

Supporting paper
for the MFA thesis exhibition:

TRACES...



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the University of Saskatchewan and the Department of Art and Art History for providing me with the opportunity to grow as an artist during my time at the U of S. Thank you as well to all the faculty and staff in the Department: including Chuck Ringness, Patrick Bulas, Lynne Bell and Joan Borsa. I would also like to acknowledge committee members, Graham Fowler, Alison Norlen, Allyson Glenn, Tim Nowlin and Peter Purdue for their insightful comments and encouragement in the completion of my thesis.

A big thank you to my fellow MFA candidates, Darren McQuay, David Dyck, Susan Varga, Alexa Hainsworth, Eileen Murray, Kaitlyn Frolek, Mackenzie Browning, Maia Stark, Pam Ollenberger, Aminah Jomha and Chiaka McNaughton.

At this time, I wish to express my sincere appreciation to twelve residents of the “Black Rock Terrace” housing for seniors in Lethbridge, Alberta for sharing their stories and visual memories with me; Denzil Logan, Margaret Fisher, Evan Gushal, Joan MacDonald, Jean Beattie, John Boon, Ethel Hogal, Rosa Peters, Nick Dyck, Lois McKillop, Jack Knight, Doris Fletcher; without you none of this work would exist and for that I am eternally grateful. I am very delighted and honored that I had the chance to listen to their stories and that they felt at ease to share them with me.

Finally, a special thank you to my family, for without you this would not have been possible. You are my rock! I consider my five children my “greatest works of art” and am very proud of the fine young men and women they have become. A huge thanks to my husband Patrick for all the support you have given me throughout our marriage and always encouraging me to do whatever I feel necessary in this lifetime without feeling guilty. You have taken on a lot in the time I have been gone; taking care of our family alone and working and maintaining our home. You are one of a kind and I am so grateful and blessed to have you as my partner in life.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Permission to Use.....	i
Acknowledgements.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iii
List of Illustrations.....	iv
TRACES.....	1
Fabric.....	2
Portrait.....	7
Collage.....	11
Beds.....	16
Hearts.....	17
Conversation.....	18
Location.....	21
Pieces of me.....	22
Charcoal Drawings.....	23
Conclusion.....	25
In memory of.....	26
Bibliography.....	28

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- Figure 1. Donna Bilyk, *Lois' Fabric*, 2011, silkscreen on rag paper, 22.9 x 22.9cm
- Figure 2. Gerhard Richter, *Strip (920-1)*, 2011, digital print on paper mounted between aluminum and Perspex (diasec) 160 x 300cm
- Figure 3. Donna Bilyk, *Jack's Fabric*, 2011, silkscreen on rag paper, 22.9 x 22.9cm
- Figure 4. Donna Bilyk, *Lois*, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 91.4 x 121.9cm
- Figure 5. Sol LeWitt, *Serial Project I (ABCD)*, 1966, baked enamel on steel units over baked enamel on aluminum, 50.8 x 398.9 x 398.9 cm
- Figure 6. Donna Bilyk, *Collage (detail)*, 2012, acrylic on MDF board, 77 boards 22.9 x 22.9cm each
- Figure 7. Jennifer Bartlett, *Rhapsody*, 1975-76 baked enamel and silkscreen grid, enamel on steel plates, 988 plates 218.6 x 4686.3 cm
- Figure 8. Installation of Sol LeWitt: A Wall Drawing Retrospective, 2007-2008, *Left Wall Drawing #413* color ink washes, *Right Wall Drawing #414* india ink washes
- Figure 9. Donna Bilyk, *Beds*, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 121.9 x 243.8cm
- Figure 10. Donna Bilyk, *Hearts*, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 121.9 x 121.9cm
- Figure 11. Donna Bilyk, *Conversation*, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 182.9 x 182.9cm
- Figure 12. Sara Hughes, *Morie*, 2004, installation at the Hocken Library, Dunedin 2004
- Figure 13. Donna Bilyk, *Location*, 2013, acrylic on Baltic birch, each panel is 60.9 x 121.9cm
- Figure 14. Donna Bilyk, *Pieces of Me*, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 91.4 x 121.9cm
- Figure 15. Donna Bilyk, *Evan*, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 91.4 x 137.2cm
- Figure 16. Donna Bilyk, *In memory of... (detail)* 2012, acrylic on canvas, 55.9 x 55.9cm

Every artist has their own unique way of creating art. When broken down into its simplest form, art production can be considered a system. A system is defined as a set of detailed methods, procedures or concepts created to carry out a specific activity, perform a function, or solve a problem. In the context of art making this can relate to the method utilized for placing paint on a palette, to the processes employed when creating the work or the use of technology to generate ideas. American artist Sol LeWitt (1928-2007) wrote: “The artist’s will is secondary to the process he initiates from idea to completion....His willfulness may only be ego....The process is mechanical and should not be tampered with. It should run its course.”¹ LeWitt is well known for his experimentation with or use of systems.

Introduction: **TRACES**

trace²

- 1a. A visible mark, such as a footprint, made or left by the passage of a person, animal, or thing.
- b. Evidence or an indication of the former presence or existence of something; a vestige.
2. A barely perceivable indication; a touch.
- 3a. An extremely small amount.
- b. A constituent, such as a chemical compound or element, present in quantities less than a standard limit.
4. A path or trail that has been beaten out by the passage of animals or people.
5. A way or route followed.

During our lifetime, we physically evolve and change. As we age, our bodies begin breaking down. We still see the world as we always have, but when we look in the mirror we can now see how we have changed. It is this breaking down of the human body that interests me. Throughout our lifetime, we leave behind a distinct trace...for others in which memories may be triggered. Through my body of work, I will show that these **traces** can be represented through various art forms, yet when combined the sum of the parts do not always equal the whole.

From 2008 – 2011, I worked part time at the Black Rock Terrace independent housing for seniors in Lethbridge, Alberta. My role was to serve meals to the residents. I knew them by

¹ (Storr 2002). p51.

² (The Free Dictionary n.d.)

name and room number and to say hi, but I really never had the time to sit and chat and find out about their lives. I was intrigued by their resilience, the poignancy of this stage of life and I thought it would be interesting to talk with them and hear their stories and insights. So, I created a structure that would facilitate dialogue to occur. I put out a call to the residents of Black Rock Terrace to partake in a project with the intent to capture a visual synapses of their present and past lives. Twelve seniors volunteered to become part of my project inviting me into their home for an interview. Knowing that these people once lived in a house and that they would have had to downsize in order to fit their possessions into their tiny two room suite, I became interested in the things they kept, the objects, old photos, etc. At the end of each interview, I would ask each person, “What is that one piece of clothing that when you put it on it makes you feel comfortable or beautiful?” I was not interested in what type of garment they chose per se, but in the fabric itself and the visual memory it represented. To accomplish this, I took a close up photograph of each of their items of clothing to document what they had selected and to record the exchange between us.

Fabric:

fab-ric³

1. (Clothing, Personal Arts & Crafts / Textiles) any cloth made from yarn or fibres by weaving, knitting, felting, etc.
2. (Clothing, Personal Arts & Crafts / Textiles) the texture of a cloth.
3. A structure or framework.

I was very interested in what the senior residents of Black Rock Terrace identified as their favorite fabric, as I believe this fabric holds a residue of the person that once wore it. On a personal note, I can recall as an eight year old girl standing in the closet shortly after my father

³ (The Free Dictionary n.d.)

had passed away and immersing myself inside his favorite suede jacket. It was my chance to retain a trace or memory of my father, and to this day, I still remember that feeling.

It was these fabrics, these simple **traces** of each of these people that formed the impetus of my thesis with developing a structure or system that could convey as sense of their stories. The first resident I asked, Margaret Fisher, told me about the blouse she chose and still wore with pride. She went on to mention how the other ladies at her table would tease her about it being an old rag, but she said she did not care because this was her favorite piece of clothing. Another resident, Rosa Peters, when asked, pointed towards her closet and asked me to go and find her treasured item. She described it as a solid pink dress with a subtle pattern of roses. Rosa explained to me that she made the dress by hand for her son's wedding and that when she dies she will be buried in it. Doris Fletcher was a resident that loved to dress up, so when I asked her about her cherished fabric she pulled out a fancy green blouse which was covered in beadwork. She did not say too much, only smiled from ear to ear as I commented on how beautiful it was and how it must make her feel like a princess.

I asked each resident about their fabric because I was interested in finding something that was tangible and visual, an object or a trace of an item that belonged to these people that made them feel special when it was close to them. When working with this visual material, it triggered my memory of the stories they each shared with me. I realized that I was searching for a visual language that I could take with me and later interpret into an appropriate art form.

Originally, I was planning on creating a consistent body of work for each resident including an acrylic on canvas representation of their fabric, photo realist work based on old photographs as well as experimental works. One requirement in the MFA program is to take an art studio class that is new to your practice, so I enrolled in printmaking. Through this medium, I

found a way via the computer to breakdown an image into basic shapes that I could in turn silkscreen. In the end, this class was responsible for a significant shift in my practice.

My photographs of the senior citizen's fabrics became the platform for my silkscreen project. I knew that I wanted to create an artistic representation with the photographs as my source. During the process I had to find a way to break down the fine details within the fabric and discovered a filter in Photo Shop that provided me with the techniques I had imagined. I spent hours playing with the image and the filter, creating 30 – 50 different arrangements of pattern, and from those I decided on one. Once I made my choice I took artistic freedom to manipulate that as well. Some of the fabrics were simple with only a few layers involved while others were more complex with up to 13 layers.

By breaking down the photographic image through the use of numerous filters in Photo Shop, I created a detailed system that enabled me to extract those very fragments or **traces** of the residents. A common thread connecting all of my works in this exhibition is my fascination with creating and remaining true to a system. A quote from John Chandler resonated with me, “[A]lthough systems are useless for philosophy and science, their inherent adaptability to art must now be evident. It is perhaps in art that systems have found their proper domain. Not all art should be systematic, but all systems are art.”⁴

I thought about painting them in different ways but decided that the best way to work with the image was through silkscreen. I found this process very time consuming and it demanded patience, but in the end it was very rewarding. French writer and journalist Emile Zola summed up my perseverance with developing this new visual vocabulary best by stating, “The artist is nothing without the gift, but the gift is nothing without work.”⁵ My goal while in

⁴ (Legg 1978). p34.

⁵ (thinkexist.com n.d.)

production was to make 10 flawless prints for each fabric. I was very satisfied with the results of my pursuit for establishing a new way of working with technology to create a system of translating data and the “traces” of the senior’s stories as shown in *Lois’ Fabric* (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Donna Bilyk, *Lois’ Fabric*, 2011, silkscreen on rag paper, 22.9 x 22.9cm

After completing this body of work, I was intrigued to learn of various contemporary artists who are engaging in a comparable system-based process. One of these who are an inspiration to me is German artist Gerhard Richter. His work on *Strip (920-1)* (Figure 2) employed a technique whereby he took a photograph of one of his paintings and, with the help of computer software, divided this work vertically; first in 2, then in 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256, 512, 1024, 2048 and finally 4096. This resulted in a total of 8,190 strips, all of the same height as the original painting. He then took these strips, sorted them out and created patterns of parallel lines. The end result was over 4,000 patterns, which Richter then further manipulated by mirroring, repeating and combining to arrive at the striations which he ultimately put together manually to form painted works, which were then re-photographed. As Richter has said, "Chance is a given,

unpredictable, chaotic, the basis. And we try to control that by intervening, giving form to chance, putting it to use."⁶ The final works are each unique, as are mine, although instead of using a painting as Richter did for the source, I used a piece of clothing or fabric. One of my creations, *Jack's Fabric* (Figure 3), is akin to Richter's work, at least in a visual manner. Unlike Richter, my work alludes to a social interaction.

With the silkscreens completed, I began to think about what was next. I wondered how I could develop my research with the seniors and further explore ways of translating this information? At the end of each interview I had also photographed each resident in their favorite chair. I began to wonder what it would be like to take their photographic portraits and break it down in the same manner as I had with their fabrics?

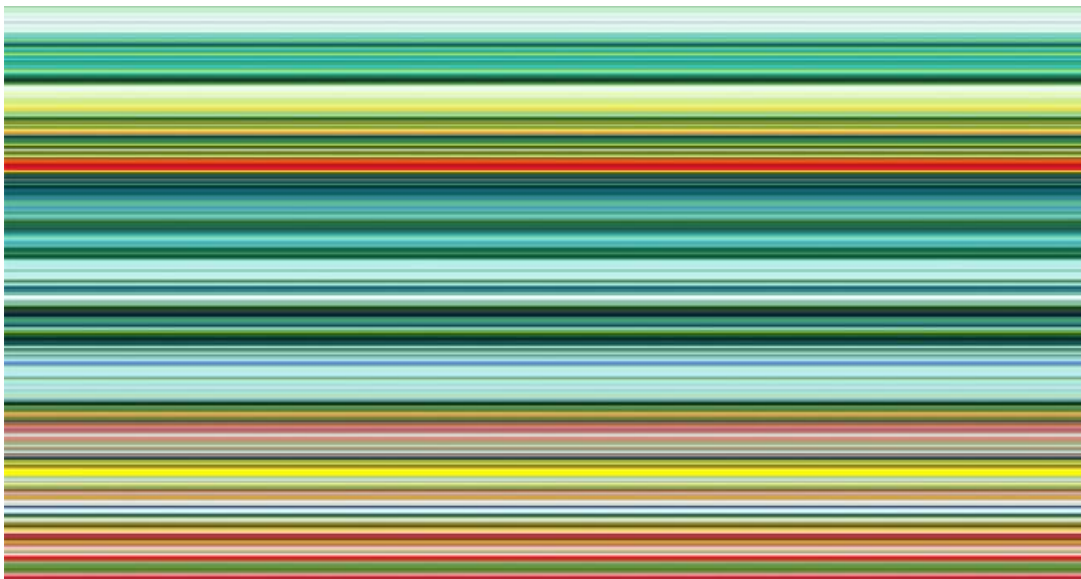


Figure 2. Gerhard Richter, *Strip (920-I)*, 2011, digital print on paper mounted between aluminum and Perspex (diasec) 160 x 300cm

⁶ (Serota 2011). p27.



Figure 3. Donna Bilyk, *Jack's Fabric*, 2011, silkscreen on rag paper, 22.9 x 22.9cm

Portrait:

por·trait⁷

1. A likeness of a person, especially one showing the face that is created by a painter or photographer, for example.

By applying the same systematic approach to translating the photograph as I did in creating the silkscreens, resulted in my respective reference image to work with. This reference image was the source material I would refer to when creating the individual works. I decided that I would paint the portraits in acrylic and created a set of strict rules. The rules consisted of having to perfectly match the colors I had chosen in the reference image. Each coat of paint had to be diluted in order to create a very flat, brushless effect. This process of applying the paint in this manner meant each color required numerous coats. The use of several coats reminded me of and referenced the silkscreen process I created for myself during the completion of the fabric prints.

⁷ (The Free Dictionary n.d.)

Like the acrylic paintings, each color in the silkscreen was made up of multiple pulls, or layers of each color to arrive at the flat, flawless effect I was looking for. The result was a flat, hard-edged painting which mimicked the flat, hard-edged look of the silkscreen images. I chose to utilize two sizes of canvas; one a square format and the other a rectangle, to carry out all twelve portraits. When installed, I wanted a variation in size from one canvas to the next, in turn creating a rhythm in the gallery. These works were very labor intensive, taking many hours to complete each one, but as with the silkscreen project, I found myself submerged in the process and time stood still.

The use of abstraction allowed me to depart from the original figure and remove the individuality until all that remained was a trace or essence of the person. It was no longer about the expression of the face or the texture of the fabrics or skin. For me, the important thing was to show each individual as part of a whole, all in the same fashion. The analogy used was pertaining to the “institution” (Black Rock Terrace) and how it stripped away the individual into a reduced form, leaving only a name and a room number or a rental payment. The focus shifted from the uniqueness of the individual to what that person represents to their institution. I have chosen to remove and distance my work from the original photograph, thus speaking in this same institutionalized systematic manner. The result was a paradox in that I am genuinely concerned about and connected to the residents, but they ended up being referenced in a coldly analytical methodology whereby each piece becomes similar and together creates a whole which is reduced from the original or from the person themselves.

This way of reducing the portrait into fragments speaks to the notion of traces and pieces that make up a whole. In essence, the information is there but not complete, requiring the viewer to fill in what is missing. My rendition of *Lois* (Figure 4) is simple, subtle, broken, flat, a trace.

From the time we are born our body is dissolving every day, moving towards its eventual end. The journey from birth to death leaves behind traces of a lifetime that once was. The *Portraits* encompasses the notion of traces, traces of the people I knew, traces of the time we spent together in conversation and traces in time that dissolve like everything in life. Since my interviews in 2011, two of the residents have passed away. I feel very privileged to have had the opportunity to sit down in conversation with each one of them and just listen.

Listening can be defined as making an effort to hear something or to pay attention or be heard. Using his systems as a means of communication, Sol LeWitt was a master at getting his students to pay attention and listen, in order to fully understand the concepts he showcased in his works. Regarded as the founder of both Minimalism and Conceptual art, Sol LeWitt used his “structures”, which were his terminology for three dimensional pieces to also partially tell a story. In *Serial Project I, (ABCD)* (Figure 5), LeWitt utilized a process that first focused on the idea, then the form. Through strictly obeying a set of rules, the form is revealed. LeWitt uses a grid to layout the formation of both open and closed cubes and extensions of squares. In text that accompanied this work, LeWitt wrote, “the aim of the artist would not be to instruct the viewer but to give him information.”⁸ LeWitt summed up his work in this series best in saying, “the serial artist does not attempt to produce a beautiful or mysterious object but functions merely as a clerk cataloging the results of his premise.”⁹ LeWitt’s focus on the importance of listening as a key to understanding reminded me of the following quote from Buddha.

“A man approached Buddha once and said, “I want to become wise. Please tell me how do I operate better in the world? What do I do to not mess up my relationships?” Buddha spoke,

⁸ (MoMA Learning n.d.)

⁹ Ibid

“It is very simple. You only have to be mindful of two things: Listen attentively to others when they are talking and even more attentively to yourself when you are talking.”¹⁰

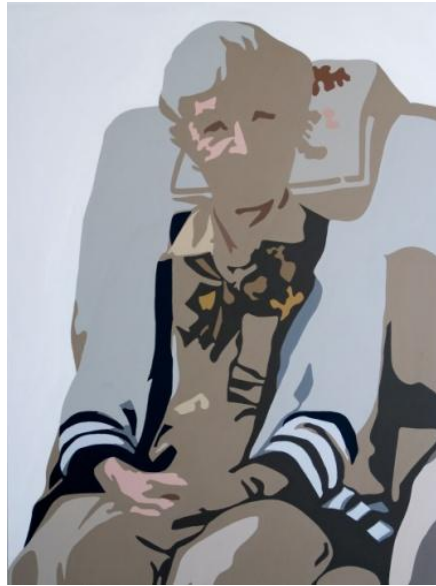


Figure 4. Donna Bilyk, *Lois*, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 91.4 x 121.9cm



Figure 5. Sol LeWitt, *Serial Project I (ABCD)*, 1966, baked enamel on steel units over baked enamel on aluminum, 50.8 x 398.9 x 398.9 cm

As my work towards this exhibition has progressed, I realized I was also thinking about myself and how I feel growing older. How my face is changing and how the lines are deepening each day as more are exposing themselves. I reflected on my experiences as a professional

¹⁰ (Swami n.d.)

photographer and how seniors seldom wanted to have their portraits taken, saying things like “I’m too old” or “I don’t like having my picture taken”. I am starting to appreciate why they feel this way and now find myself beginning to hate having my own image taken, as unless the image is digitally altered, the photograph hides nothing. We live in an age where so much emphasis is placed on how you look and the importance of trying to stay young. I was very aware, as I chose to paint these senior’s portraits in my particular trace-like fashion, that all “would not” be exposed for the world to see. The intent was to portray a very simplified and gentle quality, which hides the majority of specific facial features and pulls out only an essence of each person. Personally, I would be much happier seeing myself represented in this manner at that age than in a hyper realistic portrait that would bring out every wrinkle. In return, I am hoping the residents will be delighted with a more subdued and contemplative approach as this perhaps better captures the aging process rather than appearance of age through facial features.

Collage:

col-lage¹¹

1. An artistic composition of materials and objects pasted over a surface, often with unifying lines and color.
2. The art of creating such compositions.
3. An assemblage of diverse elements.

The portraits showcase the individuality of each senior, but at the same time they are alike. They are all residents with a room number in the Black Rock Terrace, making them part of a social group, which in turn identifies them in another manner. To elaborate on this categorization process, I elected to create a collage which is made up of 77 nine inch square MDF boards. As an aside, I mentioned the number of pieces in this work and was advised by a colleague that the number 77 had special significance. I researched this and learned that number 77 is in fact considered an Angel Number. Number 77 is made up of the vibrations and energies

¹¹ (The Free Dictionary n.d.)

of the number 7, doubled and amplified. Number 7 in part relates to inner wisdom and intuition, contemplation and discernment, understanding of others, inner-strength and tenacity, endurance and determination.¹²

A grid was used in this collage work as I wanted to ensure the utmost of accuracy when transferring the individual portraits onto the collage. Although helping to maintain the integrity of both the original portraits and the seniors, the use of the grid was intentional. It became a way to talk about this group of people who collectively belonged to a whole, an institution, but at the same time are individuals within that group. The grid in some ways is calculated and distancing, resembling the way I have chosen to work with the images. Reflecting on life and where we fit, the grid becomes evident. Our roadways form grids, our maps are gridded and the world is gridded into longitude and latitude. The grid is a way to break down things in our life into manageable sized pieces. It is also a way of organizing and grouping our lives, to create order; grids are all around us. The rooms in an institution are gridded, the lockers in the halls of schools form grids. Grids create a way of understanding, measuring and connecting the pieces of our lives.

By breaking up the individual pieces even more, it was as though I was further stripping away their individuality, resulting in a disconnect with the original source. Once the collage came together, I was satisfied that a new, stronger connection was formed as the pieces (individual residents) became a whole (community).

To create the collage, I took all twelve individual photographs used to create the *Portrait* work and combined them to form one reference image through the use of Photo Shop. This again took time as I wanted to ensure the result was cohesive and the colors were situated such that they blended well together. I used a grid on the reference image and free hand sketched

¹² (Walmsley n.d.)

each individual board with fine charcoal before applying numerous layers of acrylic paint. I employed the same system of precise color matching to arrive at a collage that was consistent throughout and displayed the same flat, hard-edged detail. As shown in my work *Collage (detail)* (Figure 6), when placed into the grid, the 77 MDF boards form a visual rectangle in a landscape formation of 11 by 7.

A contemporary artist whose work also focuses on grids and systems that I greatly admire is American artist Jennifer Bartlett. In her early career she made the decision to do all of her work on one foot square, sixteen gauge steel panels. Her decision to work in this format was mainly due to necessity, as she initially completed the panels at her kitchen table. The panels were then gridded off with the use of silkscreen in ¼ inch squares, resulting in 2,304 squares per panel. A set of rules was adopted by Bartlett in her painting technique. In each square (those she decided to color), only one dab of paint would be applied and this paint could not touch the lines of the grid. She limited herself to Testor enamels, generally associated with hobby painting, using all 25 basic colors as they came and variously mixed. “Her reliance on fixed procedures was consistent with trends in the New York art world of the late 1960s.”¹³ A representation of Bartlett’s work is shown in one of her most famous pieces, *Rhapsody* (Figure 7). “Bartlett was committed to an analytical and synoptic program. She says she chose the first four things that entered her mind, but the very structure of the program meant that these had to be very elemental things. What occurred to her were: mountain, ocean, tree and house. She then decided on three geometrical components: circle, triangle, square.”¹⁴ There were also sections devoted to color, various lines and drawing methods including dotted, ruled and freehand.

¹³ (Katz January 2007). p106-107.

¹⁴ (Danto March 1, 1986). p250.

My use of systems and incorporating a strict grid is also in dialogue with Sol LeWitt's work in his *Wall Drawing* (Figure 8). LeWitt's wall drawings brought the "idea" together with the use of a detailed set of instructions or "recipe" per se, which when followed would produce amazing results. It is interesting to note that although LeWitt designed and created the instructions for the drawings, the majority were executed by other people. This left an element of chance in the equation as his work was being produced by others, who may interpret the instructions differently than he intended. LeWitt took a calculated risk in this practice, which resulted in possibilities he may have not even considered. During his career, over 1200 wall drawings were composed. He was concentrating on the use of systems and concepts such as sequences, transparency, volume, variations, and irregularities. Like Bartlett, the work was precise and followed a strict and finite set of rules. One main difference was that for LeWitt, "it was theoretical, but not strictly mathematical. Partly it was poetic. He began with propositions for images, which became something else if they were translated into physical form by him or other people."¹⁵

In my *Collage* work, I liked the way the overall image is broken up into individual squares that form a whole within a grid formation. This speaks to the fact that the residents all form a group but a distinct group that is a formation of unique individuals. In this way they are similar, but not the same; still a separate entity within the whole. Each portrait which has been collaged together has been dissolved a little more than the way they appear in their individual portrait, as I did not want anyone to stand out too loudly. Rather, I wanted each individual to meld in gently and cohesively without distraction from the whole...to create an overall harmony and a sense of contemplative space and complexity.

¹⁵ (Kimmelman 2007). p6.



Figure 6. Donna Bilyk, *Collage (detail)*, 2012, acrylic on MDF board, 77 boards 22.9 x 22.9cm each



Figure 7. Jennifer Bartlett, *Rhapsody*, 1975-76 baked enamel and silkscreen grid, enamel on steel plates, 988 plates
218.6 x 4686.3 cm



Figure 8. Installation of Sol LeWitt: A Wall Drawing Retrospective, 2007-2008, Left Wall Drawing #413 color ink washes, Right Wall Drawing #414 india ink washes

Beds:

bed¹⁶

1. A piece of furniture for reclining and sleeping, typically consisting of a flat, rectangular frame and a mattress resting on springs.
2. A place where one may sleep; lodging.

During my interviews with the seniors I also photographed the bed of each. At the time, I was thinking about the fact that we spend one third of our life sleeping and for the majority of the human population, we sleep in a bed. Wanting to create a visually interesting composition I decided to take all twelve images of their beds and create a collage, then input that collage into the same filtering system by way of Photo Shop to create a reference image. With this particular work I changed the rules as I decided to keep the placement of colors onto the canvas more open, signifying that I allowed myself to play around with color placement on the actual painting instead of on the computer. Nothing was sacred in this work as it had been in their portraits. The individual beds were dissolved even more than the image of their portrait as is evident in *Beds* (Figure 9). I did not want the beds to be too obvious...some of the beds were dissolved to

¹⁶ (The Free Dictionary n.d.)

the point of total abstraction. When most people view the work they do not even see the beds until I point them out. This is what I sought to accomplish in the work. I wanted the beds to be present but only as a small trace. I approached the beds as a collage to speak of the fact that all of the beds are situated in the same residence. They are all from a specific room number in the Black Rock Terrace...all the same location geographically. Again the theme of individuality versus being part of a whole is hopefully achieved.



Figure 9. Donna Bilyk, *Beds*, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 121.9 x 243.8cm

Hearts:

heart¹⁷

1. The vital center and source of one's being, emotions, and sensibilities.
2. The repository of one's deepest and sincerest feelings and beliefs.

This work, *Hearts* (Figure 10), is a total abstraction, as I have left no real indication as to what it actually is. To accomplish this, I zoomed in and cropped the heart area of each individual from their portraits and then collaged them all together. The heart signifies life and vitality, and my intent was to showcase this in an abstract manner. Just as the macro section of their fabrics was represented abstractly, the heart piece is treated in a similar fashion. The work turns out to

¹⁷ (The Free Dictionary n.d.)

be about the colors and the shapes which make up the whole and the emotive potential. I am interested in the variety of total abstraction placed in a room with works that are representational and the conversations that are carried on between them. My goal, however, is to keep the language of both the representational and abstract works consistent. This is accomplished by maintaining their broken down, geometric, flat, hard-edged make up throughout.

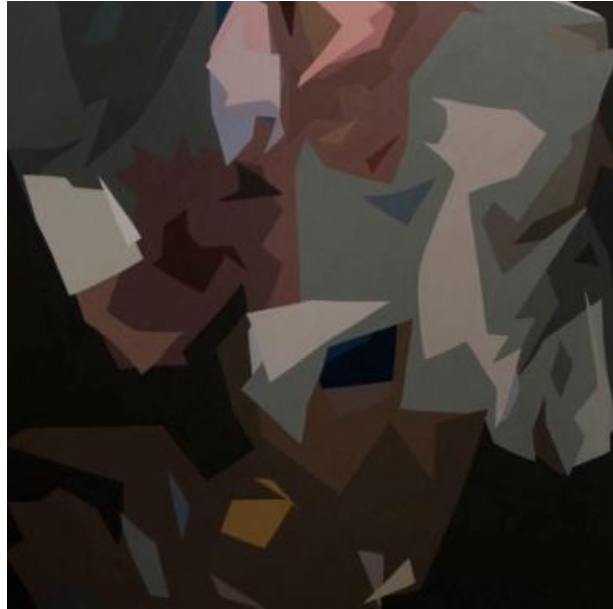


Figure 10. Donna Bilyk, *Hearts*, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 121.9 x 121.9cm

Conversation:

con-ver-sa-tion¹⁸

1. Informal interchange of thoughts, information, etc., by spoken words; oral communication between persons; talk; colloquy.

Conversation (Figure 11) is unique in that it is the only work that has no photo-reference; it was not created with the same system and set of rules. This work can be considered a point of departure as it is composed of my response to all the shapes I have been working with. I decided to take the leftover paint colors I had mixed for the paintings and release it onto a large square format canvas. Originally, I wanted to cover every square inch of the canvas with each color of

¹⁸ (The Free Dictionary n.d.)

paint that had been used to create the twelve portrait paintings. But as I began my process, something began to happen. Interesting patterns and shapes evolved on a simple white ground, floating and crashing together. As it evolved, the work spoke to me as a visual record of the conversations I had with the seniors. Shapes dancing and colliding, forming various visual areas of focus that became symbolic of a particular conversation amongst the whole. I began to see these shapes spilling out onto the gallery wall keeping the conversation fluid and unconfined, mingling amongst the other art works. At all times...connecting and encompassing.

In a similar vein to my *Conversation* piece (that is, from a conceptual standpoint), I reference the work of New Zealand artist Sara Hughes. Hughes is a globally renowned artist who transforms specific sites and gallery interiors with her paintings and architecturally scaled installations. I was very excited when I came across the work of Hughes, as I find her work inspiring and relevant to my own practice. Although her art practice is quite different than mine, I found similarities through her flat application of color as well as her connection to the world of technology. Her practice is described as "painting" but not in the traditional paintbrush and easel sense. Through her use of new imagery and site specific locations she is suggesting that painting has entered a new era in the digital age, and it is the contemporary painter's task to address what painting is and how it can operate now. She utilizes specialized computer programs to aid her in matching colors and then transfers these images to micron thin vinyl which is then applied to the gallery space, similar to wallpaper.

As illustrated in her gallery piece *Morie* (Figure 12), Hughes' work encompasses all areas of the gallery. Visually, I feel like this image in particular is speaking a similar language to my current body of work. For the duration of my thesis exhibition, I will be extending the painting

entitled *Conversation* onto the gallery walls. My intent is to daily paint directly onto the gallery walls, thereby broadening the conversation beyond the canvas.



Figure 11. Donna Bilyk, *Conversation*, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 182.9 x 182.9cm



Figure 12. Sara Hughes, *Morie*, 2004, installation at the Hocken Library, Dunedin 2004

Location:

lo-ca-tion¹⁹

1. A place of settlement, activity, or residence.

When thinking about traces of a life, location becomes very important. I decided to take a photograph I had of the site that the senior's residence is situated on, break it apart, and dissolve it into simple geometric forms using the same systematic approach. Many hours were exhausted manipulating the photograph to create the reference image. The material I chose to work on for this piece is not paper or canvas as in the previous work, but Baltic birch plywood. The end result, *Location* (Figure 13), was a relief-like wall panel painting. I liked the notion of creating an image that was not flat. Baltic birch spoke to traces of the landscape, as there are birch trees located on the ground in front of the Black Rock Terrace. Unlike the other works, the simple trace-like pieces that shape the overall image have been cut out and placed onto a solid base forming the scene. This work consists of four 2' x 4' Baltic birch panels which produce a landscape and represent the location where the senior residents live.



Figure 13. Donna Bilyk, *Location*, 2013, acrylic on Baltic birch, each panel is 60.9 x 121.9cm

¹⁹ (The Free Dictionary n.d.)

Pieces of me:

piece²⁰

1. A thing considered as a unit or an element of a larger thing, quantity, or class; a portion.
2. A portion or part that has been separated from a whole.
3. An object that is one member of a group or class.
4. An artistic, musical, or literary work or composition.

This was the last piece completed in this body of work and is quite literally pieces of me. The senior residents at the Black Rock Terrace were a part of my life on a weekly basis for over three years. Looking back, they were a part of me removed. In the same manner, I wanted to represent pieces of me in this exhibition, albeit pieces of me that exist only as a trace. For visual effect, these pieces had to be removed physically from my body; hence the photographic image of my hair, after I had cut it. Incorporating the consistent systematic approach, I worked with and manipulated this photograph and using the same meticulous attention to detail created a reference image. After many hours of painting, the final destination in this journey was reached, *Pieces of Me* (Figure 14). This piece became traces I left behind, just as the senior residents had become traces of my life.



Figure 14. Donna Bilyk, *Pieces of Me*, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 91.4 x 121.9cm

²⁰ (The Free Dictionary n.d.)

Charcoal drawings:

char-coal²¹

1. The carbonaceous material obtained by heating wood or other organic substances in the absence of air.
2. A drawing pencil of *charcoal*.
3. A drawing made with charcoal.

Memories; portrayed in old photographs representing a moment in time. When I began my MFA program, I wanted to produce something that the senior residents of the Black Rock Terrace would understand and appreciate. Each image I decided to work with, in a large scale portrait drawing format, had a strong presence through an important connection to the individual. I felt it was necessary for me to honor each resident by creating a charcoal drawing of the same size.

With one resident, I chose the photograph in which she is seated on her father's lap; she is about two years old. She told me that this is the only photograph she has of her and her father, as photos were rarely taken in those days and he then tragically died a short while later. For another, I chose a photo of a soldier who had just returned from battle in World War II, holding his first born child. The photograph was taken at the train station when he had put her in his arms for the very first time. The image used in this paper, *Evan* (Figure 15) relates to the life of Evan Gushel. Evan's father, at the turn of the 20th century opened up the first photography studio in Blairmore, Alberta, which is located in the Crowsnest Pass region. This picture was taken by Evan's father and is also on permanent display at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary along with some of his original photographic equipment. It is interesting to note, that although Evan himself went on to become a prominent photographer in the area, this was the only picture he had displayed in his room. Each photograph has a powerful and meaningful memory for the individual resident.

²¹ (The Free Dictionary n.d.)

These charcoal drawings are very different than all the other works in this exhibition. It is not part of the same system. Charcoal was the medium used to extract and represent these traces in time. I started off with a charcoal toned piece of rag paper and then proceeded to draw via an eraser. This process of erasing in order to discover content speaks to the notion of traces, as you see the distinct eraser line. The darker areas were added using charcoal. I chose to show my hand in this work as compared to the others where I felt it was important for my presence not to be evident. Traces of me are portrayed in this work by the marks, which are loose and gestural. These pieces are all about showing the mark and not about camouflaging it. They are also very much about technical proficiency in a highly realistic style.

I decided to include this body of work as I feel it speaks to the past. By being depicted in black and white, this talks of an earlier time when color was not readily available or affordable in photography and creates a sense of nostalgia. By contrast, the work which dominates the gallery walls is in color, and speaks of the now or the more recent. Two bodies of work and two very distinctly different ways of working, but yet they are all showcasing the traces we leave behind in our lifetime. I feel it is important to see the works in one space in order to have a conversation between the past and the present.



Figure 15. Donna Bilyk, *Evan*, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 91.4 x 137.2cm

Conclusion:

As an artist, I am not trying to create a body of work that is high realism. What I am attempting to do is to find a systematic approach that I can use to create works of art in various materials that talk in the same visual language. The result is a final body of work that when put together can be read as a visually cohesive experience. I have shown that these traces can be represented through various art forms, yet when combined the sum of the parts are not always equal to the whole. The eye wanders from piece to piece encountering a variety of materials that have all been orchestrated in a similar but not identical fashion. For me the work is about the exploration of an object, as well as the materials. This is where my passion lies. I rejoice in the opportunity of taking something and working with it until my ideas on how and what next have expired. This is what keeps me addicted...it is all about the process.

proc-ess²²

1. A systematic series of actions directed to some end.
2. A continuous action, operation, or series of changes taking place in a definite manner.

Gerhard Richter was asked in an interview about his multi-disciplinary approach to art, “You have done every possible subject: still-lives, landscapes, portraits, etc. Why? Because they happen to surround us. We all need them. My method is related to an attempt to do something that might be understood by today's world, or that could at least provide understanding. In other words, doing something I understand and that everyone understands. This natural desire for communication is also found in other domains, like reading and discourse, etc. I also hate repeating myself; it gives me no pleasure whatsoever. Once I've understood something, I need to start off on new ground.”²³

²² (The Free Dictionary n.d.)

²³ (Richter, Elger and Obrist 2009). p307.

In my own art practice and my life in general, this has become a common theme. Once I have mastered a subject or process, I want to learn something new and take on a new challenge. I am motivated to continuously learn and apply this knowledge through my work, and can relate to Richter's comment, "I have no motif, only motivation. I believe that motivation is the real thing, the natural thing, and that the motif is old-fashioned, even reactionary (as stupid as the question about the Meaning of Life)." ²⁴

I present Richter's theory on painting and then relate this to my own practice,

"One has to believe in what one is doing; one has to commit oneself inwardly, in order to do painting. Once obsessed, one ultimately carries it to the point of believing that one might change human beings through painting. But if one lacks this passionate commitment, there is nothing left to do. Then it is best to leave it alone. For basically painting is idiocy." ²⁵

From my perspective, I believe I was given an ability to interpret the world around me and share this through my art. At times in my life, I found this gift was a "double-edged" sword which almost felt like a curse, leaving me paralyzed and avoiding my calling to create. With the support of my family and close friends I have found a way to focus this energy and creative spirit and like Richter noted, I am doing it, because I want to make a difference in the lives of others.

In memory of...:

mem-o-ry²⁶

1. The mental capacity or faculty of retaining and reviving facts, events, impressions, etc., or of recalling or recognizing previous experiences.

Incorporating the use of a grid, I wanted to showcase the dominant color from each individual *Portrait* piece to create a visual link to each resident within the gallery space. The work consists of ten – twenty-two inch square canvases in acrylic paint, to represent the

²⁴ (Richter, Elger and Obrist 2009). p140.

²⁵ (Richter, Elger and Obrist 2009). p70

²⁶ (The Free Dictionary n.d.)

residents. By installing the work in close proximity to the *Portraits*, my intent is to get people to question why there are only 10 squares when there were 12 residents. The clue to this question lies in the title of the work, *In memory of (detail)* (Figure 16). Since my project began, two of the residents have since passed away. Jean Beattie in February 2012 and Denzil Logan in October 2012. Through creating a simple work that encourages the viewer to slow down, question and perhaps think about these people who have since passed, this is my way of acknowledging them. It is also a visual way for me to say goodbye to two people I have come to know.

During my final preparation of this paper, my mother-in-law, who was a wonderful grandmother to my children and friend to me, passed away following a long illness. It seems fitting to acknowledge her at this time as well.

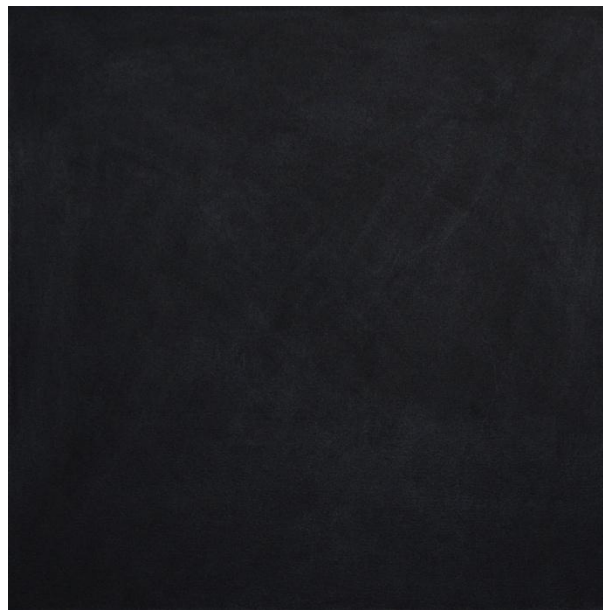


Figure 16. Donna Bilyk, *In memory of... (detail)* 2012, acrylic on canvas, 55.9 x 55.9cm

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