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Exhibition Statement submitted to the Department of Art and Art History in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

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"It is important to stay vulnerable. To permit pain, to make mistakes, not to be intimidated by touching. Mistakes are very important, if we are alert".

Duane Michals

"Franz Kafka once noted in his diary that a writer must cling to his desk"by his teeth"in order to avoid the madness that would overtake him if he stopped writing. I suppose the same could be said of every creative activity that somehow permits us to come to grips with the demons of our past, to give form to the chaos within us and thereby master our anxiety".

Alice Miller

"They are excessively warm hands, that continually want to cool themselves and involuntarily lay themselves on any cold object, outspread, with air between the fingers".

Rainer Maria Rilke (1)

"I am compulsive in my preoccupation with death. In some way I am preparing myself for my own death. Yet iif someone would put a gun in my stomach, I would pee my pants. All my metaphysical speculations would get wet".

Duane Michals

(1) Rilke, The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge. Quote found in The Natural History of The Senses

I no longer have any need or desire to take photographs. It is important for me to open this exhibition statement with this, my biggest confession. Perhaps, now, all that I can tell you will be an anticlimax. What is crucial for me is to articulate the process that has allowed me to struggle, understand and thus reach closure with this medium.

My time spent in the MFA program has seen radical shifts in my art practice. Most days I wanted to quit. Most days I was terribly unclear and insecure about what I was thinking and producing. I am certain, now, that quantity has been of little importance. As I began the process of asking myself questions (such as - why am I resisting photography?) I found myself quite paralysed. I made a slow start into using other mediums, ultimately this has been a hugely liberating experience. In retrospect, my hesitation in working with other materials came from my unfamiliarity with them. Both of my undergraduate degrees centred virtually exclusively on the production of photographs.

As I have been writing this paper I have contemplated the Statement of Intention that I submitted as part of my application to this program. I spoke of the issues that motivated my photographs originating "from a sense of personal discontinuity", my most recent work, at that time, had just moved into the three-dimensional, and my interest was in "exploring the potential of other materials while maintaining a photographic base". My intention wasn't to question photography in itself, which is ultimately what I have ended up doing.

My exploration of other materials has, alongside of questions to myself, challenged me and caused me to move forward. I have had much resistance to considering my work from a theoretical or critical perspective. Clearly, this resistance has been in proportion to my ability to articulate, to my own satisfaction, issues and intentions around my art practice. Additionally, my anxiety stemmed from a belief that if I became as conscious as I could be about what I was doing, I wouldn't be able to make work. To some extent, this became a self fulfilling prophecy. However, as I have answered my own questions, further questions have replaced them, and work of a different quality and concern has emerged.

My intention in this paper is to address the decline of photography as a medium of necessity for myself. Within this, I will address the introduction of other materials into my work, and explain my understanding of a theoretical base that had ultimately enabled me to come to closure with my exhibition.

I am smiling somewhat nervously, as I begin a discussion of my work, thinking about a quote from Barthes;

" All those young photographers who are at work in the world, determined upon the capture of actuality, do not know that they are agents of Death". (Barthes, Camera Lucida,pg 92)

The first work produced in this program was a triptych for the Graduate Students show in the fall of 1991. I have a slide of the work. The title was **Adjustment To Loss**. The work was a response to what I was feeling through the deaths of two close friends from Aids. Interestingly enough, I referred to the piece as a maquette. Three panels have been printed on mural paper, and each panel has been double printed with the same image, a blurred image of a crypt. The six images have been printed from left to right from light to dark to light, for me at the time a hope of regeneration. The stenciled text **EVERLASTING**, or sometimes just a fragment of the word has been painted on each image.

At the beginning of 1992 I produced work for my show **New Work in a Small Space** in the Workshop gallery of The Photographers Gallery. My interest at the time was in interrupting a unified surface. I recollect great pleasure at tearing up images and taping back parts together with yellow ice hockey tape, printing too light, printing too dark, toning parts of these fractured images, and presenting the photograph as much less than square or rectangle. I also constructed frames out of scraps of found wood and intended the frames to become part of the entire piece.

I had found a dead sparrow on the street, intact yet flattened by tires. I remember feeling quite tender towards it, it was somehow terribly beautiful. I picked it up gently and brought it to the studio where I photographed it with a view camera. The depth of field used gave remarkable detail, I produced a triptych from this negative, and called it **Exhumation and Ornithology**. The pieces show whole or parts of the bird, fragments of the wing, beak and claw were toned blue or gold and taped over the corresponding part of the print. I allowed myself to print too dark and often the sparrow is mistaken for a crow. The prints are nailed onto a black painted board, and framed behind glass with sections of old oak skirting boards that I have found and mostly stripped the paint off.

Another piece, produced shortly afterwards for the Regina exhibition **Sex Appealed**, resulted in the most radical shift in my work. The piece, **Search and Rescue**, comprises four 10x8 inch sheets of printed orthochromatic film, toned and taped together in a grid. The grid has been sandwiched between two sheets of plexiglass and framed with wood. The work was produced to be backlit. The image that I worked with is the my first appropriated image, found in the *Globe and Mail*. It is of a small boy reaching out to a sumo wrestler. I copied the newspaper picture, concentrating on one small part of the image; the gesture of the boy reaching out to the

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fleshy body. My image becomes a mysterious arm reaching out to a now ambiguously gendered expanse. I see large soft breasts, generous curves of the body, and a large hand at his/her side offering the possibility of a responding caress. I was delighted by this piece, yet all I could express at the time is satisfaction at the ambiguity of the images, and that the original "message" had been intercepted and redirected by my usage. That is as far as I got; I am attracted to the gestural quality, the possibility of the counter-gesture, and the knowledge that the piece "works" when backlit.

I began in 1993 to make work to be exhibited in the Blackspace gallery at AKA. The sculpture class that I took during that school year accelerated my desire to work with other materials, particularly metal. I found that working with metal allowed me to express a range of intentions that the two dimensional could not. I could surpass photography with its baggage of "truth" and "evidence", and work with more deliberate ambiguities and intentions.

Having said this, one piece in the show incorporated photography. I had purchased a metal box that was labelled Periscope Sight from an army surplus shop. The box opens up on the left hand side, and the box as well as the inside lid are lined with felt. I inserted a light fixture which holds a warm glow aquarium bulb, the cord and the plug run outside the box. On the felt inside the box, I stapled a stereoscopic card which I have obtained. It shows a baby crying, small text at the bottom of the image reads "Baby Distressed". Above this card, resting on the lip of the box, I put a piece of glass that has been sandblasted so as to obscure most of the interior of the box. I allow one small circle of glass to remain clear, and onto this I sandblasted demarkations that one would find looking through a periscope sight. This circle allows the viewer into the sight of the stereoscopic card. The glass is fractured across its width, just below the periscope sight.

Many things intrigue me by this piece. I am fascinated and discomfited by looking at an image of a baby crying. I have a response. I am drawn towards the light of the box and through the periscope sight (whose actual function is to see without being seen) into this discomfort. The fracture of the glass is both a delightful accident and a loaded addition. I have some kind of anticipation around the possibility that some kind of psychic noise will escape from the Baby Distressed. I am touched by the "pain" of an anonymous infant. Why, and what are my possibilities?:

"I am alone with it, in front of it. The circle is closed, there is no escape I suffer motionless. Cruel sterile deficiency: I cannot transform my grief."(2)

2) Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida, pg 90.

What I do experience is uncomfortability in being a witness to the image of another's pain. I feel this, and so I act upon this. I brand the word felt into the felt material of the box. For me, closure on this spectacle, entitled Delicate Instrument, exists with the possibility of closing the lid of the box.

A description of past work has been imperative for me to ground myself in the present with Tables of Content. Like Barthes, but not with a single image, I have sought to discover "what constituted that thread which drew me to Photography". (3) As much as I used other materials in my art practice, I felt that I had unfinished business around Photography and photographs.

One image that persisted was a gift given a few years ago. It had been found on the street somewhere in Poland. It is a photograph showing a mother and a young child embracing. When I made time to consciously contemplate the image, I was led to look through my own family albums that I had borrowed. My search for meaning accelerated with the realization that within my family album there was not a single image of my mother embracing me. Perhaps I could read this as a sign, as Sontag has commented, of "parental indifference".(4)

My investigations into the family album in specific have brought me closer to a totality of understanding about photography in general. I now recognize the role the camera has "within the ritualized cult of domesticity" (5), and the products of this tool being "an agent of collective fantasy of family cohesion".(6) Camera, in this sense, becomes what Rosalind Krauss identifies as "part of the theatre that the family constructs to convince itself that it is together and whole".(7)

Realizations around this have been critical for me to deal with in terms of my own psychotherapy, and past losses and pain eventually will get dealt with and integrated. I am now aware of the role of Photography in my own psychodrama.

I have been obsessed with death and loss, and for me, the camera has been instrumental in, as Barthes words, my "dead theatre of Death".(8) I want to understand my part in this theatre, as an "agent of Death". At some points in my life I enjoyed making photographs. This relationship has shifted greatly.

(3) Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida, pg 73

(4) Susan Sontag, On Photography, pg 8

(5), (6), (7) Rosalind Krauss, Notes on Photography and the Simulacral, pg 19 from The Critical Image

(8) Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida, pg 73

"I had understood that henceforth I must interrogate the evidence of Photography, not from the viewpoint of pleasure, but in relation to what we romantically call love and death" (9)

It is now what I know and accept about Photography that has moved me from a desire to position myself as referred to by Barthes as "Spectator" rather than "Operator" (10). Photography, for me cannot escape the heaviness of its relationship to death, and loss. I no longer wish to be an active producer of this meaning.

"The Spectator is all of us who glance through collections of photographs..." (11)

"As Spectator I was interested in Photography only for "sentimental" reasons, I wanted to explore it not as a question but as a wound: I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I think".(12)

Barthes refers to a photograph as a "flat death"(13), and forever linked to its "noeme", "that-has-been".(14) Christian Metz also has drawn this conclusion; with the photograph, "Immobility and silence are not only two objective aspects of death, they figure it".(15)

A photograph of a person is a "certificate of presence", (16) and in that we also must acknowledge the mortality of the subject. This is most evident in old photographs, and still present, albeit less distinct in contemporary images; "That is dead and that is going to die".(17)

In embracing this, I accept that I too must agree with Barthes that I must regard every photograph as an "imperious sign of my future death".(18)

(9) Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pg.73

(10) *ibid*, pg 9

(11) *ibid*, pg 9

(12) *ibid*, pg 21

(13) *ibid*, pg 92

(14) *ibid*, pg 77

(15) Christian Metz, *Photography and Fetish*, pg 157 from *The Critical Image*.

(16) Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pg 87

(17) *ibid*, pg 96

(18) *ibid*, pg 97

Barthes says that the photograph justifies our desire to know more about the thing photographed or the person it represents. The photographs in Tables of Content are about that desire. I went to others to pour through their family albums to find out what I perceived I could not find in my own. I wanted to find "evidence" of who and what was loved, cherished and held dear. I was adamant in not hearing any of the stories that usually accompany the showing of personal photographs. I was looking for my punctum, what Barthes calls the element "which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow and pierces me". (19)

I wondered what I was pursuing "finding" and making. Was this about fetishization? My reading of theory relating to photography and the Freudian fetish led me to consider the validity of certain arguments;

"The photographic take is immediate and definitive, like death, and like the constitution of the fetish in the unconscious, fixed by a glance in childhood, unchanged and always active later".(20)

Additionally, Metz states that photography's size and the possibility that the viewer is allowed no fixed duration of looking lends this medium to the real possibility of working as a fetish. While I am interested in this position, I do not find this reading based on castration and fear, appropriate to my work. I do, however, accept a reading of a photograph functioning as a "fetish" in everyday terms, a kind of absurd talisman:

"....even in the commonplace meaning of the word, the fetish in everyday life, a re-displaced derivative of the fetish proper, the object that brings luck...the amulet...it is remarkable that it always combines a double and contradictory function: on the side of metaphor, an inciting and encouraging one.... and on the side of metonymy, an apotropaic one, that is, the averting of danger (thus involuntarily attesting to a belief in it), the warding off of bad luck or of the ordinary, permanent anxiety which sleeps (or suddenly wakes up) inside each of us".(21)

(19) Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida, pg 26

(20) Christian Metz, Photography and Fetish, pg 158 from The Critical Image.

(21) ibid, pg 160

Furthering my investigation into the notion of the fetish, I found that a particular psychoanalytical model was relevant to my work. Lacan's concept of the Real spoke to my understanding of the photographs inextricable link to death and loss, and the concept of punctum as a wound. Lacan described the Real in terms of a "brute pre-Symbolic reality which returns in the form of a need, such as hunger".(22) Whether the "object" of hunger is the breast, bottle or mother, this search to satisfy can never be completely satisfied;

"A conflict comes from our seeking the Object of satisfaction in this or in others, despite the fact that the aim always misses the goal... the 'object' is really the satisfaction of Oneness. We seek satisfaction because we always lose what we think we had in a prior moment. The Real appears as a blockage when we seek to re-possess an object that has dissapeared".(23)

Lacan's *objet a* is whatever a person hopes will compensate for the loss of the object; "a semblance which fills up the hole, that keeps us from being one with ourselves. The Real appears in whatever concerns the radical nature of loss at the centre of words and being".(24) "The Real always re-appears at the place where an excess of Jouissance (I understand this term to mean ecstasy) indicates loss on the body, around certain objects, situations, names, persons, making things other than what they seem: a part of the objet a remains an inert presence in every act, an irreducible residum that will not dissolve. Both males and females fetishize 'objects' of satisfaction as a result of the Real of anxiety and the breakdown of idealization".(25)

For myself, the Real represents the Life/Death paradigm of photography, objet a is equivalent to the photograph, and my Jouissance, or ecstasy, is the punctum, the wound. This is the most clear understanding that I can reach on photography and to my relationship to photography.

(22) Elizabeth Wright, Feminism and Pschoanalysis, pg 375

(23) *ibid*, pg 375

(24) *ibid*, pg 375

(25) *ibid*, pg 376

Considering the concept of the Real, I am further led to the Life/death paradigm of photography, and I accept Barthes conclusion that " I must submit to this law. I cannot penetrate, cannot reach into the Photograph. I can only sweep it with my glance, like a smooth surface".(26) Photography holds us with its evidential power. Whatever means we utilize to know more, to scrutinize, to undo, to enlarge, to "reach its other side"(27), we can end up with a realization of this illusion. Our expectations might leave us empty handed. I surrender to Barthes resignation;

" I am a bad dreamer who vainly holds out his arms towards the possession of the image". (28)

In conclusion, in Tables of Content, I have sought to remain a Spectator, or as much of one as possible. The 105 photographs tell us nothing except they ratify the existence of what has occurred. As almost Spectator, I declare a sentimental relationship to these images, and on some level it seems rather absurd to be sentimental over photographs outside of myself, my family or friends. What these pictures can tell you is that they had the ability to pierce me. I present them in their flatness, and leave them to collect gallery dust and speak in their unique way of life and death. I hope now that I have let go of any expectations that I might of had about photography. I accept it for what it is and what it references, and within this, its place within an art practice.

To replace any myth that might be had about photography, I offer this alternative myth. Here exists the possibility of alchemical transmutation. The design of the tables is based on an ancient Celtic symbol for Island, a paradise for the honoured dead. On or beneath the island was the magic cauldron, where transmutation could take place. Also found on the island was the Tree of Life, which could reveal secrets of creation and provide access for the alchemists to the Cosmic Mind. The metal for these tables, like all materia prima/raw material represent chaos. From this , the elixer is obtained with which the sacred metals of gold and silver are made. With its principal of light acting upon silver sensitive compounds, Photography too has a place in this myth.

(26) Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida, pg 106

(27) ibid, pg 100

(28) ibid, pg 100

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