

2017

# Is/Was and the in between

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*Is/was and the in between*

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BFA The Pennsylvania State University, 2010

A Thesis submitted to  
the Faculty of the Graduate School  
of the University of Colorado at Boulder  
in Candidacy for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts, Ceramics

Department of Art & Art History

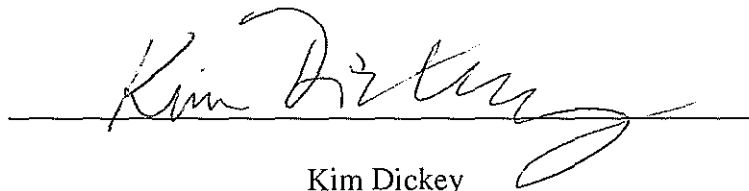
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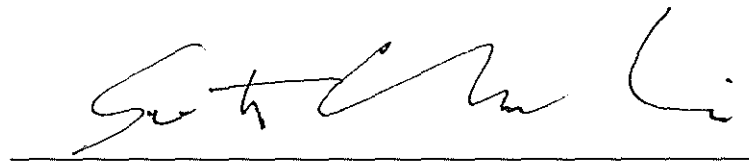
This thesis entitled: *Is/was and the in between*  
written by: Lilly Zuckerman  
has been approved for the Department of Art & Art History



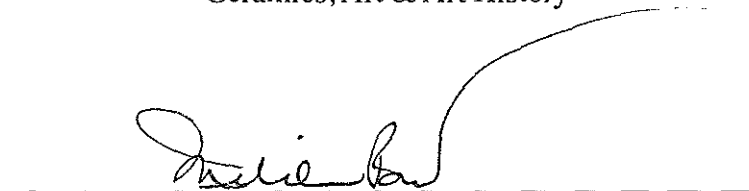
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*Everything in life is memory, save for the thin edge of the present.*

-Michel Gazzaniga (Foster 2)

## PREFACE

My goals in graduate school were to change my artwork, to make more autobiographical artwork, to experiment with different materials, and to make objects that were unknown to me. *Is/was and the in between* is different from my previous pinched earthenware sculptures that focused on the form, the hand, and cultural definitions of vessels. I feel it is important to preface this discussion and invite artist biography into the understanding of this body of work. My three years in grad school have been unavoidably bookended by my mother's declining health, her fading participation within my family, and eventual death. Over the last five years, I watched her dementia take away small and large parts of her personality and ability to function. In this time, I have experienced the tectonic shift of a parent's decline and death. This is the most autobiographical and vulnerable work I have ever created. It is informed by a time of all-consuming grief and loss in my life when I no longer could find the reserves to deflect to another subject for my work. It became clear to me that while living my grief, sculpting the body was a way to process my experience. Grief has knocked the wind out of me and the emotional place I have been making from these last few months is my knees. These figurative sculptures are a catalogue of my corporeal experiences, complete with them being contained into an oppressive and dark installation. In *Remembrance of Things Past*, Marcel Proust wrote, "Ideas come to us as the successors to griefs, and griefs, at the moment when they change into ideas, lose some part of their power to injure our heart" (Proust 944). In this place of powerlessness and grief, I have transformed my emotional pain into concepts, I look to my body as a road map, and to my making practice as a way to chart a course through this time and these ideas.



While these experiences are my own, there is also a universal nature to loss, our acceptance of mortality, and the passage of time. “What philosophy can offer art is not a theory of art, an elaboration of its silent or undeveloped concepts, but what philosophy and art share in common- their rootedness in chaos, their capacity to ride the waves of a vibratory universe without direction or purpose, in short their capacity to enlarge the universe by enabling its potential to be otherwise, to be framed through concepts and affects. They are among the most forceful ways in which culture generates a small space of chaos within chaos where chaos can be elaborated, felt, thought” (Grosz 24). No one will be free of their own mortality or that of their loved ones, and I want my art to help viewers spend time and become more at ease with me in these inevitable “small space[s] of chaos” (Grosz 24).

Witnessing my mother’s slow and painful demise and death from dementia over the course of years has radically altered my perception of time and space; I can no longer trust memories as they are made, or trust that they will be there for my perusal in the future. I look to Louise Bourgeois whose “art is the concrete record of a highly individual and idiosyncratic artist’s life long attempt to come to terms with the conflict and pain of an early experience. Her fearless confrontations with gender, sex, isolation, and death have inspired many younger artists who, like Bourgeois, make art as a personal ‘strategy for survival’” (Posner 24). In this body of work I have tried to “fearlessly confront” these ideas as a “strategy for [my own] survival” (Posner 24).

Rebecca Solnit is one of my favorite authors as her visual and tactile writing style weaves with effortless poetic flow in an out of history and minute details reaching to seemingly disparate subjects. She opens *The Faraway Nearby*, a sprawling text about rotting apricots, sea ice, and *The Arabian Nights*, framed within the story of her mother’s disappearance into Alzheimer’s



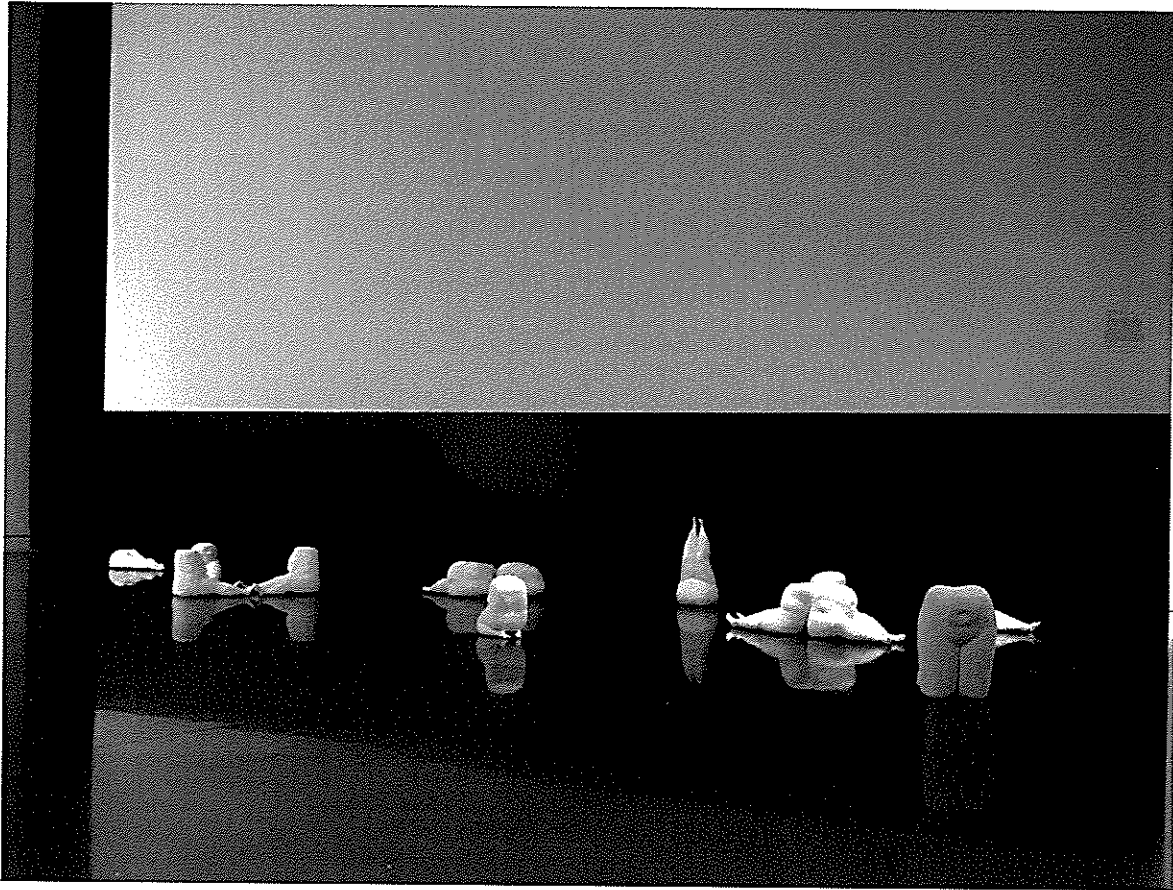


Disease. Replacing *books* with *art*, and *writer* with *maker* in Solnit's following quote, I can define my art making practice as being incredibly similar to the act of writing: "this is the strange life of books that you enter alone as a writer, mapping an unknown territory that arises as you travel. If you succeed in the voyage, others enter after, one at a time, also alone, but in communion with your imagination, traversing your route. Books are solitudes in which we meet" (Solnit 54). These are the feelings I have when making and sharing my art, specifically this body of work, with an audience. I adore how Solnit grounds her story telling in physical objects, emotional spaces, and above all empathy, in the opening sentences of the *The Faraway Nearby*. "What is your story? It's all in the telling. Stories are compasses and architecture; we navigate by them, we build our sanctuaries and our prisons out of them, and to be without a story is to be lost in the vastness of a world that spreads in all directions like arctic tundra or sea ice. To love someone is to put yourself in their place, we say, which is to put yourself in their story, or figure out how to tell yourself their story. Which means that place is a story, and stories are geography, and empathy is first of all an act of imagination, a way of traveling from here to there" (Solnit 3). It is with these goals for my art making that I hope to tell a story, to create emotional and physical spaces, in which my singular experiences can meet others with quiet empathy and imagination.

## THEMES

The major themes in this work are universal and elemental: bodies, time, death and memory. These adult female bodies, based off of my own body, are both whole and just a part. Their torsos are not present, except in our mind's eye. These bodies' knowledge, feelings, and intentions are redirected from their heads, brains, and hearts — the places where we





conventionally think of these things as living — to the belly, pelvis, legs and feet. The gut becomes the new brain. I felt very vulnerable, both emotionally and physically, as I made these pieces, and I want that mood to be palpable in the installation. The pieces are informed by my own body, and I intend for this to enhance the feeling of vulnerability. I am basically naked in the gallery. Even if the viewer doesn't know that they are self portraits, I believe that they would interpret them as copies of the same body. Each of these figures is me defining my lexicon of grieving positions. In the period of grieving that I am trying to explore with this work, I have existed in many different emotional states; some figures are resting, some are comforting each other in a spooning position, and some kneel in neutral contentment. Some seem to prop up one another, and some stretch and lean, finding the limits of their seen and unseen limbs. Their



positions define a lexicon of the helper, the sad one, the playful one, and the resting one. While all of the sculptures are modeled after my own body, the piece that is the closest to a self portrait is the figure laying down, flat, on its non-existent face. This position is the most authentic embodiment of my grief, right now.

The figures are trapped in this indiscernible threshold between gravity and exhaustion, and they are unable to rise. I am communicating a mood within the installation that alludes to a larger theme of quiet and the failure of language surrounding grieving in our culture. We do not process death and grief in ways that are useful to anyone grieving. I can barely put my own grief into words, and thus I created these pics in an installation to translate my feelings visually. In this written thesis, I am fighting language to do its job: to serve us as it conveys the physical embodiments of grief as seen in my figures, into words. But ultimately, our language fails us, leaving us with so few words to approach death and grief that the mantra of “I am sorry for your loss, at least you have your memories, and you’ll get over it soon,” are pathetically bookended by awkward silence and avoidance. I am trying to capture the stillness surrounding grief and its impossible quiet. In my own experience, no one person or phrase can “fix” my emotions, instead I am most humbled and comforted in my grief when someone agrees to be patient and present with me- just sharing space. These bodies are asking viewers to simply be an absorbent witness with and for them.

Marie Howe is a poet who speaks and writes eloquently about her large family of origin, their struggles with alcoholism, and the death of her brother from AIDS. Even though she and her sister grew up in the same home, they experienced addiction and its subsequent violence in very different ways. Alcoholism violently shattered the unity that they felt as a family causing them to have “to speak from fragments, shard to shard” (Tippet On Being). While Howe and I



are creating from different places, I relate to her understanding of how trauma causes such separations and roadblocks to communication and shared existences.

The Gate By Marie Howe (Howe 58)

I had no idea that the gate I would step through  
to finally enter this world  
would be the space my brother's body made. He was  
a little taller than me; a young man  
but grown, himself by then,  
done at twenty-eight, having folded every sheet,  
rinsed every glass he would ever rinse under the cold  
and running water.

This is what you have been waiting for, he used to say to me.

And I'd say, What?

And he'd say, This—holding up my cheese and mustard sandwich.

And I'd say, What?

And he'd say, This, sort of looking around.

It is in this vein that my sculptures are speaking their own language to and from their parts. The *this*, the gap in experiences between siblings and the short comings of our language are framed by Howe in her poem *The Gate*.

## THE BODY

These figures have been diminished in size because they are overwhelmed by their circumstances; they shrink under the weight of their context. These figures are lost in and held down by the black space — they are simultaneously engulfed by the nothingness and suspended precariously in the openness. Each body is an individual memory, and yet the spaces in between them are fuzzy — where do memories end and where do they begin? As hard as we try, our memories will never form a linear queue; instead, they function like a montage that highlights fragments of our lived experience in order to illuminate a deeper story. This cinematic quality





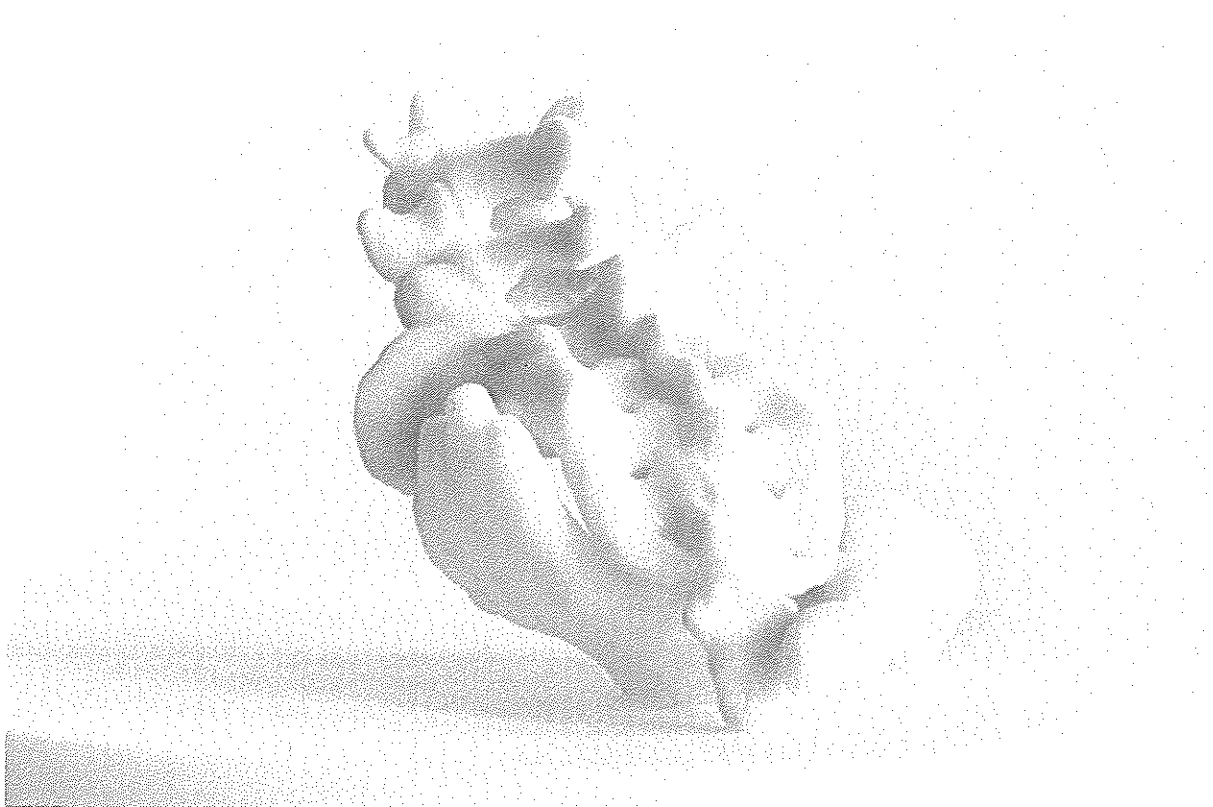
allows not only our emotions, but our very muscles, to act out and live with just a piece of a lifetime in a still scene or a few moving frames. They express a fleeting memory, and yet their permanence in ceramic grounds them physically, in the present. These memories will never be whole, just like these cropped bodies will never grow heads or torsos or arms. These bodies are moments — frozen thoughts — exhausted and held in place forever by the invisible forces of time and gravity. I strive to create sad bodies, in somber moods living in unreal and surreal spaces. These sad bodies offer an ever changing interpretation of whole that allows a new entity, grief, to be rendered visible. This visibility, allows me to create a new opening for their existence amidst the pain.

In her essay *Separation Anxiety* for the 1992 exhibition, *Corporeal Politics*, at the MIT List Visual Arts Center, Helaine Posner writes, “The history of Western Art has in large part been the history of the representation of the human form. Throughout time, the human figure has been the most valued instrument for exploring and asserting a culture’s prevailing world view” (Posner 22). She posits a “startling phenomenon in late twentieth century art, the striking preponderance of the body fragmented as a highly charged metaphor for the psychological, social, political, and physical assaults on the individual. The disturbing isolation of body parts and limbs emphasize the vulnerability of our bodies and implies physical violence, sexual oppression, and ultimate loss” (Posner 22). Isolating body parts is a tool that I am using to represent absence, presence, loss and corporeal storage of cognition and memory.

Janine Antoni creates similar sorrowful impossibilities with her Milagros sculptures. Milagros are “small religious votive charms that translate as ‘miracles’. They often take the shape of an ailing area of the body, such as a limb or organ” (Art 21). Traditionally, they are placed in religious spaces with the hope that the congregation will, for example pray for their



aching knee. “These objects capture the sadness of the body and body parts that will never meet” (Art 21). Her body parts are fragmented with absent parts that reach out in gentle embraces to other fragments. Antoni’s Milagros pairings are usually an outside feature like a hand paired with an inside feature like a jointed bone. This contrast between internal and external heightens the impossibility of these parts to be able to comfort each other. I am drawn to Antoni’s Milagros; like her, I am using a small scale, a ghostly white color, and a somber mood that holds the impossibility of separation and yearning.





*There seems something more sneakingly incomprehensible in the powers,  
failures, the inequalities of memory, than in any other of our intelligences.*

-Jane Austin (Foster 1)

## TITLE

I chose the title *Is/was and the in between* to be intentionally ambiguous. My goal is to invite the viewer to settle for a precarious moment in this space and share this uncertain mood. Tenses, like *is* and *was*, are used to qualify time passage in English. *Is* denotes presence and certainty, while *was* denotes absence or something that has vanished because it existed in the past. I am calling attention to the nuances of the *in between*, and what happens when the pressure is applied to the tenses of *is* and the *was*. The combined effect of the title, the figures themselves in their various poses, their stark lack of color, and the bodies' fragmentations all frame, amplify, and communicate to the viewer the themes of physical and emotional presence/absence. The slash ("/") symbolizes the uncertainty of tense between what is and what was; we now have a toe in both realms. By placing these bodies in the space between realms, they take on a life of their own- a life that oscillates between *is* and *was*. "*In between*" implies a bridge to and from the past and present — the bridge itself is a whole new space, indeed. I adopted this new tense, *is/was/in between*, as a way to help myself think and speak about how my mother wavered physically and cognitively over the last five years. In my extreme discomfort to share such personal details about my family and my mother's health, I look to photographer Catherine Opie and her *Self Portrait/Cutting*, 1993 because I value her methods of disclosing and hiding. Opie desired what was to her an "unattainable ideal" the stereotypical domestic life with a



partner and child and so she cut the scene, drawn the way a child would depict, into her back, in an attempt to reveal her “secret self” (Levy 58). Opie offers something deeply personal, even confessional, revealing powerful longings that are compounded by the great physical vulnerability of the sadomasochistic acts the photographs document” (Levy 58). Opie hides her face but shows her scarred naked body; this is startling because self



mutilation is generally considered a sign of unstable emotional distress that most people hide. Opie’s deep and private desire for something that we perceive as normal is starkly contrasted by the public manner and violent technique in which she shares it. Her private desires are now permanently scarred into her body. *Self Portrait/Cutting* depicts an ambiguous time, suspending viewers interpretations. The innocent style of the drawing is a child's portrayal of a harmonious home life that propels us back in time, while the material, body and blood, propels us forward, thinking about the middle aged woman mutilating her body as she dreams of the future.





## INSTALLATION

My intentions for the installation were for the figures to feel like they were in a dulled, somber, and unreal stasis. They are contained by the oppressive black space, but also floating in the mirrored floor. I was most influenced by the shine on the deep black concrete floors in the museum gallery, and I wanted my sculptures to interact with them. I finished the surfaces of my sculptures with a sprayed Tile 6 terra sigillata that I lightly burnished before firing to produce a soft sheen. While I am a white woman and I am making figurative sculptures that are informed by shape of my own body, the color choice of white terra sigillata is not meant to reference racial whiteness. Instead, I chose the white sig as a way to convey the figures' ghostliness and emptiness. The absence of life is not necessarily death; these forms are alive with their plump and full bodies. This Tile 6 terra sigillata surface glows under gentle spot lights of the gallery, and the floor reflects the figures in two dimensions. The reflection enhances their hovering, ghostly, and unreal presence.

Clay as a material inherently references the body. From creation myths to vessel anatomy like "foot," "neck," and "shoulders," connections exist between the porcelain I am using to sculpt these bodies and real human bodies. Just as ceramic vessels are repositories, the body sculpted from clay is a repository for emotions. While memories are fleeting, easily forgotten, and improvisational, the making of fragile memories permanent in material like ceramic locks them in and preserves the emotions of the time in which they were originally experienced. After working in materials like paper, fabric, video, and sound over the last three years, I came back to clay because it records a memory of how it was touched.

The scale of these bodies is meant to be an un-identifiable one; they are neither doll nor child. Instead, they are adult woman bodies shrunk to a small scale. This scale represents how the



figures feel dwarfed by their environment and therefore helpless inside it. These bodies are realistically rendered except for the size of their feet. The figures rest on the ground because their small feet would not be able to hold their weight. Their skin wouldn't even carry the weight; their only way out is to crawl. They are vulnerable to destruction in two ways: firstly, their delicate features are susceptible to foot traffic; and secondly, they would destroy themselves in attempting to walk away. I invite viewers to walk through the installation, weave between the figures, and crouch down to share the same confining black space in which these bodies are suspended. To create this enveloping space, I painted about a quarter of the wall in a matching grey/black color with satin enamel finish that mimics the glossy floor. I wanted to create a one-to-one relationship between the sculptural bodies and my own; the black paint reaches up the wall at the height of the bottom of my ribcage, which is also the point at which the figures' torsos end. I created an engulfing atmosphere that suspends the viewer's notion of space/time and heightens their sense of empathy with these figures. These are the feelings of grief: monotony, exhaustion, emotional powerlessness and physical smallness. Ron Mueck creates hyperrealistic





figurative sculptures and controls how viewers interpret, interact, and empathize with them using dramatic scale shifts. Mueck's scale can range from the entire room to life size, to very small, as seen in *Dead Dad*, 1996. Limp from death and naked, *Dead Dad* feels utterly vulnerable and on its way to shrinking away to nothing. Viewers must crouch down to see Mueck's hyper realistic details and sympathize with this small body. I aim for similar reactions of compassion, curiosity, and sorrow.

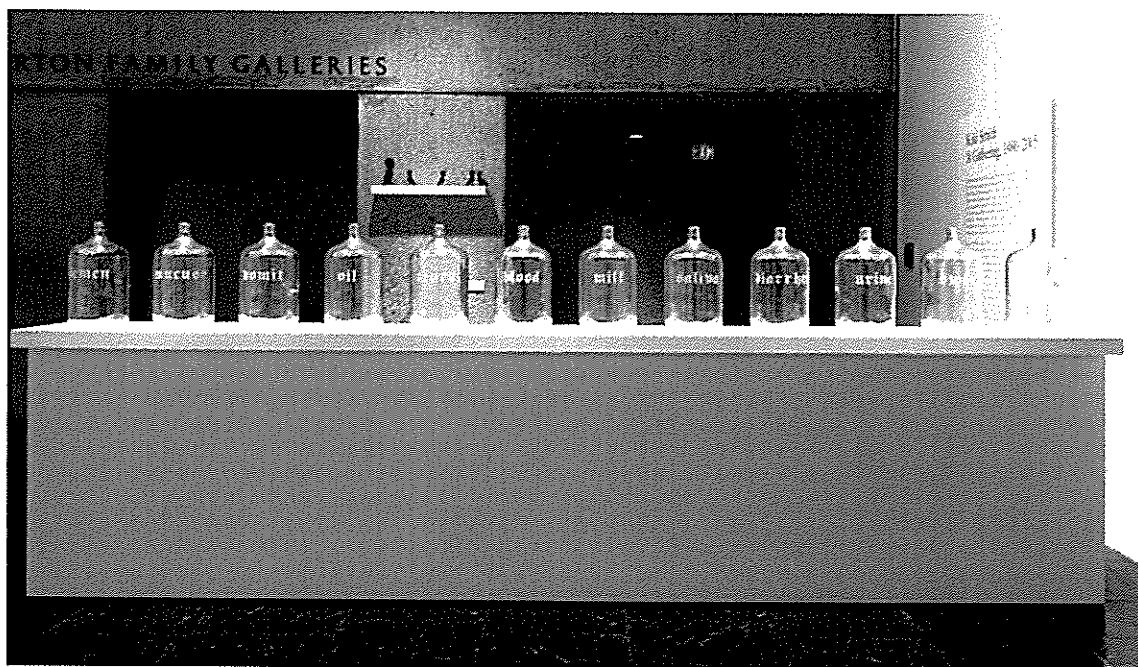
Just as memories are fragments of experiences, these bodies have been ended gently at the waist. The absent parts of these bodies — arms, hands, necks and heads — still exist in our imaginations. They are made absent by the expectation of their presence, and yet, the figures are complete, contained, and whole on their own. They never needed arms and hands, necks and heads in the first place as they have located their grief elsewhere in the body. Their positions define their own quiet language, much like in John Coplan's photographic work in "*Body Parts — A Self-Portrait*", where "the body is a stepping stone to something else, a compositional





tool. Although unmistakably human, they've been rendered transcendent, a kind of language we watch transfixed by its undecipherable integrity" (Millis). When bodies are distilled down to parts we must look for the smallest details for clues: is a muscle relaxed or tense? Is a toe reaching out or recoiling? How do these bodies feel? Coplan's photographs are also paired in surreal ways — a hip connects to an arm, a leg to a belly — so that they become abstracted letters in their form and their meaning is asking to be deciphered.

Absence is beautifully framed in Kiki Smith's minimal and precise piece, *Untitled*, 1986 of "12 empty glass water bottles [etched] in gothic letters of early science with blood, tears, pus, urine, semen, diarrhea, mucus, saliva, vomit, milk, and sweat. Her sculpture is an



impassioned attempt to heal or mend these deep divides" that separate these products of the body from the body (Posner 28). Smith has prompted us to imagine these bodily processes and results without them being present or the bodies that made them. We wouldn't know what missing without the framework.





## CONCLUSION

*Is/was and the in between* is not only the culmination of my course work, studies, and studio practice in graduate school, it is also a time capsule of a sorrowful and challenging time in my life. David Foster Wallace, in *The Depressed Person* writes, “despairing, then, of describing the emotional pain itself, the depressed person hopes at least to be able to express something of its context—its shape and texture, as it were — by recounting circumstances related to its etiology” (Wallace 57). For me, this “context, shape, and texture” has taken the form of conveying the complexities of the universal and personal nature of bodies, time, death, and memory through my choice of subject, materials, installation, and color. I have fragmented the body in order to draw attention to absence, which in turn highlight presence and the fine permeable line we create in order to define both. I have relocated the sources of consciousness and intent to a new part of the body, allowing me to make figures that live from a different place and will hopefully serve them better. In her book, *Wave*, Sonali Deraniyagala details her experience of losing her husband, parents, and two young sons in the tsunami that hit the coast of Sri Lanka in 2004. “I have learned that I can only recover myself when I keep them near. If I distance myself from them, and their absence, I am fractured. For I am without them, as much as I am on my own” (Deraniyagala 227). This binary of presence and absence that loss entails has encouraged me to keep these experiences, while painful, near me. Making while grieving often felt like an impossible feat, but it allowed me to labor and physically transform material towards a place of hope for my future.



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