

Outcome Report: Study of Tangible Dialogue

Emma Lewis

My original proposal for the Miller Arts Scholars Third Year award was to examine personal loss and dialogue through a series of artistic prints incorporating text. At the time that I proposed the award, a close friend of mine, Ceili, had passed away. I hoped that creating art would help me sort through the complexities of loss. Additionally, I hoped that the process would help me grow as an artist. I wanted to learn to make work rooted in personal memory that was still meaningful to viewers. For the body of prints, I was interested exploring dialogue between the viewer and the artist as a parallel to dialogue between Ceili and I. After Ceili died, I felt as though I had never fully conveyed to her through dialogue the love I had for her or the immensity of space she held in my life. There had been a disconnect between my intent and her perception. I recognized that there is a similar divide between the artist and the viewer, especially with artwork based on the artist's memory. Art pieces that I made about Ceili could feel meaningful to me, but ultimately confuse a viewer that had never met her or knew her story. When proposing the award, I thought the best way to approach making art about her loss was to overwhelm the viewer with a wall of prints, each containing personal symbolism and indiscernible text. I would accept that the viewer would never understand the specificities of the imagery and the text, but would grasp that there was intent behind the making of the piece and that the artist was trying to say something about a loss but did not quite have the words.

My concept for the series of prints changed over time since her death. I became less interested in dialogue, and more interested in the loss of a person. As my memories about Ceili faded, she felt farther away. I searched for videos, photographs, and writings that would help me remember. I realized, in particular, that the more I looked at photographs, the more the photographs were beginning to blend with my memories. I was filling the receding person with relics of past light. I decided I wanted my series of prints to be about loss of memory and my efforts to regain it. I have focused my series of prints on photographs that I took a month before she died. Digital images are the closest I can get to Ceili's visual identity. They interact with my memories and emotions about Ceili, replacing parts of my memory and blurring with my emotions. I chose grainy, striated pictures of Ceili cropped on her face that hinted towards a person but had become too distorted to identify. Neither the photograph nor the dulling memories fully represent Ceili. Together they combine to create a new identity, an evolution of what they were.

I printed most of the images using polymer photogravure plates, a method that I learned from one of the continuing and professional students in the printmaking shop, Rollin Stanton, over the Fall 2016 semester. Using photogravure methods, I was able to manipulate the original digital image many times through the process of making the plates, further distorting the person pictured. In each print, I also utilized differences in registration, paper, and inking to produce different interpretation of the same digital image. The repetitive methods of making a plate from the digital images of Ceili and printing the image became an almost obsessive process. I felt like I was using the digital image as a skeleton from which I would attach my memories. If I altered the digital image with my memories just so, I would remember Ceili perfectly again. The process of

making the work was retrospectively the most important part of the work. I was continuously grasping at memories that would inevitably change.

This award taught me how to make meaningful work from a loss. The body of prints, instead of directly referencing the death of my close friend Ceili, are about memory, identity, and loss, depicting a person without an obvious identity. The award helped me work through a difficult time in my life. It made me focus on and document how my thoughts about Ceili changed over time, teaching me the importance of artistic creation for analysis over a long period of time. The work was not the grand gesture for Ceili that I had intended. It instead focused on how I was learning to understand the loss of someone very important to me. I believe I grew closer to Ceili's family over the past year, in part, because of this award. It was my way of communicating my response to her death. During the Fall 2016 semester, I was reading over some of Ceili's writings that her parents had sent me. I was struck by how similar her thoughts were to my project. I believe that while the prints reference how I deal with loss, they also allowed me to have a discourse with Ceili about memory, one of the original intents of my project.

"Even now, I float in a memory. Does the memory now become the present because I have taken myself to it? And if it is in fact now a part of the present, does the past exist at all, or are we just the surf, waves rolling and crashing against the beach but never going anywhere, never progressing, merely changing and continuing in an interminable process?"

Ceili Leahy (2015)

I want to thank everyone that helped make this project possible. First, thank you to all of the supporters of the Miller Arts Scholars program, with a special thanks to Sandy and Vinie Miller and Evie and Stephen Colbert. Secondly, I would like to thank my advisor Akemi Rollando who met with me regularly to discuss my work. Finally, I would like to thank Rollin Stanton who devoted many of his weeknights to teach me photogravure and the Leahy family for all the support they gave me over the year.



Floating, January 2017



Tableside, October 2016