Dearest

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Abstract

*Dearest* is the examination of what remains of a person, looking to the objects they cherished most while contemplating the inevitability of their certain absence. The work questions the futility of preservation in the measure of time, the failure of memories held in fragile containers, and the decay of the physical body. The materials that compose *Dearest* are chosen for their innate longevity and their ability to evoke remembrance.
Introduction

The purpose of *Dearest* is to protect specific memories that feel more fragile with each passing day. It examines the roles of heirlooms, souvenirs, and relics as preservers of a person, event, time, or place. The mixed media sculptures are comprised of materials that are distinctive in their longevity and their ability to evoke remembrance. The work questions the futility of preservation in the measure of time, the failure of memories held in fragile containers, and the decay of the physical body.

For as long as I can remember, I’ve collected objects as a connection to the past. These objects become proof of my existence and reveal a piece of my history. Even as an object invites recollection, the subject of the memory is never true or real again; the details are forever warped and fragmented by time. There is pointlessness in preservation; there will be a time when everything is forgotten and has turned to dust. But there is also an inherent human need to try…
How I Remember

1. Memory in Objects

I am a collector of objects.

I am a guardian of memories.

I keep them in boxes.

I don’t want to forget.

My grandfather gave me a wine bottle box as a small child and today it is bursting with an assortment of objects. The oldest acquired object in the box is a plastic bear, 1/4” tall that came from a snow globe that I broke when I was very young. Because the bear exists, I remember the shattered globe, false snow and water seeping across the floor, and someone telling me not to move to save my feet from the shards.

Objects are containers for memory; they attach us to a place and time. I can transport my body and mind to the past. I was there then because this object still exists now.

Objects that contain memory fall into categories; those that are given away with intent by the person or persons they belonged to, those that are acquired by means of the holder to serve as a place marker, and those that are intentionally preserved in reverence of the deceased.
2. Heirloom

“The function of the heirloom is to weave, quite literally by means of narrative, a significance of blood relation at the expense of a larger view of history and causality.”

-Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*

An heirloom is an object passed down from one generation to another with the intention that it is kept within a family. Descending descendants. The heirloom is a means for a person to share intimate history with their kin. My maternal grandmother gave me some of her most cherished jewelry that was passed down to her from the generation before her. Entrusted with them, I am their keeper. Because she chose me to have them, I feel closer to her when they are against my skin.

3. Souvenir

A souvenir is an object used as a device to remember a person, place, or event. Susan Stewart states the follow about souvenirs:

The souvenir displaces the point of authenticity as it itself becomes the point of origin for narrative. Such a narrative cannot be generalized to encompass the experience of anyone; it pertains only to the possessor of the object.

I saved flowers from my paternal grandmother’s funeral as a souvenir of my sorrow, a piece from the pile of flowers atop her freshly filled grave. A rose hangs from a

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1 Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1984), 137.
doorframe in my house just out of my sightline. I forget it’s there sometimes, but when it catches my gaze, I am returned to the moment when I pulled it from the mass of wilting petals atop my grandmother’s wilting body.

4. Relic

A relic is a fragment of a deceased person’s body or an important belonging saved as an object of reverence. Stewart calls a relic: “the souvenir of the dead which is the mere material remains of what had possessed human significance.” My paternal grandmother’s dentures are a piece of her body that holds such significance. My father saved them as if she is returning from induced sleep.

\^{3} Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1984), 140.
The Need to Remember

1. Family

Within the past three years my grandparents have disappeared so to speak. They have slipped away from dementia, diminished health, and death. To protect their place in my memory, I cling to the artifacts they left behind. My maternal grandmother is alive but slips further away each day. I feel an urgency to preserve her in my recollection but also selfish for taking objects from her while she is still present. Her photographs, the ones she remembers small facts about, have traveled far away from her because of me. I want to find a way to preserve what she remembers in them so that I remember them and carry on a part of her legacy.

Dario Robleto, a Houston based artist actively working with objects and memory reflected on the death of his grandmother in an interview from On Being with Krista Tippet. He states:

Like, my grandmother who I was deeply close to. I remember her, deeply, every day. And when I go, probably no one's going to remember her in that way again. So, for the next few decades her memory is still in a sense, life after death. This is in a sense what I think memory can do on the planet. But it's going to taper off at some point, with her in particular. And many of our family members. So I just like knowing I'm going to hold on, I'm going to grasp, pull hard into the last moment. I like that art can do that. So, and I think it should. It should do that.

I feel the need to make sculptures that can capture the memories of those I hold dear even if they die with me. Robleto’s “grasp” feels familiar. The effort to hold on even though there is a point when we are all lost to time.

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2. Death

I can see her still, lying in the bed of white. My paternal grandmother’s face is sagging from gravity. Her flesh is unnatural, waxy, caked in makeup, fictitious. Her mouth is fixed in a tight lock over her dentures.

My father cried, something I had never witnessed before in my life. He sobbed and shook like a child- but he was no one’s child anymore. The sudden erasure of her being had a catastrophic effect on the composure of those in the room. People bent close to the body, to get their last look, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t go close. I couldn’t look for more than a second without some sort of repulsion for the falseness of her.

I try to see her before all of this but the unfavorable sight of her in a box dominates my recollection of her. Before she died and before I moved away, I went to her home to say goodbye. The home was the one she had lived in for over fifty years, since my father was born. As my mother and I pulled up to the dead end road, she rose out of the flowerbeds she was examining. Her enormous hydrangea bushes were at their peak bloom, full with blue petals and bending from the weight of their mass. She moved across the yard with ease that day. I couldn’t recall her looking so healthy for many years. She seemed to have turned back time that day, reminiscent of my childhood memories of her minus the hazy cloud of cigarette smoke. She looked so much more alive.

The day of her funeral was the death of my last happy memory of her alive and the vision of her corpse in the casket replaced it.
I went to clean up her gardens last summer, for the weeds had overcome the beds in her absence. Her hydrangeas were yet again collapsing with the weight of the flowers and I cut free a few bundles of them to bring home. They are the memento to place her back in the garden. My father has been fixing up her house every Sunday like it’s his religion. Quite soon after her funeral, her belongings were rifled through, sorted, taken, donated, or tossed. Almost two years later, I was surprised at the small piles of her things spread throughout the house; the things my father had not yet assigned a place in the world. Sitting atop a mass of mundane things was a set of her false teeth quietly collecting dust in the soft glow of the curtained window. Why did he save those? Because they were the closest thing to her body left in the house.

3. The Future

I want to preserve memories for the future.

I fear forgetting.

I fear being forgotten.

I fear the passage of time.

I fear the haze of recollection.

No one wants to be erased.
Materials of Memory

1. Clay

Clay is a material that remembers. It is malleable when fresh, but at some point it stops flexing, becoming frozen and fragile. If it is not cared for properly it will crack, split, fissure. It will remember what you did to it and at some point it resists you. Clay is like flesh; it shimmers with sweat, it cracks from dry heat of the sun. Under the right conditions it has a profoundly prolonged existence. Ceramic objects tell the secrets of human history in their shards.

Clay is a material of heartbreak. It is destined for failure in some way or another. The cup that slips from your fingers and shatters against the sink or the revelation that everything you spent weeks carefully manipulating and caressing has revealed its every flaw. The joys of making will outweigh its inevitable ruin. The life cycle of a clay object is reminiscent of any living thing; it will rise and fall and eventually it’s fragmented and scattered.

2. The Coffin

In the mid to late 19th century, affluent individuals had the opportunity to purchase a coffin made of cast iron. They were heavy to prevent grave robbing, airtight to preserve the body, and custom made to fit perfectly around the figure intended to rest inside it forever. The faceplate was removable to reveal a glass window so that family members could see the deceased before they were buried or entombed. My earliest American ancestors could not have afforded such a poetic luxury.

The glass is an idealistic separation, a barrier between worlds. It’s a final meeting of the living and the deceased. In the open casket funerals of today, we present the corpse altered, painted with flushed cheeks, and propped up on pillows as if merely sleeping in a room full of sorrow. The body is touchable and yet, is nothing like touching a living body. I gravitate toward Victorian mourning traditions for their sensitivity to the truth of death. I long for a lock of my grandmother’s hair.

There is a need to preserve my last happy memory of my grandmother while alive in a beautiful tomb. I want it to be one of luxury because that recollection of her alive is a gift; not everyone is lucky enough to have one. I want to remember her in her garden when her body moved effortlessly across the yard, over the memory of her in her casket. I wish to give my cherished memory a final resting place.
My hair is the part of my body that will last a very long time after I die. It does not break down the way skin and flesh does; it remains true to life. The hair of mummified humans
still retains color and style thousands of years later. My hair ties me to my past; it is part of my mother, my father, their mothers and fathers, and so on.

A century and a half ago it was common practice to weave loved one’s hair into mementos. These objects were formed both from the living and the dead at a time when terminal illness was more common and life expectancy was drastically shorter than today. The objects were a physical representation of a person or persons that could exist beyond death.

I grow my hair long and cut it when I feel I’ve changed. I saved my first cut of hair in 2012 when I felt restless with myself and I no longer wanted to look the same. I needed to start something new. The hair held that past self so I saved it. In 2015 I cut my hair again after my paternal grandmother died quite suddenly. I could not accept that absence. The disgust I felt for not having called her made me inclined to remove a piece of myself. I cut my hair again this year, 2018. A night I couldn’t sleep. 3:00 a.m. I kept touching my hair, feeling its dry, brittle state. I ran my fingers through it, grasped it, felt its unnatural thinness. I rose from the bed and crept into the bathroom. I stared in the mirror at my reflection and battled internally with the state of my body, my hair. I woke my partner and handed him scissors and instructed him to cut the ponytail of hair. Relief swept over me with the hacking slices of the dull blades. Severed.

I will grow my hair out and cut my hair again, but it will only be when the time is right… when there is a part of myself that can never be retrieved from time.
The hair I’ve saved over the past six years has been woven into flowers, embroidered into fabric and set in ceramic frames. These wreaths of hair are meant to serve as the end of various cycles of my life.

4. Lipstick Residue

Our actions reverberate across time. They leave traces of our existence. There are unintentional ones, such as the wearing down of a flight of stairs as a person walks up and down, up and down, day in and day out. There are purposeful ones, like a child’s handprints in the cement of the sidewalk in front of their childhood home. A person leaves a trail of their “being” behind.

Relics are, as stated previously, a deceased person’s body part or significant belonging. They are often presented in a reliquary; containers used to house and protect a sacred object. They often allow the relic to be seen by viewers through glass or openings.

My mother always wears lipstick when she leaves the house. She will purse her lips, roll the tube around once, curl her lips into her mouth, and reach for whatever piece of paper she can find to blot the excess. That blot, like a fingerprint, is a part of her identity as my mother. I asked her to save them all for one year: January 1, 2017 - December 31, 2017. This past year she turned 60, much to her dismay. They are my keepsakes of her that I collect with the understanding that there will be a time when they are no longer made.

I want to keep the collection safe but still show them in reverence. I constructed a monument for them.
5. Our Faces

In the Mutter Museum of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania there is an enormous glass display case full of skulls. At first glance, the sheer number of floating heads diminishes the idea that these were once living, breathing people. Upon closer inspection, a revelation occurs: they were once like me. The skulls are set in rows, labeled by plaques, and the side of each cranium is etched with words. These words tell a tiny story; the person’s name, where they were from, their age when they died, and how they died. The identifying
factors bring the viewer a sense of deep human connection. The skulls are no longer simply a scientific study; they are the viewer themselves.

I wonder, what does my skull looks like.

I can press my fingers against my cheeks and feel bone. I can roll my tongue over my teeth tracing their arc. I can imagine it, but I can’t truly understand it.

If I saw my skull, would I know it was mine?
If I saw my partner’s skull would I know it was his?

I look at my dog and know he will not be with me one day.
What will make him last longer that his last breath?
Will his hair remain in the cracks the floorboards?

Once I lived in a very old house in Philadelphia. I hammered a nail into my bedroom wall and tried to make it bear too much weight. The nail pulled free ripping a hole and exposing white plaster. Tiny fibers poked out of the edges of the void. They were hairs. The walls were held together with strands of horsehair. The walls were once horses.

For Dearest I constructed three ceramic skulls of my partner, our dog, and myself. Using clay mixed with our hair, I constructed our faces on top of the skulls. These strands of
hair hold our faces together as the “skin” layer of clay cracks as it dries over the ceramic “bone”. Over time, the unfired clay will degrade further eventually turning to dust.

Image 5: Grace Tessein. You, Him, Me. 2018. Glazed midrange earthenware, glazed porcelain, unfired porcelain mixed with the individual’s hair, wood, epoxy, iron. Photo by Grace Tessein

6. Photographs and Sisters

My maternal grandmother is not able to remember much these days. She is able to recollect small memories from photographs. She always remembers the ones of her and her little sister, Lorraine. When Lorraine passed away, my grandmother was heartbroken. Now the photographs of them are what links her failing mind to their bond. The photograph of her and her sister with their dog gives her so much joy when she sees it. She sees the family pet from the 1930s and is taken back to another time. She remembers how he got his name, Lucky, and tells us why with a sly grin. Lucky was lucky to have lived. Lucky bit a live wire and survived electrocution. He lived on with a scarred mouth and a child who cared deeply for him.
I selected three photographs of my grandmother and her sister because she seems deeply, cognitively connected to them. The photos are printed with light sensitive dye on vintage needlepoint linen and have been slightly obscured through the process. Utilizing my hair and my sister’s hair, I stitched back into the images to find the elements of the narrative that are important to my grandmother and therefore are important to me. The chain of connection is part of my family’s legacy. It can only be broken when we are all forgotten.

Image 6: Grace Tessein. *Sisters*. 2018. Light sensitive photo dye on found linen, the artist’s and her sister’s hair, wood, nails. Photo by Grace Tessein
**Conclusion**

*Dearest* was created as a means of preservation for the memories and people I hold most dear. It is an exploration of how specific materials speak of human existence and the passage of time. By using the pieces of my personal narrative presented through the heirloom, souvenir, and relic, it is my intent that the viewers feel a connection to their own stories held within their most cherished objects. I hope that they will reflect on what memories manifest in the belongings they collect over time.

To end, I would like to contemplate a quote by Sally Mann in her memoir, *Hold Still: A Memoir with Photographs*:

> For me living is the same thing as dying, and loving is the same thing as losing, and this does not make me a madwoman; I believe it can make me better at living, and better at loving, and, just possibly, better at seeing.\(^5\)

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Bibliography


Vita

Grace Tessein grew up in the suburbs of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She received a BFA from Tyler School of Art at Temple University in 2012. Grace is planning to graduate with an MFA in Studio Art from Louisiana State University in August 2018. She is looking forward to the next adventure with Dennis and Sugar Jaws.