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Co-ward: Records of a Fugitive Heart

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CO-WARD: RECORDS OF A FUGITIVE HEART

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
of the Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by
Melodie Serena Reay
B.F.A., Concordia University, 2012
August 2016

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And to my mother.

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ABSTRACT

Co-ward: Records of a Fugitive Heart, is a collection of objects that are themselves collections of events both internal and external. Each object, hand-made and/or un-made, is a record of a moment of vulnerability, in regards to moving away from, or towards, another.

NOTES ON THE FUGITIVE

co- (prefix)

1. together; joint or jointly; mutual or mutually
2. indicating partnership or equality

ward (noun)

1. any of the separate divisions of a hospital or prison.
2. a political subdivision of a parish in Louisiana.

-ward

1. adverbial suffix expressing direction; Old English *-weard* "turned toward," from root **wer-* "to turn, bend"
2. a suffix forming nouns that denote persons who regularly engage in an activity, or who are characterized in a certain way, as indicated by the stem; now usually pejorative:
dullard, drunkard, coward

coward

1. (noun) a person who lacks courage in facing danger, difficulty, opposition, pain, etc.
2. (adjective) proceeding from fear

I am a co-ward coward. I am afraid of losing the things that I care about. I am afraid of losing the care that the thing's about. This work is fueled by a common desire to confront this fear. With clay and word as my antiquated registrars, I make and unmake documents to serve as testament to my efforts. This work is a series of exercises in losing.

When broken down into its two constituents—*re*, a prefix indicating repetition or backward motion, and *cord* from Latin *cordis*, meaning "heart"—the word *record* simply means *return to the heart*. To remember, to know something so well as to never forget, is to know it 'by heart.'

A common tale of the origins of art is that of a potter's daughter who, when she knew she was seeing her lover for the last time, traced his shadow on the wall, which her father later filled in with clay to make the first relief portrait. In this tale, it is not merely the love object, but its *anticipated absence* that drives the impulse to record and remember, and ultimately inspires the birth of pictorial and sculptural representation. Thus, implicit in the act of recording, of knowing by heart, is the heart's awareness of imminent loss. It is of note that these strategies of representation structure the visual object as a *physical contiguity*—the shadow—of the absent body. They are indexical, and their concern is less with creating than with continuing.¹

In other words, "Initially, there was no intervention on the part of the artist."²

¹ Lisa Saltzman, *Making Memory Matter: Strategies of Remembrance in Contemporary Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 2.

² Victor I Stoichita, *A Short History of the Shadow* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 1997), 12.

RE-CORDS



Figure 1. *Your Back, To Me*, 2016, unfired porcelain recording of your departure

I moved here from Heartbreak, to get as far away as possible, without entering the ocean. So as to get as far away as possible, I travel light from then on.

A deliberate and effective wiping of the slate involves not merely a farewell to people and place, but to most worldly possessions. One cannot differentiate between the handmade and passed down, the gifted or invested. In order to have the last word with objects that bear a false semblance of 'home,' one must dismantle and disseminate them all in one fell swoop.

With no more than a suitcase and a mistrust of objects, I show up on the doorstep of a master's degree program, the foundation of which is contingent upon a pious belief in objects. Thus began a three-year wondering of what it is to be a maker and how to not be one, what even it is to be made, then, what *is* to be made, and is my concern with the making or the made *thing*?

It turns out my concern is with the *re-cording*.

The potter's daughter traced her lover's shadow, but it was her father who later refilled the absence—with clay. I am tracing shadows with the clay.

What is worth recording? The surest way I have found to be certain of a thing's worth is to measure the discomfort in no longer having it.

It is about recording more than can currently be played back.



Figure 2. *At Least My Mistakes Are Not All In Front Of Me*, 2016, 2013 journal with pages relieved of their words, or words relieved of their pages

Working backwards from representational object making will eventually put you back at the beginning, tracing the shadow of someone not yet left.

Things become more fragile and precarious. Of those that make it through to their 'finished' state, nearly all of them will meet a shattered end shortly after. I do not mind, and this pleases me. I find satisfaction in making things that are bound to fail. With a couple of exceptions, the majority of them terminate when bone dry.

Bone dry is the material's most vulnerable state.

Cafard is the French word for cockroach. Thanks to the French poet Baudelaire, other translations include melancholy, pointlessness and non-believer. Since last August I have been commemorating each cockroach I kill with a death mask.

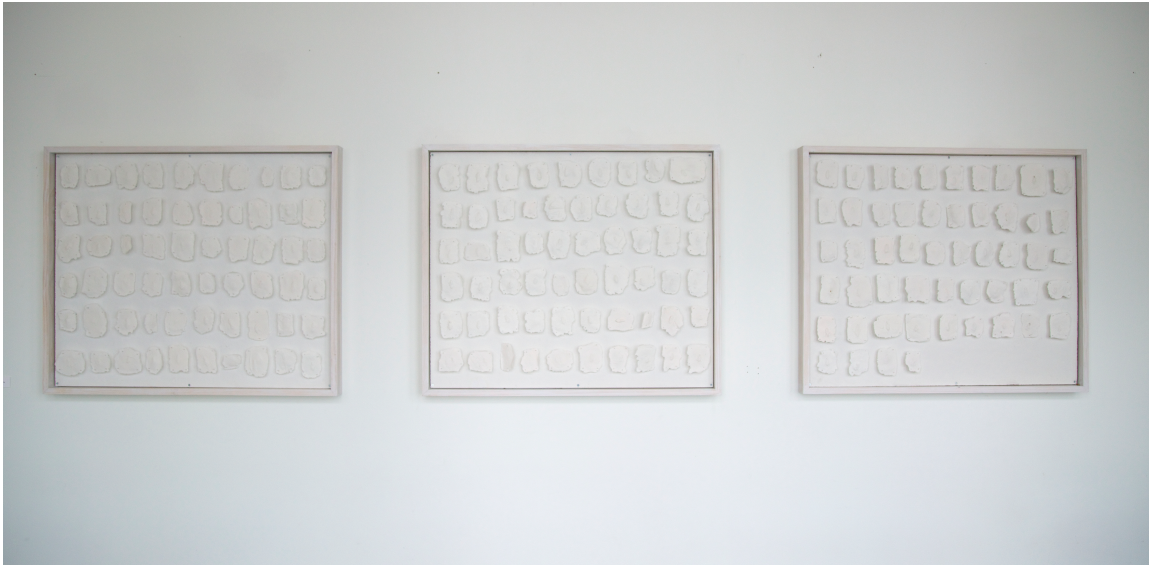


Figure 3. *Le Cafard Me Pourchasse (Pointlessness is Chasing Me)*, 2016, ongoing, porcelain death masks of cockroaches



Figure 4. *Le Cafard Me Pourchasse (Pointlessness is Chasing Me)*, detail, 2016

My house is infested with pointlessness. The resilience of the non-believer is astonishing.



Figure 5. *Le Cafard Me Pourchasse (Pointlessness is Chasing Me)*, detail, 2016

The thing is to be brief; a container to be out-lived by its contents, as evidence to no one that they need not be contained.

The thing must also be, before all else, a record, which is to say a memory with a citation, which is to say a return to the heart, with authority.

Lately the thought has occurred to me more than a few times, to put my head on the track when no one is looking, just to see what it would feel like. Not to be so wrecked, but to be so wrecked by *love*, as I like to imagine Mamie Smith was when she sang *Crazy Blues*. Is it really so far off? I suppose it's true, to borrow your words, *I don't love you—I don't even know you*. But I can hear the train coming and I might not love anyone more. So I concentrate hard on you as I kneel down and press my face to the steel. One ought to have a reason.

As an exercise in losing, the goal is to end up with an object that I cannot not deny care for, and then subsequently lose it.

This is a trick to allow myself to do things that are more important than making objects, and still end up with objects. Motivated by an imagined quota of objects to be met, this in turn tricks me into doing things I would otherwise be too terrified to do. Namely, making myself vulnerable to others.

In keeping with a traditional approach to art-making, as essentially driven by the fear of losing love, this work documents the fears and efforts in losing and finding and losing again.

It is about three people: A past love, a current non-love, and a mother.
It is about three empty spaces: past, present and future.

A pyramid of worth is an upside-down hierarchy with the greatest worth making up the bottom, and a confused tendency to interpret its growth as positively correlated to elevation, so as to assign to the top the things deemed most precious. When the bottom folds, not the best hands, nor realtors, can sell a house of cards.

Why is the material trace important? The material is the stuff through which the intangible is housed, the inarticulate uttered, the fleeting paused. There is an affirmation of presence in the material that our faculties will not allow us denial or skepticism of. You are honest, I want to believe.

Words, clay, human bodies—all orchestrated to hold, carry and transport something of great matter.



Figure 6. *Butterfly Collection*, 2016, ongoing, unfired clay recordings of nervousness, excitement and/or overwhelming anxiety

It is not easy to sit and speak in front of a class and not feel nervous. It is not easy to keep the slab in one piece during introductions while pretending, *what clay?* It is not easy to get up and walk normally without bits of it falling down your pant leg and onto the floor. It is surprisingly easy to keep a straight face.

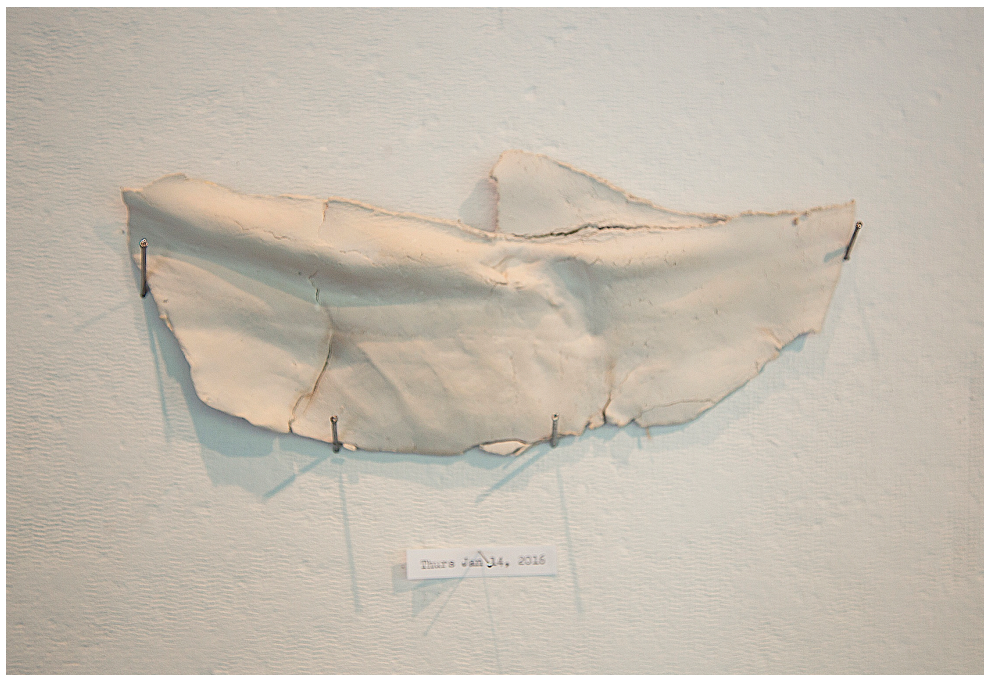


Figure 7. *Thurs Jan 14, 2016: Class*, from *Butterfly Collection*, unfired clay recording, 2016

When making clay slabs be sure to use boards to transport and/or flip them over. Any stretch or bend or kink in the clay now—no matter how much you try to straighten it out or smooth it over—will reappear in the drying and the firing. Remember: clay does not forget.

Clay is essentially gray matter.

Clay's memory is perhaps more reliable than my own.

Clay hasn't any words and I can't understand it.

I have been fantasizing about seizing and containing the tyrant emotions that govern my body and turning them into souvenirs. Neurosis incarnate! I think I will send you a postcard of this one.

I had planned on getting this impression of your back for some time. How fitting that when I finally do, it is on the eve of your departure from Louisiana. The only surprise to this ending is the nausea I'm feeling as I approach Lafayette. I can't believe I have to pull over at a Circle K in Henderson and drape a piece of clay over my stomach before I can work up the nerve to proceed. An ending that will not end.

In my attempt to record a broken heart in clay, (or butterflies in my stomach, or the words stuck in the back of my throat) are several intentions:

1. To turn it to dust.
2. To remember it.
3. To forget it.
4. To acknowledge that a present vulnerability will soon be forgotten, or that a forgotten vulnerability may yet warrant recall.
5. To give myself a task to do to, like putting on armor, or cleaning up a spill.
6. To escort it from inside to outside my self; to create distance and proximity.
7. To have an active hand in its departure.
8. To contain it; keep it from running amok.

In her essay on the abject, Julia Kristeva exemplifies our bodily fluids and waste as "what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death."³ Such is the emotional ambush within my borders that I must constantly cast out in order to survive. Nausea, panic, anguish, when my attention is turned to you.

³ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Trans. Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1941), 3.

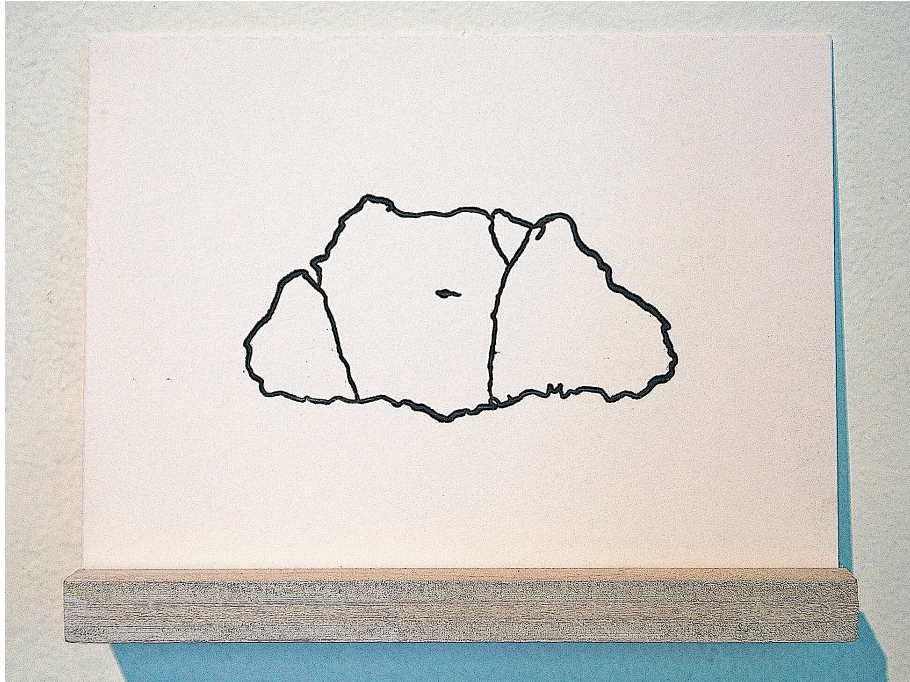


Figure 8. *Tues Feb 9, 2016: Regret*, from *Butterfly Collection*, relief print postcard, 2016



Figure 9. *Tues Feb 9, 2016: Regret*, from *Butterfly Collection*, unfired clay recording, 2016

Imagine a yawn turned inside out. Instead of the muscles stretching, they're folding in. Instead of the lungs filling, they're being vacuumed out. The sigh closing the yawn like a period is instead not even a question but an abandoned sentence—a long dash extending out into space. Into the infinite polite decline. This is a feeling of regret.

I had a mind to lend material weight to such things, so that I might relieve myself of some of their burden. So that I might really make one sing with the proper lighting. Or the proper projection out of a car window while driving over the Mississippi.



Figure 10. *Death Mask*, 2015, unfired porcelain recording of my heart while reading the letter you left me; *Swallow Hard*, 2016, unfired porcelain recording of my throat while holding your face in my hands

There are some cultures that believe that with each photograph taken a thin layer of its subject is removed, and that these layers are finite and can be depleted. Kristeva too claims there is a finitude of that which the body can jettison to stay afloat. “Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit—cadere, cadaver.”⁴

⁴ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 3.

In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes' search for the essence of his mother culminates with a single image of her as a little girl, which he calls, *The Winter Garden Photograph*—"a supererogatory photograph which contained more than what the technical being of photography can reasonably offer...this photograph collected all the possible predicates from which my mother's being was constituted . . . it achieved for me, utopically, *the impossible science of the unique being*."⁵

He wrote this while mourning the recent passing of his mother.



Figure 11. *Mother (Winter Garden)*, photograph, 2016

So certain that something of his mother is in the photograph that he turns it over, "to enter into the paper's depth, to reach its other side (what is hidden is for us Westerners more 'true' than what is visible)."⁶

⁵ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, Trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 70-71.

⁶ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 100.

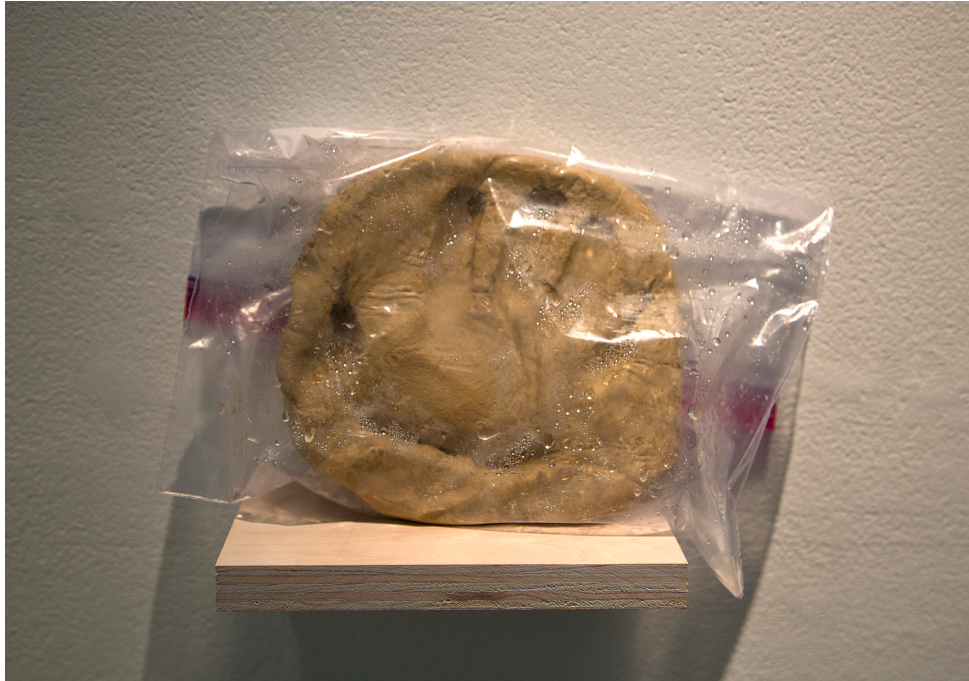


Figure 12. *Mother (Winter Garden)*, clay imprint of my mother's hand, 2016



Figure 13. *Mother (Winter Garden)*, 2016

In his essay, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," Andre Bazin states, "The photograph as such and the object in itself share a common being, after the fashion of a fingerprint."⁷

⁷ Andre Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" from *What is Cinema?*, Trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 195.

The Permanent Way is another name for the railway. During construction, a temporary track was often laid to transport materials. As the work was completed, the temporary track was taken up and the permanent way installed.

I lay clay on railroad tracks, I step onto it, I move forward one slab at a time, pulling them up behind me as I go and turning them over. The resulting tiles, with impressions of my footsteps on one side and the track on the other, are then viewed in reverse, so that my footprints are hidden underneath. Likewise, standing on the upturned impression offers the unusual vantage of actually standing on the tracks' underside.

The word *understand*, in Old English, translates simply as: *to stand under*, or *among*; while in Greek: *to stand upon* or *before*—both etymologies imply that understanding is experienced through the body.

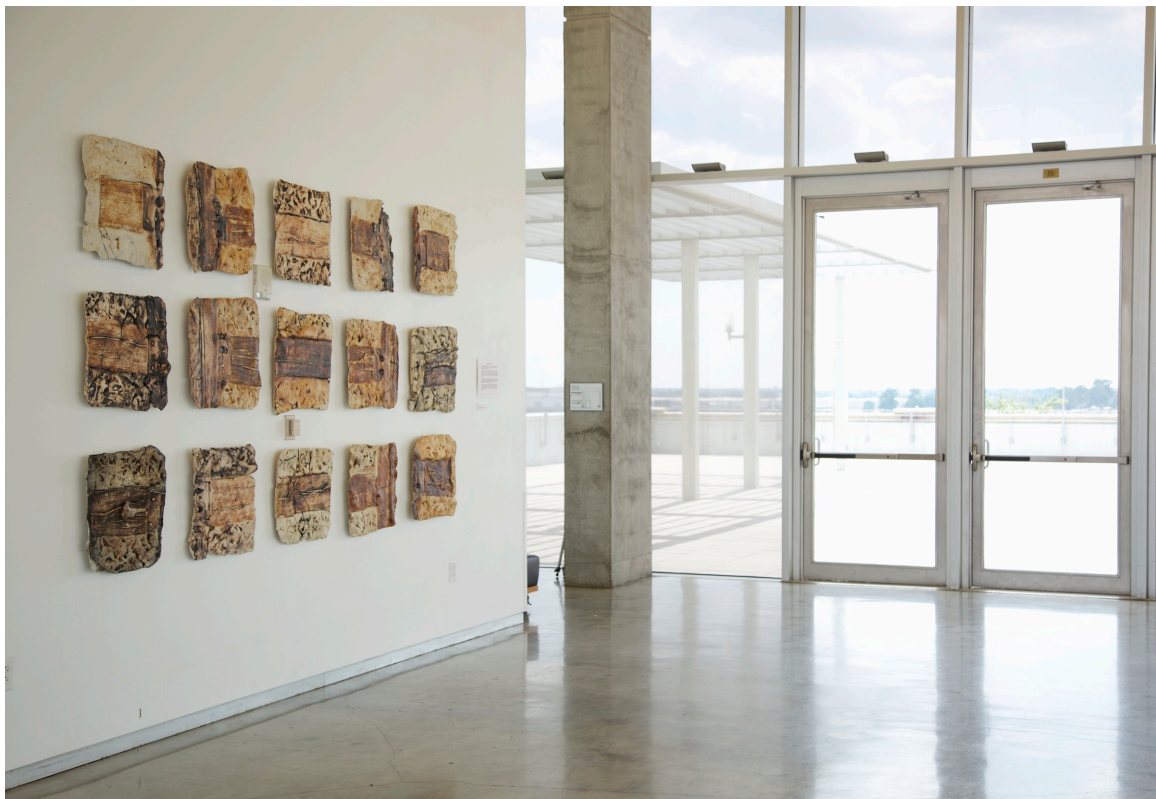


Figure 14. *The Permanent Way*, 2015, ongoing, unfired porcelain recordings of my walking on the railroad tracks

Is the worth of an object not made to last greater or less than one made to be 'permanent'?

You are asking the wrong question.

What is the worth of the circumstance leading to the procuring of the object?



Figure 15. *The Permanent Way*, detail, 2016

The tracks are in constant need of restoration, and taking impressions in “plasticine” was one of the earliest methods of measuring the extent to which the rails have worn.

When put into words, a circumstance is in its most resilient state.

Words are untethered and indepleteable (I believe this to be true, in spite of the countless times I am depleted). They refuse ownership. And you cannot destroy what you cannot catch.

somewhere went
what been

prolific

and

whistling



Figure 16. *Somewhere Went What Been Prolific and Whistling* from *A Three Season Word Inventory*, 2016

I wrote on the wing of a moth.
I flung a dewdrop from a blade of grass.
I watched the sun fall in and out of step with a loop of a barbed wire fence.
I turned over on my back to the sound of an engine roaring in the sky and saw only a mosquito.
I wrote a sentence like dragging a string. Through a field. Of string.
I closed my eyes for a moment and almost fell asleep but was yanked back by three sounds and then four: an engine in a sky, a rattling whirl of an AC unit, a train somewhere in a distance. Then a man's voice as he rode by on a bike path. Five: a pulsing car alarm. Six: chattering birds. Seven: ever so softly spokes spinning. The spatter of a dewdrop. A moth's message in flight. If I listen hard and long enough, beyond these might I hear it?
Bike: ding ding. Train is further away.

Thinking on the people and moments I have been attempting to hold in clay led me to consider other ways in which a person's presence manifests. I thought of a person's words not just as indelible imprints but as also charged and moving things. I now know this to be so by the arduous undertaking of removing them. I began with the most weighted words I could think of, that of a good-bye letter, and continued with hand-written accounts of my own history.

It is about listening.



Figure 17. *At Least My Mistakes Are Not All In Front Of Me*, detail, 2016, 2013 journal with pages relieved of their words, or words relieved of their pages

The auricle is the upper chamber of the heart named after its resemblance to the ear.

Rules for reading my journal:
Please maintain order
Please do not mix words
Please do not leave door open



Figure 18. *Him, Him, Her: A Three Season Word Inventory*, 2016, first journal in Louisiana, selected entries removed



Figure 19. *Him, Him, Her: A Three Season Word Inventory*, detail, 2016

The three or so millimeters in between the tip of this pen and the paper plane (as in surface) translates as three or so minutes, or three and a half decades. This is followed by a staccato of pauses of varying lengths in between most words. Could be measured in weight—no—it is heavy, yes, but unweighable, so far. Could perhaps be measured in pounds of unwritten pages. Twenty-two minutes brings me here, likely twenty-one and a half of three or so millimeters.

Three or so millimeters stretch into the horizon. Were you to peer over the edge of one side and drop, I don't know, your pen, and wait for the sound of it meeting the bottom, it would be the closest thing to silence your beating auricle will ever hear. If you succeed in falling in after it, you will never know it.

Just as I am falling asleep, a loud sound comes from inside my jaw like a slamming door and startles me awake. It echoes like down a dark hallway. Whatever it is, I never say it.

My love's shadow left a goodbye letter on the wall

A snowstorm

Left a snowflake



Figure 20. *Goodbye Letter: A Ten Breath Breathing Exercise*, 2016, video projection

It is about the failure and triumph and betrayal and permanence of an utterance.

I had a dream that involved a piece of paper. A little note, one word perhaps, that I slid under a wall, that was itself a piece of paper. Just a regular sheet of paper that was enough to block out everything. On the other side was one—or every one of them all mixed into one—who once loved me.

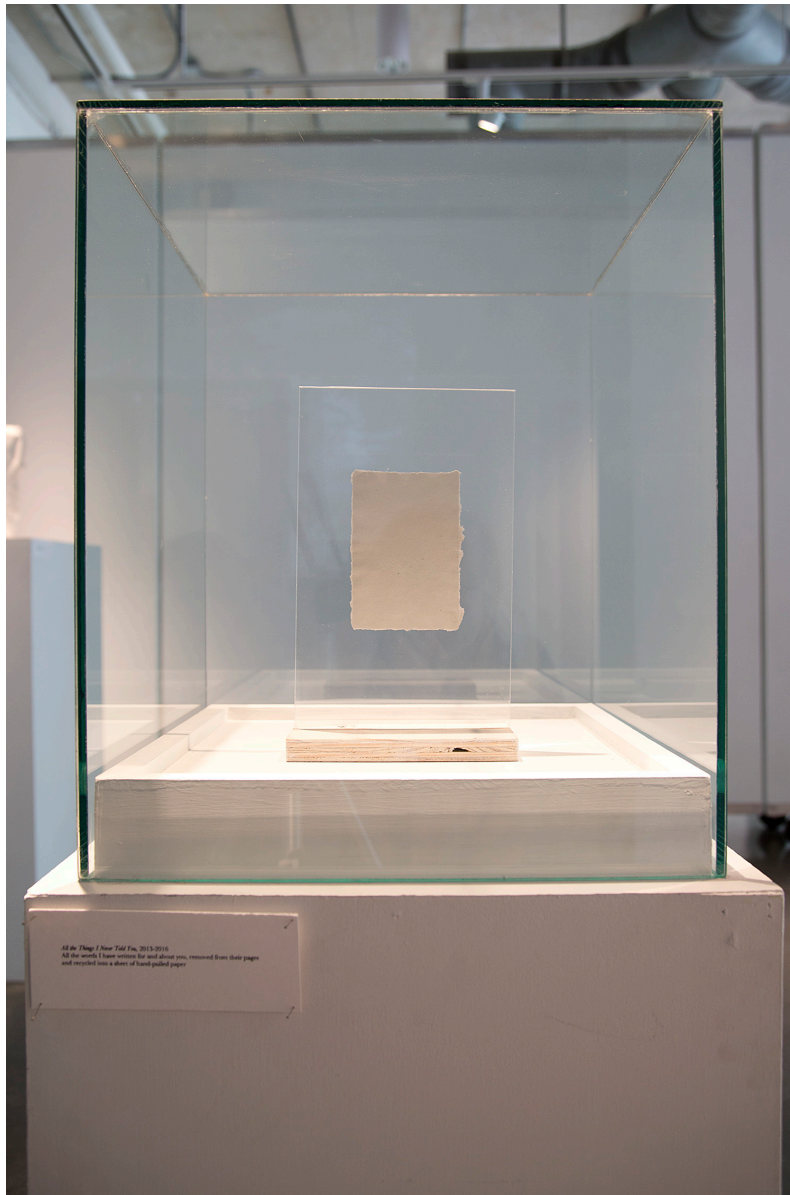


Figure 21. *All the Things I Never Told You*, 2013-2016, all the words I have ever written for and about you, removed from their pages and recycled into a sheet of hand-pulled paper

When figures appear in your dreams, what are these thoughts made of? When someone kisses a face in a photograph, what kind of materiality does the loved one in the image possess? In what ways do a phantasm in the mind and an image made of light resemble each other? They exist on the obscure frontier of materiality and immateriality, but does this frontier correspond to the mysterious, ungraspable frontier between body and spirit, between physical individual forms and the animating of character of persons?⁸

I come home to the box on my doorstep, marked by your unmistakable scrawl, three days before my thesis defense. Nearly two years after my request, you send it the night before you leave for the army, to earn your place in the world. I have an idea of what is inside but I don't know exactly what part you chose. When I open it up I am not prepared to hold your face in my hands. It's like a real death mask. You moaned into the clay for a good ten minutes, said it took your allergies away.

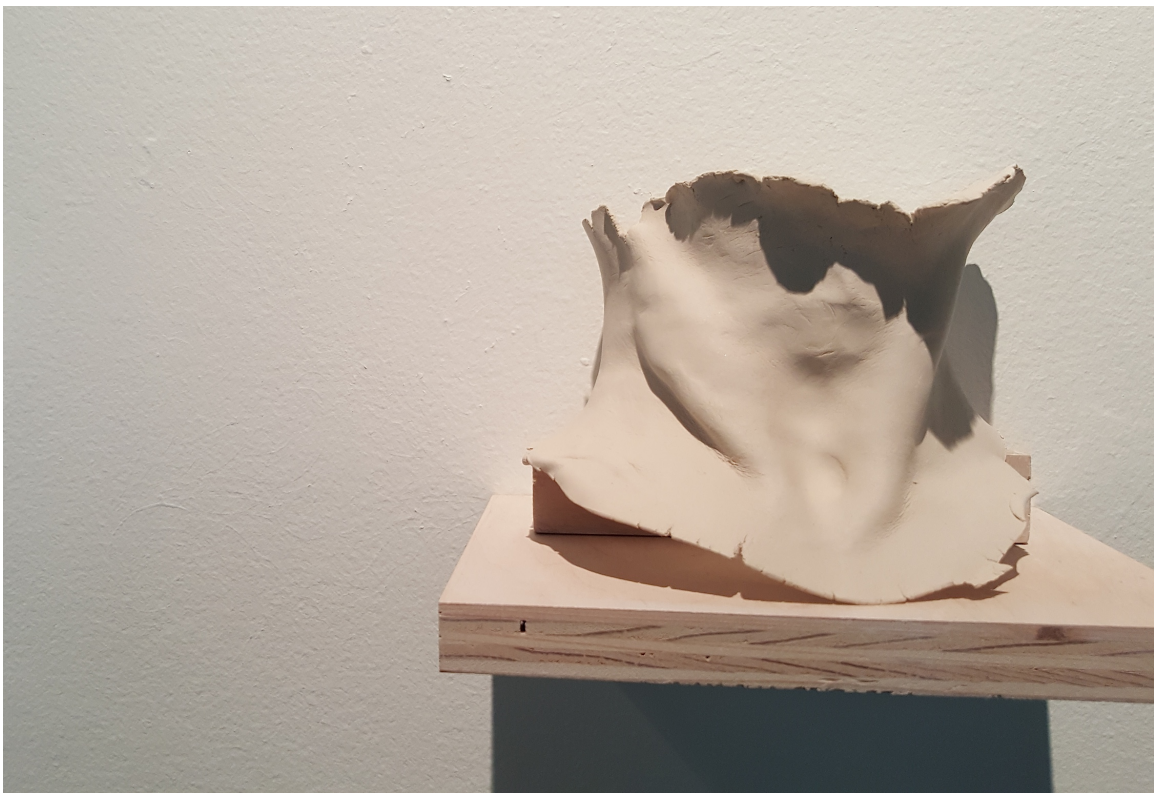


Figure 22. *Swallow Hard*, 2016 unfired porcelain recording of my throat while holding your face in my hands

⁸ Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors, and Media into the Twenty-first Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 189.

Eschatology is the study of the end of things. Etiology is the study of the origin of things. Etymology is the study of the origin words. I have yet to learn the word for the study of the end of words.

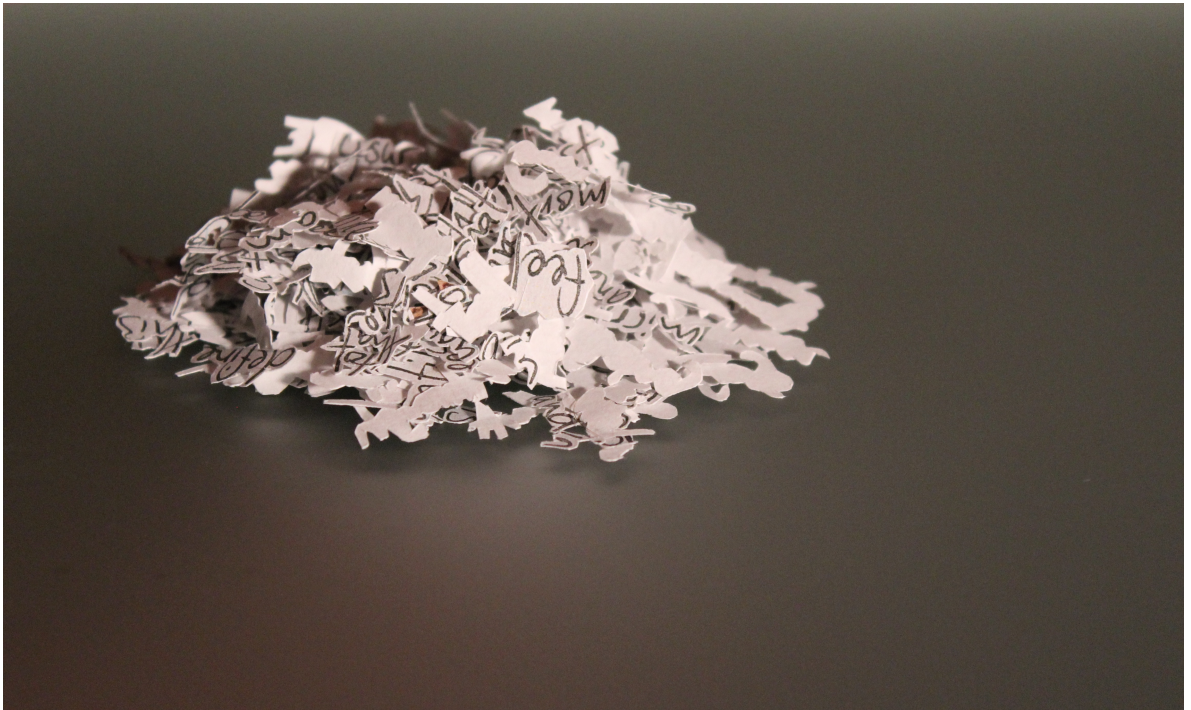


Figure 23. *Goodbye Letter*, 2016

I remember a big field and everything in it, a picnic table, barbed wire, cloud, moth, mosquito. I can't recall and it doesn't matter who was who, or who I was, I don't know you yet or anymore and we were all mixed up and the same. If it was me, doing something wrong, which it kind of felt like, it was only faintly, as from a distance. I could no longer hear the train. What woke me was Hazel Dickens singing *My Better Years*. Maybe that's just to assure me that this is about heartache, even if I don't understand why yet.

You were wrong. In our first conversation you said we dream in silence.



Figure 24. *Your Back, To Me*, detail with hair, 2016

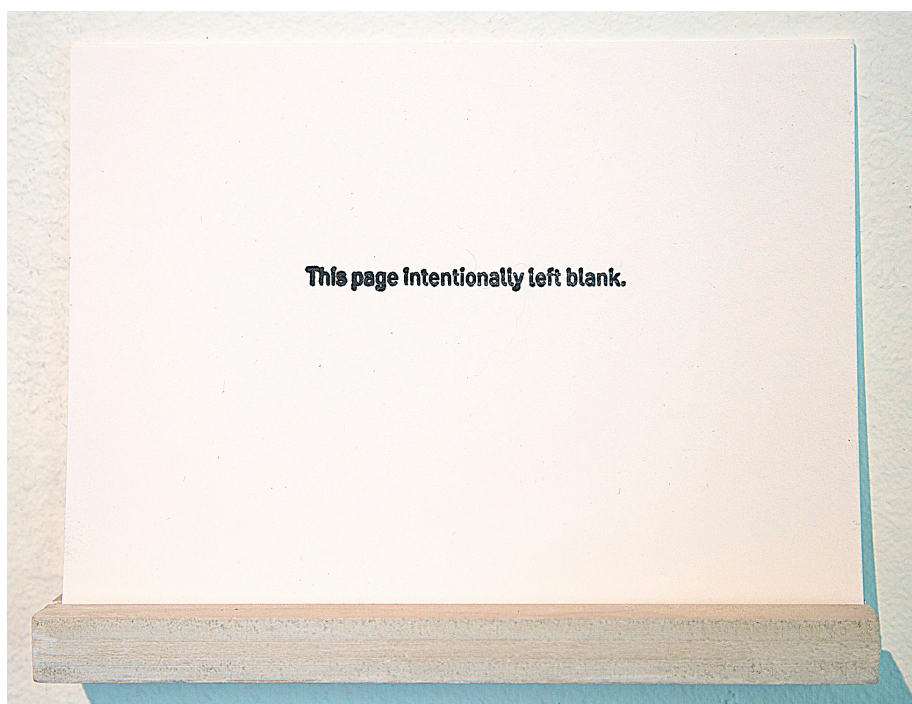


Figure 25. *This Page Intentionally Left Blank/Currently Recording*, from *Butterfly Collection*, relief print postcard, 2016

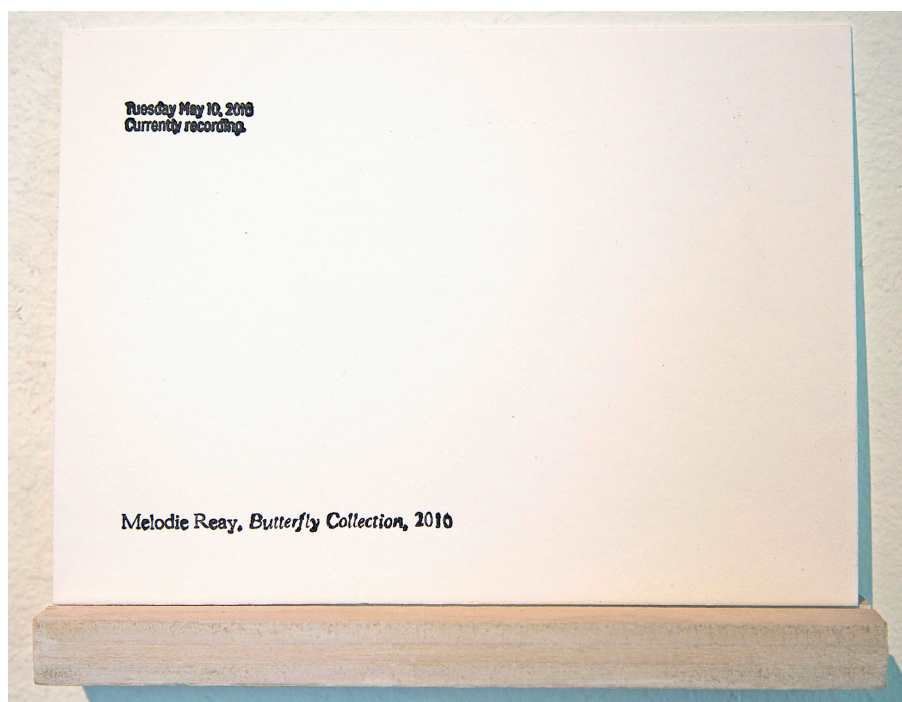


Figure 26. *Currently Recording/This Page Intentionally Left Blank*, from, *Butterfly Collection*, relief print postcard, 2016

INSTALLATION VIEWS



Figure 27. *Installation View 1*, 2016



Figure 28. *Installation View 2*, 2016



Figure 29. *Installation View 3*, 2016

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VITA

Melodie Reay was born in British Columbia. She received her BFA at Concordia University in Montreal, and is a current MFA in Studio Arts candidate at Louisiana State University. Upon graduation she plans to live on in Louisiana, turning her research to song and dance.