Darkness on the Edge of Town

Sarah Louise Ferguson

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, sferg21@lsu.edu

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DARKNESS ON THE EDGE OF TOWN

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
Masters of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by
Sarah Louise Ferguson
B.F.A., Studio Art Florida State University, 2011
August 2018
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dedicated to my best friend Elise Hamlin 02/11/1989 - 10/16/2010 and my Grandmother Kay who recently passed.

Special thanks to Lee Delossantos for letting me interview him for this project.

Additional thanks to: Andrew Pfalz, Hira Tariq, Haley Hatfield, Jamie Kutner, Hye Yeon Nam, Derick Ostrenko, Vincent Cellucci, Kelli Scott Kelley, Carrie Ann Baade, Lilian Garcia Roig, Mark Messersmith, Jeremy Waltman, Andrea Berg, Aunt Rose, Katie Ferguson, Tiffany MacCaughey, Natalie Hunsinger, Cristina Moscoso, Holly Frantz, Trevor “Heather Birdsong” Birdsall, Don Hertzfeldt, Riley Clare, Tamara “Tammy” Duplantis, Amanda Barker, Tracy Gough, Anthony Cudahy, Tino Moncada, Bridget Collins, all of the talented students I was able to teach at LSU, and anyone else in the world who will help me out in the future.
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ABSTRACT

Darkness on the Edge of Town focuses on a series of dioramas I created accompanied by audio and video. This thesis exhibition is based on a series of interviews I conducted with a friend who is a recovering opioid addict who has spent the majority of his life incarcerated for drug offenses. The American opioid epidemic currently looms large mostly because of the influx of drug abuse in middle class white communities. My subject is of Puerto Rican descent and represents the much harsher treatment of minority addicts by the criminal justice system. His personal story represents a deep yearning to overcome his past and start anew, but also a sense of alienation from existing so long outside the bounds of society. By creating a portrait of my friend, I am also investigating the issue of addiction more broadly. My role as an artist is to convey his story, and visually recreate the memories that he has lost due to his imprisonment and addiction, while also humanizing him as a person whose basic rights have been curtailed by the system.
INTRODUCTION

My best friend, since I was six, died of an opioid overdose on a St. Petersburg Florida patio one night in October 2010. Her name was Elise Hamlin and she was the person closest to me. Her death left me in a much lonelier world. Elise died at the height of what is now known as the opioid epidemic, or deaths related specifically to prescription pain medications.\(^1\) Although 2010 is seen as the height of the crisis, many of the measures to stop over prescription have caused addicts to seek much more dangerous street drugs, and so the death toll due to opioids has actually risen since 2010.\(^2\) My original concept for my thesis was understanding Elise’s death within the larger context of this ongoing crisis. I quickly became overwhelmed by grief and the magnitude of the opioid crisis at large. The emotional toll of trying to understand my friend’s death and the complexities of opioid addiction fell very heavily upon me. My chronic insomnia spiraled out of control, which eventually led to my hospitalization and inpatient treatment. During that stay in the hospital, I met many other people suffering from addiction and mental health tragedies.

One of these people was Lee Delossantos, a forty-one-year-old man coming off opioids who had spent most of his life behind the walls of prisons for drug-related offenses. He was awaiting transfer to a recovery home in New Orleans and had only one pair of clothes since he was recently released from the Louisiana State Penitentiary.

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The facility had no clothing for him upon release, and Lee’s time in prison left him with no friends or family that could visit and bring him such a basic necessity. Lee was awaiting transfer to a drug rehabilitation center. He worried about only having his hospital garments and no other possessions to prepare him for adjusting to a free life, and eventually ending up back on the streets. Even though the inpatient treatment center was designed for recovery it was too underfunded to provide basic necessities upon discharge. For example, Lee felt that if he did not get a bed at a detox center that he would be unable to present himself professionally for potential job interviews, therefore he would not be able to get gainful employment, and face homelessness again. This was something I witnessed not just in Lee’s case, but another woman who did not have shoes to wear upon release. I asked Lee and the other woman for their measurements, and used my one of two daily calls to ask my boyfriend to buy some thrift clothes and bring them during visitation hours. Lee was extremely grateful for the clothing, and constantly thanked my boyfriend and myself. He told me that it was the nicest thing anyone had done for him. This I assumed was an exaggeration, but I wanted to discover and understand the story of someone who claims I committed the nicest gesture in their life by the simple act of making sure he had an extra pair of clothes.

As I talked with Lee, I found him to be a very candid person when speaking about his life as an addict. After eventually securing a bed at a New Orleans facility named the Odyssey House, Lee agreed to keep in touch with me about his progress. We would talk on the phone for several hours and he would detail how, although he was grateful for his freedom, his years of incarceration made it difficult to adjust to a free life without feeling alienated. Lee allowed me to record our phone calls, and through hours of audio I began to see a portrait of a person form from the two-dimensional associations of a felon that
had long been kept behind bars. The audio illuminated not only a specific person’s fight with addiction, but also the moral grey area surrounding the motivation of criminal acts, and the injustice of our criminal justice system’s punishment of addicts.
HOW TO REPRESENT A LIFE WITH NO TANGIBLE ARCHIVE

When I met Lee, he was a gregarious person who drank way too much coffee and talked incessantly about how excited he was to live a life outside of the prison system, away from drugs. He talked so much I barely read the books I thought would keep me occupied during down time. While interviewing him, I realized that Lee had no material archive other than his memory. Clothing, photos, keepsakes, and other reminders were all lost during his periods of drug use, homelessness, and imprisonment. As I listened to him remember his life, I realized he could not accompany his words with old photos. I decided to create the world he was describing from the ground up.

I do not wish for my subject to be gawked at, and although I want to draw a viewer into his story aesthetically, I want to avoid sensationalizing the prevalence of violence and abuse in his life. For instance, Lee recalls a moment where two young twins are shot in front of their mother. He says, “...they came to the house and they killed both of them kids. The twins. They shot ‘em in front of the mom” (Figure 1). As an artist I did not want to create a gory horror movie scene out of this recollection. Aestheticizing real dead children felt unethical to me, but the memory was still important to Lee. For scenes so obviously violent I decided to focus more on symbolism rather than direct representation of brutality. In my piece “Twins” I referenced the set design for the Grady twins scene in the Stanley Kubrick film The Shining. (Figure 2) The twins in my diorama are represented by two identical turned over rocking chairs.
Figure 1. *Twins*, Sarah Ferguson. Mixed Media. 2018.

**Twins**

They came to the house and they killed both of them kids. The twins. They shot 'em in front of the mom.
Figure 2. Stanley Kubrick, *The Shining*. Film. 1980.
PAST WORK AND PROCESS

I initially started my thesis with the intent to create a narrative game about addiction, and I wanted to constrain the parameters of my investigation to my own stories at the outset. This proved problematic for me since I struggled with putting personal issues into words while I was resolving them. As a result, I felt a need to distance myself, but at the same time not overwhelm the viewer with too much data regarding addiction in general. Instead of focusing on myself, it seemed important to talk to others and learn their point of view. My interviews with Lee started thereafter, and creating a portrait of him became my primary approach to the topic of addiction.

At the beginning, the environmental models for Lee’s story were all digital models that I hoped to include in my narrative game format. However, this became a problem since I kept expanding the landscape of the game to include smaller and more precise details. Eventually, spatial constriction became a priority since I was having trouble limiting the scope of my work, and I moved from digital models to more sculptural miniatures that had precise boundaries limited by real space (Figure 3). This was important because it allowed me to edit more carefully, and condense some of Lee’s story to avoid getting caught up in details. The end result was to create self-contained dioramas that more loosely followed the interview audio. For final presentation, this audio was included on an iPad for the viewer to listen to along with a Google Maps screenshot of the actual location Lee talks about (Figures 3 and 4). In addition, these self-contained scenes gave the impression of confinement, which is a way in which Lee spent the majority of his life. Although my life differs from Lee’s, our conversations have given me further insight into the ineffectiveness of criminalizing addiction. Addiction is
considered to be a disease, but instead of treatment those who suffer from substance abuse are recycled in and out of jails and prisons.\(^3\)

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Figure 4. Sarah Ferguson, *Matches*. Mixed Media. 2018.

Figure 5. Sarah Ferguson, *Website Audio for ‘Matches.’* Website. 2018.
THE WORLD IN MINIATURE

After leaving the hospital Lee relied on Google Maps to look up places from his memory given the aforementioned absence of any material mementos. He was fascinated by the ability of technology to show him how his old homes and hang-outs now looked. Even if a place had burned completely to the ground, he would still look up the address to empty lots to find visual cues of the past. At the time I started interviewing Lee, I began to recreate some of the scenes he was describing to me. I have always been drawn to non-fiction podcasts and documentaries that tell the stories of people who are ordinary and flawed in a way which shifts the viewer or listener’s perspective.

Werner Herzog’s concept of “ecstatic truth” is important to me because it explains the limitations of representation as “fact,” and instead focuses on underlying “poetic truths. He states, “There are deeper strata of truth in cinema, and there is such a thing as poetic, ecstatic truth. It is mysterious and elusive, and can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylization.” 4 My thesis title, Darkness on the Edge of Town, is in reference to the Bruce Springsteen album by the same name. The album reflects both the human ability to overcome circumstances with hope, and to be overcome by circumstances which extinguish hope. 5 This theme is reflected in Lee’s story in how his bad upbringing led him to make desperate decisions, and his current wish to live a better life despite his past.

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5 Dave Marsh, Bruce Springsteen: Two Hearts, the Story (New York: Routledge, 2004), 16-18.
RELATED WORK

The artists who influence my work most directly focus on the effects of addiction or stigmatization. Each artist finds a way to bring the audience to a place of understanding with the subjects who might be misinterpreted. In *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, I am interested in the context of Lee’s life story, which I think aids viewers in gaining a greater understanding of the difficult situations addicts face. The artists and filmmakers who serve as my inspiration include Werner Herzog, Nan Goldin, Jackie Dives, and Stan Brakhage.

In his movie *Into the Abyss*, the filmmaker, Werner Herzog specifically seeks to show inmates as human despite having misgivings for their actions and choices (Figures 5 and 6). In many of his works, Herzog illuminates people on the fringes of society. Unlike his other documentaries, Herzog reserves his usual style of commentary and lets his subject speak at length. For my diorama audio, I also took the approach of letting Lee recount his life with a minimal amount of guiding questions or commentary. Along with the interview clips, I also included shorter quotations below the miniature scene that I felt would get the viewer interested in listening to the longer track on the iPad (Figure 7). Herzog used extra footage not included in his film *Into the Abyss* to create a TV series called *On Death Row*. Within one of the episodes he interviews a prosecutor who chides him for “humanizing” a death row inmate. Herzog shoots back, “I

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am not humanizing her, she simply is human.” The tendency to dehumanize is dangerous, even when applied to the worst criminals because it enables unjust treatment and even torture. Herzog states that, “as a German coming from a different historical background, and being a guest in the United States, I respectfully disagree with the practice of capital punishment.” I see work that elucidates what society considers criminal as extremely important. While my historical background is different from Herzog’s, my mother’s side of the family are Romani immigrants who came to the United States to avoid persecution in Eastern Europe. Romani were often seen as criminals in their host countries due to myths perpetuated by the native population. Luckily my family emigrated before the systematic killing of Romani peoples during the Holocaust, but I have always been struck by how the concept of criminality is fluid and can lead to devastating inhumanity due to misunderstanding and propaganda in the name of justice and purity. This in particular drives my interest in creating an honest portrayal of criminals such as Lee as people who face harsh repercussions largely due to a lack of understanding about addiction as a health issue.

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8 Ibid.
10 Ibid., 590.
Figure 5. Werner Herzog, *Into the Abyss*. Film. 2011.

Figure 6. Werner Herzog, *Into the Abyss*. Film. 2011.
Figure 7. Sarah Ferguson, *Release*. Mixed Media. 2018.

Release

I get out of prison eventually, and we go to this place right there in Pinehurst called Goodies ... or Gooduns'. Go in there and eat a chicken fried steak, some okra, and a baked potato. I remember that's the meal I had.
In the same vein as Herzog’s focus on inmates locked away from the rest of the world, the photographer Nan Goldin is famous for making images of her friends who are addicts and who are commonly seen as outcasts and criminals. Despite being a successful artist, she herself struggled with an addiction to opiates which guides her current work. She now actively works to hold Purdue Pharma accountable for their role in the opioid crisis due to their misleading advertising.¹²

I’ve started a group, P.A.I.N. (Prescription Addiction Intervention Now), to hold them accountable. To get their ear we will target their philanthropy. They have washed their blood money through the halls of museums and universities around the world. We demand that the Sacklers and Purdue Pharma use their fortune to fund addiction treatment and education. There is no time to waste.

While Goldin’s current work against Purdue Pharma is more focused on activism, the connection between her work and Werner Herzog’s death row films is that it makes a viewer reconsider how others should be treated with dignity, despite their lifestyles not being perfectly in line with the law. A person’s history of desperation and abuse is something I believe should be considered in how we treat them. It is my belief that our justice system should be more focused on rehabilitation and mental health treatment instead of punishment. The justice system takes in our most vulnerable over and over. The lack of a mental health safety net places people like Lee in a precarious position with very few options outside of re-entering prison multiple times. Addicts are not treated, nor do they find the type of recovery they need from the prison system. In the process of imprisonment many inmates lose possessions, relationships, mementos, and end up with a history that only exists in memory.

Another photographer, Jackie Dives, takes portraits of her brother who is an opioid addict. In a similar manner to Goldin, her intimate pictures show the toll a person’s addiction has on themselves and those around them. Although I do not use images of Lee in my work, I believe it is his voice that serves to best represent him because it gives him the agency of storytelling. The result is a style of portraiture that seems completely natural to Lee, the ability to talk freely and honestly about his life.

On a more practical level, my use of miniatures and video was influenced by cinema. The experimental films of Stan Brakhage are intriguing to me because through in-camera editing and nonconventional filming techniques, they give the viewer a new way of seeing the world through films that are impressionistic (Figure 8). Brakhage does not set out to replicate how the human eye views the world, instead he is interested in using film to create a new perspective. Since drugs give users an altered state of mind, and therefore seeing, I wanted the video pieces to reflect this. To film I used mirrors, and self-made lens filters to achieve a kaleidoscopic effect. The narration for the video was audio I felt was poignant because it contained scenes that Lee seemed to reflect upon more, but they did not fit the static nature of the miniatures. For instance, one of the stories Lee tells about is a high speed chase. I felt this experience, and three others like it, needed movement to accompany the more active stories (Figure 9).

While creating the miniatures, I was working as an extra for various TV shows and movies. Being on set fascinated me due to the ability of the crew to utilize tiny

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15 Ibid., 25.
spaces to create the scenes in the film. I had always had the impression that film sets were more grandiose, but instead the sets themselves were more like the miniature scenes I was creating (Figure 10).

Figure 8. Stan Brakhage, *Commingled Containers*. Film. 1996.
Figure 10. Sarah Ferguson, *Shadowlands*. Mixed Media. 2018.
CONCLUSION

In my work I strive to present one person’s story and hopefully elicit some empathy in the viewer. Far too often, people like Lee are seen as statistics rather than as individuals with complex life stories. I believe this dehumanizing approach can have no positive benefits on those who need treatment not to be labeled as criminals. The loss of Lee’s archive represents how some experiences disappear inside the walls of the penitentiary system. By making this work I am helping him visualize the memories that only exist in his head, while also giving the viewer an insight into the life of someone who has been stigmatized by drug addiction.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


VITA

Sarah Ferguson is an artist that crawled out of the swamps of South Florida into the swamps of Louisiana. She received her B.F.A in Studio Arts from Florida State University with a focus on painting, then moved to Baton Rouge to pursue digital art. Sarah has worked as a drawing and painting instructor for community arts centers, as well as teaching digital art courses at LSU. She lives with her boyfriend and two dogs Marzipan and Morticia.