

**GROWING PAINS**

***or: It Doesn't Fall Far, or: Tread Carefully, or: Any Number of Phrases Relating or Reflective of Generational Cycles of Trauma***

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*To Hank, both real and imagined, the ever-complicated man I wish I had gotten to know far better.*

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## ABSTRACT

Over the past three years, I've developed a practice heavily focused around refuse. There is physical refuse, like my partner's old work clothes, too worn out to be of use, or the paperboard packaging from the meals I make, medical bills, letters, cigarette butts, food packaging—any material that can be tied to the body through labor, nourishment, or self-care. There is also psychological refuse: fragmented, distorted memories altered from truth through years of rumination, generationally inherited dysfunctional behaviors and thought patterns, obsessions, compulsions, delusions, and grief. I believe that what we choose to discard creates a detailed portrait of the self, a convoluted curation of what we believe no longer serves us.

My practice is entirely cyclical, involving the making of my own paper substrate from physical refuse. This is coupled with the repetition of printmaking, stamping a block or screen printing, in order to process the psychological refuse and to document thoughts about my estrangement from my father's family. What are the challenges of becoming a fullyformed adult in a world both the same and different as the ones they occupied had and have occupied, especially with such limited information about their inner lives? My face matches my grandfather's, my uncle's. But my father's face looks nothing like mine. How can we solve fictions we know nothing about?

## AN INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, I aim to document my cyclical practice of papermaking and printmaking. My practice is heavily contextualized around my inherited and developed conditions and traits from my father, his family, and his abuse, the most notable familial figures being my uncle, Hank, and my grandfather, David.

I have selected five artists that have been heavily influential in my work: Mary Kelly, Dawn Roe, Yayoi Kusama, Bryan Lee O' Malley, and Natsuki Takaya. These artists have been instrumental to me in both aesthetic choices and content of the work I make. Lastly, I will discuss the three finished pieces of art I feature in my thesis exhibition: *self-persecution*, *intangible/tangible*, and *tread carefully*, and how they relate to the influences of the artists above and my processes of digging through my relationship to my father's family.

## 1. FAMILIAL CONTEXT

My interest in my father's side has always been present, but I found it to be sparked when I realized that after a few years on testosterone (hormone replacement therapy), I looked strikingly similar to Hank and my grandpa Dave. Growing up, I looked far more like my mother than my father. I still look like her, but transitioning seemed to have given me that paternal resemblance. Not exactly to my actual father, but his family. Realizing this inspired me to dive deeper into my psyche and relationships to his family.

I am currently estranged from my father and his family and have been for some time. My grandfather and his sons were, and are, deeply complicated people. My father is a product of the cycle of abuse, and for that reason I have chosen to separate myself from him. We were never particularly close. Because of this, I have minimal knowledge of his side of the family. I am fully aware there is an entire sea of information I do not have access to, and likely never will. What I know deeply, is that my father and his abuse have left me with many learned and inherited behaviors and thought patterns that I have had to dismantle in order to function as a healthy adult. He has also, in addition to genetics, graced me with multiple mental illnesses, most notably obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and complex post-traumatic stress disorder (cPTSD), which his own father likely imparted onto him.

My grandpa David died long before I was born. He, as far as I'm aware, was not a kind man, or a loving father. He was married two or three times, and I never met his wives, either. My paternal grandmother, whom I was partially named for, died when my father was very young. I have since changed my name, for unrelated gender reasons.

My father is a terribly abusive man, and, in my childhood, threatened the life and safety of my mother multiple times. This culminated in the temporary relocation of my mother and I to friend's house after friend's house. At the age of 17, for a decent chunk of time, I did not have a permanent place to stay.

My father was one of several siblings. He has one sister, Victoria, and *had* three brothers. Two of them, I never knew. Danny (name unrelated to my own) was quite problematic, and vanished off the face of the earth in the early 2000s. I know very little

about Joe, other than that he was the oldest sibling, and similarly to Danny, had not been seen in several years prior to his death. The last sibling, the second oldest, was my uncle Hank.

Other than Victoria, Hank (given name Henry) was the only sibling of my father I ever got the chance to meet. He was an artist, a leatherworker, and the only “out” member of my family at the time of his death. He was a multiple-packs-a-day chain smoker, a member of several niche fetish communities in Knoxville, Tennessee, and rarely ever left his house, which had previously belonged to my grandfather, David. The last time I had seen it was when I was five years old. I remember that it reeked of cigarette smoke and leather dye. Hank died when I was in my early teens. Much of the information I know about him I learned far later, from my mother, who has since divorced my father.

It is a strange and nauseating experience to grapple with familial relationships when you have very little credible detail, no avenues to new information, and poor memory from the few firsthand experiences you have. In my processing, I find the need to re-analyze what memories and information I do have in order to gain understanding, as well as a sense of control over myself and my familial ties.

## 2. PROCESS AND PROCESSING

For the past year and a half or so, I've been intently focused on making my practice cyclical. I have obsessively torn up my paper garbage, including old artwork, to make new paper; to make new prints and paintings; to rip them to shreds; and so on. This started after a revelation of the amount of paper waste I produce, but in committing to this practice, I've developed a material language of refuse; representing what parts of my father I leave behind in order to grow and abandon the cycle of abuse throughout my family. At present, through this body of work, I have made it a high-priority goal to utilize as little untouched, non-recycled paper as physically possible.

The cyclical nature of my paper practice is a great source of pride in my work. I have found that a heavily repetitive task is extremely helpful when ruminating on memories. It is a very sensorily involved task, the slime of the paper pulp, the cool of the water on your hands when you pull, the pressure you impart on to the paper when sponging out the water.

Conceptual feminist artist Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* utilizes the refuse and ephemera generated from the birth of her son and from the first several years of his life. *PPD* relies on keeping the majority of the refuse intact, documenting them almost like artifacts in a museum, highlighting the physicality of the objects and pieces themselves. The objects Kelly displays are private, intimate glimpses into her life and labor as a mother, such as the tears in her hospital nursing gowns and the stains on her son's diaper linings.

Reading about *Post-Partum Document* inspired me to utilize my own refuse as a reflection of the self. It is heavily contextual and changes throughout different points in life. What I am eating, what clothes have become unwearable, what gifts I have received, what logistical and clerical work have I been doing and contributing to. What readings have I been doing? What have I been teaching my class? I find it helpful to inventory the physical ephemera I discard and leave behind. Unlike Kelly, though, I do not keep my scraps pristine, but rather deconstruct them through the process of papermaking.

My papermaking process is laborious, but repetitive and meditative. I tear apart or shred whatever paper material I wish to use, both from unprocessed refuse and my own work, and soak it for an extended period of time (twelve hours to several weeks) in the refrigerator. In addition, I keep a stock of old clothes that I shred by hand and beat in the Hollander beater until they are loose fibers. I mix a ratio of these materials that I change each time, playing it by ear, and occasionally add a small amount of abaca for stability and ink absorbancy. I then mix it with water and blend it. When I am preparing to pull the paper, I often add colorants - old screenprinting ink, dried bits of acrylic paint, continuing the recycling of scrap. Other times, I try to rely on the coloring brought to the pulp by the refuse itself.



Figure 1: Daniel's papermaking process (pulling, couching, lifting)

Kelly's work utilizes items involved in the birth and raising of her son to explore the traces that motherhood leaves behind. Another example of similar exploration can be seen in experimental photographer and film-maker Dawn Roe's multiple-year body of work *Conditions for an Unfinished Work of Mourning: Wretched Yew* is a meditation on grief that inspired my practice of working with the concept of the trace in its entirety. Her utilization of ephemera, oftentimes organic, sometimes man-made as a methodology for expressing our relationship to the environment and the physical memory that is present in those spaces; the "radical despair"; the profound hopelessness and pointlessness of existence) that serves as inspiration for working around grief and revelation. In addition to ephemeral traces, Roe's imagemaking and film-making processes rely on unpredictability, which often becomes a part of her work in and of itself. *Wretched Yew* is composed primarily of cyanotypes and lumen prints that were physically pinned onto

the branches of the yew trees, capturing their movement in the wind and the animals and insects that live among them, making it impossible to see the results until they were unpinned. This technique also gives Roe's work a sense of aesthetic fragmentation.

Fragmentation, aesthetic and otherwise, plays a significant role in my printmaking. My experiences of living with OCD and cPTSD means that I have significant memory problems. It is difficult for me to concretely remember events, places, or time periods. There are often holes, and sometimes I find myself compulsively replaying and re-analyzing vignettes over and over, to the point where I am not even sure of what's imagined and what factually occurred.

This repetition of fragmented memories translates well into the visual artJapanese of multidisciplinary artist Yayoi Kusama. Her use of color and repetition in her expressions of her life as an abuse survivor with obsessive-compulsive disorder. Her woodcuts, sculptures, and installations have directly impacted the way I view installation work through printmaking. The repetition of the same composition, simple or



*Figure 2: Daniel's relief printmaking process (rolling, running through press, lifting)*

complex, ad nauseum, gives her work greater emotional impact.

Relief printmaking involves a significant amount of repetition - one must stamp a carved block onto multiple pieces of substrate with considerable force, be it with the help of a printing press, a baren, or even a steamroller. In screenprinting, a squeegee must be dragged across the screen pressed forcefully in order to stencil a repeated image onto surfaces. This inherent repetition allows me to better visually explore and explain my experiences of repetitive flashbacks and compulsive re-imaginings.

My figurative style of mark making developed from the many comic books and mangas I read as a young teenager, with the most influential artists being Japanese mangaka Natsuki Takaya and Korean-Canadian cartoonist Bryan Lee O'Malley. These

artists have not only very distinct visual styles, but their most impactful works influenced me with their relevant content to my teenage years, as well.

Natsuki Takaya's critically acclaimed serial manga *Fruits Basket* centers around trauma in various forms, such as cyclical familial abuse, familial deaths, bullying, and grooming. The setting of the story is fantastical, surrounding a family who mysteriously transform into animals under multiple circumstances. Reading *Fruits Basket* as a child and young teen single handedly kickstarted my passion of drawing, and Takaya's twists on 1990's shoujo-manga styling not only influenced an entire generation of manga and comic book artists, but significantly influenced the ways in which I view line and form on two dimensional planes, and that is evident in my work *self-persecution*.

Bryan Lee O'Malley's debut graphic novel *Lost at Sea* is a coming-of-age story surrounding a traumatized high schooler named Raleigh on a three-day road trip with three strangers. During this road trip, she develops an intense delusion that a cat has stolen her soul. O'Malley distorts his figures to accentuate the atmosphere and confusion of the characters using perspective and frequently breaks out of the comic book "frames". Re-reading this book during the first summer break of grad school inspired me to break out of the frames in dynamic cartoonish ways, with varying line thicknesses, intentionally varied hatching, and high contrast shading.

### 3. THE WORKS

#### *SELF-PERSECUTION*



*Figure 3: self-persecution, Sintra block print and inkjet on BFK and handmade recycled paper, 278 x 96 inches*

My multi-print installation, *self-persecution*, serves as the introduction to this body of work. The repeated image is of a new self in the process of metaphorically “killing” a past self. The composition for these prints was inspired by frames from Takaya’s *Fruits Basket* and stills from old westerns, particularly the shooting scenes in Sergio Leone’s *the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, but with a sword in the place of a gun. The linear shape of the sword better acts as a division between the two sides of the composition, and as a tool of optical movement. I am very interested in the idea of confronting oneself later in life.

These prints were made in response to a time when I was undergoing hefty medication changes, in addition to assisting in familial matters related to my father. I was very unwell. I was not eating or caring for myself well, and was reflecting the difficulty of becoming another version of myself. It is sometimes very productive to let go of behavioral refuse (in this case, lack of self-care) and ideological refuse (negative self-talk) is important to developing as a human being, though that transformation can be painful and abrupt. This piece is an indirect allusion to grappling with inherited parts of the self that must be challenged in order to promote growth.

The prints in *self-persecution* are reduction block prints, done on one 17 x 34 piece of heavyweight PVC tiling from Home Depot. In reduction, only one block is used, and more of the block is carved away between each layer in order to create highlights and shadows. Each one is printed with the knowledge that one cannot pull more prints from an earlier layer than have already been done. Throughout the past three years, I have discovered that reduction is my favorite way to work. It requires a significant level of planning and foresight, and adds a healthy, but nerve wracking, challenge to the physical printing process. In addition, certain individual prints within the installation have overlaid swirling arrow patterns printed on handmade paper.



Figure 4: *self-persecution* (detail)

## 5. INTANGIBLE/TANGIBLE (IT DOESN'T FALL FAR)



Figure 5: *intangible/tangible (it doesn't fall far)*, 2025. Acrylic, inkjet, and Sintra block prints on handmade recycled paper, 57.5 x 37 inches

To create *intangible/tangible*, I travelled to my late uncle Hank's house in Heiskell, Tennessee. About 20 minutes out of Knoxville, this house was left to Hank in my grandfather's will. I visited this house many times as a young child, but had not seen it in several years, both leading up to and after Hank's death. My memories of it are of Hank's leatherworking studio, filled with hundreds of tools and his many sketchbooks, where he taught me to do basic leather stamping. Influenced and inspired by a still from the video installation in Dawn Roe's *Wretched Yew*, I wanted to create a backdrop by taking an image of the house itself. I was not able to enter the house like I had as a child; there was a large orange padlock on the fence-gate, and the door had been red-tagged. I bought a pack of Marlboro Reds, sat on Hank's driveway, next to his neighbor's son's car, and smoked one cigarette. I left him the rest of the pack, as they were his favorite.

The photograph itself was digitally edited and printed at 57.5 x 37 inches, tiled atop twenty sheets of tabloid sized handmade paper consisting of old artworks and worn-out clothing I wore in high school. The paper was colored mostly by the material content, but I experimented with coloring both with gifted acrylic pigment, and expired phenazopyridine pills.

The labor of making twenty 11 x 17 sheets of paper and piecing them together correctly is a massive undertaking. Taking this puzzling together further, over several months, I printed over 100 prints of both myself and my grandfather, David, based on an



*Figure 6: test prints for intangible/tangible of David and Daniel*

old photo. In this photo, David is in his mid to late twenties, well dressed, and grinning an asymmetrical grin, the right side of his mouth curls up noticeably higher than the left, just like mine. It felt strange, almost nauseating, to realize how similar our faces were despite the difference in time and the fact that we never met. I decided that I would emulate his portrait by

dressing like him, and I carved PVC blocks with both of our faces. These prints are not reduction, but single layer prints.

After grappling with several ideas and dozens of material tests, the final prints are printed on oiled and acrylic sealant-soaked tissue paper, which lent the perfect amount of opacity. I overlaid six of the final tissue prints overtop the photograph and painted the figure of myself on top of that. The rest of the prints are strewn about the floor beneath the piece, breaking out of the two-dimensional plane of the wall.

## TREAD CAREFULLY



Figure 7: tread carefully, 2025. Acrylic and silkscreen on handmade recycled paper and salvaged bedsheet, 77.5 x 60 x 18 inches

The final piece, *tread carefully*, is a 77.5 x 60 x 18 inch paper collage painted with figures. Influenced by frames in O'Malley's *Lost at Sea*, the shadows of the figures drip off of the wall and fold onto the floor of the gallery on a recycled bedsheet. This composition came from a photo of Gabriel, my partner, and I, walking through the ten-inch-deep snow surrounding the school adjacent to our apartment complex. I captured the shadows we cast, distorted by our footprints and the footprints of many schoolchildren and local animals, and depicted them to display a melancholy glimpse into my familial past, and traits left behind.

The work is made up of twenty-two sheets of blue handmade paper consisting of discarded prints, as well as two shirts I wore frequently in high school that were gifted to me by a friend. I painted the overlaid figures of Gabriel and I with acrylic, emulating the style I use with my reduction block prints. The shadows of the piece are made from a bedsheet from my childhood home. The bedsheet was dyed and subsequently screen printed with multiple colorways of two images of my uncle, Hank, as a child. These are based off of the only image of Hank I have. The prints are intentionally sprawled and overlapping, to give a sense of messiness and confusion as an allusion to the fictions I had to develop of Hank's life due to the lack of physical information.

Breaking the frame has become typical of my print compositions to create more dynamic images, but has been used in this piece to further the connection to the audience with the scene itself. The shadows stretching out onto the floor invite the viewer to step into the image itself, and view the messy background the figures gaze into, whatever futures are held there.

#### 4. IN CONCLUSION:

The work within my thesis show is a documentation and a reflection of many hours spent ruminating on my relationship with my father and his family, and how generational cycles of abuse must be broken. My handmade paper is a productive expression of the inherited pieces of my father and his family that I have chosen keep, reform, or abandon completely in order to grow and heal. The imagery printed and painted upon my handmade paper are expressions of the vivid and fragmented flashes that my memory presents itself in. With inspirations from Dawn Roe, Mary Kelly, Yayoi Kusama, Natsuki Takaya, and Bryan Lee O' Malley I have taken ephemera that is often overlooked in order to document and illustrate my life as a product and a force pushing against the cycles of generational trauma and abuse.

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