HELLO AGAIN يا اهلا A STUDY OF GRIEF

Diana Abouchacra

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HELLO AGAIN
رّا اهلا
A STUDY OF GRIEF

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
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B.F.A., University of Connecticut, 2017
August 2021
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my thesis committee for their guidance, feedback, and support, Denyce Celentano, Leslie Koptcho, Kelli Scott Kelley, Andy Shaw, and Patricia Suchy. I would also like to extend a thank you to Loren Schwed for her valuable support and advice throughout the years. I very much appreciate Allison Young for her generosity with sending me her insightful suggestions on this thesis paper.

Many thanks to my artist cohort at the School of Art, it has been a pleasure and an honor to be in this program with all of you. A special thanks to my peers in the Printmaking Department for their support and friendship. I would like to extend my sincere thanks to my co-exhibitor, print colleague, and friend Michael Whitehead who has provided me with a tremendous amount of encouragement, patience, kindness and understanding throughout the duration of this master’s program. I am extremely grateful to my dear friend Samantha Rosado for her unwavering friendship, love and support, always challenging me to do and be my best. I’d also like to extend my gratitude to Destiny Kasubaski for playing an important role in helping with my growth in grief, for her open & inquisitive mind, and her kindness. I am grateful to my friend Drew Wallace for his friendship, constructive criticism, and his help with the growth of this project in its beginning stages. I also wish to thank old and new friends who have helped in my journey and time here in Louisiana.

My success would not have been possible without the unwavering support and love from my cousin Hisham Abouchacra and my aunt Samar Shamseddine. And I cannot begin to express my loving appreciation to my siblings, Maya and Ryan Abouchacra, for their unparalleled love, guidance, friendship, and profound belief in my capabilities. And lastly to my mother, Amal Shamseddine Abouchacra, thank you for blessing me with a love so unconditional – I dedicate this thesis to you.
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ABSTRACT

Grief is an unwanted visitor who we all come to know throughout our lifetime. Although every person reacts differently to bereavement of a loved one, almost always the lost other becomes etched into our being for the remainder of our lives (McClocklin & Lengelle, 2017). In today’s society, we are encouraged to say “Good-bye”, but what if instead, we allow ourselves to keep those who have passed on close to our hearts and say hello again? Hello Again is a body of work that explores my experience with grief. The artworks made for this exhibition investigate my process of mourning and attempts at healing through a variety of art processes, including printmaking, ink drawings, experimental installation works and soundscapes.
Grief recovery is a long and arduous task and in this paper I share my story and contemplations on grief. Although people’s grief can be similar, it is important to note that it is a very personal matter. I do not write to claim that I know the entire experience grief encapsulates because it is much deeper than anyone can ever fully fathom. I write only what I know and have gone through. I separated this thesis into two parts. Part One of this paper introduces concepts on grief from my research and personal experience. In Part Two, I continue speaking about grief and my thoughts but integrate my artwork into the discussion. Figures are referenced throughout the paper and are listed in order after the Table of Contents.

Grief has infiltrated my life in every nook and crevice it could find. I share parts of my journey, not to show that this is what a bereaved person should experience or feel, but to express myself and hope to find personal healing through the process. An unintended positive result of the artwork is that it does hold the potential to assist others in their bereavement. In full disclosure, the work created for this exhibition was not aimed at helping others, although it would be fulfilling to know I have helped someone. Rather, the art created for Hello Again لَا يَا اَمْرَأَة was made in hopes to further find understanding in my grief experience and to feel more connected to my late mother.

It is important to note that feelings associated with people whom we have lost are complex. Relationships are different with every person, and not everyone has positive and loving memories with the deceased. Thus, not everyone will feel connected to the thoughts expressed in this document. In the sections to follow, I talk about my relationship with my late mother and my experience after she passed on. She was someone whom I loved immensely. Although like all people, she was not perfect, the feelings I have for her are overwhelmingly ones of warmth and love. Therefore, the concepts discussed in each section stem from this viewpoint. Above all else, the reader should only take with them what resonates and leave behind what does not.
Art making is an intuitive exploration for me that helps to process emotions where other approaches tend to fail. It is a safe space where I can delve into the depths of my wounds – to witness, understand, reflect, and perhaps find resolve. Themes that revolve around my artwork include grief, vulnerability, ephemerality, multiplicity, and transformation. I am interested in moments of interaction between people and how fleeting and transient they are. Questions I ask myself are: Can forms of personal interaction be translated tangibly? How can material act as memory? Do process and method bring forth altered and expanded meaning?

Shifts in perception intrigue me, they can encourage new mental connections and a possibility for expanded growth. I am particularly enthralled with the link between our emotions and memories of a departed loved one. They are constantly shifting in relation to one another and take on different forms of meaning. I am drawn to creating immersive environments that incorporate components that activate the senses of the viewer. Thus, my work often takes the form of installations.

I am fascinated when auditory components are paired with my installations, specifically in their capability of triggering memory and feelings of nostalgia. Sounds when created and linked together in a rhythmic pattern can create meditative and calming environments. Repetition and layering are also formal elements that are present in my work and can further add therapeutic and meditative experiences in the installations. My aim for the spaces I create is to envelope the viewer, allowing them, if only for a moment, to transcend into my constructed world. With this body of work, I share my story and present the viewer a lens into my coping strategies with grief.
PART ONE:
Reflections
PART ONE: Reflections

EXPERIENCE AS ART

The making of art stems from experience\(^1\), whether the art is representational or abstract, artists are pulling from their lived reality to create their work. In their art, artists are also encouraged to make work that is universal. For creators whose work stems from a personal and intimate place, how do they keep the work relatable to the viewer? This also beckons the question; can art be too personal? Shame researcher Brené Brown, in her book *Daring Greatly* claims that vulnerability and sharing personal stories with people is the key to genuine connection and having fulfilling relationships (2015). Is this still the case when Brown’s perspective is looked through an art lens? Can people find meaningful connection with art even when the work is very personal? Suffice to say, a connection between the maker and the onlooker is present, and the work even has the power to incite healing not only in the artist but in the viewer as well (Botton & Armstrong, 2015).

... 

On a hot summer’s day in mid-August of 2016, I was met with the news that my mother had tragically passed away. The unbearable pain felt after losing one of the fewest people I loved unconditionally cannot be described. Overtime, I found solace in my art making. My work has evolved, and I have taken a direct approach in talking and creating work about my grief. During this transition in my art practice, I have come across feedback that commented on the nature of my work as being too personal. At the time, I took the comment to heart, and made it a goal to search for the answer because I had a genuine desire to make work for anyone to connect with. Yet, no matter who I asked or what I read, there was no clear answer describing what denotes an artwork that is too personal. In my searching for answers, instead, I found successful artists whose work is

\(^1\) The word ‘experience’ can be interpreted in many ways. Here it is referred to as “something personally encountered, undergone, or lived through” (Merriam-Webster).
both universal and personal, such as Trenton Doyle Hancock, Janine Antoni, Yayoi Kusama, Louise Bourgeois, Mark Rothko, and Frida Kahlo. These are just a handful of artists who utilized their career to heal through their work and find meaning in their trauma, in the act of making.

In a different sense, when people hear others talking about their relatable personal and tough experiences, they can feel even more connected and understood. For example, I attended a few sessions of grief group therapy and entered with my suspicions. After witnessing everyone be incredibly vulnerable and open in sharing their personal stories of their own grief journey, I was unexpectedly heartened to share mine. Being able to hear other peoples’ story has helped me see grief through different lenses. There were comments from people that expressed things I had known and felt far too well, but remarks others made that gave me a slightly different outlook on mourning and loss.

Personal stories should be told, whatever form they may take, because it is not only shown to help in someone’s own healing, but also in supporting others who may not have the courage to express themselves as freely (Brown, 2015). This in turn fosters a nurturing community of authenticity and wholehearted connection. For me, wanting to share my personal story through the artwork made for Hello Again أهلاً يا أهلاً came second. What came first was the desire to heal through expressing and traversing my grief creatively, and to feel more connected to my mother. I did not set out on this art venture in hopes of healing people. That assumes others are looking to be helped and puts me in the position of the ‘rescuer’ which is not a role I want to play. Nonetheless, sharing our stories helps us heal and inherently has the potential to encourage others, too.
ART AS THERAPY

Therapy can immensely help in the process of desensitization in individuals who experience traumatic loss, the panic and anxiety once triggered from the associated memories can be alleviated. The person begins to reconstruct how they view the event. This gives the healing individual the opportunity to redefine their perspective of the incident that created the initial trauma, helping them move forward. Many different therapies exist that help in one’s accessing of traumatic life events. One form is art therapy. A common approach in this field is for the therapist to ask the patient to create an artwork. When they are finished, the therapist allows for some distance to follow between the artwork and the maker, they then help the patient reveal hidden meanings, “guiding the client to notice specific structural components in the artwork and the feelings they convey” (Rubin, 2016, p. 26) In turn, this helps the individual understand themselves in a new light, allowing for growth and increased mindfulness.

... 

In the years following my mother’s physical death, I found it extremely debilitating to think of her although her absence impacted all parts of my life. Daily tasks were extremely difficult to complete, and my body often would find itself in auto-pilot mode. My mother being taken suddenly from my immediate reality was a traumatic event that had pulled the rug of stability from under my feet. Throughout the years, many methods have helped me process the heartbreak and trauma. One particular process that has helped me profoundly cope with the grief is artmaking.

Art is therapy (Botton & Armstrong, 2015). In fact, the pioneers in the field of art therapy were artists themselves (Rubin, 2016, p. 33). With each artwork made, I have gained more insight into my internal emotive state. I have recognized that the art process and resulting work act as reflections of my journey in grief, as well as a tool in my healing journey. For three years after my mother passed away, I barely talked about mourning and loss in my artwork, looking back, I realize
how my pain still found a way to speak through my art. The grief had to be released in some way, and it found itself in my art practice. The more artwork I made, the greater my strength became to further delve into my emotions behind the aesthetic and conceptual choices of the work. Eventually, I was able to face the grief that had been looming over me and accept it as a part of my current life experience, and as expected, the focus of my artwork and studio practice followed soon after.

I have learned that time can ease the pain to help in processing the intensity of the trauma. Yet, if I had not delved deeper into my emotional wounds, I believe my healing would have been stunted. Recovery was an intentional decision I had to make to get better. Healing has entered my life in many ways and from many different sources, but my art practice has played a big role in the process. At first, artmaking acted as an outlet for my emotions, but one day while reflecting on some of my work, I realized how interwoven the topics of grief and loss were in my artmaking. I began to connect ideas with aesthetic decisions and, in some oddly fulfilling way, I felt seen by myself. As if I was finally acknowledging the pain that had been seeping into my work, begging to be recognized all these years. Intangible thoughts gradually transformed into awareness, and a different potential to recognize and acknowledge them materialized (Rubin, 2016, p. 26).

My studio practice became a safe haven where my grief could be expressed freely and seen in a different light. I found myself choosing techniques and concepts in my making of the work that simultaneously supported my healing, i.e., repetition, ritual, and soundscapes. Art has given me the tools to explore unknown territory, beyond my hurt and suffering, aiding in reconstructing the narrative I tell myself surrounding my mother and grief. She is not gone with her physical body; she still exists in ways I would have never acknowledged if I were not an artist.
HELLO AGAIN

Often times in western culture when someone passes away people are pushed to say ‘good-bye’. The idea of someone existing after their death is discouraged and they are almost expected to close the chapter on them and move on. The relationship the mourner has with their departed loved one may change and shift long after they have passed away and for the remainder of the bereaved’s life.

…

I remember in one therapy session two years ago, I was instructed by my counselor to write my mother a good-bye letter. In the note, I was asked to write all the things I wanted to tell her, the words left unspoken, and the plans left unfinished. Although this can be recognized as comforting, the attitude of sending my mother off never sat well with me.

When talking to a friend about my grief process, he mentioned a talk therapy he had come across called “Saying Hello Again”, I was immediately intrigued. After doing some research on the subject, I discovered a narrative and community therapist, David Denborough, who further explains the ‘Hello Again’ talk therapy. In his book *Retelling the Stories of Our Lives*, Denborough dedicates an entire chapter on how to reintroduce a lost loved one back into one’s life along with sharing questions to delve further and paired with real stories of people going through this healing process (Denborough, 2014).

The therapy focuses on remembering the individual who is lost to us and aims to shift our perception into re-integrating the person whom we’ve lost into our lives rather than shutting the door on them completely. In his book, a few questions that Denborough asks in his talk therapy that resonated strongly with me are:

♦ What did your ______ (lost loved one) see when they looked at you through their loving eyes?
♦ How did they know these things about you?
♦ If they could be with you today, what would they say to you about the efforts you are making in your life? What words of encouragement would they offer? (2014, p. 212).
After answering these questions on my own, I found myself in a state of catharsis. I was able to look at myself with the love and compassion that only my mother held for me, and strangely it felt as if she was with me, and I felt her unconditional love for the first time in a while through me. The answers I wrote in response to these three questions became the focus of my installation for the third component of my exhibition titled “Hello Again” as seen in figure 1.

Figure 1: Hello Again Installation, close up

Saying ‘hello again’ as talk therapy has been influential in bringing my mother back into my experience, but also in acknowledging a transformed version of myself. As human beings, we are constantly changing, shifting, and growing, both in our mental and physical nature. I am not the same person when my mother passed and my outlook on life has changed throughout the years, thus the action of ‘saying hello again’ has facilitated a reintroduction of myself to myself. In doing so, I have garnered a deeper appreciation for myself on this journey of transformation.

I decided to title my exhibition Hello Again يا اهلا. The title is accompanied by the Arabic translation to reference how I spoke with my mother, in Arabic. An important note to keep in mind is that language when translated can carry slightly different connotations and meanings. It is
entangled with culture and may be more nuanced than what the direct translation offers (Marin, 2020). The literal translation of لَا اهْلَ (transliterated: “Ya Ahlan”) is “Oh Family”, however the social implications of it are lost in translation. There are many different interpretations to this saying, but the general meaning of it is to welcome one back to their own people. In Arabic, this phrase is said when we see someone whom we are extremely fond of, welcoming them back to our tribe.
PART TWO:
Observation and Connection
PART TWO: Observation and Connection

REPETITION & RITUAL AS HEALING

When trauma is experienced, such as a loved one dying, the bereaved slips into a deep sense of panic and shock. Their sense of grounding is shattered since their reality has been permanently affected by the incident. To help re-create structure in one’s life, repetition can be implemented, such as a routine, which can slowly help in re-constructing a sense of stability and balance in one’s life. Repetition is considered a stress reliever and can encourage recovery (Sorge 12). In art therapy, for example, it is understood that “repetition, either as a repeated pattern or ritual, is an important factor in the healing process” (Sorge 21). Yet, one must be mindful to not fall into the issue of running away from the problem in throwing themselves into a monotonous cycle.

As mentioned earlier, repetition and layering play a large part in my artmaking. The repetition that takes place in the process of making my work along with experimental rhythmic soundscapes incorporated in the final installation of some artworks can speak to ritual and healing. The three components that make up my exhibition Hello Again are “Material as Rediscovered Memory”, “Visual Journal”, and “Hello Again”. In each series I utilize repetition in different ways, each acting as a method of healing.

In “Material as Rediscovered Memory” (figure 2), the repetition occurs in the printing process. My mother’s cutting boards became the matrix, and I was able to pull a multitude of prints from them. With each print, I inked up the matrix differently, allowing for variation and individuality in each print. The lines my mother made with her knife filled in with my painterly application of ink onto the cutting board.
The resulting printed lines portray the positive space of her impressions, allowing her movements to physically be perceived and recognized, similar to discovering a fossil (figures 3). The usage of the same imagery from the cutting boards and the changing of colors in each print can represent a transformation in my relationship with my mother, which furthermore represents recovery and healing.
The body of work titled “Visual Journal” acts as a therapeutic process. Each entry made addressed the emotions that have surfaced throughout traversing my grief in the research executed in preparation for this exhibition. The selection of entries curated for the exhibition (figure 3) consists of one-hundred and fifteen 5” x 7” ink drawings on handmade paper (not all shown in the figure). These journal entries act in the same way any diary or journal would, but instead of writing, I create a painting of what I am feeling at the time. These drawings are a response to my emotional state which is conveyed through many different techniques and strategies. I did my best to make one entry per day throughout the academic year, and, in repeating this task daily, I created for myself a routine or ritual.

Figure 4: Visual Journal

The third part of the exhibition titled, “Hello Again” also speaks to repetition and ritual. The installation, as seen in figure 5, includes repeated text on paper structures (some suspended) and incorporates sound to create a multisensory experience for the viewer seeing the artwork. The writing is transferred to the paper through a printmaking method called screen-printing. The text is compulsively layered throughout the paper scrolls, and the process itself required a repetitive motion.
In the course of printing on these scrolls, two different paper materials were used and layered on top of each other. The paper on the bottom, closest to the ground was a thick cream paper called Okawara. The second scroll placed directly on top was a more translucent white paper called Tengucho. When printing the text on these layered papers the ink transferred through the Tengucho and onto the Okawara, and when peeled off from one another (figure 6), the transferred text on the thicker Okawara paper appeared visually faded. The text transmitted from the Tengucho onto the Okawara references a transaction and could be interpreted as someone’s residual thoughts left over, fading in memory.
The paper installation is accompanied by a soundscape (figure 7) that is heard from different speakers throughout the space. Sound chants and their contribution to healing have been studied and researched, specifically, in cultures and communities such as Chol Mayan Indians in Mexico (Rodriguez & Lopez, 2019). In a fieldwork study, a Chol Mayan healer executed a four-part healing ritual to a patient who was ailed with hives.

The chanting acted as one part of a much larger ceremony. A verse from the healing chant includes statements encouraging the ‘sickness’ that resides in the patient to leave the body and depart (Rodriguez & Lopez, 2019).

Although the sounds I create in this soundscape do not stem from a cultural tradition of ritual healing, the audio includes a lullaby and prayers my mother used to say to me along with personal messages to her. These sounds and words are personally comforting and healing to me. The audio is manipulated through the editing process and is heavily layered with repeating elements. The intentional repetition consequentially creates a rhythm in which the viewer can be absorbed into an introspective setting. The text and the auditory elements complement each other in their repetitive nature. The experience of sitting in the subsequent immersive installation can be calming and possibly elicit certain emotional responses.
ABSENCE & PRESENCE

Death is a rude reminder of life’s impermanence. When a loved one passes on, the relationship once had with that being changes forever. There is a deep void left in one’s heart that no external thing can help fill. Their absence is felt for the remainder of the bereaved’s life. Overtime, the griever will notice a shifting in the relationship with their departed loved one.

...

After my mother passed, I was consumed by grief. Everywhere I looked, I noticed her absence, she had been snatched right out of our lives. Every object she had touched and every place she had been only served as a reminder of her death. Over the years, I noticed a transformation take place, through intentional introspection, that the objects that served as a reminder of her passing shifted to evidence of her existence. As time passed, I realized that her memory was slipping away, and that these same material objects that had once served as a reminder of her absence acted as artifacts, by inherently having retained her residue. They hold pieces of her, allowing me to celebrate and embrace the memory of her presence.

In my series “Material as Rediscovered Memory”, I used my mother’s old cutting boards to create artworks. She is portrayed in the line work from her using a knife to prepare food for my family and me. Although she never intended for her hand to be highlighted in her arbitrary knife usage on cutting boards meant for kitchen work and not visual art, I am elated with our collaboration. Artworks like this (figure 8) help me realize that even in her absence, my mother is still present more than ever.

The questions introduced from the “Saying Hello Again” talk therapy helped shift the way I view my mother. I realized in viewing myself through my mother’s loving eyes that I am able to incorporate her more into my daily lived experience. In my installation “Hello Again”, I screenprinted a selection of my responses from the talk therapy onto long paper scrolls (figure 9). I
was able to pass through my written thoughts and layer them obsessively over one another, this
created movement in the layering and repetitiveness of the text. Another factor that added to the
movement that can be felt in this work was color. Two ink colors were used along with two font
sizes., the brown text was written larger than the soft blue text. The blue color represented the
atmosphere to me, the more distance put between things the more blue they appear to us. The
words that were fading and visually receding because of the blue color create depth and can speak to
feelings of longing. This idea was further pushed by pairing the blue color with the smaller text.

In both series, “Material as Rediscovered Memory” and “Hello Again” demonstrate the
repetition of line and text with layering and color manipulation. Color is used to create more depth
in the work, further creating a push and pull dynamic. Areas in the artworks begin to recede and
others come forward. Absence and presence can simultaneously be visually acknowledged. The
colors used in these artworks were muted and neutral, resembling tones found in nature. I gravitated
towards quiet soft colors because for me, they promote feelings of calmness and tranquility. A gentle
transparent blue-green and a soft yellow, for example, further encourage a certain stillness that can
be felt when someone finds themself in serenity which can exist in nature.
Figure 8: Material as Rediscovered Memory I

Figure 9: Hello Again Installation
MATERIAL AS MEMORY

Going through a departed loved one’s possessions can be extremely difficult. The act of giving away or getting rid of their objects can require incredible internal strength. Although the deceased are no longer with them in the physical world, the bereaved may still experience their loved one through their own memories and even the departed’s belongings left behind.

... Letting go of my mother’s things was painful because it was interwoven with the idea of letting her and her memory go. However, it is the memory that the object stirred up which was painful to let go of and not the physicality of it. It took me four years to be able go through my mother’s belongings and discard the things that were of no use to me anymore. In cleaning out her things, I made an incredible discovery. I found her excessively used cutting boards and couldn’t help but save them for art experiments.

As an artmaker, I categorize myself loosely as a mixed media and installation artist. I am trained in printmaking which has influenced my work both conceptually and physically. Printmaking is the process of creating a matrix on a surface, i.e., woodblock, metal plate, etc., inking that surface up, and then transferring it onto paper. What I am most connected to in printmaking is the repetition that exists in the multitude of prints that can be recreated from the one matrix. Yet, simultaneously, the unique differences that can exist with each print in the sensitivity of touch and pressure in ink transfer. As a result, when I saw my mother’s cutting boards, I recognized them as pre-made matrices that when inked up, could be printed repeatedly. As can be seen in figures 10-12, my mother and I acted in collaboration, her line work and my inking, to create a series I have titled “Material as Rediscovered Memory”.
Figure 10: Material as Rediscovered Memory II – V

Figure 11: Material as Rediscovered Memory VI – VII

Figure 12: Material as Rediscovered Memory VIII - XI
Even though my memory of my mother is fading with every passing moment, the cutting board remembers her strokes and movements – as if it was just yesterday. While making these prints, I felt like an archaeologist would, excavating my mother's artifacts, i.e., her cutting boards, discovering information which they have always held, revealing themselves to me only through artistic means (Robleto & Tippett, 2020). Material holds memory, and what I found in these artworks is a rediscovered memory. One that had gone unnoticed until seen in a new light with artmaking; creating a transformed relationship with my mother.

Additionally, I realized the more I printed the cutting boards, the softer the lines that my mother made on the matrix became. This happened because the cutting boards were plastic and the cuts that were made on them were flattened with each transfer through the printing press. I did not anticipate these lines would be augmented each time I printed, thus the immediacy of her lines began to fade. Literally seeing her hand disappear in my prints disappointed me at first because I felt I would never be able recreate her deep cuts again. However, conceptually, this unintentional aesthetic component added to the body of work: 1) The fading of the lines with every imprint can imply that the nature of my relationship with this person is constantly changing. 2) The more time that passes, the less brutal and immediate the pain is, which is reflected in the constant smoothing of the lines in the cutting boards and consequently in the prints, which can denote healing. In accepting my mother’s fading lines in my physical prints, I am able to understand my pain in a slightly different way, which, in turn, has helped in my healing.
CONCLUSION

The grief journey is long and daunting, and the destination we may set out as ‘things going back to normal’ will never be reached. However, there are many shifts that begin to happen in the healing process where the relationship we have with our departed loved one changes. Additionally, grief starts to be understood through many different perspectives and lenses, allowing for deeper healing. One important note to keep in mind, is that there is no one right path to healing. If anything, this paper along with the accompanying art exhibition, presents an opportunity for the reader and viewer to look inside the recovery of one person’s experience.
REFERENCES


VITA

Diana Abouchacra is a Lebanese American mixed-media artist. She plans to receive her Master’s in Fine Art this August 2021. Art making is an intuitive exploration for Diana that helps to process emotions where other approaches have failed. She views her art as a safe space to delve into the depths of her wounds – to witness, understand, reflect, and perhaps find resolve. Diana works in a variety of art mediums including video, printmaking, installation and sound. She loves incorporating experimental strategies and techniques into her studio practice. Themes that her artwork touches on include grief, vulnerability, ephemerality, multiplicity, and transformation.