2012

I saw life

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I SAW LIFE

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 Arts

by

David Williams
B.F.A., Colorado State University, 2008
August 2012
DEDICATION

This body of work is dedicated to:

My Dad

John David Williams
March 11, 1946 – August 11, 2009

And to my Grandpa

Bert Eugene Hyde
July 7, 1924 – April 26, 2012
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincere gratitude goes to my entire thesis committee: Leslie Koptcho, Kimberly Arp, Denyce Celentano, Ed Smith and Kelli Scott Kelley. You have all in different ways been exceptionally helpful during this research. Leslie, thank you for your generosity, knowledge, and patience with me throughout my graduate studies. You were so very warm with me from the moment I arrived in Baton Rouge, and I will never forget the three years spent here with you as the chair of my committee. I have learned so much from you. Also, my thanks to Kimberly Arp for without your advice at pivotal times I would not be where I am today. Denyce Celentano, all I can say is thank you so much. You pushed me where I did not realize I could go. I will miss our talks. Lastly, and most importantly thank you to my family for all your support, specifically my Mother. You all know the roles you have played.
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ABSTRACT

My thesis embodies the uncertainties and reservations that surround one’s mortality. Dealing with the loss of my father who suddenly passed away two and a half years ago has sparked an emotionally driven artistic process. The abruptness of my Dad being alive one second and with little or no warning deceased the next has impacted my work tremendously. My goal has been to evoke and share the very human emotions that occur during the erratic stages of grief. This research acknowledges the ‘black and white’ absolutes of living and dying, yet those ideas are juxtaposed with the many gray areas often more difficult to comprehend. Those ‘gray’ interests include: the conflicting forces of a falling body and a rising spirit, reflections of time, change, impermanence, significance, and finally questions of after-life. Although, many of the questions I have explored are esoteric in nature, there is not an enlightened inner circle, or a resource for exact answers to my interests. I am trying to link embodiment, or physical existence, with ideas that are only present in the mind; as well as searching for a visual and metaphorical bridge between here and hereafter. Representing obscurity with any kind of clarity is difficult. Is it possible to depict those places and ideas?
I SAW LIFE

Most evenings I sat on the bank of that stream with music playing in my ears, which helped block out the noise from the ongoing traffic. I felt comfort surrounded by grass, trees and water. I would sit, often with ambivalence, sometimes sad, other times satisfied, and look up at the sweeping shifts of the clouds... searching for the perfect gap in the cloud formations where light would be exposed. Gateways to what I could not see, nor could I understand, and places not of this world were at times revealed and then would fade.

The more one dwells in the reality and the intricacies of a painful event, the more one yearns to reinvent those memories, abstract them, and to experience resiliency. My thesis embodies the uncertainties and reservations that surround one’s mortality. Dealing with the loss of my father who suddenly passed away two and a half years ago has sparked an emotionally driven artistic process. It was a traumatic experience for my family and myself, and certainly marks a pivotal time in my life. The abruptness of my Dad being alive one second and with little or no warning deceased the next has impacted my work tremendously. My goal has been to evoke and share the very human emotions that occur during the erratic stages of grief. This research acknowledges the ‘black and white’ absolutes of living and dying, yet those ideas are juxtaposed with the many gray areas often more difficult to comprehend. Those ‘gray’ interests include: the conflicting forces of a falling body and a rising spirit, reflections of time, change, impermanence, significance, and finally questions of after-life.

People have been pondering death, and afterlife for millennia. In Plato’s *Phaedo*, which recounts one of Socrates’ last conversations before his death, he states, “As the body is mortal and is subject to physical death, the soul must be its indestructible opposite.” My investigation is a highly personal one, however losing a loved one is an inevitability experienced by everyone. Attempting to narrow the gaps of my own understanding of the places that I think of as afterlife, and exploring one’s last moments on earth, has been difficult, yet endless. Is it possible to depict those places and ideas?
The definition of esoteric\(^1\) has been intriguing to me throughout this research. Although, many of the questions I have explored are esoteric in nature, there is not an enlightened inner circle, or a resource for exact answers to my interests. I am trying to link embodiment, or physical existence, with ideas that are only present in the mind; as well as searching for a visual and metaphorical bridge between here and hereafter.

Abstraction is often defined as a simplification of an idea, or an object, but I prefer to approach abstraction as an entanglement of problematic ideas, or challenges that may or may not be loosened depending on how the course of searching and experimentation plays out. Finding imagery through mark making, and learning from the unanticipated happenings that occur during the process of making is second nature to me. This way of thinking acts as a liaison to the obstinate process of visually representing what cannot be seen, or accurately visualized. For instance, I would like to envision life after death to be quite similar to life as we know it, yet that perception seems too far removed from my logic to pursue ‘imagistically’ and also rather boring. To me, representing the uncertainties of life with familiar imagery is more of an abstract idea than approaching my doubts with uncertain similes. Representing obscurity with any kind of clarity is difficult. Finding symbolic and metaphorical stepping-stones that coincide with my interests, such as: the historical uses of gold leaf, the ways my contemporaries have explored similar notions, and lastly conceptualizing regional, and familial folklore has greatly changed my work as a whole.

There are swallows all over the world, but I have never witnessed so many in one place as I have in Italy. Swallows represent both warning signs of storms to come, and possess traits of always finding their way home. Because of Italy’s geographic location, African swallows are abundant and make their presence known. It is said to be true that when the swallows fly wildly and erratically there is bad weather to come. Italy’s cities are very compact, and often there are very narrow walkways and streets. When one walks down a street in a compressed ancient city there is frequently not a lot of sky to be seen. If a large number of swallows are noisily humming around overhead it is quite similar to

\(^1\) esoteric- understood by or meant for only the select few who have special knowledge or interest: recondite.
looking through a picture finder on a camera that crops the scene as it is laid out. I have witnessed hundreds and hundreds of swallows swooping and yelling for hours as dark clouds rolled in. Beautiful yes, but also quite troubling and mysterious. On one hand, I wish there could have been a warning sign before my father’s death, and on the other I am glad there was none.

My love for art history, and history as a whole, has proven quite beneficial as I have found historical connections, which have changed my imagery. One of the magnificent aspects of Italy is that every town has its own iconic, master work of art tucked away in a large or small chapel. Visiting over thirty towns, and cities within Italy over the last four years has given me some insight to the history of Italian art. In the summer of 2011, I worked as a resident artist in a printmaking studio in Castiglion Fiorentino, which is south of Florence. Although, this was my fourth time working in that same studio, this trip proved to be the most rewarding. More important than the religious relevance of the artworks I visited, I began to understand the use of gold leaf. Research of the historical functions and rationalizations behind the use of gold leaf in Byzantine and later eras of art history shows its use for the conceptualization of divinity and infinity. Notions of illumination, light, flatness, and vastness all encompass the intentions and interpretations of gold leaf. Although, this is a very complex discussion, what rang true for me, was that during this time period in Italy gold leaf depicted realms that humans could not comprehend, nor should they try.

Pienza is a town in Tuscany that I have visited a number of times, but my visit last summer to the Duomo (cathedral) left a huge impact on my work. There are six altarpieces that were done in the middle of the 15th century under Pope Pius II. Four painters from the Sienese school: Sano di Pietro, Matteo di Giovanni, Vecchietta, and Giovanni di Paolo depicted both Assumption and Annunciation scenes of The Madonna with Child and Saints. In front of these paintings, I began cropping the pictures with my hands in order to block the majority of the figures depicted. In doing so, the paintings were left with quite non-representational compositions. To me, it was breathtakingly beautiful. From then on I began intensely researching the use of the gold leaf.
The timeline is debated as to the exact dates, but for reference the Byzantine era is 5th century AD to 1453 after the second sack of Constantinople. But, truly the first sack of Constantinople in 1204, marks the beginning of Renaissance ideology. During the 13th and 14th centuries the Catholic religion was at a place where humans were encouraged to be closely connected to God, however there was an absence of thought that men had the ability to think independently; and people were to perceive the icons of Catholicism apart from themselves. There was a gap between the divinity, which only God and his close consorts could possess and the everyday man. Illiteracy was widespread so much so that much of Catholic ideology was taught through images and folklore passed down from generation to generation. The spirituality and faith that people possessed of a realm beyond human comprehension existing during a highly illiterate time with mainly images as resource made a large impact on me. As well, I felt the pictorial space in which the gold leaf depicted during this time was not challenged for hundreds of years. The belief that these pictorial representations were displayed as truth and were not to be questioned necessarily has also been a point of intrigue. This struck me as a wonderful avenue for experimentation.

Gold leaf was used not only for halos, and decorative ornamentation; but filled entire compositional backgrounds of altar paintings, illuminated manuscripts, mosaics, and many other surfaces. The large areas of gold leaf used throughout these time periods were often confused within the compositional components of foreground, middle ground, and background that we understand today; and that were further recognized throughout
the Italian Renaissance. Often the foreground is shown in one-point perspective, but there is no middle ground or background as gilded surfaces encompassed that entire space.

Humanist philosophies gained popularity throughout the Renaissance. This new philosophy saw man as a rational and sentient being, and enabled man to inquire about history beyond Christian history. Figures, proportions, and compositions became more realistic for a number of reasons, but the one I will emphasize is that the creation of credible space, allowed artists to focus on more accurate representations of the human body, naturalistic landscapes, as well as illusionistic atmospheres within the medium of painting. Artists and viewers alike could now more so than ever relate to the areas religious icons were portrayed as being in, or inhabiting.

So, as the ideologies of the Renaissance gained popularity, which looked back to Greek classicism, and naturalistic ways of learning, the use of gold leaf dwindled. It is difficult to understand whether gold leaf separated man from notions of one-self, or the opposite, but to ponder incomprehensible spaces such as: heaven, or ideas of divinity were being approached differently and challenged more so than before. It became quickly apparent to me that gold leaf served the exact function I had been searching for. Instead of seeking unattainable imagery, and being dissatisfied with my attempts, I could now incorporate gold leaf to signify unexplainable, esoteric ideas, and or places in my work. I travelled to Florence soon after to buy some metal leaf materials.

Figure 2 - Experiments while working in Castiglion Fiorentino, Italy, 2011

In addition to the impact gold leaf has had on my research, the use of drapery, which often signifies grace and elegance in Italian art, has also played a developmental
role. I have utilized Japanese papers as a form of skin-like drapery, and wrapped some of the corporeal forms I make with that material. I figured out that if you put an epoxy-resin on thin rice paper it becomes transparent, yet holds the imagery on its surface. Although, I use synthetic resins, true resin stems from plants and trees naturally, and have been documented in Ancient Greece, Egypt, and Italy for uses of incense and perfumes and religious ceremonies. In nature, resin often solidifies around an object or organism, and preserves that moment forever. Referencing the body after one dies, to me personally, is a very sensitive subject. I believe drapery has given my forms the reverence and dignity they deserve.

As I have definitely been highly influenced by the past, I am equally interested in contemporary art. Prior to the last couple of years these interests were more fueled by visual connections rather than by conceptual ones, which has changed. The importance of relating to how or why an artist interpreted certain subject matter in their work has drastically affected my partiality to what kinds of artworks inspire me. My attraction to Kiki Smith’s work is her ability to focus on very personal subject matter in an ambiguous, empathetic, and honest way. She addresses ideas of spirituality, and death in ways that are quite intriguing to me. I have had a long time interest in her print titled, “Pieta” where she is sitting holding her dead cat. I will further explain this interest later. In October of 2011 I had the privilege to interview Kiki Smith. As I took away a great deal from the hour-long phone conversation we had, there were a couple of points she expressed that have resonated with me greatly. Towards the beginning of the interview I mentioned my work and subject matter, and told her that I finally realized how close our lives can and should be linked with our artistic lives, and how she has inspired me to do that. Below follows excerpts from that interview:

KS: I don’t think one has to have one’s work about anything in particular. All art is just a way to synthesize your experience… um your visual experience…it’s just a way of synthesizing your visual experience of being alive. It can always have endless manifestations, it doesn’t have to be about anything. If you just say it’s a space, it’s not like making a temporary order, but a temporary model of what engages you at a particular moment. Work changes all the time, it changes. Your life changes, so it’s just normal that different things surface in your work at different times. For me, I am not trying to make a personal narrative about my family life, but I am definitely using my poor family, (she laughs) anything is up for grabs. I am not separating my personal life from any other
interest in my life. They are not protected against my artwork either. It’s just a way of filtering your experience through making some sort of visual manifestation outside of your own body… with your body but outside of it. So they have their own space to breathe in and look at it.

DW: Yes, your work seems to have changed quite a lot over the years.

KS: Yeah you know I have been making work since I was twenty-four, now I am fifty-seven, so yeah my life changed over the years. The things that are interesting to me, or are compelling to me, changes. You have a very different kind of energy for one, and also the things I’ve seen… when I started making work I had not seen so much of the world. And also my work is just a response to what I am seeing, and what is interesting to me, what I try and learn about. And I think I like to learn about forms that already exist and that are compelling to me and then and to try and look at them through making…to learn about them through making.

DW: Have you ever been apprehensive about tackling an issue or subject matter in your work?

KS: Umm, yeah sometimes I suppose, but I don’t feel like in a way… sometimes I don’t like my work, I think why does it have to be a particular way or have to look a particular way, sometimes I have an idea of doing something that I kind of dread, and I kind of hang around in that dread for awhile, and then do it or not do it, and sometimes it’s just too much work… you know because I’m just lazy. (we laugh)

KS: I think the whole thing about being an artist is that you are supposed to let go of your judgment… ‘judgmentalness’ about what you’re supposed to be doing, you just follow your work, you know, if your work wants to go in some weird place that you don’t want to go or whatever, you just follow it regardless, and that seems to me the deal. You are not supposed to be saying oh this is good or this is bad, it doesn’t matter, you just need to go where it takes you. See what it looks like, and to me still everything is really located in the process, you know the process is really where you have your real experience and freedom from yourself kind of. A thing is just a thing, afterwards some things are more fulfilling and more interesting than other things in the long run, for you and for other people, but the things come and go. And the things are usually dissatisfying or you wouldn’t have to make another one.

DW: Yeah I think if you are ever satisfied you should just stop.

KS: (she laughs) Yeah I think that you would just quit. I think there is always something new to explore… Basically all you can do is you can do what is closest to your heart, or closest to your consciousness to do, and if that fits with the rest of the universe then so be it and if it doesn’t so be it…but basically all you have to do is show up and do your work as non-judgementally and as deeply connected to you as possible without being invalid about it. One wants to have pleasure and enjoy it essentially. Basically to me making
things is about pleasure, what gives me the most happiness, the most satisfaction, the most pleasure, is me being busy doing something.

I feel honored to have spoken with Kiki Smith for the insights she shared, and also for her generosity to openly speak with a stranger. She helped me to realize that although topics are at times very personal, and complicated, follow your instincts, be playful in your approach, and be mindful that this is just a body of work, a stage in my own maturation as an artist. A great deal of finding my way through difficult subject matter occurs during my art making. I have pursued different paths while approaching death as my content, yet determining whether or not to continue to do so in a certain direction has been experimental. Certain directions to my work have been stopped short, because I did not feel that anything cathartic came out of the process.

My exhibition is divided thematically based on the various stages of the grieving process: *Warning Signs, Death, Spirituality, and Resiliency*. Leading my audience in a quasi-narrative fashion, I have created an environment that moves clockwise around the gallery. By directing my audience in a circular motion, I emphasize not only the timeline of events of my own grieving process; but also suggest more universal ideas of time, and the cyclical nature of my subject matter. *Warning Signs*, acts as the introduction to the show. It was inspired by two phrases often used in Italy: “when the clouds look like little sheep it’s going to rain buckets” and as I mentioned earlier, “when the swallows fly wildly and erratically a storm is sure to come.” Ideas of warning signs, death, spirituality, and resiliency are portrayed throughout the exhibition. There are references to these themes in my titles, but the specific stages of grief are not precisely differentiated or delineated.

I have always said that if my hands are as rough as my grandfathers’ when I die, I will die happy. Growing up, I worked on my grandparents ranch in Colorado during the summers. At an early age I was fixing and building fences, rolling barbed wire, doing chainsaw work, splitting the wood, among many other physical tasks. A very important aspect to this body of work is my exploration of new material. I enjoy using my hands and to work in a physical manner. I have learned how to weld, how to forge cold steel, how to engrave on copper by hand, among other processes. I have explored using various papers, copper, wax, steel, glass, tree branches, photographs, toenails/fingernails, resins,
oil, tar, metal leaf, mylar, and video processes. A great interest of mine while approaching my current work has been to blur the boundaries between three-dimensional objects and two-dimensional illusions on a flat surface. As well, different mediums lend themselves to certain ideas more successfully than others. For example: wax and fibrous paper resembles skin, copper is reflective like gold, and resin illuminates. Photographs and video capture a specific moment in time, and although toenails and fingernails are proteins they share similarities with bone. All of these experiments have enhanced my confidence to make a cohesive body of work with a variety of material, and to utilize them as they support a specific concept.

Although, I splice multiple techniques together, my regard for traditional printmaking methods is unwavering. The inherent evolutionary qualities of intaglio printmaking work as metaphors for states of being, and act as a model for how I approach all of my work. Manipulating a copper plate either by hand, or with acid etching techniques is a laborious process. When one prints a state of that plate, he or she reflects back on the decisions made, and more often than not moves forward deciphering what is to be kept, erased, and what is to be worked upon further. The results of those efforts are dependent on many variables, and at no time are there any guarantees until a print is made from the matrix. But, now there is documentation of that state.

While I am a quite stubborn formalist at heart, I never make preliminary sketches as to how something is supposed to look, or end up. I usually construct certain parts of a composition and allow the work and process to inform me from that point forward. That is not to say that I do not start with a concept or a certain frame of mind. All of my recent work, both conceptually and visually are reflections back, and then deciding where and when to move forward. Making imagery, layer upon layer, and then cutting them up to make something new goes hand in hand with my concepts of attempting to understand complex situations that are unclear until a deep and intimate investigation has occurred. Although I did not mention this under my Italian influences, I attribute a portion of the collage techniques I utilize to the mosaics that I have seen while in Italy, (specifically, at San Marco Basilica in Venice.)

In addition, I have found there are certain things that I simply cannot represent in a picture, or an object so I write those ideas down on my surfaces. This allows me to
recollect memories, and acts as a type of journal where I can communicate with my dad; talk with him and share news. Although, most of the writing is illegible and a personal expression, handwritten text has been the foundation, and jumping off point to nearly every piece included in my thesis.

There are five works in particular that I will briefly discuss, which I believe encompass a great portion of the ideas, concepts, and process of how this body of work was executed, and realized. In Italy, summer of 2011, I made a monotype print that has informed much of my work, both conceptually and compositionally.

Figure 3 - Study for Separation By Moments

The goal was to represent the separation between life on earth and what happens after we die. I wanted to portray the rising of one’s spirit, but to also show the inevitability that we will die, and that there is a great separation between life here on earth and wherever the other side is. Compositionally, I made decisions that highlight an upward rising or force that is cut off by a strip at the bottom. That strip represents here and now on earth, (the living). The gold leaf at the top of the composition serves as the area I cannot locate.

*Separation By Moments*, is a large triptych, which references an altarpiece, and is based on the study I made in Italy. This mixed media painting has great importance to me not only because it was the jumping off point to my thesis research, but moreover it points to some of the most important aspects of my inquiries. Quite literally I attempted to find heaven in this piece. I began writing on the surface of the three panels with a
brush and red oil paint. The color choice was in reference to the Sienna red that shines through on many Italian panel paintings. Italians artists used red as a preliminary under painting before the gold leaf was applied. Often as a viewer you can see that red shine through the gold leafed areas. I then started cutting up older prints that were completed the previous year. They were made when I was searching for something that could not be found.

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Figure 4 - *Separation By Moments*

The steel end caps on the left and right sides represent a solid, unavoidable fact. I remember when I saw my dad in the casket he was not there. All of the wonderful attributes that encompassed who he was were gone. We will die, we will be apart from all earthly relationships, possessions, etc. and there is a gap between everything understood by people on Earth, and wherever the next level is or whatever it looks like. Also, the steel references permanence. I decided to bend the steel to the shape I wanted so they might appear as solid chunks. There are machines that could have achieved this outcome very easily, but I wanted to cold forge the steel with my hands. The process of hammering is in recognition of the steel’s strength, and there are remnants of those
efforts. Nothing about understanding one’s mortality is easy, so approaching my work in the most difficult and laborious ways possible was always the goal. Hammering steel is quite cathartic as well. Additionally, the steel end caps enclose and capture the imagery on the three panels.

There is also a glass box on the bottom of the three panels and two end caps, which compositionally cuts them off like the strip of paper on the study I made in Italy. The viewer is separated and pushed back from the steel panels and the imagery between them with a fragile material. Life is extraordinarily fragile.

This finished presence of this painting absolutely ended up differently than I had envisioned, and more violent than intended. Not being able to see where my dad is, or to make sure he is ok came out visually.

*Lift, Grasp* is also a large triptych, which shares certain qualities of *Separation By Moments*, in that again I attempted to capture a visual moment of a place not of this world. The main difference from *Separation By Moments* to *Lift, Grasp* is that the actual rising of a body is strongly emphasized.
As mentioned previously, drapery represents dignity and grace in Italian paintings, so I covered a large area of the wooden panels with a Japanese rice paper as drapery. Leaving the wood grain open as I ‘resined’ the paper onto the surface was in recognition of an organic substance being wrapped. I also made little pockets, or capsules with the paper that I then filled with red oil paint in reference to bodily circulation. Both, Lift, Grasp, and Separation By Moments are large in scale to force my audience to physically interact with works. I wanted both paintings to evoke enough intrigue from a distance to compel the viewer to come up close and have to use their body to investigate their surfaces.

I have always been influenced by the iconic imagery of Madonna and Child, and specifically the pietas. Pieta literally translates from Italian to English as pity. Traditionally, the imagery is of Mary holding the deceased body of Jesus. Michelangelo’s pietas have had a great influence on me, as well as Kathe Kollwitz’ and Kiki Smith’s portrayals of that theme. After completing “Lift, Grasp” I had nightmares that I was with my dad and that I could not hold his body up, he continued to go limp. These dreams were actually quite traumatic for me, so I knew I needed to address that subject. I had never seen the image reversed, (child holding a deceased parent). Reverse Pieta: Time Now is a two sided piece that has both print and painting qualities with a mixed media sculptural object attached. One side references my want to reverse time, and the other represents current time. There are clocks embedded into both panels. The one on the pieta side is shown in reverse, and on the other side the clock is shown more visibly in correct time and order. Ever since my dad died, I have been overwhelmingly aware of my own mortality, and the fragility of that notion. The backside is mirror-like to emphasize reflection of oneself, and to be aware of the time spent here and now, alive. I included copper plates at the bottom of both sides which act as reflection pools for viewers, as well the copper expands and continues the imagery from the panels down through the ground.
Figure 6 - Installation view of *Reverse Pieta: Time Now*, (front side)

Figure 7 - Detail of *Reverse Pieta: Time Now*, (front side)
You must let go of people and move on, in a good, positive way. One artwork in particular I believe exemplifies that struggle is the photo collage, *Fade They Will*. At times it is difficult to be around men of similar age to my Dad when he passed. I took hundreds of photos of men around the age of 60, because I wanted to make a portrait of my Dad with those photos. I hung all the photos on my studio wall, and it quickly became apparent that none of them were my Dad, and it was painful and quite honestly I was in a bad place emotionally for days after. The realization that I needed to let go of certain things surrounding my father’s death became apparent. I came back to the studio and removed all of the photos except two that were randomly of sunsets. Drawing inspiration from sunsets and linking them with my visual and metaphorical interests is an exercise directed to change, and impermanence that I have thought about ever since my Dad passed. But this time I found myself collaging the sunset photos by accident, placing the sunsets on the left side and working my way to the left, where eventually there would be photos of a sunrise. It was time for a new day.

After spending around six weeks intricately collaging the 4x6 and 5x7 inkjet photographs I believed the image done. To seal some of the photos that had not been glued, I decided to selectively resin the surface of the 4ft by 6ft panel. A chemical reaction occurred which I still do not fully understand, but something with the resin,
contact cement, and spray fixative caused an extreme bleeding of the photographs. Twenty percent or so was gone after one night, then thirty, then the next day forty percent gone, and so on. I could not do anything about it.

Everyday more and more would fade away, I tried to stop or at least slow the process, but nothing worked. I found that I could manipulate it so I did. Satisfied after working on it one night, I would come back the next day and it would be gone, or at least different than I had left it. Finally, I had to let go, succumb, submit to the forces of nature. I could not change this chemical reaction. The photos are still changing to this day. It is not what I once had visually, or how I had envisioned the collage would end up, but often that is how life is. How to make a positive out of what seems at first detrimental is one of the many things I have learned through this emotional investigation of imagery.

Figure 9 – Fade They Will

Today I woke up quite early, for me, and put on a pot of coffee. I cleaned up my kitchen and tidied my apartment, which hadn’t been done in days. Out in the sunshine with a cup of coffee I walked over to a nearby stream that I frequent often during sunset hours, but rarely this early in the day. There was one and then another splash into the
water from the turtles who had been sunbathing on a rock. I rarely got a good look at them, because my presence always seemed to be a startling one. The surface of the water was humming with ripples of life and movement. I looked down towards my feet at the bright green foliage all around, and noticed a small lizard that was perfectly camouflaged in its surroundings. After watching it for a couple of minutes, it moved slowly from one end of the leaf to the other. Although engulfed by the size of its steady platform, when the lizard reached the narrow tip, the leaf was bobbing up and down. Then in an instant the lizard jumped to another leaf. This leap was nearby to my standards, yet an impossible distance for the size of this little brightly colored lizard. Birds were swooping around, and I was overwhelmed with a sense of insignificance, strength, and remiss.

Our time here on earth can appear at times ordinary until a revealing event occurs, which enhances one’s comprehension of the absolutes and certainties of life. My Mother has always told me since I was little boy that God never gives you more than you can handle. That is difficult to understand at times. But I believe it is true. Whether you believe in God, or if a God had something to do with your eventual circumstance is rather arbitrary, you will continue to wake up and put one foot in front of the other. While in shock, and upset that everyone else around you is still performing their everyday routines like nothing is wrong, things will become easier.

Attempting to understand death has been a difficult artistic venture, yet this process, which continues to morph in new directions, has been wonderfully rewarding. I have tried to remain playful in my experimentation, and to keep in mind that while my heart and soul are now thrown out on surfaces for people to observe and converse with; once these works are out of my possession, there will be aspects of my grieving that will leave with them. In the end, I still do not fully understand what happens when you die, or what that might look like, and that is ok. The fragility of life is something that I did not fully understand, and still do not, but I have a great respect for it.

The fragility of life, and the finality of death impact the way I think, what I believe in, as well as what I am influenced by as an artist. Although the fragility of life is still quite a mystery to me, I now respect life more than ever. I will never stop thinking
about the body, and the last in-between moments of living here on Earth and hereafter. These notions are deeply etched into my consciousness. Although I hope that with time, certain aspects to my work that currently hold importance and that I have dwelled on will fade; I will continue to address some of these notions within my work.

I honestly shared the human emotions that occur during the erratic stages of grief, and believe that some of those are universal, but what I have learned is that everyone mourns and deals with loss in a great many ways. And for my audience, did they leave my exhibition feeling as if they had had an experience of sorts? I am not sure. I hope so. What I do know is that after looking to the skies for meaning, and attempting to catch fleeting images and memories that I could in fact not hold onto, those experiences have brought me full circle back to here and now. The beauty of life: colors, smells, forms, nature, laughter, conversations, friendships, and love all become more clearly drawn after loss. Or at least they have for me. Over the course of the eight months I have had to make this exhibition, I constantly asked myself, how is the show going to end; or if there could be or even had to be a closing statement from an individual artwork that might put closure to this body of work. The conclusion I have found is that the resilience I have been striving for is alive in the daily process of making. I do believe my Dad would be proud of me. I saw life.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


David Williams was born in Colorado Springs, Colorado in 1984. He spent his first year of undergraduate studies playing football at Oklahoma State University. After being injured, David was forced to quit and transferred to the University of Hawaii at Manoa. After one year he returned home to Colorado and attended Colorado State University where he took his first art class since he was in middle school. In 2008, David received his B.F.A in Graphic Design. After being accepted at Louisiana State University to pursue a Master’s degree in Printmaking, David and his Dad drove from Colorado to Louisiana to visit the school. David has fond memories of that trip with his Dad, which marked his first trip to the south, and the last road trip he and his Dad shared together. David still resides in Baton Rouge where he is pursuing artist in residence programs and continuing to work in his studio.