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Jennifer Rose Wolken

Missouri State University, JWolken@live.missouristate.edu

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Coping with **Burdens**





Coping with **Burdens**

Jennifer Rose Wolken

Springfield Art Museum, Springfield, Missouri
May 1, 2021 – May 23, 2021

*Special thanks to those closest to me.
You make coping with my burdens possible,
and without you this process would have been impossible.*

Missouri State University
Art & Design Department
901 South National Avenue
Springfield, Missouri 65897
417-837-2330
artanddesign@missouristate.edu
art.missouristate.edu

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COPING WITH BURDENS

Art and Design Department

Missouri State University, May 2021

Master of Fine Arts

Jennifer Rose Wolken

ABSTRACT

How to carry and cope with burdensome circumstances beyond my control is the main theme I am currently exploring in my artistic practice. I create art objects and experiences that can elicit an empathetic connection to the realities of living with burdens like grief and chronic illness, or help you to process your own relationship to a wide variety of burdens. Individual pieces explore aspects of how I or close family members cope. My practice is multi-disciplinary and the forms focus on reinterpretation of the book as a sculptural art object or artists’ book. The processes I use are overwhelmingly by hand, and craftsmanship is given attention. This way of making is important to me as a way to honor the memories and experiences that are the subject matter of my work. The materials I choose are mostly natural or reference nature as a reflection on my beliefs. Time and attention spent in my artistic practice serve as a contemplative time, helping me to process my relationship to grief and illness. This practice helps me to make deeper connections to my coping mechanisms, including a deeply held system of belief that is also in the work for viewers to discover.

KEYWORDS: coping, burden, grief, illness, sculpture, artists’ books, belief, memory, craft, materiality

COPING WITH BURDENS

By

Jennifer Rose Wolken

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Approved:

Deidre Argyle, M.F.A., Chair
Kevin Hughes, M.F.A., committee member
Jin A. Seo, M.F.A., committee member
Sarah K. Williams, M.F.A., committee member
Julie Masterson, Ph.D., Dean of the Graduate College

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Coping with **Burdens**



Book of Days, displayed curled.

Introduction

In the last few years, I have formed a new relationship with my artistic practice. During this time, I made a lot of painstakingly emotional and time-consuming art. It started with work about my grief from the loss of a loved one in death. As time went on, it became about living with chronic illness. The theme of all the work made in this period was coping with these burdens that were beyond my control. Looking at examples of art about grief and chronic illness impressed upon me that there are many different specific reasons to need coping mechanisms present in our lives. We live in a unique time in human history. This intersection of technology, population, culture, pandemic, social and political upheaval has caused a profound need for most humans to have to deal with things that they find completely overwhelming. Some people intentionally find ways to cope, attempting to incorporate this into their lives in a beneficial manner. But many others experience life on autopilot, unintentionally riding the waves of sad and frustrating circumstances without spending the time to unpack them, and then sometimes dealing with these in harmful ways. Making art has become part of an intentional process I use to deal with circumstances beyond my control in a healthy and positive way. My work reflects on my specific struggles while coping with burdens of grief, chronic illness, and more.

Through this body of work, I responded to loss and frustration. Both making and experiencing art have helped me to

process loss. I have used art to find a realistic overview of situations. I found comfort by keeping memories alive through the making of art, and by sharing my burdens with others through performing and displaying my artwork. Making art as a physical activity, a ritual of daily life has helped me to cope. Finally, I have used art to remind myself that I have hope. The artwork I have included in this document touches on all of these coping mechanisms. Some in concept, some in the making process, some in their display and distribution. In all of my work, the specific materials used add to the meaning. Memory is visceral and tactile and ties into all of our senses, not just sight. My work ties to memory through materiality and this adds layers of meaning that are not always apparent to the casual viewer without explanation.

Formally the work is based on a strong desire to explore the sculptural potential of book forms. The body of work I created during this period varies in medium and material but is centered in three-dimensional forms that echo the function or the look of a book. I am pushing the idea of what a book is formally and conceptually. The book is powerful as a physical form in the history of humanity. That richly layered history is something I draw from to build concepts into form. The parts and pieces of the book can be used to unfold narrative in time and space, and to communicate in ways that I found to be compelling for the topics I am engaging with.

Dealing with Difficult Topics While Exploring Meaning in Form

I have researched and used dozens of traditional bookbinding techniques in my work, but one I keep coming back to is the called the long stitch. The long stitch binding style was invented in the middle ages as a practical book to use for keeping track of data, designed for use as a business ledger on docks or in market places. The functionality of it was the precursor to a modern-day spiral binding, in that it opens more than flat, making it an ideal form for recording any experience of life that happened away from a desk. This meant it was quickly adopted by explorers, it is the style of book that Lewis and Clark used for their journals while exploring the western United States. Because it was designed to record data, this is the binding style I chose for a book that counts the days of my father's life. A book with pages that are three inches by three and one-quarter inches, dyed in cinnamon tea, but otherwise blank. Its cover and spine are made up only of brilliantly colored red glossy leather. The soft leather front cover is embossed with a set of numbers that form a date. The back cover is embossed with another date. On the outside of the spine is evidence of the long stitch binding technique. In this technique, the pages make up folded sections and the thread that holds them together gets sewn to the outside of the spine and is visible there. The thing that makes it clear that this is more than a common-place ledger is that the spine is almost twenty feet long. Because of the flexibility of the form it can twist and curl and pile on itself or stretch out to its full length.



Book of Days, red leather cover with embossing detail.

Content that could have been written or printed out on the pages of a book is instead visible and readable in the form itself. If you look at the dates embossed on the front and back cover, you could calculate that the time between them is just over sixty-two years. The number of pieces of paper between those two covers holds a significant part of the content of the piece. I intentionally choose to use leaves instead of pages as my counting method. A leaf is the sheet you can hold in your hand as you turn the page. There are 22,672 leaves in this book. This number is the exact number of days between those two dates on the covers. It is the number of days my Dad lived. Every twenty-four-hour day has two parts, the day and the night. The two pages of each leaf represent that part of the passing of days. In the exposed stitching on the spine, the stitches have been varied in an area at the center of those



Book of Days, center spine detail with signature in stitching.

twenty feet and there is a signature visible. Don Wolken, my Dad. The title of the piece is *Book of Days*. Other details like the color red and the smell of cinnamon pages are bits of his personality, his favorites.

It took me three months of 14-hour days with three assistants to make it. Like the medieval ledgers that inspired *Book of Days*' form it is here to count data; to help me to grasp visually and conceptually the totality of the days of my Dad's life. The assistants that helped with fabricating parts of the book were three of the people who were there for the last week of his life. The laborious processes prompted conversations about him, his illness, and his death that we might not have had otherwise. The piece also prompted conversations when I chose to do most of the sewing at the Springfield Art Museum in public



view. During that performance, I talked with friends, community acquaintances, and strangers about grief. Conversations you just don't have in passing. The presence of the art-making process between us opened all of us up to speak more freely, and more comfortably, about uncomfortable things that we were holding close.



Book of Days, being sewn by the artist at the Springfield Art Museum.

I also presented this piece at a showcase during a Book Arts Conference in New Orleans in January 2020. About halfway through the showcase, a library curator who has spent 25 years collecting Artists' Books for a very prominent east coast University Library Collection, and whom I have immense respect for, walks up, pauses with her mouth open in front of this coiled mass and then says, "That's not a book." Moments like this have motivated me, even more, to dig into what a book can be in the context of art. The definitions for a book are complicated and seem to contradict one another. The word book can be used as a noun, adjective, or verb in English. You

Facing page: *Book of Days*, stretched out to full length on display at the Springfield Art Museum, Springfield, Missouri.

can book an event or call someone’s face an open book. You can use the word to refer to things as varied as standards, law, or accounts. Which is all very interesting, but it’s the object, the noun that interests me here. In the *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, the noun has nine definitions with sixteen subcategories under those nine. Obviously, this object is an important one to us humans.

“Book (noun) 1b: a set of written, printed, or blank sheets bound together between a front and back cover.”¹

Making and displaying large sculptural pieces that have formal ties to the definition above but do not contain any text or illustrations on the pages has prompted me to do further research into the form. I want to really understand what allows an object to embody that definition of a book. One resource that correlated with my thoughts about books is from an essay by Ulises Carrion titled, *The New Art of Making Books*. In it he said,

“A book is not a case of words, nor a bag of words, nor a bearer of words. A writer, contrary to the popular opinion, does not write books. A writer writes texts. The fact, that a text is contained in a book, comes only from the dimensions of such a text...A text contained in a book ignores the fact that the book is an autonomous space-time sequence.”²

This definition touches on the fact that book forms are a technological invention separate and distinct from the text, or narrative, that is so inextricably associated with them.³ I am interested in using my sculptural work to bring attention to this distinction. This explains in part the reason I feel drawn to the book forms to visualize the passage of time in my sculptural work, as I did in *Book of Days* to help me cope with an ending of a period of time. In the next two pieces I will discuss, I found the ability to visualize time through that same form (with leaves) allowed me to put an ongoing situation in perspective.

That situation started in 1998 when at the age of nineteen with no prior history or warning, I had a grand mal seizure. Doctors assured me it shouldn’t happen again. After all, I had no personal or family history and all my tests came back, “perfectly normal”. That was a little over twenty years ago now. I would like to tell you that we found a treatment or that I miraculously stopped having them as abruptly and unexpectedly as they started. But that’s not what happened to me and it’s not what happens to most people. It turns out that most people who have seizures never know why, and I’m one of those. I have had fourteen of them so far and I will have more. I have adult-onset grand mal tonic clonic seizures. They have been as far apart from each other as five years and as close together as twenty-nine days. I have no warning that one is starting and am unconscious during them. When I first regain consciousness I have no memory, not just of the event but of anything at all. I don’t know my name or anyone else’s, the year, the season, how old I am. This gradually returns and as I have had more of them it comes back faster. It seems my brain has created pathways for quicker recovery over the years. Of course, I never regain those minutes of unconsciousness from each seizure. Instead, I have fourteen holes in my life. Fourteen times I have woken up and started over. Depending on the environment I was in during the seizure I have injuries that vary from concussion and cuts, to ripped out teeth and dislocated limbs. The injuries and the lack of warning make this condition hard to deal with in the long term. Amnesia is the hardest thing to deal with immediately after and the thing I fight with the most when I wake up.

Approaching the twentieth anniversary of the first seizure was hard for me, as it meant that I had now lived longer with seizures than without and I was feeling emotional about this milestone. Those years represent my entire adult life. I chose to cope with the anxiety and distress this anniversary brought me through the making of another sculptural book titled ...*in anticipation of a rare event*. The risk of seizure is an ever-present looming influence on how I live. It influences decisions large and small. I stopped driving because it’s too much of a risk of harm to myself or others. Pregnancy is risky for those of

us who have seizures. Even holding my newborn nephew is too much of a safety risk for him. I should not swim or be in a bathtub. I must consider my environment at all times. I can't be on a roof. I shouldn't be on a ladder. So, I shouldn't change light bulbs or smoke detector batteries or clean out my garage's full gutters. Even standing on stairs and concrete floors is a risky environment for me. For context into the realities I live with that inspired details of the artwork, ...*in anticipation of a rare event*, I am going to relate some details of my seizures that some might find disturbing in the next paragraph. I include them here because it is important that persons with disabilities feel seen in all of our existence, even the parts that are hard for others to hear. One thing I have learned by living with this condition for many years is that it's important for my mental health to feel like I don't have to hide these details. Also, no two experiences with seizures, or any health condition, are the same. I include the details of my experience in the materials of my artwork. I share details below to give you insight into those specific material choices.

Sometimes I take risks anyway and walk into environments that others think of as normal, knowing I could easily kill myself in them. Because I have no warning, I have to think about these things every day. How many places do you go regularly that have a concrete floor? Every time I do, I have to think about the aftermath of the time I flung myself backward with force from a standing position during a seizure on a concrete floor. When I regained consciousness, I was already vomiting into a bucket while someone held me up in their arms. An ostrich egg-sized lump on the back of my head and three months of severe vertigo followed. Although all the seizures I've had are categorized the same, the second seizure I had at the age of twenty-one was the most violent, it's one of the only times I have gone forward instead of backward. (Because some epileptics don't just crumple softly into the floor when they lose consciousness. They first fling themselves with all the force in their muscles in one direction or another before they start seizing.) That time I apparently slammed my face, actually my open screaming mouth, into a desk that still holds the marks from my teeth. I woke up to blood in my hair and figured out

it was from the teeth I had ripped out and broken. Despite living through more than a dozen scenes like these, I'm okay. We say this quickly and easily in everyday conversation but it's such a complicated phrase. We say it even when we are not okay. It's relative. For an epileptic, I'm okay. I woke up every time so far. I have been able to maintain a relatively normal life, but I have made choices in my adult life that many would not consider okay.

I thought back to *Book of Days* and decided to approach my struggle with this span of time in a similar artistic form. This piece, ...*in anticipation of a rare event*, is intended to be displayed

...*in anticipation of a rare event*, worn by the artist, rear view.



on my body as a symbol of the weight of twenty years of epilepsy in my life. The piece is heavy and uncomfortable when worn around the neck but it does not block all movement. You just have to be flexible about your expectations, be patient, and get creative in your problem-solving for how to continue with it as part of you. The only text of the book is displayed on the spine in the exposed stitches of the long-stitch binding. It reads: “I have dramatically altered my life in anticipation of a rare event.” The final patina was achieved through an eight-hour soak of the entire book form in an avocado dye bath. The colors and patina of the materials represent aspects of physical illness and injury associated with this condition. These choices along with the frayed strings left in the piece also represent the emotional rawness that I feel when focusing on it in thought or conversation.

...in anticipation of a rare event, displayed flat.



As I counted up the days so that I could make a book with a leaf for every day from that first seizure to the twentieth anniversary, I realized that fourteen seizures during that time made it a fairly rare event. During the days that had elapsed, less than two percent of them had included a seizure. Which is ironic for the influence it wields on me. The way the form hangs on the body could hold the connotation of beauty sash, but in some ways, disability and chronic illness must be worn as a badge of both honor and horror. I survived another day and I have the scars inside and outside to prove it. Although I originally conceived of this as a worn piece, it speaks without me under it too. There is a kind of beauty in the form and colors, but life is still beautiful with a disability or chronic illness. I think that is an important statement to make visually. The book is also worn, bruised, and damaged by the processes I put it through. Just like I am from seizures.

...in anticipation of a rare event uses bookbinding methods and still looks like a book to a large extent even though it functions as a piece of sculpture. In some of my other pieces, the formal connection to books may not be as apparent. *Waiting for the Next Occurrence* is a sculpture. Because it is made mainly of paper bound on copper wire in sequential order I would also call it a book, an artists' book. In *The Oxford Companion to the Book*, a kind of encyclopedia for all things in and around the subject of books, I found a definition for “artists' book.”

“Artists' Book: a medium of expression that creatively engages with the book, as both object and concept.”⁴

As genres of art go, the artists' book is relatively new. *The Oxford Companion to the Book* identifies them as “coming to maturity during the second half of the twentieth century.”⁵ The same resource entry contains a whole section about disputed definitions of the form. The same article that presented the above definition states two sentences later that there is an “absence of a workable and readily accepted definition.”⁶ Part literature sometimes; part functional object much of the time; part sculpture most of the time. Some artists' books are made in multiples, some in editions, others as a unique object. In gener-



...in anticipation of a rare event, worn by the artist front view.

al, I am more interested in artist's books as unique objects. As individual works of sculpture with a reference to the book in materials, process, or form.

Book of Days, ...in anticipation of a rare event, and *Waiting for the Next Occurrence*, all count time with leaves of paper. This usage of the book is unique to my work. For *Waiting for the Next Occurrence*, bound leaves are where the association with books ends. The concept of binding is much looser in this piece. The leaves are bound together in the center of the page with a rod driven through them instead of a historical sewn technique. They cannot be flipped through like the pages of the other two can be. They serve more literally the same purpose of counting days visually. In this piece, they count all the days of my life so far.

The purpose of the piece is to illustrate the interruption that the fourteen seizures, fourteen gaps, have had on my life. Like ...in anticipation of a rare event, this piece was a response to the twentieth anniversary of seizures in my life. In many ways, the making of *Waiting for the Next Occurrence* was an attempt on my part to visualize where these events fit into the larger arc of my life. To chart these occurrences laid out to correct scale

Waiting for the Next Occurrence, displayed at the Springfield Art Museum.



on the timeline of my life and see how they may have been precipitated by or caused other events in my life. In that way, the piece has given me context and perspective that has helped me to have a slightly different mindset about my relationship with Epilepsy.

Another purpose of the piece is to confront my fear of the gap. The philosopher Lacan wrote about fear of the gap as mankind's greatest motivation.⁷ For him the gap was death. For me, the unconscious time period of seizure and the ever-present reality that it could result in death without warning correlates with Lacan's basic notion of fear of the gap. The gap that results from each seizure is represented in the piece by a ceramic ring that interrupts the line of the leaves of paper. With the paper representing a timeline, each ring is positioned in the piece on the day it occurred in my life. While I don't consider

Waiting for the Next Occurrence, alternate view.



the fear of these occurrences to be my greatest motivation, coming to terms with the sporadic and unpredictable nature of them and the fact that any seizure could result in sudden death is a process I am continually working through. Making this piece helped me to think about how much I allow that fear to motivate me, and that I can choose how much it controls me. The process of making Waiting for the Next Occurrence helped me to contemplate the fact that I don't agree with Lacan that fear should be or is humanity's greatest motivation. With this ever-present risk in my life, I believe I can be an example of how we can choose our motivations and build our life around that, while still acknowledging our fears and taking proper precautions. I have not always been so forthcoming with the fact that I am an epileptic. An acquaintance who had known me for ten years found out that I have seizures. She was shocked, and said, "but you're so active. You seem so normal." While I still make choices in the details of these activities to minimize my risks during them, I live between those seizures. Not because I fear today could be my last, but because there are more important things to focus on. The people closest to me make that possible, as do my conscience efforts to not make my illness the central focus of my life. Most of the time I chose not to focus on what I can't do, but on the possibility for what I can do. Despite the ever-present risk of a seizure at any time, in the twenty-plus years since that first seizure in my parent's sunny mid-day living room, I have had over eight thousand days when I did not have a seizure. Waiting for the next Occurrence shows that those days, even though they too are tainted by this condition, are far more numerous than the days I have had a seizure.

Notes:

1. Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, Incorporated. 2015, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/book>.
2. Ulises Carrion, "The New Art of Making Books," In *Artists' Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook*, Ed. Joan Lyons (Rochester: Gibb M. Smith, Inc., Peregrine Smith Books Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1985), 31.
3. George Boudalis, *The Codex and Crafts in Late Antiquity* (New York.: Bard Grad Center, 2018), 1-16.
4. Michael F. Suarez and S.J. and H.R. Woudhuysen, ed. *The Oxford Companion to the Book* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 484.
5. Suarez, *The Oxford Companion to the Book*, 484.
6. Suarez, *The Oxford Companion to the Book*, 484.
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Why the Book is Important to My Work Formally

A large part of my practice as an artist is a fascination with the various forms that this object, the book, has taken. I was first exposed to traditional book design and binding at the age of nine. I then rediscovered it while studying graphic design professionally twenty years ago. The basis for the development of these forms to hold narrative is now something I am very interested in researching and using in my artistic practice. It is something I have spent countless hours researching and experimenting with. The body of work in this document and in fact the document itself are a direct result of that process of facination, research, and experimentation with what a book was, is and can be. Questions I have used to guide my exploration of this include: Can the form convey the narrative by its materiality, its haptic connection to the reader, without text? Did stories only become works of literature by being written down? Or was that just the newest technology to record the information by? If our cultural notion is that the book contains words, does that mean it has to? This section dives briefly into a little bit of the more formal research that has guided my art making.

The definition of the book is much larger than just the technology of written records. The physical ways we organize and absorb knowledge changes the conclusions we make from it, and what we do with it. Walter Ong, a twentieth-century historian who wrote a great deal about the transition to literate society believed that even the massive change in culture from Middle Ages to Modern Man was precipitated by a change in

the way we physically organize and absorb knowledge.⁸ Specifically, the shift from oral narrative traditions to written narratives recorded in books caused a change in the way we think. Despite my interest in other forms, the codex is the book form I reference most in my artwork, so understanding the shift in human culture that happened either for it or because of it gives me new insights into how to extend the use of that form beyond my initial understanding of it. Books are essentially a form intended to share narratives, but they are not the first nor the only way we share narratives as humans. “Habit of mind”⁹ is a reference to oral traditions of disseminating information, in other words, what came before the technology of the book. In *From Memory to Written Record*, M.T. Clanchy presents arguments that non-literate peoples of the early middle ages in Europe had a grasp of language that was more complex than most of the centuries since. Due to their oral traditions, the organization and articulation of their thoughts individually and collectively were also more complex.

New technologies in communication are often used at first to amplify old patterns of thought. Thus, early print culture in Europe initially reinforced the interaction of oral and literate strategies of the later middle ages, aiding and reinforcing the “Art of Memory”.¹⁰ The “chain of semiotic knowledge” became longer as text interacted with orality both before and after being written, creating layers of signs that encouraged allegorical thinking.¹¹ Writing as an act encourages a more linear thought pattern. However, in middle age Europe its interaction with what was still a very oral-based society encouraged and reinforced a circular thought pattern; a concept of time and storytelling based on the way knowledge is exchanged within an oral society. As we become a society obsessed with video communication this process is starting to happen in reverse. Oral performance, book forms, and edited videos are all more than just the latest means to share a narrative. The formal aspects of each presentation impact the way we process the story being told. It is an important part of my artistic practice to use these formal aspects of any book form I explore to guide the audience’s reading of my stories. To do this I must understand how that form emerged and interacted with culture. The

importance of book forms in the formation of culture gives them a complex and uniquely powerful place as an object. That power is worth using in artwork to grab the audience's attention and thoughtfulness. Because of its familiarity as a form, I can also use elements of the book to guide their visual reading of sculptural work.

As I researched the history of physical forms of books that attempted to record knowledge, thought, and narrative I found many interesting and obscure forms that did not resemble a modern codex. I wanted to know how these developed and how they can relate to understanding experience instead of just describing it. Things like the South American khipu. The recent rediscovery of the khipu was hoped to be the discovery of the beginning of their writing tradition in ancient Peruvian culture. It turned out to be a census type of ledger in all known occurrences. As I looked at traditional Peruvian stirrup spout pottery, I concluded that the stories of that culture and that time period are recorded in that form. While these stories may not be long enough to be compared with works that signaled the emergence of literature in other cultures like Gilgamesh or The Iliad, the stories presented are complex and challenge our notions of human activity and relationships.

In *Communities of Readers*, Roger Chartier scholarizes, by using historical reference, that every stroke of a letter, no matter how minute, every millimeter of margin, rag line, indentation, or kerning, impacts the meaning of the text being presented.¹² These tiny details have nothing to do with what the words say and everything to do with how they say it. I don't reference this to talk about letters specifically but to illustrate that when I use the book I am tapping into a history that accepts focus on minute details. We are all trained unconsciously to look at book forms microscopically for clues to the narrative. This is one reason I can focus on even the most minute detail of materiality and form to carry meaning when working with artists' books. In *Provoking the Artist's Book*, a scholar of English Literature who also happens to be a book artist, Anne Royston, points out the dependence of the reading of a theoretical artists' book is on the material provocations. The materiality of

the artists' book does not simply add to the narrative. It is the narrative. She describes what she views as the "key to artists' books."¹³

"Material and formal considerations embedded into materiality and form; reading as a vibrant and immersive experience; writing that develops in tandem with its medium, shaping and being shaped by it."¹⁴

Dolph Smith, a book artist for more than five decades and professor emeritus of the book arts program he helped start at Memphis College of Art, defines a successful artists' book as having narrative and anatomy along with the allowance of some acts of nature in the form.¹⁵ For him narrative does not have to be text or image, it can just as easily be expressed through function or more specifically proprioception. In an article he wrote entitled, *Working at the Reach of My Headlights*, he talks a great deal of "being aware of the void", a phrase he borrowed from the sculptor Isamu Noguchi.¹⁶ This concept is one of what happens between a work of art and a viewer out of reach of the artist. As far as objects go, artist's books are in a unique position in this sense. In *Art as Device*, Viktor Shklovsky says,

"the complex life of many people takes place entirely on the level of the unconscious,...and so, in order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel...man has been given the tool of art. By 'enstrangling' objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and 'laborious'."¹⁷

In other words, it wakes up our perceptions from the monotony of our lives. Torben Sangild in *The Aesthetics of Noise*, mentions the noise that distorts the signal as it travels from transmitter to recipient and that this distortion comes from the medium.¹⁸ Aaron Cohick summarizes the findings of Sangild and Shklovsky in relationship to artists' books by writing:

"the book arts are all about structure...in the literal sense as well as the spatial, temporal, metaphorical, and conceptual sense. Books are a series of overlap-

ping, intersecting, and interconnected spaces that the reader moves within and through. Books mirror our experience of time and the world. Books actively shape our experience of time and the world. That reflection/shaping of our experience of time is one of the most important ways that artists’ books can bring our attention to the world, and allow us to ‘look hard,’ be present in it, be present with others, regroup, and regroup.”¹⁹

Artists’ books can cause the viewer to experience the narrative in a way that is beyond language, while still mimicking the format of the familiar tenants of the book in structure. Both the conceptual and the formal complexity of the book excites me as an artist. I see boundless potential as I use it in my artwork.

Notes:

8. Walter J Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982), 37-49.

9. M.T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 192.

10. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record*, 192.

11. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record*, 192.

12. Roger Chartier, “Communities of Readers,” In *The Order of Books*. Trans. Lynda G. Chocrance (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 1-24.

13. Anne Royston, “Provoking the Artist’s Book, Part 1: Theoretical Artists’ Books/Material Argument,” *Book Art Theory (blog)*, *College Book Arts Association*, September 1, 2017, <https://www.collegebookart.org/bookarttheory/5056666>.

14. Royston, Anne, “Provoking the Artist’s Book.”

15. Dolph Smith, “Working at the Reach of My Headlights,” In *The Penland Book of Handmade Books*, ed Jane LaFerla and Veronika Alice Gunter (New York/London: Lark Books, A Division of Sterling Publishing Co., Inc, 2004), 158-166.

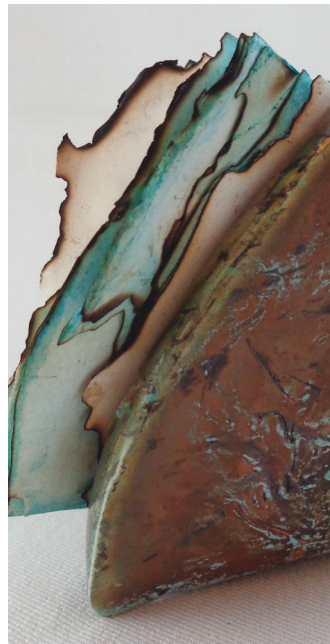
16. Smith, Dolph, “Working,” 158-166.

17. Viktor Shklovsky, “Art as Device,” In *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Normal, IL: Illinois State University, Dalkey Archive Press, 1990), 5-6.

18. Torben Sangild, “The Aesthetics of Noise” (DATANOM, 2002), <http://www.ubu.com/papers/noise.html>.

19. Aaron Cohick, “Reader Read Your Reading, Part 4,” *Book Art Theory (blog)*, *College Book Arts Association*, August 15, 2017, <https://www.collegebookart.org/bookarttheory/4924573>.

The Development of Vessel Books



Into the Fire, detail of side view.

About a year and a half after my Dad's death I was looking for ways to cope with some of the anger and angst I was holding inside. In one of the pieces I created during that time, the form became a merging of ceramic and bookbinding processes. I developed a name for this form and now call it a vessel book. As I merged the two processes it occurred to me that a book is a vessel for our thoughts, observations, and imaginings. A book holds these and can carry them through space and time, just as a ceramic vessel holds more tangible things so that we can carry them through space and time.

This piece was one of the first of a series that deals with my reaction to the mourning after my father's death. In particular, this piece references cremation. The title, *Into the Fire*, is a reference to both the cremation process that was my father's end and the creation process of this particular vessel. The vessel was raku glazed and fired. The pages are blind embossed with a free word association of my emotions about death, cremation, and mourning. This etching only became visible after the pages were soaked in an ink dye bath. The page edges are burned as an added reference to the fire that finished the creation of the vessel. This detail also serves as a further reference to the fire of cremation that is the subject of the piece. In this way, the material and techniques used to make the piece are integrally tied to the narrative it tells. Although it contains words on its pages, most viewers never need to read them.



Into the Fire, front view. In the Collection of University of Southern California at Santa Barbara Library Special Research Collection.

Instead, they read the piece as a whole through its materials and their conjunction in the piece. The processes for making the vessel and for binding it followed traditional ceramic and bookbinding techniques. Although I had no tradition to follow when figuring out how to combine the two into one form.



Into the Fire, back view.

Doing so on this piece started with the decision to drill holes in the bottom of the vessel and sew the page block directly into it. The details of making this particular piece led me to question what else was possible by merging ceramic forms with book-binding forms and processes. It also led to an exploration of where and how the narrative is included in a piece. Peruvian stirrup spout vessels became an inspiration for possible locations of narrative. The form variation present in those and the way stories are included on the more complex ones encouraged me to explore where I placed the narrative. In the vessel books that followed, I tried to explore and innovate as much as possible in how the physical forms of books and vessels relate. I also pushed the idea of how the form can contain a narrative in each of them.

In *Off Balance*, I made my first attempt to put words into the surface of the vessel. I kept pages as part of the form for conceptual reference to books. But those pages are made from a banana plant and are heavily textured while at the same time translucent. This makes them impossible to write or print any text or images on, so their purpose has transformed into a visual and historical reference to the book and its associations with narrative. The stirrup or ring from the traditional Peruvian form is also there, but I omitted a spout, also rendering this part of the form impotent to its traditional function while using it to reference the other part of the form, its attachment to the narrative. Replacing the spout where a person would receive water from the vessel with elements of pages is a reference to receiving knowledge instead of water. The piece is intentionally created to feel like it could fall over and the text carved into it reveals my feelings of my life being off-balance still over a year after my Dad's death. In another stirrup vessel book, I used all these formal elements except I made the book reference even more obscure by using literal leaves in place of pages, a reference to the leaves of a book. *Dignity Lost* is a very balanced stirrup vessel. It is grounded, if you will, in its visual weight. It contains a line of writing about dignified existence on the vessel wall. But the crumbling and haphazardly attached leaves on its stirrup portion belie the real meaning of dignity lost in terminal illness.



Off Balance



Dignity Lost, side view.

What if the text goes away completely? What if the illustrations are minimal? Can the form and materials speak for themselves? These are the questions I asked as I created a piece I later titled, *Tea Comfort*. The form is a stirrup vessel, sans the spout. Onto the stirrup, I sewed stained tea bag paper, folded and sewn into a text block of a book, attached to the stirrup ring. This piece is part of my material explorations of the combination of vessel and book but is also part of my explorations of coping and finding comfort in daily rituals of life. The only imagery on the piece is the shape of leaves on the surface of the vessel. The patina of orange and blue along with imagery of tea leaves on this vessel was accomplished by using cyanotype chemicals and photogram processes in between firings. Multiple applications and multiple firings were needed to create the end result. The incorporation of photographic processes with ceramic vessels is another way I have explored the concept of narrative as part of the form in several pieces within this particular series of vessel books.

Tea Comfort, side view.



Tea Comfort, detail. Close up of cyanotype photogram imagery on surface of.

Workman, front view.



Workman, detail of page images.

Legacy, my hand print on the outside of the vessel along with a mix of materials I regularly work with for the pages.



The creation of these stirrup book vessels encouraged me to keep pursuing this idea of book/vessel combination. Many pieces have followed that diverged from the Peruvian formal influence into other vessel forms. *Workman* is a small vessel book, small enough to be held in one or two hands, intimate to view. The patina of the vessel is from cyanotype chemicals put through a high fire kiln environment. It is perfectly round with a hollow ring thrown as the rim of the vessel and holes for binding below the ring. Tiny images, the same image over and over again was printed on the pages. These were bound to the vessel on the top of the rim. The image is a close-up black

and white portrait of my Dad dressed to work in the yard and expertly trimming a tree. It's an intimate portrait I took of a very specific moment in the life of a man who was proud of working with his hands and who made me proud to work with my hands. *Legacy* is a piece that pairs with *Workman* to speak about the things he left behind in me and how that relates to my work and my world view.

Legacy is a double-walled vessel book, a recent formal development in my work. These give more potential for pushing the page connection to the ceramic form while maintaining the function of the inner vessel. The inner and outer vessel relate to the inner and outer portion of a book form while allowing me to pushing the conceptual potential of connection to the function of vessel forms. This give me more ways to layer the

Legacy, detail showing the inner vessel with the most important legacy from my Dad.





Protection, feathers vessel featuring feather sewn into the page-like protrusions cut into the sides of the outer vessel.



Protection, shards vessel featuring paper clay shards inserted into the side of the outer vessel.

Facing Page: *Protection*, detail top view, the inner vessels holding an egg, nesting materials, and a baby's soother.

hierarchy of the narrative contained in the piece. *Protection* is an example of two double walled vessels, paired for the piece. In one of them, the pages are ceramic shards of paper clay that have pierced the side of the outer vessel. The inner vessel is still intact and functional as a vessel which holds a delicate bird egg. The paper clay shards are heavy with the texture of the paper that burned out of them during the firing process. The other vessel has feathers sewn onto ceramic flap-like opening in the outer vessel wall an infant's toy held in the inner vessel. *Protection* and other double-walled vessel books I have made play on that combination of strange page-like attachments and imagery on outer walls with a solid functional inner vessel. As a group they speak of family attachments and the ways we carry one another emotionally, and at times even physically, to help each other cope through the ebb and flow of life and all its complexities.

The book forms I use are hundreds of years old, the vessel forms I am combining them with are thousands of years old. How can you innovate with materials and processes that have so much history? Just because something is working one way does not mean it couldn't work a new way. New use might give new insights or perspectives on something familiar. I constantly seeking to problem solve in this way in my practice. This body of work was shown at two conferences, in 2019 at the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts Annual conference, and in 2020 at the College Book Arts Associations Annual conference. Conversations with an international group of experts in both fields at these events has led me to believe that the formal considerations of how I am combining bookbinding with ceramic vessel is considered innovative by some experts in these fields. These conversations encouraged me to keep experimenting with this combination. Combining ceramic vessels with books has helped me to think about the purposes of both forms, where I can see familiarities of purpose, and how that can become part of my narrative. Thinking about the purpose of functional art or craft items in my artistic practice ultimately connects me to people through the activities that the items were used for. Those activities are what I am referencing with the combination of forms that have become vessel books.



In One Place: the Isolation of Pandemic, front view showcasing a year of tea at home.



In One Place: the Isolation of Pandemic, 3/4 back view, highlighting the feeling of being tied to one place.



Choosing How to Use Text to Enhance Narrative

Despite my insistence that it is not needed to convey narrative, text has still been an important element in some of my artwork. I believe text is powerful and written language commands power when used formally in artwork. When I do include text, I do so very carefully and purposefully. I found resonance in Walter Ong's thought of "text as tangible object."²⁰ The book is not just there to be a "bag of words" as Carrion asserted but the text and the book's form can both serve as equal conveyers of thought, emotion, and time.²¹

While trying to grapple with my use of text in my current practice I returned to an artist that I had researched as a young graphic design student some twenty years earlier, Jenny Holzer. An article by Gordon Hughes argues that the text itself in Jenny Holzer's work is purposely stripped of its value, its power, its structural foundation within the power structure we understand. The value is constructed by its formal presentation but not in a way that is familiar. In this void of traditional structure systems, the real power of the text emerges and we are, on careful examination, led to questioning the source of power itself.²²

As a contrast to the way Holzer uses text, I also looked at work by Ann Hamilton. Her work deals with text very differently while also acknowledging its' power. In an interview with Amei Wallach, it was clear that Hamilton resists putting motivations

and meanings of her work into specific words, instead, she tries to resolve her intuitive vision by creating an experience for the audience to navigate.²³ It is ironic then that text is a very important part of many of her works. She has used printed text transmuted into smoke that’s absorbed by horsehair, or braille that’s highlighted by dripping red powder, words read aloud by persons with speech impediments, or poems and songs that are layered in such a way to create sound texture.²⁴ She intentionally blurs our understanding of the language so that the piece is not about what is being said but about the sensory experience of the language only.²⁵ Hamilton’s many varied uses of text give me a material reference for what is possible in a space that inhabits all of our material senses to convey the experience of a word or language.

The book as a form is already powerful and comes with its own set of structures that the viewer is responding to. Picking text with all of its power structures and preconceptions that match or contrast the form adds to that “enstrangling” that Cohick mentioned.²⁶ Dealing with the audience’s preconceptions of the text that I want to use has been something I have grappled with in this body of work. Especially when I choose to use Biblical text, as I have in several pieces that dealt with grief. I don’t believe the historical context must preclude the usage of the text for its’ echoes of truth in my experience. However, I do believe that I must be careful in my presentation of it if I do not want to include its’ history as the main subject matter of my work. I have used lessons learned from the approaches of Jenny Holzer and Ann Hamilton, albeit on a much smaller scale than these two artists. Holzer stripped text of its context and gave it context by its presentation. Hamilton uses text as one element of a multifaceted experience. *Hope & Futility* and *Catalyst* are two of the pieces where I tried to apply these lessons on text application.

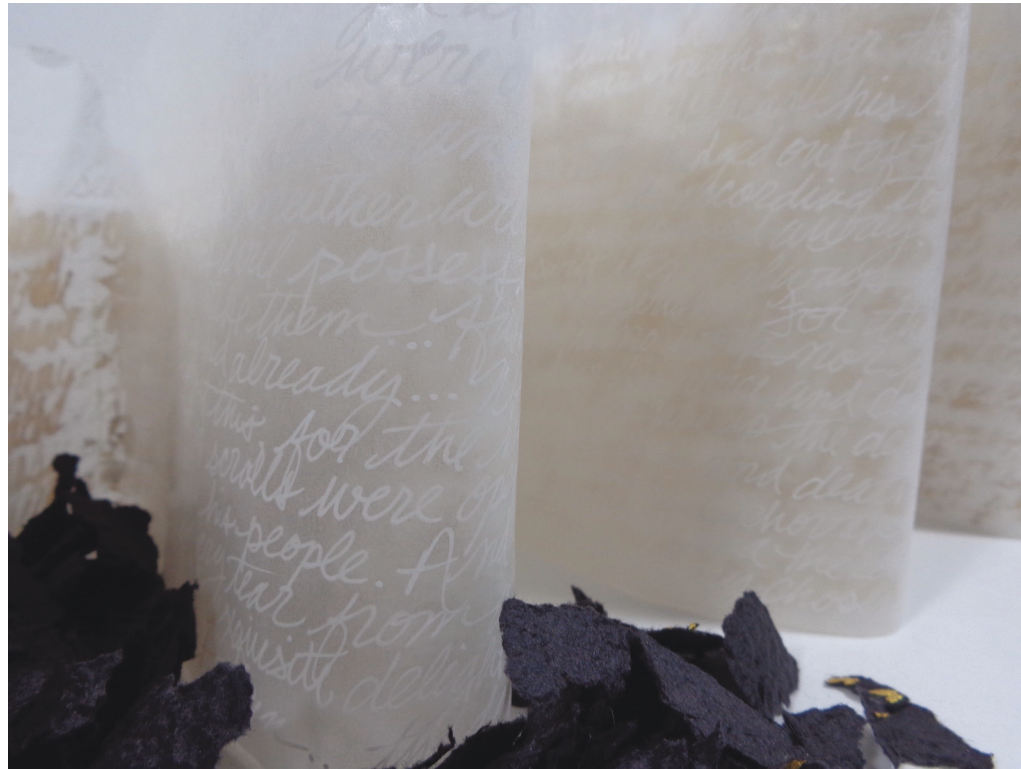
Early in my grief processes, I made *Hope & Futility*, a leather scroll with text written in ink on the surface attached to a cylindrical ceramic base that the leather wraps around. This is the first piece I included biblical scripture on. The text is a chosen collection of scriptures on both the subjects of futility and



Hope & Futility, a scroll book.

hope. Both of these subjects are presented together without breaks or references to the source of the text to encourage the viewer to contemplate their relationship to concepts of hope and futility, and the interaction of them in life.

Another piece used biblical text differently. The piece, *Catalyst* is based on the familial experience of my Mom’s brother dying in a creek high in the mountains of Colorado in the summer of 1975. Although this happened four years before my birth, I have always had a sense of grief over him. After visiting where he died, I wanted to explore how this grief was different from the grief I felt for my Dad, who died when I was thirty-six years old. During this exploration, I realized much of what I felt about my Uncle was empathy for my Mom’s grief, but I also came to realize that his death was the catalyst for change in my parent’s life. *Catalyst* is about that event, the grief it



Catalyst, glassine page detail.

caused, the search for answers that grief set off in my parents, and the profound changes they made as a result of what they found. The text included in this piece is a direct quote of Bible verses that reflect the things my parents accepted during this period of grief and coping. It seems appropriate to include since the event of my Uncle's death caused my parents to study these scriptures. That text was the catalyst for a dramatic change in their lives, which altered how they raised me. These words are part of the building of a visual narrative in the piece, not the narrative in its entirety as words and text are in some books. While making this piece I thought about the powerful impact of seeing handwritten words included in May Stevens paintings. The words in her paintings are texture more

than they are text to be read.²⁷ The color choices for the text are particularly striking in her work. This creates a layer of visual interest as well as another layer of narrative. Speaking about artists' books in which words become part of a visual narrative Ulises Carrion stated,

“In a book of the new art words don't transmit any intention; they're used to form a text which is an element of a book, and it is this book, as a totality, that transmits the authors intentions...In the new art you often do NOT need to read the whole book. The reading may stop at the very moment you have understood the total structure of the book.”²²

Catalyst is to be viewed in just that way. The reading is in the structure. The words are there to be one element of the story among many. Other elements of the narrative include the materials and their arrangement. A single long glassine sheet in a loose accordion book format represents lightness and hopefulness. On the entire plane of glassine is a tight hand-written block of small white text that serves more a visual than a literary purpose. It can be read, but the reading of it is not needed to appreciate the visual presence the texture of the text adds to the piece. This sits in contrast to the matte black overwhelmingly rough and bumpy paper, coptic bound in a tight

Catalyst, full view.





Catalyst, detail of rock and mylar sections.

block that serves as a symbol of overwhelming grief. Painted and torn mylar sheets are bound together to represent rapids, danger, and death. The piece starts with a small collection of granite rocks, taken directly from the creek that my uncle died in. All of these parts viewed as a totality tell the narrative of *Catalyst*.



Catalyst, detail of black hand-made paper section.

Notes:

20. Walter J Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982), 37-49.

21. Ulises Carrion, “The New Art of Making Books,” In *Artists’ Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook*, Ed Joan Lyons (Rochester: Gibb M. Smith, Inc., Peregrine Smith Books Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1985), 40.

22. Hughes, Gordon. “Power’s Script: Or, Jenny Holzer’s Art after ‘Art after Philosophy’.” *Oxford Art Journal* 29, no. 3 (2006): 419-40. <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.missouristate.edu/stable/3841029>.

23. Amei Wallach, “A Conversation with Ann Hamilton in Ohio,” *American Art* 22, no. 1 (2008): 52-77, <http://doi.org/10.1086/587916>.

24. Wallach, “A Conversation,” 52-77.

25. Wallach, “A Conversation,” 52-77.

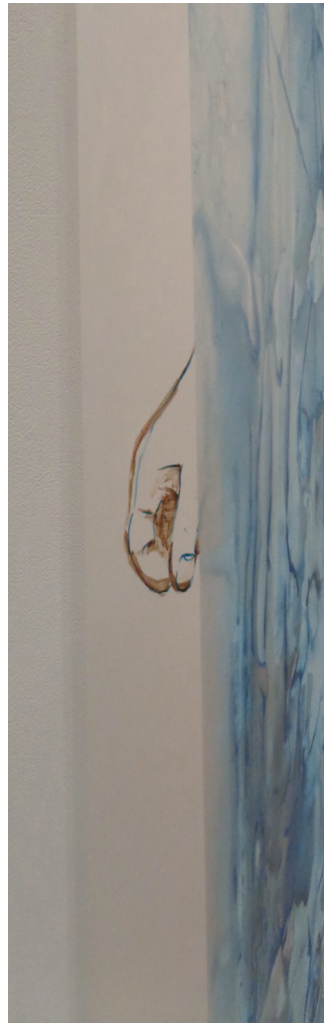
26. Aaron Cohick, “Reader Read Your Reading, Part 4,” *Book Art Theory (blog)*, *College Book Arts Association*, August 15, 2017, <https://www.collegebookart.org/bookarttheory/4924573>.

27. Patricia Hills, *May Stevens* (San Francisco: Pomegranate. 2005), 125-146.

My Complex Relationship with Narrative

By being a form to share a narrative, books organize knowledge. I have established that materiality impacts the understanding of the information presented in my artwork. As I explored how to present narrative visually, it has related to my experience of learning American Sign Language or ASL. While learning it, I found that the structure of sign language is completely different than the written language of the same country or region. My experience is that sign language is not just made up of gestures; modern ASL involves your whole body from the waist up. It is highly dependent on exaggerated facial expressions, arm position to the body, and gestures, as well as minute hand and finger positions. Some concepts that are expressed as sign language are difficult to translate into oral or written language. It indeed represents another mode of thought pattern.²⁸ This third type of thought pattern is as important as those that accompany oral and written language expressions, but as a more visually based way of communicating, it has changed my approach to narrative.

The experience of learning sign language helped me appreciate other ways of telling and reading stories. The way Walter Ong described an oral society in *Orality and Literacy*, has much in common with modern Deaf Culture. When he talks about language as a “mode of action” and not “simply a countersign of thought”, this is a large part of the difference from English to ASL.²⁹ Since I began learning ASL, I find that the text is



Into the Mist, detail of the two mylar scrolls that hang together to make the piece.

Facing Page:
Into the Mist, full view.

subservient to the visual presentation. I am more concerned with the idea of narrative or thought apart from text and whether the form can tell that story. In explanation, this sounds simple enough but in practice, I found the experience of trying to think in idea groups (instead of words) challenging and profoundly different from my pre-existing thought patterns. This has impacted my approach to all of my artwork in the last decade.

Throughout my career as a visual artist, I have felt uneasy with the concept of narrative. Representing a moment in time was my goal and I did not think that was narrative. I thought of narrative as a more complex planned story. This became something I needed to come to terms with when my work transitioned to artists' books as a primary medium because relationship to narrative is always part of the conversation about the work. Researching artists' books as a genre I have become comfortable with narrative by realizing I had the wrong idea about it all along. Ulises Carrion's said:

"A book is a sequence of spaces. Each of these spaces is perceived at a different moment—a book is also a sequence of moments...Written language is a sequence of signs expanding within the space; the reading of which occurs in time. A book is a space-time sequence. Books existed originally as containers of literary texts. But books, seen as autonomous realities, can contain any language, not only literary language, or even any other system of signs...A book can also exist as an autonomous and self-sufficient form, including perhaps a text that emphasizes the form, a text that is an organic part of that form: here begins the new art of making books...To make a book is to actualize its ideal space-time sequence by means of the creation of a parallel sequence of signs, be it verbal or other."³⁰

With this in mind, I have come to appreciate that my approach to a concept in my artwork is narrative. A collection of signs meant to be compared and overlaid to create meaning to

the viewer. As I work I ask myself what overall story are they telling as a group. Many times, I design the details of materiality or form to create a language of materials that draws visual connections between pieces. My intention is for the viewer to also see conceptual connections in the use of these materials. *Into the Mist* relates visually to *Catalyst* in this way. There is a strong material connection in both works that leads to a conceptual connection to my belief systems that have guided me through grief.

While making works about grief I have encountered misconceptions about my own belief about death, because my belief system does not include belief in an immortal spirit that survives death. From my studies, I believe the Bible clearly states that the dead no longer exist, except in memory. How do I help my viewers to be able to appreciate my belief for what it is? This is a very narrative-based struggle I have had with my body of work that deals specifically with grief.

One piece that came out of this particular struggle was called, *Into the Mist*. *Into the Mist* is in the form of a fourteen-foot-tall vertical scroll. It began with the thought that life is fragile and short and transitory. Our memories of our dead loved ones are flawed and they fade, like figures into the mist. This reminds me of a scripture that says, "you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then disappears." —*James 4:14 (NWT)* Since my Dad died my belief is that he simply does not exist except in memory at this point. I may not be able to remember my Dad as clearly as if he were here, but I believe God can. Than ancient man Job said: "Man, born of woman, is short-lived and filled with trouble. He comes up like a blossom and then withers away; he flees like a shadow and disappears...there is hope even for a tree. If it is cut down, it will sprout again, ... if a man dies, can he live again? I will wait all the days of my compulsory service until my relief comes. You will call and I will answer you. You will long for the work of your hands." —*Job 14: 1, 2, 7, 14, 15. (NWT)* I believe God will remember many individuals who have died. My belief is that he will do so by resurrecting them to a new life on earth. On an earth re-



stored to His original purpose and that my Dad will be among them, emerging from the mist of memory.

The material of *Into the Mist* is two sheets of a translucent mylar. It is painted with a line drawing in blue ink of my Dad life-size, in a walking stance, as if he is moving forward. The forward movement is a reference to my hope that he will emerge from the mists of memory someday as part of a resurrection promised in the Bible. The scroll is displayed touching the floor to convey my belief that this will be a resurrection on earth. Thoughtfully contemplating this hope is one of my ways of coping, and making this particular piece was a way to deal with my very real present moment of fear of forgetting the details of him, while at the same time reinforcing my ability to envision a hope to see him again in the future. Perhaps this preoccupation with viewers' understanding of my narrative comes from my training as an illustrator, but I have also created work where I worry less about the viewers' preconceptions with the narrative. In this work, I am less concerned with the viewer understanding the specifics of my narrative intentions. The intention of these pieces is to allow the viewer to relate to the piece either through or beyond their own experience. Presenting a narrative that unfolds as it does in life, in bursts and fragments of connection. Where the viewer is encouraged to scan and skip through information in any order they happen to (as is our nature). I have done this by obscuring the specific details of my life with chronic illness. Instead, I am trying to reference an experience and an emotional state that might be more universal.

The specific subject matter of a vessel book I call *Exposed* is coping with how it feels to try to talk about chronic illness. The choices for this piece try to create that individual experience. It started with a hand-written page about the subject. A vessel about the size of the palm of two hands was wheel thrown and then cut in two. The main theme is written in clay, in a Mishima technique, on the inside of the vessel which is splayed apart and askew. The full-size page of handwriting has been cut down into small pages. These are nested into signatures which are then sewn through holes in the vessel halves, literally



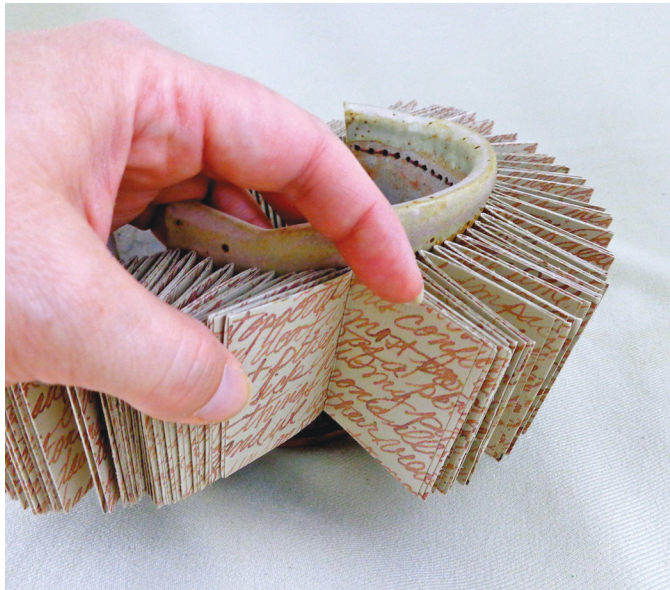
holding the two halves of the vessel book together. The handwriting is purposefully made difficult to decipher by the cutting and reconstruction of the pages. In the same way, the details of chronic illness are usually hidden from onlookers, who may get hints over time. Trying to explain these details can feel like being cut open and rent in two.

Exposed, in the collection of J. Willard Marriott Special Collection, University of Utah Library.

Exposed, detail of the text on the inside of the vessel.



Exposed, close up of the writing on the pages.



Tapestry: A Life Unraveling, viewed from the top.

In *Tapestry: A Life Unraveling*, I dealt with terminal illnesses' emotional impact on patient and caregivers. It is also a vessel book with the side removed from a tall vase-like vessel. On the opposite side, holes were made to accommodate the binding of pages directly into the side of it. A crawling shino glaze and pages full of unraveling burlap and other fibers that seem to trail behind the piece give a very visceral look, feel, and smell to the piece. Like *Exposed*, it turns an emotional response to illness into a visual three-dimensional form where the materials and the form connote those feelings to the viewer.

The purpose of two pieces titled *Raw* and *Blue* is to use the materials and form to express emotional illness itself. These emotions often accompany grief and chronic or terminal illnesses, but these works addressed the emotional states directly, no matter the cause. In *Raw*, I used the raw state of the four types of materials to portray the concept. The emphasis becomes the shapes and the precise repetition of the thread binding the paper to the ring. The ring is then just balanced on the woodblock instead of being attached. The raw and precarious nature of my feelings while grieving the loss of my Dad are my main reasons for making the piece. These intentions



Raw, viewed from above.

are not stated though, encouraging the viewer to contemplate the reasons for the raw materials and their strange form, and then find their own feelings in it.

In *Blue*, the viewer is invited to explore their connection to the topic of anxiety and depression through the word connotations. The word blue and its' synonyms are written in bold brush strokes left visible in the final form. These words are then obscured through tearing the mylar surface and by layering the transparent mylar in the form of the piece. Anxiety and depression have become part of the daily lives of so many during this pandemic, including my own. I have made use of ceramic and mylar materials, connected through bookbinding techniques in a form that is worn around the throat to explore the way that these conditions can literally close around the victim's throat.

The form and display of the piece reference a type of historical fashion that society still loves to reference for its uniqueness and absurdity. The ruff is a historical piece from the 16th and 17th centuries that impacted the wearer's posture and inhibits natural movement.³¹ It was viewed as a symbol of status and wealth.³² What it adds to my narrative is a reference to the inhibition of movement. I hope this formal reference also says that these conditions are universal, privilege does not cure these kinds of pain. The ruff form can be seen as beautiful, just as depression is sometimes glorified in culture. The presence of the words blue and its synonyms on the ruff are used by me to help the viewer form the conclusion that where ever we see pain we should acknowledge it, even while the wearer might be trying to obscure their pain, as is the case with the very bold words being hard to decipher without close attention.

The culmination of my experimentation with narrative in form is *Articulate: Fuse, Breathe*. During a time marked by pandemic, climate change, and social and political upheaval our connections to and dependence on others for our existence has become very clear to many people. However, some people still fight this notion of their individual actions impacting other individuals they don't know. I believe acknowledging and



Blue, on display at the Springfield Art Museum, Springfield, Missouri.

leaning into those connections is one of the key ways to cope with burdens beyond our control. Like many of my pieces in this body of work, the ring form symbolizes an individual scope of human activity. By combining a mix of materials and techniques I have used in other pieces into an installation format with these forms, I sought to make something that caused individuals to contemplate their connections to other people and humanity as a whole. This concept relates closely to my feelings about coping with grief and chronic illness. In my personal experience, successful coping is only possible with awareness and nurturing of our connections to others.



Articulate: Fuse, Breathe, detail.



Articulate: Fuse, Breathe, detail.

Articulate: Fuse, Breathe



Notes:

28. Walter J Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982), 37-49.

29. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 37-49.

30. Ulises Carrion, “The New Art of Making Books,” In *Artists’ Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook*, Ed Joan Lyons (Rochester: Gibb M. Smith, Inc., Peregrine Smith Books Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1985), 31-43.

31. Katy Werline, “16th Century Ruffs,” *The Fashion Historian (blog)*, November 1, 2011. <http://www.thefashionhistorian.com/2011/11/ruffs.html>.

32. Werline, “16th Century Ruffs.”

Studio Craft and Materiality

My work has a strong base in studio craft. Reading *A Theory of Craft, Function and Aesthetic Expression*, by Howard Risatti, reinforced a clearer definition of my practice tie to studio craft. Growing up in a time period when craftsmanship has all but disappeared from daily life and the economy of the community around me, I feel there is a nihilism to society void of the craftsmanship that comes from making with one’s hands. A mind and body in tune with true craftsmanship has a deeper and richer experience on this planet. There is something about the patience and persistence learned in the workshop, making things, that is missing from other realms of human experience.³³ There is also a balance of humility and accomplishment from this physical practice. These ideas are always present in the choices I make about what materials, and more importantly, techniques to use in my work.

I think where we are heading in art overall is influenced by the settling of the technology revolution into our everyday lives. In the span of my lifetime, it is beginning to drive us back to craft and craftsmanship. I read an essay entitled, *The Time of the Object* by Synnove Vik, which said that the two thousand teens were the age of the object.³⁴ Disposable and increasingly sleek objects have become so important for everyday life among the age group that has never experienced life without smart-phones, that there is now a distinct fascination with objects made by hand to have a longer usable life span.³⁵ Objects that

were becoming forgotten and rendered useless are having a renaissance. Subtly commenting, through my choices as an artist, on the commodification of objects and the loss of visible production processes is something that is also an important motivation in my practice, and one thing that ties my work to studio craft. The process of making objects by hand is being recognized as something integral to humanity even as we try to abolish all evidence of it in our economy. This renewed obsession with the object, especially handmade objects, makes my use of centuries-old bookbinding processes have continued resonance with the part of my audience that recognizes and appreciates the handmade aspects and who has the same concerns about production processes.

Isamu Noguchi's book called *A Sculptor's World* helped me to bring my own feelings about craft in art into focus. He valued craft from his formative years apprenticed to a traditional carpenter in Japan.³⁶ He later searched for craftsmanship in every genre and medium he worked in.³⁷ I too have a deep appreciation for craft in art because of other life experiences. I was raised in an environment of historic restoration. Because of this, how I make things matters to me, and this ties my work strongly to contemporary studio craft. Noguchi also did not feel the need limit his artistic expression to one medium, but spent time through his whole working life stopping and starting different mediums depending on the opportunities afforded him to work in certain studios, with certain masters of a quite diverse array of mediums.³⁸ I have spent time learning new material processes if I felt they would help me to communicate better. I learned about craftsmanship with ceramics, metals, and alternative photo processes during the creation of the body of work highlighted in this document. I relished the chance to return to the educational setting to learn these new skills and have the time and focus to lean into a new direction in my artwork.

Something else that ties to the importance of how I make things is my use of recycled materials whenever possible. This ties into my respect for the planet, our place on it, and the craftsmen who have come before me. An example is the dis-



Tea Comfort, detail of teabag pages.

carded avocado skins and pits that I used for dye materials on ...in anticipation of a rare event. It was an intentional choice to use this natural recycled material instead of a commercial dye product. In my current work, the meaning of the pieces is tied very strongly to the materials I am using. *Tea Comfort* uses real used tea bags from my own daily tea drinking rituals as an element of the form. The woodblock that is the foundation of my piece titled *Raw* is taken from a felled tree that overlooked my first tenuous steps into using ceramic as an artistic medium twenty years ago. Using that helped me honor a place, an experience, and teachers who set me up to make the work I am making now. Work that has literally supported my journey through grief.

When choosing materials for *Waiting for the Next Occurrence*, it was important conceptually that I incorporated copper. The use of copper was an important material choice for me because it is a recognizable conductor of electricity. Our lives are dependent on electrical energy in all our cells. All our thought patterns as humans take place as electrical exchanges between cells. The copper wire runs through the whole piece except the middle of the rings, which represents the gap caused by a seizure. I wanted that material reference to be visible to view-

Waiting for the Next Occurrence, detail of copper cuffs and ring.



ers to accentuate the concept of the gap in normal processes that our lives depend on. Although a seizure is technically an electrical storm, what it produces is a ceasing of things that are dependent on a normal flow of electricity between cells, like thought and breathing. Any instance of this has the potential to lead to a stop of electrical activity, resulting in death of the individual. The copper cuffs that connect the wire to the rings are meant to loosely connote the electrical storm that kicks off a seizure, as such it was important that they were hand tooled, with a rough and erratic texture. The ceramic rings, while representing the gaps in my consciousness due to seizures are also connotative of the damage to mind and body that occurs during the seizures. Because of this the wood firing process was a perfect way to create a very organic, irregular

surface with coloration of bruising, cuts, other bodily injuries that are the hallmark of grand mal tonic-clonic seizures. The material choices in this piece hold a deep layer of meaning in the piece, accentuating the real danger that the occurrences of seizure are.

Another piece I made titled *What He Was*, holds a lot of personal meaning in the individual materials used to make it. It started as ceramic panels and I wrote on the wet clay all the things my Dad was to me: mentor, protector, teacher, helper, etc. By slashing through these words while the clay was still wet, I experienced a cathartic release of pent-up anger about the loss of those roles he filled in my life. I filled the indentions left, words and slashes, with a darker clay body and fired, then glazed and fired. The whole material process in this piece offered me emotional closure. To combine these three ceramic panels, I used scraps of one-hundred-year-old cedar siding that was part of one of the last projects Dad and I worked on together. My Dad had touched them over a dozen times as a process of salvaging and reusing them. I don't consider the use of these materials a veneration of the objects, rather a touchstone for memory, and a way to honor his past actions and to say I remember them.

Similarly, *Book of Days* 22,672 leaves is paper that my Dad personally cut to size while assisting in my studio. This particular drop did not have a purpose and instead of recycling or throwing it away, I had him stack it up. When Dad worked with me in the studio, we would take tea breaks every day. I have over sixty varieties of tea in my kitchen but Dad didn't really like any of them. He loved cinnamon and the color red. I found him a tea that he loved called cinnamon hibiscus. The hibiscus made it red and it was a really strong cinnamon flavor. It was a Kroger brand tea. When the only Kroger chain grocery store was leaving town, I was concerned about the availability of this tea in the future, so I bought all of it I could find locally. Four months later Dad was no longer able to come work in my studio and within six months he was dead. I still had four and a half boxes of that tea. That is what I used to tea stain the paper he cut so that the book smells of his favorite scent.



What He Was

To incorporate his signature on the spine of his *Book of Days*, I created templates directly from his handwriting.

For a piece titled *A Humble Life*, it was important to me that I used not only the brand of overalls my grandpa wore, but a pair of Big Smith overalls that belonged to him and were worn and paint stained from his wearing. The material choices of



A Humble Life

overalls, pennies and glaze colors were so strong that on sight, with no further explanation my sister immediately knew the piece was about our Grandpa.

These minute material details will not be apparent to many viewers but they are very important to my practice. They are part of the way I work through emotion and find solace in the activity of art-making. I can't conceive a piece of artwork without considering how the materials add to the meaning. Even if the viewers will never know all these details, it matters to me that these physical details tie into the overall theme of the piece. Materiality matters. Layers of meaning matter. Memory is visceral and tactile and ties into all of our senses, not just sight. Right now, all of my work is about memory. Come to think of it, the work that matters to me always has been.

Notes:

33. Howard Risatti, *A Theory of Craft, Function and Aesthetic Expression*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 281-306.

34. Synnove Vik, "The Time of the Object," In *Crafting a Continuum, Rethinking Contemporary Craft*, ed Peter Held and Heather Sealy Lineberry (Arizona State University Art Museum. Santa Barbara: Perpetua Press, 2013), 30-35.

35. Vik, "The Time of the Object," 30-35.

36. Isamu Noguchi, *A Sculptor's World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1967), 111.

37. Noguchi, *A Sculptor's World*, 111.

38. Noguchi, *A Sculptor's World*, 111.

Making as a Cathartic Activity

I view my artistic practice as an exploration in an attempt to grow in understanding of myself and the world around me. Marcus Boon and Gabriel Levine talk about art as a “living expression of the collective transformation of the world”, and say that art has become, “a space for the revaluation of values”.³⁹ This correlates in my mind with what Michel Foucault in *The Ethics of Concern for the Self*, says about practice being an “exercise on the self by which one attempts to develop and transform oneself”.⁴⁰ Similarly, Louise Althusser, in the essay *What is Practice*, says, to paraphrase: practice is a process of gathering and storing perceptions of the real world and then making connections and drawing conclusions.⁴¹ In my artistic practice, as pieces progress and layer onto other pieces in space and time, I allow for the things learned while making them change me as a person in the span of my life. Through doing this, my process of art-making, or my practice, has become cathartic for me.

About the time I started Graduate school my Dad became terminally ill and died. After this event, the focus of my practice became a deeper and more immediate need for anxiety meditation, and I used it to help me to divert the anxiety into artistic expression. It also served as a way to channel and understand a confusing array of emotions. This has given me a rich well to draw from conceptually in my artistic practice. I have used many recent pieces in these ways, pieces like *What he was*, *Ex-*

posed, and *Book of Days*. During this time, I have had no choice but to deal with overwhelming loss in my artwork. Some of my pieces have facilitated the expression of very personal feelings. Some have become communal, much like the artist Emily Jacir’s piece: *Memorial to 418 Palestinian Villages which were Destroyed, Depopulated and Occupied by Israel in 1948*. It took the form of a white canvas tent, very reminiscent of those given to refugees, which was embroidered with the names of the Villages. The embroidery was meant to recall women’s crafts and female mourning practices of the past. Interestingly she intended to do all the embroidery alone, but when she was running out of time, she invited friends to help. One hundred forty people answered her call and it became a social and communal event of remembering. When displayed, it triggered strong emotional responses, especially in viewers who had experienced the displacement and loss that the piece mourned. Instead of encouraging closure, it achieved just the opposite.⁴²

My piece entitled *Book of Days* required the help of assistants in the massive task of tea staining each individual sheet of paper required for it. For such assistance, I turned to those who were there for Dad’s last days, my Mom, my sister, and my friend. As we worked we remembered, and we talked about things that had been too difficult to discuss before then, things made easier to discuss during the task we were working at with our hands. An article by Kira Van Lil helped me to place these actions in the context of historical reference and to understand that shared task was akin to mourning rituals of the past.⁴³ We all felt it did have a healing quality, and facilitated discussion that might not have happened otherwise, elevating the tasks beyond simple emotion. Similarly, *Catalyst* made grief about something bigger than the emotions and helps connect the piece to a larger human experience by shifting the subject from my feelings of grief for someone I had never known to what my Mother’s grief facilitated.

Kira Van Lil’s article, *Creative Qualities of Mourning: Artists Responding to Loss Today*, concluded that artists have brought attention to mourning in a way that can activate social groups. She argues that this has more in common with Freud’s definition of

melancholia than his definition of mourning. She encourages a reexamination of the way Freud's definitions have altered our sense of what is proper and in fact what is sane in the way of mourning practices. She highlighted artists like Dario Robleto, whose practices involving the using of handwritten letters and hair from deceased revisit Victorian mourning rituals. During that time, it was culturally responsible for women to take two years to mourn and carry out craft rituals that encouraged memory and hope. Robleto's display of items made to remind us of these practices encourages contemplation of the objects and this history.⁴⁴

All of this encourages an active engagement with loss. Through my own experience, I feel that the proliferation of Freud's ideas about grief has destroyed cultural traditions surrounding grief and altered our ability to cope with it in a beneficial way. Art can help reinstate an acceptance of practices that encourage a healthier approach for individuals and society but that doesn't dictate specific responses as pre-scripted traditions of the past did. Balance and acknowledgment of individual needs and paths through pain are the key.

Residing with you in Grief deals directly with these concepts. The piece is one of the least related to book forms of all the pieces in this body of work, but still ties strongly to the body of work through concept and materiality. It is comprised of two double walled vessels. The two forms have a familial similarity. The stoneware clay is left naked, raw, un-glazed. The kind of grief that my Mom and I felt after my Dad's death is a very physical emotion. I had strong physical pain in my chest for six months or more. I was exhausted more easily, I was also easily overwhelmed and started having panic attacks. Because of the closeness of our relationship and the fact that she lived with me for three months after Dad died, my Mom's grief was a close and ever-present companion of mine. Of course, hers was different and deeper. Helping her through that by being present for her, listening, and absorbing her pain is the subject matter of *Residing with You in Grief*. The hair that is overflowing from the inner vessel on both forms is cuttings from my Mom and myself, to connote Victorian practices of grieving. At

that time, it was common for women to create crafts from dead loved one's hair, spending time carefully braiding and arranging it. Unlike the Victorians, our society now contains very few prescribed or even accepted rituals surrounding grief once the person is buried or cremated. So, our hair in this piece is undone and disheveled. The materiality of this piece contains the narrative in a visceral and unsettling way.

Anxiety has been a minor factor in my life since my pre-teen years but it expanded out of control after my Dad's death. So, I turned to my artistic practice for a source of solace, directed and thoughtful meditation, and a way to understand my feelings. First I returned to clay, a medium that I had little practical knowledge of how to work with but that I remembered being very physically and emotionally centering. The physical processes did prove to have a cathartic impact on my practice and as I worked I responded to the material properties of the medium for a way to explore the subject matter. Of course, the use of ceramics in my work to understand and express these emotions expanded beyond just a response to the medium, but that core is still there in my physical artistic practice. The

Residing with You in Grief



ceramic vessels and rings that I made have come to act as symbolic stand-ins for people or for scopes of human activity in my sculptural work.

I found a deep and abiding resonance in the words of *The Dalai Lama* as translated by Jeffery Hopkins, “The pleasure and pain that the mental consciousness experiences is mainly influenced by the experience of the eye-consciousness, the ear-consciousness, and so forth.”⁴⁵ My belief about the state of humans is that the soul is the whole person, and no part of us separates from the body. This is based on a study of the Hebrew and Greek terms used in the bible for the English word: soul. Ne‘phesh in Hebrew literally means “breather” and a study of the original languages has led some to translate Genesis 2:7 to say that after God put the breath of life into the first man he “became” a person or soul, not that he was given a soul. The bible in its original languages uses ne‘phesh and psykhe’, both translated in most English versions as Soul, in connection with all earthly creatures and with reference to that which is material, tangible, visible, and mortal, even stating that the soul or person can die, and clearly defining death as a state of non-existence. This means my core belief about what makes us human is that we must experience things both physically and mentally; and that our full mental understanding cannot be reached without tactile and other sensory stimuli. This belief is why I find solace in the process of making things with such a rich and varied material content, and why I like to imbue meaning into those materials.

In 2019, I made a stoneware ceramic chain that was fourteen feet in length and about forty-two pounds. Performing with this chain became a way to talk visually about living with physical illnesses in a piece I call *Burdensome*. I activated the chain with my body. The performer needed to be someone who did suffer from physical chronic illness. Besides seizures, I have a number of other conditions including asthma, chronic fatigue, fibromyalgia, damaged nerves from shingles, chronic dislocations of all joints, and other things. All of these conditions caused the movement with the forty-five-pound, fourteen-foot-long constantly undulating form to be labored and painful. It



clearly gave the connotation of carrying on life underneath constant symptoms of illness. The reaction to videos of the performance was to generate deeply personal discussions from those living with many different types of illnesses.

Burdensome, video still. Image shot by Neal Polallis.

The process of conversation that my artwork has generated with a wide array of people during and after the making has proved therapeutic. Public presentation of what in the past was considered private practices of mourning can impact the message of the work. I have been keenly aware of the context in which I was making these very private pieces and considered not carrying on with Graduate Studies during this phase of my life for that reason. My choice to do so created some conflict for me in the context of my own mourning processes. I struggled with the viewers’ misconceptions and found myself overthinking how to make my own understanding of this clearer. Despite this, when the work was displayed, I have received unexpected expressions of appreciation for making my emotional journey public. I experienced this while stitching the pages into the spine of *Book of Days* on-site, in front of museum visitors. Performed as an installation piece, it was a very satisfying and

cathartic exchange about the subject matter and my process to present it. I have also attended exhibits including my work and anonymously sat in the museum listening to visitors' responses. This was surprisingly satisfying because I learned that the raw emotions of the pieces did come through and spoke to the viewers about their own experiences with loss.

While making *Waiting for the Next Occurrence*, I was able to have conversations with close family and friends that stood in as studio assistants for the long and arduous tasks of paper dying, and metal forging. Conversations consisted of my feelings of living with chronic illness, and why I feel it's important to talk about, also their experiences of watching these conditions in me and others and how we can offer each other support. In a very similar experience to the making of *Book of Days*, this process created opportunities for discussions that might not have taken place otherwise.

Standing Tall is a piece made during this time and is based on poem written by a friend. As it does in much of my work, the ceramic ring symbolizes an individual's scope of activity. It is wheel thrown and the wood fired. The pages contain the poem and a set of original photographic salt prints I made for the piece. The pages of the book portion are designed to mimic a dos a dos binding style, with the information repeated and mirrored on both sides of the center. The whole piece highlights the reality of coping with chronic illness, both physical and mental, with the overall impression that successful coping does have ups and downs.

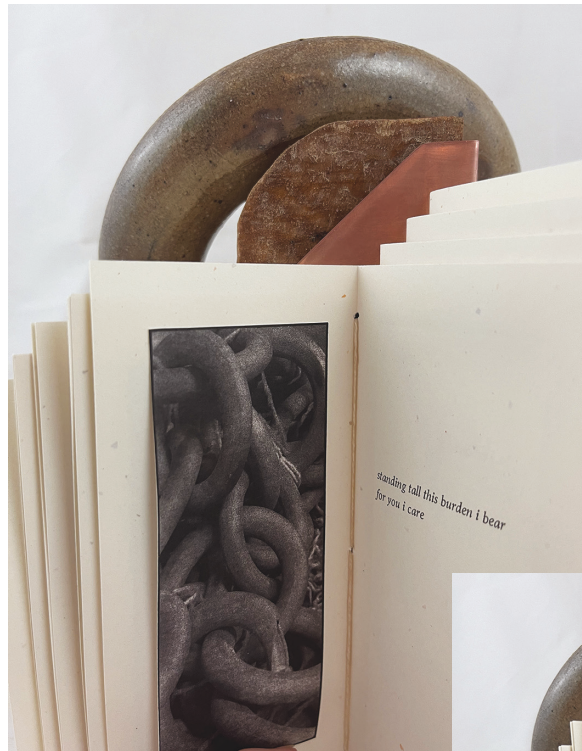
Through this body of work, I have had the ability to converse about and cope with my own grief and the emotional toll of chronic illness. My work has opened dialog on difficult subjects for myself and others. People have been willing to open their emotions and find layers of understanding and solace while viewing the work and discussing it.



Standing Tall, front view.



Standing Tall, side view.



Standing Tall, burdens page view.



Standing Tall, ability page view.

Notes:

39. Marcus Boon and Gabriel Levine, "Introduction," In *Practice*, ed Marcus Boon and Gabriel Levine (Cambridge, MA : The MIT Press, 2018), 19.

40. Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of Concern for the Self," In *Practice*, ed Marcus Boon and Gabriel Levine (Cambridge, MA : The MIT Press, 2018), 201.

41. Louise Althusser, "What is Practice?," In *Practice*, ed Marcus Boon and Gabriel Levine (Cambridge, MA : The MIT Press, 2018), 45.

42. Kira van Lil, "Creative Qualities of Mourning: Artists Responding to Loss Today," *International Journal Of The Arts In Society* 6, no. 6 (December 2012), Art Full Text (H.W. Wilson), 152-154.

43. Lil, "Creative Qualities of Mourning," 141-142

44. Lil, "Creative Qualities of Mourning," 142-146.

45. Louwrien Wijers, "The Dalai Lama, On Collaboration with Joseph Beuys: In Conversation with Louwrien Wijers," In *Practice*, ed. Marcus Boon and Gabriel Levine (Cambridge, MA : The MIT Press, 2018), 198.

In Conclusion

I found myself dealing with a very personal emotional journey in the last few years. I made artwork that responded to this personal process, coping with these burdens through the contemplative process of making art. Metaphor, repetition in process, and design choices have all played a role in the therapeutic parts of the work I have made in the last two years. Leaning into my beliefs and incorporating those into my artwork helped me spend time with them, reinforcing their benefit in my process of coping with the burdens beyond my control.

Digging into the formal aspects of the work, delving deep into artists' books as a genre of fine art, and emerging with new and innovative forms that were responding to my need to cope has been very rewarding. I have found 'the book' to be an especially effective formal element in my sculptural work for a formal connection to narrative and its use as a space/ time sequence. In the later usage, it has helped me to chart and visualize time and burdensome events in a way that is not just a cold set of statistics but connects to my experience and viewers' emotions. The combination of ceramic vessels with books has allowed me to create intimate and emotionally moving sculptural works that carry the narrative in the details of the form.

Through the making of this body of work, I have tried to honor experiences and circumstances that are difficult to deal with. I have found that my personal story can have a meaningful and positive impact on other individuals by just being shared. In the end the best way to cope is sharing the burdens of events beyond our control with others. Sharing the pain and the process, but also sharing the comfort and the hope.



...in anticipation of a rare event, worn by the artist.

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56	<i>Articulate: Fuse, Breathe</i> , 2021, Mixed media. 60”x72”x36.”		
59	<i>Tea Comfort</i> , detail of teabag pages.		
60	<i>Waiting for the Next Occurrence</i> , detail of copper and rings.		
61	<i>What He Was</i> , 2016, Mixed media. 25”x14”x1.”		
62	<i>A Humble Life</i> , 2021, Mixed media. 3”x8”x8.”		
67	<i>Residing with You in Grief</i> , 2020, Mixed media. 5”x12”x6.”		

Colophon

This exhibition catalogue is the compilation of six years of study at Missouri State University. It was designed in the spring of twenty-twenty-one by the author in Adobe InDesign. The main text, notes and bibliography are set in Baskerville. Front matter, section titles and captions are set in Avenir. All images included are of the authors work. The design is set to be best viewed in double page spreads instead of individual consecutive pages.

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