A Catalogue of Thoughts

Whitney Meredith
Washington University in St. Louis

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Washington University in St. Louis
Graduate School of Art

A CATALOGUE OF THOUGHTS

Whitney Meredith

A thesis presented to the Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts of Washington University in St. Louis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

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Abstract

The nature of experience is ephemeral, but drawing is a permanent record of change that can serve to concretize it. Drawing is about concentration, memory and failure, and it enables a depth of seeing. In my work, through drawing, collecting, and arranging, I struggle to store time and set an image against the tide of inevitable and constant change. The lens which I take is that of the fragment: the preeminent form, normative and unavoidable, which enables the distillation of personal narrative and memory in a way that speaks to the universal nature of existence. My analysis is built upon the text of Hans-Jost Frey's *Interruptions*, William Tronzo’s *The Fragment: An Incomplete History*, and Rebecca Solnit’s essay, written for *Once Removed*. At the same time that I provide a theoretical and contextual framework for my artwork, I show through the writing and theories of John Berger, James Elkins, and Simon Downs that drawing, as a process, relies upon this concept of fragmentation to offer the meaning that it does.
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Spiral Construction

Order is reassuring. Where it is tidy, I feel safe, at least until something comes to disrupt the order. That order is susceptible to disruptions is a reminder of how precarious it is, and of the fact that one can only ever forget for a short time that it does not include everything. The disruption endangers order. It is experienced as a danger to the extent that order is seen as a value that is hard to give up. Wholeness, coherence, unity, completeness, completion are seldom neutral terms: they are used as value judgments. What is ordered and made into a whole is regarded as meaningful, what is meaningful as valuable.¹

This thesis is constructed as a collection of fragments. It is a representation of my artwork and it is representational of my artwork. Much like my visual work, sections of writing are bound together—a summary of memories, theories, and definitions that influence my day to day studio practice. Memory is what creeps into the artwork before I am aware of why. These moments of recollection are not meant to be tangential, but are the setting for the ideas I explore visually. Fragments of quoted text serve as anchors in the studio and in this document. They are used to ground otherwise abstract thoughts to a historical or theoretical base.

There are many things that can happen in the studio. There can be days of making, reading, an afternoon of writing, a re-ordering of things accumulated, and art works made. There are nights where I stay up with an image until I have to sleep on a mat, like a nest, in the corner of my studio. There are, after opening parties, late nights with small groups of friends, record player on, conversations moving in and out of the work. The studio has become another home for me, a place for daily life.

Many of my pieces focus on an aspect of meditation. Attempting to transcribe a ball of hair using
graphite involves unbroken concentration, constant measuring and re-measuring. Sewing a line in thread on paper activates a kind of non-concentration, non-thinking—moving a needle in and out rhythmically, caring for a plant so that I can continue to draw it for months. Each project has a certain set of rules, parameters that have to be adhered to, and the work evolves around them. It is generally a slow and intuitive process.

In the studio there is a constant state of flux, a movement of artwork and objects. Ideas and themes spiral through time. Sometimes it is only after I have left an idea and returned to it in a slightly altered way—perhaps a year later—that a work and its motives make sense.

I use a wide variety of materials, media, and objects in the studio: there are drawings, thrown pottery, forged steel nails, hooks, a hammer, collections of studio talismans organized and displayed in a shrine-like fashion, large drawings, small drawings, some have color, neon and glitter, others are simply the shiny grey of graphite, there are paintings with pours of sleek resin and clouds of dry pigment on oil ground or unprimed canvas or linen, there are also soft sculptures, sometimes pieces unto themselves, sometimes props to start a drawing from (studio friends I call them), plants, fabric, fur collected from my cat, hair collected from myself, a year’s worth of sweepings from the studio, along with other things. Most of the items saved or collected have a direct link to my past or recall a memory. They are the things that I have noticed, things that stick in my mind. They don’t always seem to have a purpose to serve, but are stored away until the thought becomes clear. I collect until I need the item gathered. I am a hoarder of experiences and the physical residues of existence.
Mannerism of Memory

I was in fifth grade when my mum was diagnosed with cancer. They told her there was a ten percent chance that she could live up to a year, even with treatment. She began chemo right away but didn’t want to slowly lose all of her hair. So, after her first dose she came home, put her hair in a low ponytail (using a rubber band, not a hair tie) and cut it off—just at the nape of her neck. Then we went to a Great Clips by our house, she asked them to do something, anything with what was left, just to make it as short and styled as possible. We asked for a bag for the sheared ponytail and saved it in a jewelry box.

It wasn’t until I saw the Great Clips bag, folded and wrapped around itself, lying on the bottom of my great grandmother Schwarz’s (my mother’s father’s side of the family) jewelry box in an old armoire in my basement, that I could recall any of this. I had forgotten that my mum had turned this into her jewelry box, or rather a memoir storage box. It contained a hodge-podge of my great grandmother’s jewelry, screw post earrings, crystal glass necklaces and ornamental brooches, hat pins, along with objects my mum had saved: old glasses, rabies vaccination tags for our dogs and cats, a sealed envelope (which I dare not open that reads simply, “Important”) that I believe contains a handkerchief that my mum used at her grandmother’s funeral. And there are little bags of cut hair—hair that I had forgotten about—as well as one full mid-length ponytail, cut off just above the rubber band.

My mum endured years of chemotherapy. The drugs would change and every now and then she would have a “break” from the drugs altogether. Her hair would begin to grow back. Once she went into remission, her hair grew to her shoulders. It was curly then, but the cancer came back.
Again the chemo started. She didn’t go back to Great Clips. At the beginning of each chemo cycle I would cut her hair in the bathroom. First with scissors, if it had grown long enough, then the electric clippers. Finally, I carefully used a razor on any stray hairs left. This is what fills the individual small bags. She would save a handful of hair swept up from the bathroom floor every time I cut it.

I can remember, in such detail the scratchy feeling of her buzzed hair, the pull of the razor and my fear of nicking the back of her head where there were bumps and valleys, and how smooth it would be after. But all of this information had been stored somewhere else. It isn’t a memory that can live on the surface; it’s too painful to recall at just any moment. So it remained, underneath memories waiting for the proper cue to remember.

The purpose and history of my hair drawings snapped into focus with the discovery of these clippings. The drawings are an attempt to pause time. To take time to look at something small and seemingly insignificant, something that is literally washed down a drain without any thought and record its existence on paper. This recording becomes a meditative exercise grounded in formal drawing. The act of drawing is also the act of looking—of closely observing an object in a way that cannot be anything other than an intimate act.

*Art objects [...] provide some sort of comfort for the sad fact that as we go on through life, the people we love and the places we have visited recede from our lives, and then from our memories. Art gives us ‘real metaphors’, concrete instances of absent people and distant places.*

Each time I washed my hair I would ball and knot up what had come out in the process; rinsing it and allowing it to dry fully before putting it into a jar. I became intrigued by the small tangled
shapes: the masses that bulge out, the loops that fold in and swirl behind. They looked to me like small drawings, so I began to draw them.

I begin by gluing each knot of hair to a small piece of gridded paper (two and one half by three inches). Another sheet of paper is then grid as the first and the drawing commences. The hair is my figure model.

My desire is to replicate in scale and exactly as possible, the little knots of hair glued to the paper. This is difficult and there is often in the process of following the weaves and turns, a losing and finding of the image. The struggle as I replicate these miniature knotted souvenirs is fundamental to the process. The stray hairs of the model continue to move and the drawing changes.

When completed and placed on the wall, with the drawings next to the little knots of hair, there is a distance between the souvenirs and the drawings. Physically, affected by the sudden gravity of being placed upright, the actual hairs stray. The drawings—painstakingly attentive to replicating every detail, every delicate curl of hair—remain static as a moment in time set down in graphite.

Drawing, collecting, and arranging are ways of concretizing the ephemeral nature of experience. In particular, drawing enables a depth of seeing that cannot be embodied by any other medium.

It is in the struggle of trying to see the form, attempting to mimic the form in graphite with a tool that inherently cannot be as delicate as human hair, that tension builds in the work. The drawing
has to be fought for, and is never fully won. James Elkins wrote in a letter to John Berger about the inability to truly capture and fix a drawn image against the model:

As I draw, the model becomes defective. The image in my mind is marred by the marks I put on paper. And so because a drawing cannot quite be touched, because it shifts when I try to fix it on paper, because it does not simply transcribe something in the world, because it can never bring back what I once loved.

There is what I hold in my mind while drawing, what is actually put to paper, and the model. The goal is always to bring them closer to being the same thing, the same moment. The distance between object and interpretative reflection motivates my practice.
Drawing Knots of Hair I
Graphite on paper, hair on paper
Approximately 30 drawings each measuring 2.5” x 3.5”
2016-17
Fig. 1

The drawings in this series can be shown in two forms: they are sometimes shown with a corresponding grid comprised of the models used to make the drawings, the actual knots of hair glued to sheets of paper; or they are shown alone, just the drawings in a grid. Each mode of display leads to different interpretations of the work. The grid used in both installations betrays the overall obsessiveness of the project and allows each small drawing to take on an imposing scale, which contrasts with its diminutive composite parts.

Shown alone, the drawings read very slowly. It takes time to see all the little knotted lines, mainly centered on each page, not much bigger than the palm of my hand. Each one takes on a different character. Some remain soft, light. Others seem more aggressively drawn, the graphite more built. It becomes a puzzle for the viewer to solve. How is each drawing different from the one before? What makes each one unique, or are they unique at all?

When shown with the actual hair models, the work is about finding sameness. Not from drawing to drawing, but from drawing to model. It is a search for accuracy, or a search for flaws. This installation draws the viewer’s experience closer to my own experience making the drawings. For me, each one is scrutinized throughout its making. And it doesn’t end for me when the drawing is completed. There is still a yearning to make it closer to the actual, to somehow transcribe the untranscribable.
Drawing Knots of Hair II
Graphite on drafting vellum, hair knot on paper, forged steel nails
30” x 44”
2017
Fig. 2

In the second series of hair drawings the scale of the drawing remains true to the scale of the actual knot of hair while the expanse of the paper opens up. The knots are drawn on large sheets (twenty-four by thirty inches) of matte drafting vellum. The vellum is hung about an inch and a half away from the wall, held at the top by nails I forged and weighted at the bottom corners with my great grandmother’s screw post earrings. Flush against the wall, centered behind the sheet of vellum, is a larger sheet of paper (thirty by forty-four inches) where the actual knot of hair that was used as the model is glued down.

The real clump of knotted hair is obscured, nearly obliterated by the drawing. The overlay provides just enough translucence to allow the color of the hair knot to show through, ghostly behind the drawing. They begin to absorb one another; the object is its representation’s shadow.
Ghosts

Where are we when we draw?4

Drawing plays with appearance; it oscillates between seeing, thinking, remembering and imagining, controlling and being controlled as the image emerges. It is continuously and simultaneously shifting itself in the course of its making.5

It’s not the physical space, but the mental one that is interesting. I look at an object—the model—and study it as an attempt to commit it to memory. The first marks are made, an attempt to place something real on a flat surface. Then: back and forth, one mark, one look, again and again. Eventually something like an image emerges. In my mind there is only the object and the image.

When drawing, years of training rise to the surface of my mind. I begin to hear the voices of past instructors and mentors. I hear Lynette Lombard telling me I need to “see the large shapes to understand connections in the whole image.” She takes my glasses away from me. I hear Ophrah Shemesh yelling, as she hits my elbow to straighten it while I take measurements. “Whitney you are taking a walk. Stop that. Look. Feel it. Make the mark. Focus.” Graham Nickson asks me if I have considered the edge closely enough, “keep moving out, touch the whole page.” John Newman tells me, “it isn’t enough to be a nice girl from the Midwest who knows how to do her homework and makes nice paintings.” He wants more, but I don’t know what; I can never make him happy. John Lees tells me to “stop worrying about all of them, you already know what you need to know, just draw.” Nicole Wittenberg says, “fuck the school, they’re too uptight.” They all come to the surface at the same time, a battle of mentors in my mind, and I realize I’m not focusing. Ophrah would be disappointed.
Drawing is about concentration, memory and failure. Try and try again. I study the thing, try to feel it, hold it in my mind, then turn to the page, and make a mark. I look back to the object, back to the paper, and correct it. Eventually the image grows up, becomes its own image on the page. I look less and less to the object but try to complete the image according to how it is set on the page. There is a breaking point, a rupture between the object and the image. Lynette tells me: “ultimately all you will have is the image; it has to make its own believable world that is separate from the thing used to create it.”

A line that is drawn, and then erased but refuses to disappear on the page is referred to as a ‘ghost’. A palimpsest. Latin, derived from ancient Greek, meaning literally, “scrapped again” or “rubbed smooth.”

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Connectivity
[Homesickness is Nostalgia]

We part with so many objects in life, from thrown-out letters and fingernail clippings to lost keys and stolen cameras, like Hansel’s and Gretel’s leaving intentional and unintentional trails behind us, trails eaten by time and others as their crumbs were by the wild birds so that we cannot find our way back, either to who we were or to the objects that accompanied that moment in time.®

The stories that I make up while drawing are pieces of my own personal narrative. I make images that speak about connectivity—the desire we all feel—to be connected and grounded to a like form. When we are children we are most connected to our parents, to the unconditional love they supply. As we age we begin to look for that unconditional love by finding a sexual partner, pair bonding. Through time, as we weave in and out of connections to people and places there is a rupture of the self, a feeling of displacement that can only be described as a kind of homesickness that cannot be quelled because ultimately there is no single home—only moments in time that inevitably pass from existence.

It is the fragment an the fragmentary state that are the enduring and normative conditions; conversely, it is the whole that is ephemeral, and the state of wholeness that is transitory.®

In my work, I struggle to store time and set an image. In the face of inevitable and constant change, I want to leave a sense of uneasy closure in an image that reflects this feeling, a gap left for the viewer to fill with their own interpretations and conclusions about the ephemeral nature of experience.

There are always a few simultaneous projects in progress in my space. Sometimes in the end
they join together, or parts of each body of work combine until new work happens and it’s all reordered again. Each artwork, whether it is made in a series or singularly, becomes a movable puzzle piece. For one installation works may be shown as a group, then in another installation half of that group is shown along with new works or older works, to create a new piece. Work is always building on top of past work, weaving in and out of time.

Every regrouping has the potential to change the meaning of the individual works. When the sewn pieces are shown with the hair drawings the fact that they are both linear strands is emphasized. The little knots of hair, grouped with sewn hair works and hair used as pigment for painting clearly focuses on hair alone as a medium. Meaning and emphasis can change. Perhaps that is the overarching meaning of the work: we are always in a state of flux; of becoming something new; of uncertainty and exploration. Memories along with dreams of the future create the present moment, thus nothing can ever be pinned down. In the artwork, in the studio and in life—it is always what will be or what was. Change is constant, and outside of concentrating on making the drawing at hand there seems to be no clear present moment.

As simplified imagery on a small scale, my drawings rely on repetition for clarity and impact. The drawings are made in an almost obsessive, serial way. Forms repeat and morph from drawing to drawing. When selected and catalogued into separate groups, they coalesce. As a species we are inclined to look for familiar images in chaotic forms, a face on the moon or a figure in a cloud. We also attempt to draw connections when given two disparate objects. By grouping the drawings, I ask the viewer to connect them individually and from group to group—to make their own interpretations based on the given visual cues. Together these groups suggest a story more complex than any single image could convey.
Hope Chest (for the past)
Mixed media, found and saved objects
45” x 14.5” x 6”
2016
Fig. 3.1-3.2

Sometimes the objects are hoarded exactly […] because the moment or the person cannot be likewise possessed. 9

Sheer Elegance (taken from my grandfather’s record collection), fur scrap (gifted from my beloved studio mate at the Studio School, Silvie), a dried clementine (I forgot to eat), forged steel hammer (forged by me), one half dried kola nut (from Mali, I forgot to eat it again), vial of hair (mine, from cleaning out a hair brush), wad of silicone (a byproduct of the studio), baboon jaw (bottom half, gifted by Minerva of Spring Street Studios), forged steel hook (first forged object, without hole for hanging), beads made from a root (for lactating women and infants, from Bamako), music box (John Lennon’s Imagine, gifted by Tim, technically my manager, and friend), steel blank (from punching a hole in the forged hammer to insert the handle), copper nail (from a hardware store time forgot in NYC), pieces of broken pottery (removed from the island of Djenne-Djenno illegally), dried purple flower (from a plant I was gifted, and subsequently accidently murdered, by an unknown giver), unfired clay pot filled with hair (Tom Kitten’s), cotton blossom (from my back yard), gold candy (from Felix Gonzalez Torres at the Pulitzer), hand woven baskets (gifted from my father’s partner), cowry shells and seeds for casting fortunes (gifted from Sekouba Camara, a mentor in Bamako), dried grapefruit rosette (from fruit plate, then worn as a brooch), and balancing scale in wooden box (purchased for $10 at Government Surplus)
Bubbles

It was two weeks before my twenty-first birthday. There was no more chemotherapy, no more options. We were preparing for the inevitable in the best way we could. I took out her trach\textsuperscript{10} and cleaned it every morning and night. I measured and poured the goo from a can into a bag and set the machine for her feeding tube. I massaged her legs, which had bloated over double their size and ached—full of fluid. There were pain medications, anti-anxiety medications and a number of things I have since forgotten and don’t want to remember. I set up a notebook—a kind of nurse’s log—where I recorded everything.

Now I had to learn how to change and hook up a saline drip as well. No one had told me this would happen, but the home health nurse explained that it was the reason for her visit. I suppose we had set up the meeting but I didn’t remember. I slept on the couch next to my mum, a few hours at a time. It was getting hard to keep days straight. I was shown how to prime the needle and told to make sure I had released any air bubbles in the line.

I asked the nurse if I was supposed to have more training, if this was legal. I was only twenty, a college student studying art who knew nothing really. Why would I be allowed to do something so important? She told me that this was my training, and that I would do just fine. It was easy really, she said. She did one, asked me to repeat her actions and left.

We used to buy bottles of children’s bubbles and would blow them at the cats. We would play with them for hours. I was told even the smallest bubble in the IV would cause an aneurism,
stroke, or heart attack. My mum had a port, so that part was easy; I wasn’t afraid of the needle. I was afraid of the bubbles.

*Drawing, as a means of explaining an experience, conflates events or separates instants into a described whole. In its effort to explain and translate, no drawing will do justice to what is lost. As soon as that thought is articulated, another is lost, and every point of significance identified makes it less likely that we will find other possible points. There remains an enormous difference between what is seen and what is understood, and again between what is drawn and the drawing itself. In its effort to delineate, drawing is contradiction.*

My plant drawing grew out of the methods of the hair drawings. The scale is enlarged however. The plant measures approximately eleven inches and the drawing measures seventy-two inches. The intention is to depict the plant as accurately as possible, even for only that hour, and although it is subtly changing.

Drawing an hour a day does not allow me to catch up with the growing or shrinking of the plant. I tend to concentrate on the center of the plant, working from the inside out to its extremities. I rarely make it all the way out. Sometimes all I do is erase.

The surface is important, oil ground on canvas. The oil ground provides an ultra-slick, almost plastic surface for the graphite. A soft lead slides across the top, and a harder pencil incises the ground, never to be erased.

Time passes, the plant changes, the drawing changes. The drawing holds the passage of time, though a line is never fully erased, only dulled.
I often think about what will happen if I fail to keep the plant alive. I will still have to move forward, continue to draw. How will I draw the decomposition? I will still have to hang it on the wall. What if it falls apart? What if it’s too fragile to be anything but on a flat surface? I suppose I could redraw the grid and allow it to settle, undisturbed as I draw its slow decay. There will be bugs. I will want to stop. Will anything be left of the drawing? An erased de Kooning without the prestige of his name or Rauschenberg’s.\textsuperscript{12}

I don’t want the guilt of killing the plant. It is my responsibility now. I’m afraid I’m not very good at it. I forget. After my grandfather died someone placed a potted plant in my studio. It had purple flowers. I don’t know what kind of plant it was. No name of the giver either, just a note that read, “plant this and it will bloom this time each year.” I forgot to water it and it died. I saved the shriveled flowers—thin like tissue paper—and I think of drawing them before they are destroyed. It won’t be the same as planting it, though.

In my front yard my mum planted lambs ear, a cutting from the plant my grandmother had received from her mother. It has taken over my front yard. It’s the only surviving thing there. I don’t know how or why. It went so many years without care.

When my mum was sick I was her only caregiver. I was a sophomore in college and was afraid I would have to drop out. The Dean of Students devised an independent study where I would draw her. In his mind it related to my major and was something I could do at home when taking care of my mum. In reality I could never sleep, I didn’t have time to draw or do anything but be with her, and I didn’t want to remember it. I didn’t want to have an image of her in charcoal, forever dying. It was too much. Now I wish I had done it.
That is what the plant drawing is. It is every moment condensed into one. An attempt to move with time as well as set it. A permanent record of change.
The Rules:

1. After the first two weeks each drawing session will be limited to no more than one hour per day.

2. Try to keep the plant alive. Water it regularly.

3. When drawing, place the plant on nails placed on the wall with the grid drawn on. When not drawing the plant hang it on its hook. It is much happier there than on the wall and can absorb light and moisture from all sides.

4. If the plant begins to die, try to bring it back, but continue to draw it in its current state.

5. Erasure is allowed, but no whiting out. If a line cannot be fully erased, it must be left as is.

6. Continue. If the plant dies, draw its decay until nothing is left.
Eva Hesse

Arnhard Scheidt, a wealthy industrialist and collector, invited Eva Hesse’s husband Tom Doyle to “an unusual kind of Renaissance patronage.” Hesse was to go along with Doyle and both would be given space to work in. They worked on the top floor of a factory in Kettwig. Hesse was clearly influenced by the atmosphere of her studio. The abandoned factory was no longer in use but was undergoing renovations. There would sometimes be workers in the building. Hesse was having trouble working in her new surroundings, and Doyle recalls, “I told her why don’t you try some of the shit lying around here.” Hesse took screen, heavy mesh, cord wire and plaster, creating what Doyle recalls as “The Piece,” the one that truly embodied her. It was “it, all that trying and everything, it’s really her.” While the work did not survive, it has been described as something close to Ringaround Arosie, 1965 (Fig. 5). From here Hesse’s work developed quickly into her mature style, as she slowly began to explore different materials.

Hesse’s work came from her own bodily engagement with new industrial materials. She used rubber, latex, resin, and fiberglass in ways that were never intended by the manufacturers. She lent intimacy to the otherwise cold and crude. She chose to brush on latex in thin layers as opposed to using an impersonal and perfect mold. I can imagine her dipping rope into latex and using her hands to mold it. She strove to control substance and form, while also allowing it to have its own character. Hesse herself alludes to wanting a universal, not personal, view of her work.

I would like the work to be non-work. This means that it would find its way beyond my preconceptions.
What I want of my art I can eventually find. The work must go beyond this. It is my main concern to go beyond what I know and what I can know. The formal principles are understandable and understood. It is the unknown quantity from which and where I want to go. As a thing, an object, it accedes to its non-logical self. It is something. It is nothing.¹⁶

Perhaps most importantly, in the fourth line of the statement Hesse wrote, “It is my main concern to go beyond what I know and what I can know.” Here she is telling the viewer that the work goes beyond herself. Despite her habit of exclaiming, “I have no ideas.” In fact, striking ideas that arise from the space between painting and sculpture. Her ideas came from her material and the work evolved according to the basic properties of the medium chosen. The finished work lies suspended somewhere between the object it was and the object it became.
Substance and Alchemy

Color and material serve as sensual signifiers. In the same way that form in drawing can describe an object in space, the material can describe the visceral feeling of that object. I make many of my own paints—binding raw pigments, as well as glitter, sawdust, hair (mine, my cats, and people I know), pumice, tobacco leaves, fleecing, gold leaf, and sweepings from the studio floor. My palette also consists of garish ready-made colors—fluorescent greens, yellows and pinks—along with more subdued pastels and earth tones.

The theory and aims of alchemy are embodied in this act of binding. The philosophy of alchemy is complex, but for my purpose it boils down to a secret knowledge of how to manipulate a series of materials in a specific order to create a new material. While alchemy means literally the transformation of a substance’s particles and chemical composition of a substance into a truly new substance with new particles (i.e. turning silver to gold), I prefer to think of the process metaphorically.

While I control substance, sheen, texture and weight, each drawing, painting or sculpture, embodies a fierce and unpredictable character, oozing messiness and physicality. In my practice, this is embodied in the act of adhering a pigment to a substrate, creating something new and stopping its motion against the impacts of time. It is a combination of substances organized in a direct way with the aim of ultimately bringing order to chaos and elevating the power of the raw materials. Themes of binding and transformation are apparent in my imagery. Binding is not only a process but a visual product. I want my work to be sensual, to have a tactile feeling.
There is a strip of asphalt that I tripped over when walking back to the studio. Looking down I saw it wasn’t really attached to the crack it was meant to mend. I ripped it up from the ground as if it were a weed and continued walking to the studio where I used two copper nails to place it vertically on the wall. It hung there for a few weeks—slumping more and more each day, as though it were trying to reach the ground again. One day I came into the studio and it had torn in two, the bottom half on the ground—it could no longer bear being on the wall, and in its yearning for the ground plane, it flung itself free.

I speak of the asphalt as though it were alive—not in a sentient way, but it does have natural tendencies—it can move itself.

It now hangs as two pieces of asphalt, side by side, on the wall with one raised slightly higher than the other. There is a copper nail at the top and at the bottom and a large steel nail I forged in the middle fixing the pieces to the wall. The molecular structure of asphalt is in a constant state of flux. When it becomes humid and hot it reacts by becoming more and more limp. It hangs pathetically on the wall. In the winter it stiffens, becomes hard and even brittle. The one that hangs lower has twisted itself on the bottom, curling under itself and back out again, the copper nail almost subsumed by the twist.

The nails have been absorbed by the piece; they have truly become a part of it. As the asphalt
hangs on the wall the holes from the nails, which act as hooks holding it to the wall, loosen. When it is removed from the wall and stored flat, however, the nails sink into the asphalt. The holes close up as if the asphalt were skin trying to heal. This is something I do not control. The material is left to be affected by natural fluctuations.

I think of it as another way of mark-making, and while I do not effect the changes it makes I do choose where and how to position the asphalt on the wall. The two strips are dark, thick lines. One side is mostly smooth, the other ripples like the deckled edges of paper where bits of small rock are caught in the tar (technically bitumen, I believe). These little rocks are sprinkled throughout the piece; some jutting out of the asphalt, half absorbed, half floating. Others are clearly below the surface, only noticeable as hills and valleys.

I love the asphalt because of its mortality, its vulnerability. I have limited control over it. I know our time together in the studio is limited—one day it will droop in the heat and tear itself away again, becoming three pieces, then four. Or perhaps I will be handling it in the cold and it will crack in its brittle state. It has a life in the studio and will one day die there, retiring it from being a “piece” to a dead artifact.

*Things have a life of their own. It’s simply a matter of waking up their souls.*

17
Ending Beginning

Here is now here. But however true that still was a moment ago, now here is already there, at the beginning, and instead of it something else was—and now, again, no longer is—here. That here is at the beginning can also only be true when the beginning is no longer here. The beginning is there and in retrospect. Here and now are words with which one can only lie. The beginning, which exists only after the fact, has always already been the beginning. There is no such thing as beginning, only having begun, and it remains unclear how it has come to that.

At that time a hunt started: the letters have been trying to catch up with the Here and the Now, from which they get further and further away even as they are formed. The text writes itself towards the beginning, which slips away from it more and more precisely for this reason. The more the text strives towards its goal—the be able to begin—the more it is already beyond it, past it in time and space [...]

What, having begun, cannot begin, cannot end. The end would be the chance to begin, which the text endlessly misses by going on. Just as the beginning lies before as well as behind, so does the end lie behind as well as before. Because the end cannot be said, saying can have no end. Where the test ends it is unfinished, because although its end has come it is still unsaid, and when the test says it, it has not yet come to an end, since it is still in the middle of saying that it has. Writing, which must always already have begun in order to be able to say that is has, must always continue in order to be able to say that it is ending. It always ends too early or too late, and therefore does not end at all, for it misses its own end [...]

The arbitrariness of beginning and end, which are impossible to keep a watch on from the inside of the whole, is the whole’s crumbling away at the edges.18
Try, Try Again
Hand sewn paper
2016
20 individual sheets each measuring 3” x 4.5”
Fig. 7

To puncture, rupture, bind, and mend. While determinedly quiet (one cannot dismiss the somber use of white thread on the soft white pulp of the page) there is also a subtle, subversive violence inherent in the act of sewing. In Try, Try Again, the viewer is given only a meandering line or two and a tangle of loose thread.

One small sheet of paper follows the next; no image is given and nothing is mended. There is only the continued rupture of thread on the page, from page to page, in what seems like could be an endless line. It is a physical manifestation of meditation.

When sewing the paper, all I can focus on is the in and out of the needle, a process of both rupture and binding. Here, process overtakes the image, meaning there is no intended image. The image made on the paper is only the residue of an action and time spent in single minded concentration.

The small size of each drawing is important. The scale references something cared for, even loved. The repetition of each sewn page suggests that the piece could continue and has no set boundary, referencing the ongoing process of transformation. As a whole Try, Try Again becomes a reliquary without confinement.
Bleed

When I was twenty-one I ran away to west Africa. It was the best thing I could think to do. I didn’t want to quit school, but I didn’t want to be there anymore and I knew I couldn’t be in my childhood house because there were too many haunting memories. I applied to a study abroad program through Antioch Education Abroad in Mali. While I was there I had a sand reading, a type of fortune-telling practiced by blacksmiths.

In the reading Sekouba stopped, and looked up. He blushed and said simply “you do not bleed.” I didn’t understand the statement and asked, “how do you mean? Of course I bleed when I am hurt.” He explained sheepishly, “no, you do not bleed as a woman does.” These things were not talked about between opposite genders in Mali (it was taboo to even hold a man’s hand in public unless he was your husband). It was true, something I had not talked about, but I had not bled for over a year.

What my gynecologist could not explain Sekouba described as my uterus mourning the loss of my mother. It needed time to reconcile, to come to terms with being the only woman left in my family. It was the kindest, most comprehensive explanation I had received. I could understand and accept it—and move on. A few months after returning to the States I bled. My uterus had stopped mourning.
Conclusion

There is no distinct conclusion within the fragmentary nature of my artwork. The work will continue, it will weave in and out of drawing, collecting, and arranging along with a focus on materiality. Here, mourning the loss of my mother has severed as the focus of my artwork. It is my hope that the work also speaks to a larger sense of change and loss, something universal to the ephemeral human experience.
3. John Berger, 112
9. Rebecca Solnit, 115
10. Trach, short for tracheostomy. A tracheostomy is a permanent “opening surgically created through the neck into the trachea (windpipe) to allow direct access to the breathing tube…A tube is usually placed through this opening to provide an airway and to remove secretions from the lungs. Breathing is done through the tracheostomy tube rather than through the nose and mouth.” Molnar, Heather. "What is a tracheostomy?” Johns Hopkins Medicine, based in Baltimore, Maryland. September 08, 2008. Accessed April 30, 2017.” http://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/tracheostomy/about/what.html.
12. Rauschenberg wanted to make a series of drawings to show with his white paintings. He began by making drawings and then erasing them, but it wasn’t enough. He decided to ask de Kooning, whom he had studied under at black mountain College. He showed up with a bottle of Jack, hoping de Kooning wouldn’t be at his studio. He was, and Rauschenberg explained the idea, and why he needed a drawing from him. De Kooning responded that he ‘didn’t like it, but would go along with it because [he] understood the idea.’ ‘It needs to be something I will miss,’ he said, and went through two portfolios. Then, ‘it should be something difficult to erase,’ went through a third portfolio and took out a drawing with pencil, crayon and charcoal. It took Rauschenberg a month to erase it. De Kooning saw this moment as a ‘changing of the guard,’ he was erased by Rauschenberg. Sfmoma. YouTube. April 27, 2010. Accessed April 30, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGRNQER16Do.
14. Lucy R. Lippard, 28
15. Lucy R. Lippard, 29
17. Rebecca Solnit, 121, referencing the gypsy Melquíades in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, by Gabriel Garcia Marquez.
Figures

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Drawing Knots of Hair I
Graphite on paper, hair on paper
Approximately 30 drawings each measuring 2.5” x 3.5”
2016-17
Fig. 1
Drawing Knots of Hair II
Graphite on drafting velum, hair knot on paper, forged steel nails
30” x 44”
2017
Fig. 2
Hope Chest (for the past)
Mixed Media (see p.12)
45” x 14.5” x 6”
2016
5 Months in 152 Hours
Graphite on oil ground canvas
72” x 72”
2016-17
Fig. 4
Ringaround Arosie
Eva Hesse
Pencil, acetone, varnish, enamel paint, ink, and cloth covered electrical wire on papier-mâché and masonite
26 3/8" x 16 1/2" x 4 1/2"
1965
Fig. 5
**Asphalt Skin**
Found Asphalt, copper nails, forged steel nails
Approximately 23”x12”
2016
Fig. 6
Try, Try Again
Hand sewn paper
2016
20 individual sheets each measuring 3" x 4.5"
Fig. 7
Bibliography


