

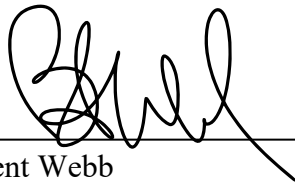
FOUND.

by

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of Radford University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Art

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## Statement

I am a keeper.

I keep lots of things.

To me, these objects spark memories that connect me to my past; where I am from and who I've become. They are snapshots of time.

I believe I am not alone. Many people collect and acquire. We keep things for generations and pass them on to future generations. The cycle of giving and receiving is never-ending. Objects themselves hold a great quantity.

They hold the people they've known, the memories they created, and the place they visited. We are a portrait of the stuff we have gathered.

It is human nature to want connection: to ourselves, to the earth, and to others. The things we carry connect our stories.

The body of work presented in this thesis explores trauma and memories of trauma triggered by inanimate objects. The series is presented through a variety of still life oil paintings.

Alexandra E. Leonetti  
Department of Art, 2022  
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*Dedicated to my mother and father. Thank you for always believing in my artwork  
and for accompanying me to all the flea markets, auctions, and antique shops.*

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## **Introduction**

I have always loved to draw. From a young age, you could always catch me carrying around a drawing pad and pencil. My claim to fame was winning the school's cookbook cover contest in fifth grade.

One of the great things about growing up in New York is the access to museums. I have always been fascinated with realistic paintings. I'd get as close as I could to the artwork, before the alarm would set off, and try to figure out how the artist worked. How could they create these masterpieces? How might I, one day, paint like this?

After many trials and tribulations in the art world, flash forward many years. Today I present to you a body of work that dives into the more personal aspects of my life. The past traumas, the current haunts. These fifteen artworks started out as tributes to the dead. Then memorializing shrines. Finally, as I write my way through their meanings, finding out that they really are just odes to buried feelings.

I encourage you, the viewer, to look at the artwork and find your own meanings. What will these objects mean to you? What memories conjure up?

## Chapter 1: The Process

What comes first, the idea or the objects? It all depends on the moment. I start my process by exploring antique stores, consignments hops, and flea markets. I like to believe that the objects call out to me as I pass by. The whole subject may not come to me at first; I run through the standard questions in my mind: What symbolism does the object represent? How can the color or value of this object fit in with others in a setup? What other objects might I use to piece together a potential setup? (and maybe most importantly) How easily can I acquire those other objects?

I have learned from other still life artists that the process of putting together a still life setup takes longer than the painting. It is about making a truly convincing and appealing composition. One must pay close attention to even the negative spaces and shadow shapes created from the object forms. One must always think of compositional eye movement; how will the viewer's eye be lead through the painting? There's a lot of manipulation in still life setup, many tricks of the trade.

Unlike the old masters, one modern advantage we have today is Photoshop. Objects not easily accessible to the artist can be placed in the still life composition. It is an advantage to those who have painted extensively from life and understand how to work against the flatness of the photo. Photographs can never tell you the full story of an object, landscape, or person's face, but they are convenient references for artists. Landscape painter Mark Haworth explains: "The camera cannot see like the eye can when it comes to color accuracy, depth of field, and the warms and cools of highlights and shadows. There's a lot of distortion that comes along with photographs."<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes the idea comes to me first. There are clearly many things that can influence an artist. Sometimes it's a worldly event, sometimes it's personal. One could even create a portrait of someone through the objects they've collected in their life or the objects that represent them

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<sup>1</sup> Courtney Jordan, "How to Avoid the Pitfalls of Painting from Photographs," Artists Network, February 4, 2021, <https://www.artistsnetwork.com/art-techniques/how-to-avoid-the-pitfalls-of-painting-from-photographs/>.



the most. Anything goes. As Julie Beck, a contemporary still life painter, once told us, “keep your ideas together on a list of ‘Orphan Titles’: one page of your sketchbook dedicated to the ideas you will explore at a later time.”

Why oil paint? Oil paint has a beautiful, rich quality. The colors are deeper and sophisticated. The smell will always bring me back to good memories, a place of creativity and art. The buttery texture of the paint latches onto the canvas softly. It mixes well, it dries slowly, the list goes on. The quality of oil paint allows me to create my best paintings in any subject matter, and there is still much more I have to learn. Many more techniques I need to develop and colors I’d like to try. Practice makes progress. Progress takes time.

Oil paint is permanent, it is heavy. The permanence of the material being used just so happens to coincidentally work with the themes of my thesis. The permanence of death and the heaviness that blankets the time thereafter. It is possible to fix or cover a part of the artwork with more paint but the underlying layers can still show through.

## Chapter 2: The Influence

There are a variety of influences for this thesis exhibition.

I traveled to Italy to study the methods of the old masters. My painting technique is influenced by the work of the Dutch Masters of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

The flourishing Dutch Golden Age was largely strengthened by wealth from foreign trading and colonial ventures. Society became captivated by the pleasures of ordinary life, from education to material goods. “These changes had enormous repercussions on the art market, and it’s no coincidence that the still life arose as an independent genre in Europe parallel to the birth of early market capitalism and the world’s first consumer society.”<sup>2</sup>

The still lifes presented by the Dutch masters are dramatic: dark backgrounds, shiny metals, rich vermilion. I have tried to recreate that sumptuousness in my thesis work. I want my viewers to see the everyday objects as something more, something special. Their dramatic displays and color surprises are meant to express the exceptionality of the objects.

The idea for this collection of thesis work came to me in the summer before my final semester, but I think it actually lay dormant in my mind for many years prior.

I’m sure I’m not alone in realizing that I have experienced more deaths in the past two years than ever before in my life. It is one of the few connections that all humans will have, an inevitable event, the end of a life. My work explores the idea presented in the original poem, For Whom The Bell Tolls by John Donne,<sup>3</sup> that speaks of a man who hears a funeral bell and asks about the person who has died. It says we should feel a sense of belonging to the whole of the human race, and should feel a sense of loss at every death, because it has taken something away from mankind. Because none of us stands alone in the world, each human death affects all of us. Every funeral bell, therefore...tolls for thee.

The Dutch art genre, known as Vanitas, was closely linked with the cultural movement present in early European life known as “Memento Mori,” Latin for “remember you must die.”

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<sup>2</sup> Julia Fiore, “The Hidden Secrets Lurking in Dutch Still Life Paintings,” Artsy, September 4, 2018, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-dutch-lifes-dark-secrets-hide-exotic-delicacies>.

<sup>3</sup> “For Whom the Bell Tolls by John Donne,” by John Donne - Famous poems, famous poets. - All Poetry, accessed December 2, 2022, <https://allpoetry.com/For-whom-the-Bell-Tolls>.

These paintings were saturated with symbolic imagery that forced the viewer to take a deeper look. The still lifes remind us of the futility of earthly possessions, pleasures, and glories in the face of inevitable death, with the term *vanitas* derived from the passage in the Bible, Ecclesiastes 1:2: “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.”<sup>4</sup>

Ernest Becker was a cultural anthropologist determined to figure out why human society develops in certain ways. Much of his theory is examined by the scientific community but his insights are just as important to the arts and humanities. As briefly described of Becker’s thesis in *Denial of Death*, “our sense of vulnerability and mortality gives rise to a basic anxiety, even a terror, about our situation. So we devise all sorts of strategies to escape awareness of our mortality and vulnerability, as well as our anxious awareness of it.”<sup>5</sup>

I believe the habit of collecting starts somewhere, and for many it starts with the death of a loved one. Like many things in life, it’s cyclical. We keep relics to keep memories alive. To keep a person alive in our minds. To control the passing of time. These thoughts are created as a response to denial of death, as we are afraid to lose something or forget. We create these “dead” tributes to memories, and it reminds us of our own mortality. The ultimate human connection: Memento Mori.

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<sup>4</sup> Fraser Hibbitt, “Vanitas: Dutch Master Paintings Explained,” TheCollector, July 9, 2020, <https://www.thecollector.com/vanitas-dutch-master-paintings/>.

<sup>5</sup> Glenn Hughes, “THE DENIAL OF DEATH AND THE PRACTICE OF DYING,” Ernest Becker Foundation, 2022, <https://ernestbecker.org/lecture-6-denial/>.

### Chapter 3: The Work



Figure 1: *victims aren't we all*

Imagine being 3mm away from dying? I don't think you can unless you've been in that situation.

It was very early in the morning when I received a message that my friend had been shot in the face. He, an NYPD rookie, was on a routine walkthrough. He and his partner asked some loitering men for IDs. When one man said he'd left his upstairs, he returned with a gun instead, and shot both officers.

I remember everything from that day. I remember collapsing into the Music teacher's shoulder and sobbing while fifth grade patrols looked on with worry. I remember needing too many breaks from chaperoning the school's event that day...and then getting in trouble for taking too many breaks. They didn't know. They didn't know that I was holding my breath waiting for my friend to make it out of surgery and wake up to face another day.

He's made it out alright, by the way.

The memories still creep back to mind every now and then. Anytime I travel to NY, chat with my friends. Anytime I see mindless violence on the news. Anytime I hear, "Abolish the Police."

There are plenty of families patiently waiting for their loved ones to return home.

There are bad people and there are good people. There are bad cops and there are good cops. As there are bad teachers and good teachers, bad doctors and good doctors. Abolishment is not the cure for the violence. We rely on the protection offered from our first responders. So, as with teacher and doctors, there should be more education, training, and screenings in place for this profession. Eradication is not the solution.



Figure 2: *in peace, sons bury their fathers  
in war, fathers bury their sons*

In high school we had to read, “The Things They Carried,” by Tim O’Brien. As a true high schooler, I didn’t remember much from the story about war...except for the relics that the soldiers carried.

Each person carried items that represented who they were: a self portraits through inanimate objects.

This stuck with me because I’ve always collected and kept things that may seem trivial to others. What may look like a small pebble, actually represents the walk along the Arno during the last days overseas.

For this painting I was thinking of an American soldier that may have encountered a French soldier during WWI. The objects are a mixture from both countries.

Was there a struggle or was this a friendship?

This painting was the first of the series to start to take on aspects of Trompe L’oeil: a French phrase meaning “deceives the eye” used to describe paintings that create the illusion of a real object or scene.<sup>6</sup> From here I began to move from classically composed setups to a combination of objects meant to deceive the viewer into thinking they might touch the scene.

<sup>6</sup> “Trompe L’oeil,” Encyclopedia Britannica (Encyclopedia Britannica, inc.), accessed December 2, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/art/trompe-loeil>.

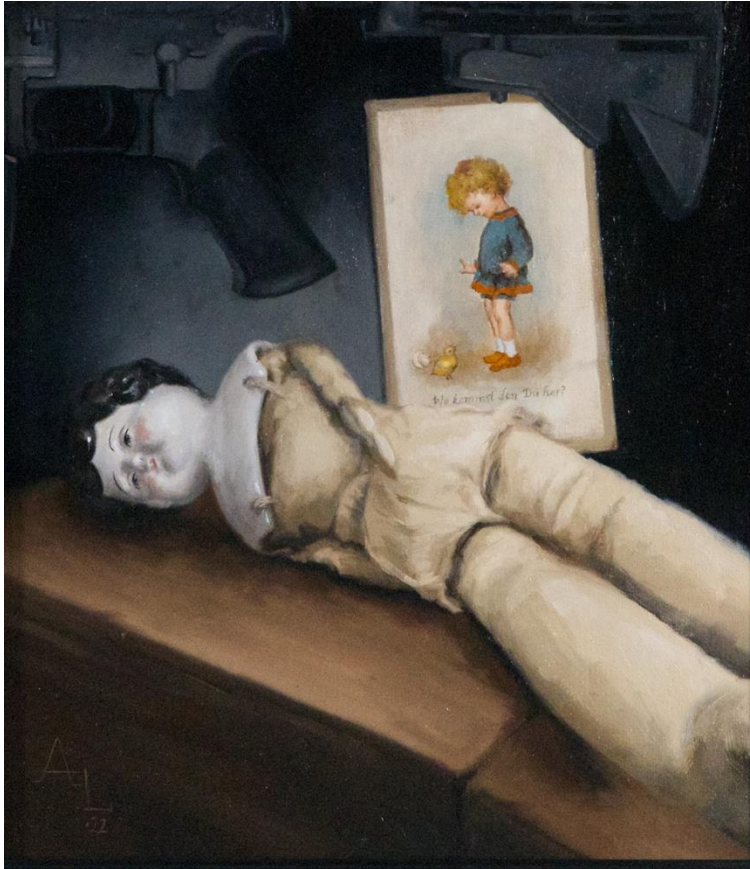


Figure 3: *breath until you're dead  
crucify the kid  
nature has a gun  
who will save the son?*

“There have been over 600 mass shootings in the United States so far in 2022. More people died in mass shootings at U.S. schools between 2018 and 2022 than in the previous 18 years combined since the watershed 1999 Columbine High School massacre. 2022 is already the worst year on record. As of Oct. 24, there had been 257 shootings on school campuses.

“The rising annual tally of school shootings has occurred despite enhanced school security in the two decades since the Columbine massacre. Metal detectors, clear backpacks, bulletproof chalkboards, lockdown apps, automatic door locks and cameras have not stopped the rise in school shootings. In fact, the May 2022 mass shooting at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, provides a case study in systemic failure across the school safety enterprise.”<sup>7</sup>

I first started teaching in 2012, and then the Shady Hook shooting took place. It is sad that we live in a world where students have to practice ducking under their desks or hiding in closets in case of a mass shooting incident. There are too many things wrong; schools aren't locked down tight enough, gun control, and mental health instability. We are failing and may be too deep in to dig ourselves out.

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<sup>7</sup> The Conversation, “School Shootings Are Already at a Record in 2022,” Snopes (Snopes.com, October 26, 2022), <https://www.snopes.com/news/2022/10/26/school-shootings-2022/>.



Figure 4: *grief does not have a timeline*

There is nothing that can prepare a female about to learn that they may not have the ability to have a child. It doesn't matter if you're ready for one or not. It is a blow to your genetic programming. All the dreams of smiles, of first steps, of creating Santa, of this new human who looks kind of like you. Crushed.

Or how about miscarriage after miscarriage. Hopeful for months, then an overwhelming weight of emptiness.

Be kind to those who grieve the hopes of a family.

Female reproductive rights have been in the hot seat recently. States that have banned abortions are hoping that this will encourage more people to adopt. How about making adoption an easier process? Or maybe a little less expensive. Not only lawyers and doctors should be given the privilege to have children through adoption.

There are a few policies that have not been thoroughly thought out.

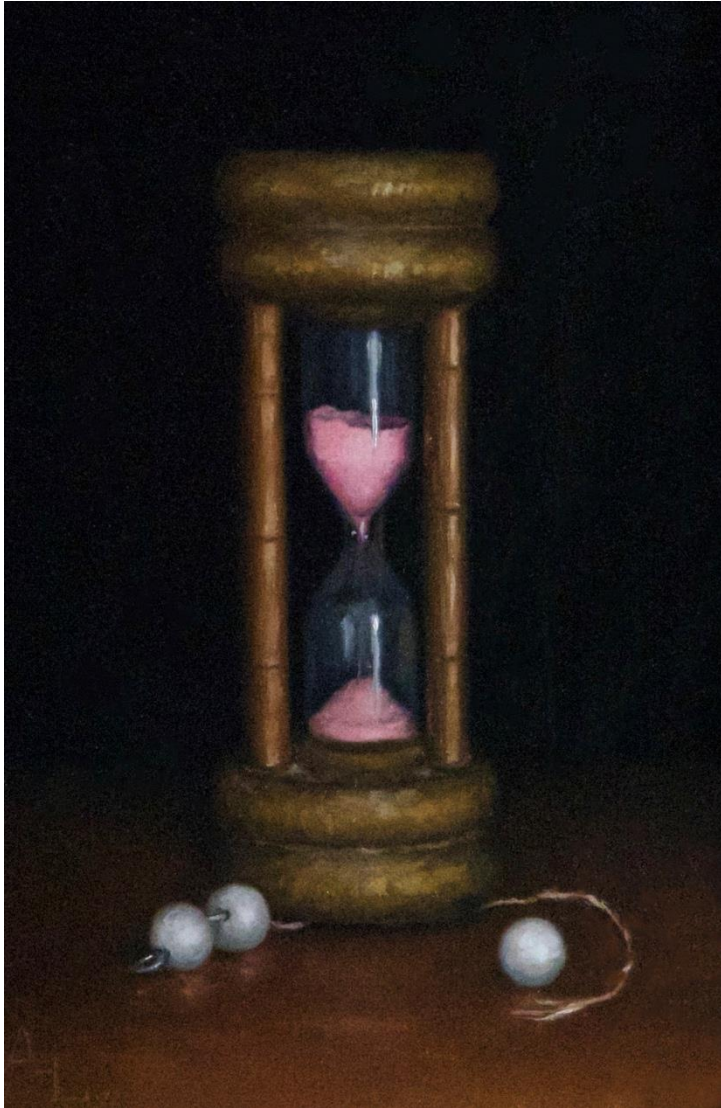


Figure 5: *time flies, and then no need  
to endure anymore  
time dies*

There are so many stories, quotes, songs, and poems about time. Because time is constant. There's no stopping or waiting. You're either with it or anxiously working against it.

This hourglass was my grandmother's. As a child, every time I visited I would reset the timer over and over again. It was the only timer I'd ever seen with pink sand. It was unique.

It's weird to have the things you loved around this person now passed on to you. It's like those things shouldn't exist if that person does not.

A life taken too soon, my grandmother's passing was the first time I'd fully experienced a death in the family. Everything changed, and everything hurt. Over time, the memories were easier to revisit and the hourglass a gentle reminder of the time spent at grandma's house.





Figure 6: *i keep waiting to wake up and miss him less*

“Tempi Senza Precedenti” is another title I have for this piece. From Italian to English, it translates as “Unprecedented Times.”

I was in Italy during the first months of the global pandemic in 2020. Some of our friends were complaining of getting really sick and staying in bed for days. We all thought it was a bad flu...eat an orange and you'll be fine. Then the number of reported deaths started to rise, and it didn't stop.

The school closed. The country closed. I had to leave Italy before I was closed in too.

This piece is an ode to the beginnings of a time we will never forget. The eurocents spelling out 20-20 covering the identification card of an elderly Italian gentleman. A vaccine close, but too far away.

It's as if the man emptied his pockets for quite possibly the last time.



Figure 7: *nothing is trivial*

As a child, I had these small tea sets. The smallness of it all was precious to me. Little cups for little hands. I loved to play pretend.

This piece is a small representation of moving away from childhood, moving away from pretend and into the real world.

The matches, quick to extinguish, illuminate a small, chipped cup. The closer an object is to the light source, the larger the shadow it casts.

It can be a stressful transition from pretend to the real world. The shadows cast can be long and the light available in brief surges.

But life is a box of matches. It ebbs and flows, goes in and out of darkness, ups and downs. Once you can accept that, you'll know that the darkness cannot last forever. It can't rain all the time. There is a light coming so just ride the wave.



Figure 8: *if I can't be close to you  
i'll settle for the ghost of you*

I've always loved dogs. The family did not get its first puppy until I was 33, but he was worth the wait.

I've never loved an animal as much as I love this dog. He brings so much joy to our lives. I know he'll only be around for a little bit, and one day, after many games of fetch and when his fur turns white and his collar is old and frayed, we will have to say goodbye.

So appreciate the time you have with the ones you love, and cherish the memories of happy times spent together.



Figure 9: *she was gone long before she died  
she was my anchor  
and then I suppose she was my burden*

Memory is a funny thing. Some things stick, and others simply fade away.

Dementia hits hard. One day a person forgets to get milk at the store, then next they've forgotten their children's names. The family watches as their loved ones' memories fade away and all we can do is offer them comfort and support. The children become the parents, and the change in cycle continues.

In many and varied ways, the black butterfly is the most dramatic of butterfly symbolism. This is particularly true regarding transformative properties. In many cultures, the color black is often perceived as a mark of misfortune. Misfortune and struggles are necessary for to positive change. If we never faced any challenges, we would never grow.

Interestingly, so many of the negative associations for the black butterfly involve change and transformation. We often fear change. Yet life on this planet would cease without the change of seasons – the growth processes of every plant and animal.

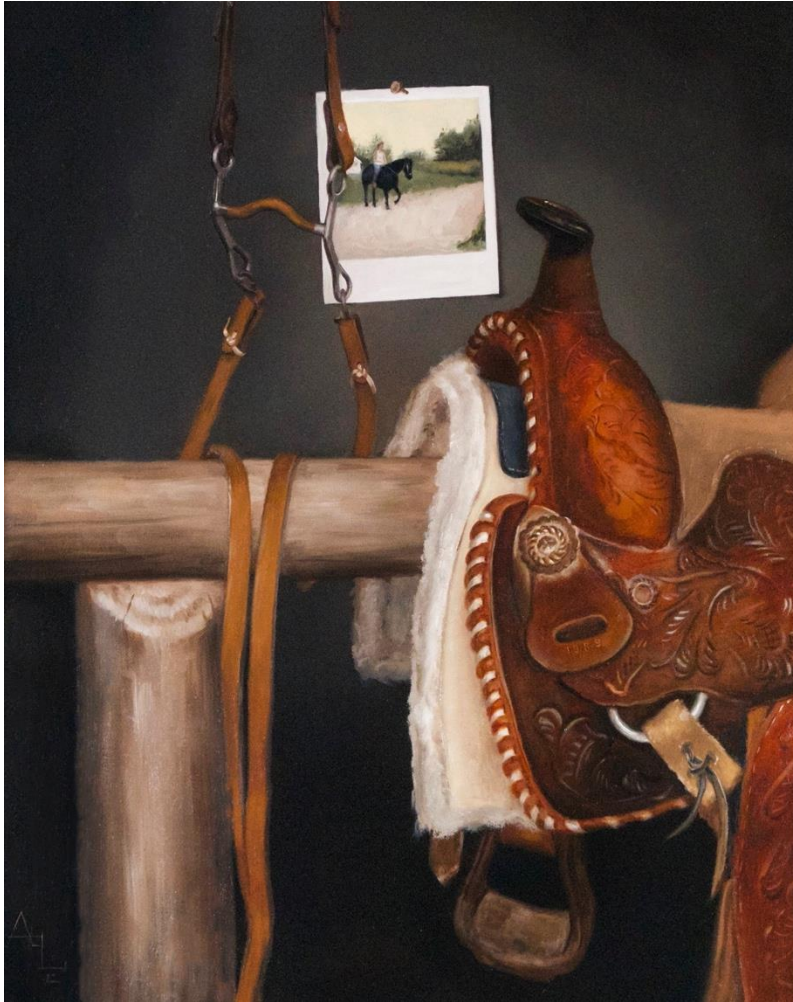


Figure 10: *the carousel never stops turning*

We had a great horse. Marty, short for Martin, after Martin guitars.

I met Marty ten years ago. He was the neighbor's horse and then he was our horse. I didn't grow up with animals bigger than gerbils, and now we had this big guy.

I was never going to be a rider (they're too tall, no seatbelts, etc.), but I knew I'd spoil the heck out of him with brushing and treats. Marty Mart was always there. Every visit home, he was waiting at the gate for a treat. Every time I looked outside, his silhouette against the landscape.

He got sick and spent his last day lying in the field trying to breathe. Burying a horse is pretty traumatic. But again, life moves on and nothing is immortal. The barn is still the same, with his special halter and bit still hanging, ready to be passed on to the next generation of horses.

He was a good horse. My Marty Man.



Figure 11: *will we find closure  
or will we circle the drain*

People who suffer a loss will experience grief in many ways. While some can come to terms relatively quickly, others will look for external ways to cope. Alcohol has become an all-too-common means of dealing with that grief.

People come to terms with loss in many different ways. In some cases, that can lead them to start using alcohol. It is one thing to drink alcohol recreationally. Someone could go for years drinking modestly without developing a problem, but once they start drinking for a specific reason, be it grief, depression, or even anger, they can easily fall down a rabbit hole of abuse.<sup>8</sup>

As part of the diptych, below this painting in the exhibition is a painting of a child's outreached arms. Childhood trauma has been linked to a number of negative outcomes later in life, including alcohol dependence.

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<sup>8</sup> Cooper Smith, "Alcohol and Grief," Alcohol Rehab Guide, October 31, 2022, <https://www.alcoholrehabguide.org/resources/dual-diagnosis/alcohol-and-grief/>.



Figure 12: *until all that's left is the shape of it*

This piece is about mental illness and religion. Both, some people believe in, some people do not. But studies show a more positive result in combating depression with religious support.

“Studies among adults reveal fairly consistent relationships between levels of religiosity and depressive disorders that are significant and inverse. Of 93 observational studies, two-thirds found lower rates of depressive disorder with fewer depressive symptoms in persons who were more religious. In 34 studies that did not find a similar relationship, only 4 found that being religious was associated with more depression.”<sup>9</sup>

So it's not a perfect system, but it's about finding what works best for the individual involved.

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<sup>9</sup> Simon Dein, “Religion, Spirituality, and Mental Health,” *Psychiatric Times* 27, no. 1 (January 10, 2010), <https://www.psychiatrictimes.com/view/religion-spirituality-and-mental-health>.



Figure 13: *and the memory itself was like injury anew*

This is the only piece with a human depicted.

That is because you, viewer, are human and it is human nature to question our own mortality in light of another's passing.

Why do we create these still lifes, these "dead" tributes to memories? If we let the objects go, do we let the memories go with them?

Terror management theory suggests mortality salience as a defense mechanism. A need to control that affects our behavior. So we hold on, and we collect, and we don't let go in order to keep this person alive... if only in our minds.

A still life is a stagnant setup of inanimate objects, but it would be devoid of meaning if not for the human viewer and the moments that have shaped them.





Figure 14: *five crows, sickness*  
*six crows, death*

*Cancer* is a disease in which some of the body's cells grow uncontrollably and spread to other parts of the body.

When I was young, before I knew about disease, I used to love watching the smoke from my grandmother's cigarettes. It would dance and twirl in the air like a beautifully choreographed ballet.

To this day, the smell of cigarette smoke brings me back to the memories of spending time at grandma's house.

If I pick up that familiar smell with no cigarettes in sight, I take it as a sign that her spirit is around.

I know that sounds horrible, but we hold on to what we can.

Ironically, that was not the cause of death. Cancer is a tricky thing that way.



Figure 15: *some things don't just go away  
they stick, they echo*

I've had a reoccurring dream that I am trying to interact with my grandmother but there is always something in the way. One in particular was a phone call. I was told she was on the line and I tried to talk to her, I tried yelling and screaming, but I heard nothing in return.

Because we can't predict exactly when someone will pass away, each death is a shock. Each one is sudden.

This painting depicts an unexpectant death, and the sudden loss of communication with the person involved. No more phone calls.

You are left with relics of the time shared together; the train tickets, the photographs, the jewelry. And the memory of their voice.

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