poetry in Sandra Faulkner's *Poetic Inquiry: Craft, Method, and Practice*, she states, "The personal is poetry … Poetry of personal experience is vital. Poetry has the power to highlight slippery identity-negotiation processes and present more nuanced views of marginalized and stigmatized identities, to demonstrate embodied experience and to be social research and autoethnography."[86] It is with this in mind that I have included my own poetic prose within the exhibition and also engaged poetic inquiry as a research methodology which shapes the entire project.

Due to the extremely personal nature of the work in this exhibition, it has at times been difficult to sort through my own emotions regarding the work. In order to process my own adolescent experiences, I began recording my thoughts and feelings in the form of poetic prose. As each phrase joined the next, I began to understand and articulate myself in a way I had been unable to before. The additional clarity I achieved through the process of autobiographical poetry has allowed me to imbue my visual work with added dimensions of meaning. The poet John J. Guiney Yallop describes the process as similar to opening a set of nesting dolls: "For me, it's like the Matryoshka dolls; poetic inquiry goes further inside to the hidden, or waiting, treasure that the first, or second, glance does not give access to."

[86] Sandra L. Faulkner, *Poetic Inquiry: Craft, Method and Practice*. New York: Routledge, 2019, 25.

Poetic structure has also become a significant part of the choices made during installation of the work. Thinking of images as words or phrases and a sequence of images as a completed poem has helped me create an installation that shares the rhythmic qualities of poetry. The poetic pause can be visually translated to negative space between images. This plays out in the exhibition, signaling connections between images to viewers through physical proximity or contrasts between them through increased distance. Additionally, this slows down the viewing of the images, allowing time to reflect before encountering each new image or idea (see fig. 19).

Figure 19. Katie Prock, Photographic installation, *Yesterday We Were Girls,* 2019 - 2021

As an avid reader of poetry, it is my experience that many of the most arresting lines are concise and specific. This attention to detail and economy of language is echoed in the images depicting objects, flower petals, sneakers, or bugs in honey, that are used as symbols for states of mind or states of being. By associating these images with the portraiture of the series, the objects gain new meanings and associations.

Hindsight

Looking back at the process of creating my thesis exhibition, it's easy to see only the decisions and discoveries I made that pushed me toward my end goal. It's easy to get lost in the result and forget about all the distractions and difficulties I faced. However unwelcome these complications were at the time, they have proven to be some of the best lessons in the studio.

I frequently procrastinate when facing large tasks because I am unable to envision where a piece or project will end up. I struggle with fear of wasting time or pursuing ideas that do not turn into successful work. While it has been a difficult mental block to work through, I have learned that it is impossible to judge the end result from the beginning idea. During the creation of the images included in my thesis exhibition, I discovered that picking up the camera and making images even when I did not have a specific idea of what to photograph often opened up new ideas and got me thinking about my original ideas in a new way. I have learned that I find it easier to respond to something when envisioning work even if that something is a piece or an image I have created myself. When I am responding to something I have already created, I am able to view my studio work in the same light I do my writing. Instead of aiming to create a finished draft on my first attempt, I now create multiple iterations of my work in the same way I create drafts of written work.

Iterating on previous ideas can present its own set of problems in a studio setting. One of those issues for me has been an inability to identify when a piece or project is finished. While creating versions can be a helpful part of refining ideas it can also be a trap that is hard to move on from. It can be hard to recognize when you have achieved what you want to. In order to avoid spending too much time overworking my ideas, I have learned the importance of taking breaks from the studio in order to reflect on the work I have created. Taking breaks also helps me to avoid perfectionism. If I set time limits for myself in the studio, I am encouraged to work at a faster pace which keeps me open to intuition and chance occurrences. Academia can be a difficult

environment in which to allow oneself to create imperfect work. However, due to the conceptual goals of the projects I am working on, imperfections are actually a goal. I am most pleased with my work when I work quickly and intuitively and the process of my work is preserved in the finished pieces in the form of elements such as overcuts, fingerprints, and smudges of extra glue.

The perfectionism that makes it difficult for me to walk away from finished pieces also makes it difficult for me to settle on final iterations of bodies of work. Through the process of shaping the thesis into a gallery exhibition, I have learned the importance of concision. My initial vision for the show included far more elements than the prints, the collage, and the ceramic pieces. However, I discovered that the additional elements were confusing and actually obscuring the meanings I wanted my work to convey. Maintaining the clarity of work when it is joined together in a body of work requires editing and looking at the work as if for the first time.

While I have by no means learned these lessons for the last time, I have benefited greatly from learning them the first time during the process of my thesis exhibition.

A new kind of witch

Consider the idea
that there was never anything wrong with you,
that hearing invisible things isn't a "bad sign"
and that knowing where the pain lives
might help you tame it.

I wish I could always be this "incorrect" and unapologetic.
I wish anyone could see the cost,
put their hand in the empty spaces,
smell the burning on the air. Out of sight,
out of my mind.

Maybe this white-hot magic is just science
we don't understand yet.

Tapping into disobedient forces this strong
would level most anyone else.

The only way to survive is to say, out loud,
the things that are true.
Abandon the pack, it's not you who need them.
Bone and blood have never been hard enough
to hold back the multitudes I am.

This thing that is me, but not me,
plays razor-sharp mind games.
Generations of pain blazing in my gut,
thick and threatening to choke me.
Everything burning towards the surface,
ghosts of family fallen to the same, like
smoke hovering close in front of my eyes.

Always the wrong self
in the all the wrong places,
but holding on,

fighting,
refining,
waiting

for the rest
to catch up.

CONCLUSION

Upon entering the exhibition as installed in the Schmidt Center Gallery, the viewer is at first only able to see the large-scale collage piece *A Blue Hand Reaches Towards the Moon* along the back wall of the gallery. As the viewer moves further into the space, their view opens up to reveal the entire installation *Yesterday We Were Girls* which spans two walls on the left side of the gallery. Discrete yet complimentary, both the collage piece and the installation use negative space to create a fractured yet rhythmic viewing experience. The viewer is simultaneously drawn in close by intimate details and forced backwards to take in the large-scale pieces as a whole. Image fragments, patterns, and textures repeat throughout the exhibition and by progressing through the work the end begins to resemble a beginning. Guiding the viewer through the space, poetic prose handwritten on the gallery walls articulates expectations for the bodies and behaviors of the women in my family.

Poetry is a kind of magic. It takes feelings and concepts that seem beyond expression and wraps them up in a single poignant phrase. There is a line of poetry I have had in my head for a long time: Even when you tell a story about the past you are still talking about the present. I have not written the rest of the poem, and I might never be able to because that phrase feels complete within itself. Everything begins to overlap, and the beginning stays with you until the end. *Yesterday We Were Girls* is at its core an exploration of these orbits through life and time. Focused on my own experience of the tension between intimacy and distance, acceptance and rejection, as well as the hidden and that which is laid bare, this body of work tells a specific story with broad ramifications. As with poetry, by focusing on the details, you gain a deeper understanding of the whole.

PLATES

Plate 1.1 *Yesterday We Were Girls,* Installation, Schmidt Center Gallery, Florida Atlantic University, 2021

Plate 1.2 *Yesterday We Were Girls*, Installation, Schmidt Center Gallery, Florida Atlantic University, 2021

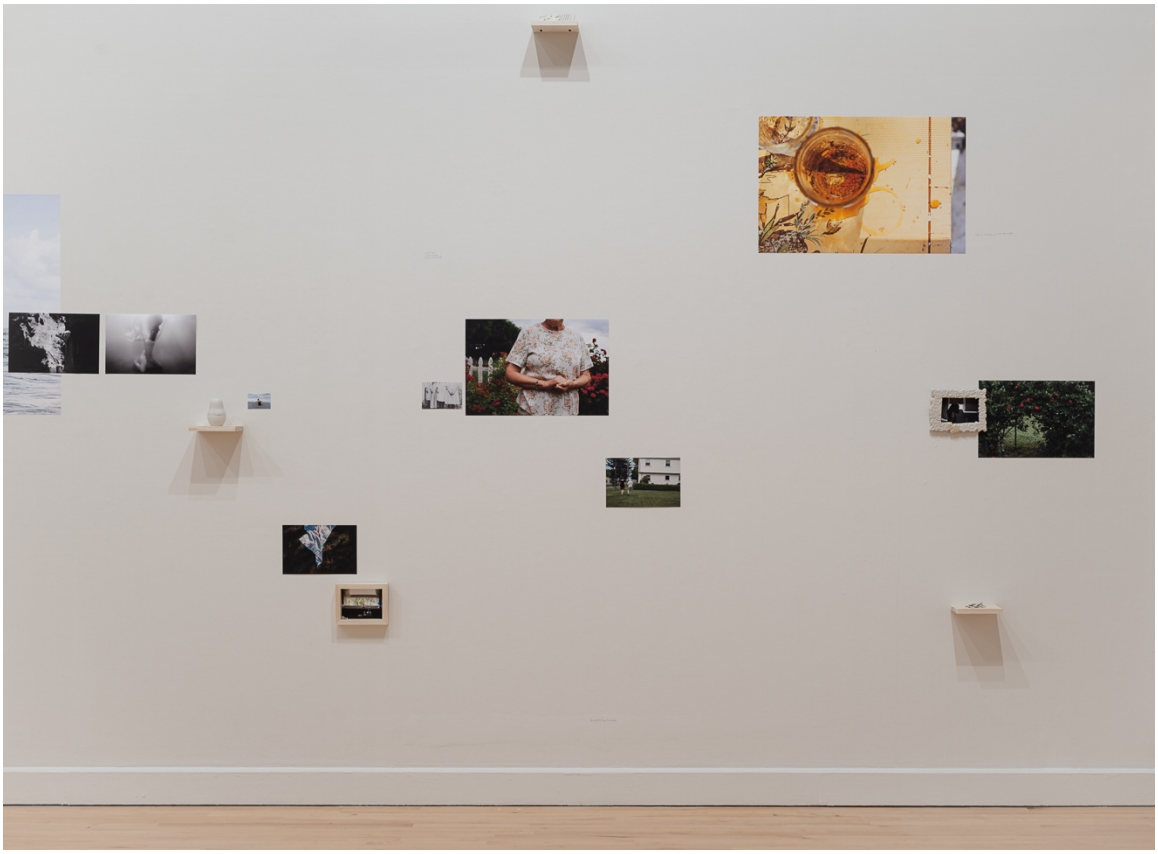

Plate 1.3 *Yesterday We Were Girls*, Installation, Schmidt Center Gallery, Florida Atlantic University, 2021

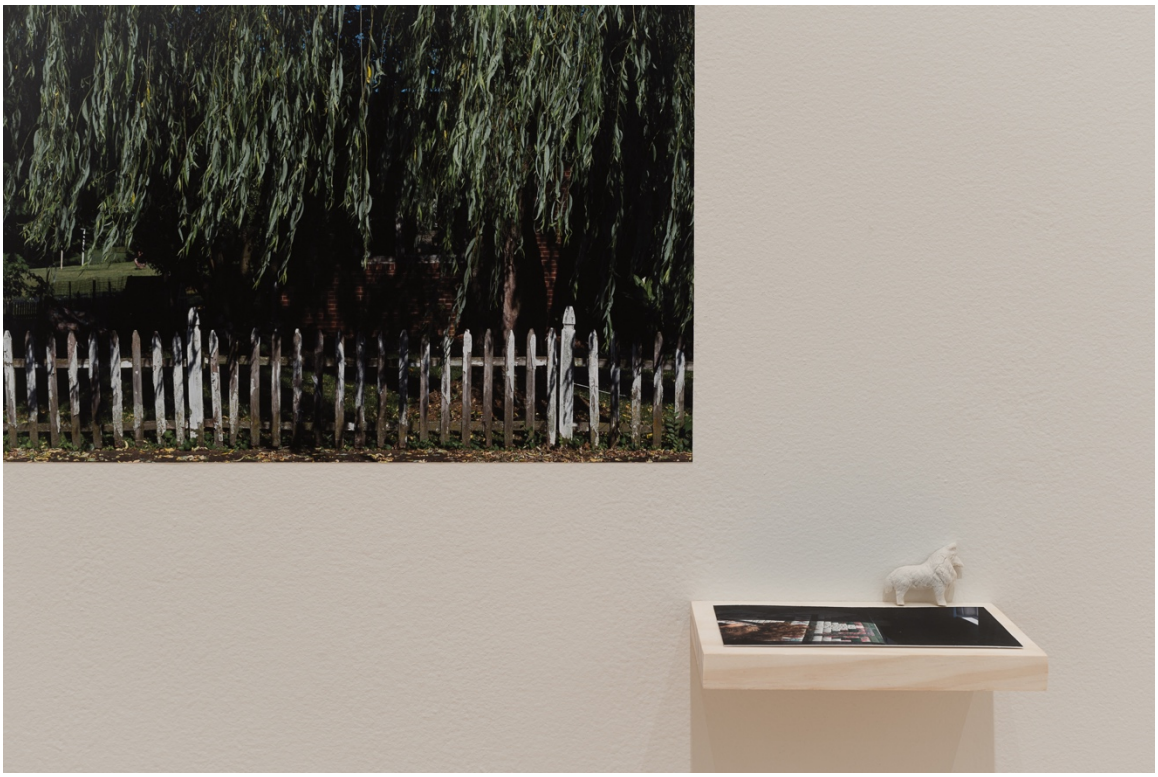

Plate 1.4 *Yesterday We Were Girls*, Installation, Schmidt Center Gallery, Florida Atlantic University, 2021

Plate 1.5 *Yesterday We Were Girls*, Installation, Schmidt Center Gallery, Florida Atlantic University, 2021

Plate 1.6 *Yesterday We Were Girls*, Installation, Schmidt Center Gallery, Florida Atlantic University, 2021

Plate 1.7 *Yesterday We Were Girls*, Installation, Schmidt Center Gallery, Florida Atlantic University, 2021

Plate 1.8 *Yesterday We Were Girls*, Installation, Schmidt Center Gallery, Florida Atlantic University, 2021

Plate 1.9 *Yesterday We Were Girls*, Installation, Schmidt Center Gallery, Florida Atlantic University, 2021

Plate 1.10 *Yesterday We Were Girls*, Installation, Schmidt Center Gallery, Florida Atlantic University, 2021

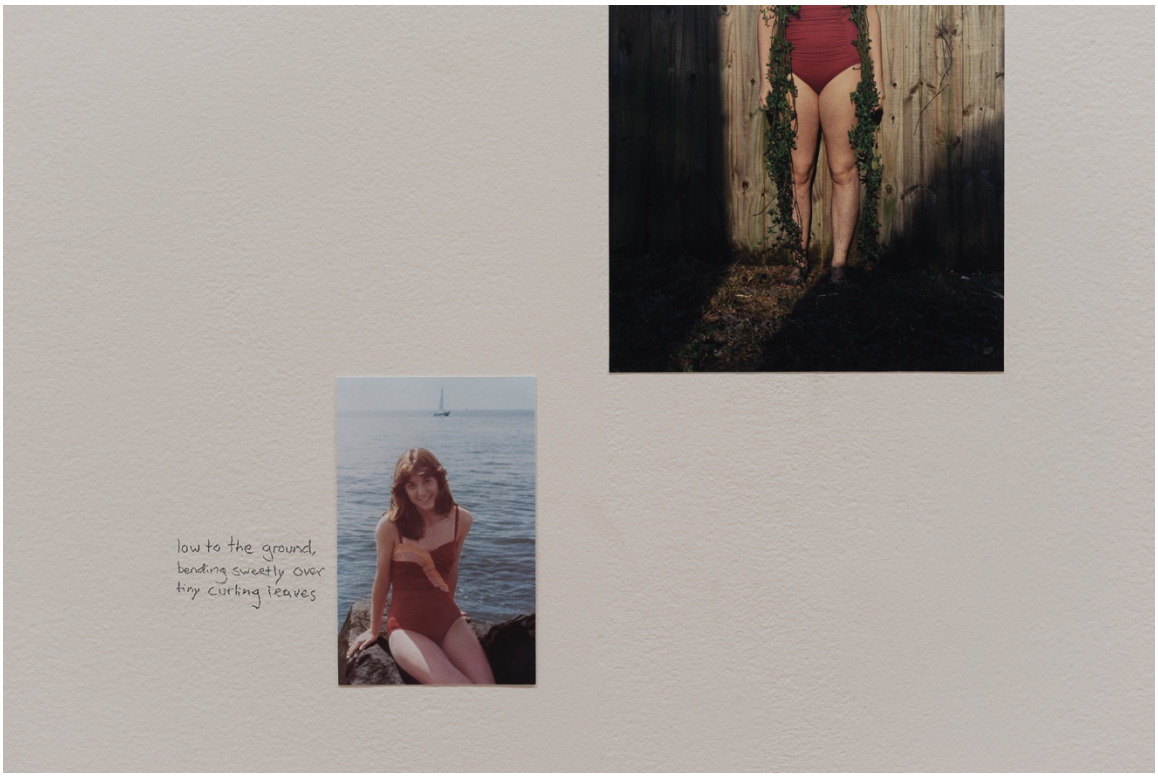

Plate 1.11 *Yesterday We Were Girls*, Installation, Schmidt Center Gallery, Florida Atlantic University, 2021

Plate 1.12 *Yesterday We Were Girls*, Installation, Schmidt Center Gallery, Florida Atlantic University, 2021

Plate 1.13 *Yesterday We Were Girls*, Installation, Schmidt Center Gallery, Florida Atlantic University, 2021

Plate 1.14 *Yesterday We Were Girls*, Installation, Schmidt Center Gallery, Florida Atlantic University, 2021

Plate 1.15 *Yesterday We Were Girls*, Installation, Schmidt Center Gallery, Florida Atlantic University, 2021

Plate 2.1 *A Blue Hand Reaches Towards the Moon*, Installation, Schmidt Center Gallery, Florida Atlantic University, 2021

Plate 2.2 *A Blue Hand Reaches Towards the Moon*, Installation, Schmidt Center Gallery, Florida Atlantic University, 2021

Plate 2.3 *A Blue Hand Reaches Towards the Moon*, Installation, Schmidt Center Gallery, Florida Atlantic University, 2021

Plate 2.4 *A Blue Hand Reaches Towards the Moon*, Installation, Schmidt Center Gallery, Florida Atlantic University, 2021

Plate 2.5 *A Blue Hand Reaches Towards the Moon*, Installation, Schmidt Center Gallery, Florida Atlantic University, 2021

Plate 2.6 *A Blue Hand Reaches Towards the Moon*, Installation, Schmidt Center Gallery, Florida Atlantic University, 2021

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