CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

GONE FROM MY SIGHT

A graduate project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Arts in Art

Visual Arts

Ву

Katherine Parsons

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Dedicated to Jean Parsons. I will never be able to express the impact you had on my life, in every possible way. I would not be here if it weren't for you.

I miss you.

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ABSTRACT GONE FROM MY SIGHT

Katherine Anna Parsons Master of Arts in Art Visual Arts

The California State University, Northridge Graduate Thesis show opens on the anniversary of a loved one's passing, which inspired me to create a piece influenced by her life as well as her death. My caregiving experience prompted me to study how our society fails to deal openly with death and mortality, unlike societies of past ages which had symbolic structures such as rituals, rites of passage and the like embedded into their culture. While religion and ideas of the afterlife persist in the American belief system, the society as a whole seems to repress notions of death and dying and prize youth and innovation. We are products of the Enlightenment after all, and since most of our meta-narratives have been dismantled, we are left to chose which story we might want to tell ourselves, which game we choose to play. I still believe there is value in the old forms and find that art and design often reference them successfully. However, without a genuine belief in them, many of us still find it difficult to find solace in their rites. Art and design use ideas of ritual and empathy to portray authentic experiences of death and dying and if successful, can be extremely useful in memorializing the deceased and processing loss. My thesis project, *Gone From My Sight*, and references these ideas as well as my own experience.

INTRODUCTION

The Mike Curb College of The Arts Graduate Thesis show opens on the anniversary of my grandmother's passing, a woman who helped raise me and for whom I served as caregiver during the last year of her life (Appendix B and C). This compelled me to reflect on my own feelings of loss, death, mortality, memory and the way design, art and video suitably address these ideas. I hope to honor her with my work by conveying these themes in my Master of Art project.

I.

With the dismantling of meta-narratives, the symbol structures once so embedded in the lives of the populace have lost much of its significance. For most of us, the loss of significance comes the loss of an orienting structure to help cope with mortality and the fragility of life. The difficulties that we all face at one time or another, such as the loss of a loved one, the idea of aging, and our own eventual demise, seem insurmountable. Few would deny that our society does what it can to keep any reminder of death at bay, often emphasizing youth and beauty instead.

Religion and belief still hold sway in America, as evidenced by the 2007 PEW Forum on Religion and Public Life, which shows that a majority of Americans report a belief in a kind of deity or hold some kind of spiritual conviction. The statistics report that 71% "absolutely believe in God" and 70% "believes many religions can lead to eternal life." ("Spirituality" 276) Still, our culture is primarily a secular one, despite many political arguments to the contrary. Spiritual traditions become a matter of choice and consumption, not obligation. Many of us "try on" spiritualities and traditions like we try on clothes, attempting to find something that is comfortable and not too restricting. I feel that most of us chafe at the idea of committing to tradition, and then wonder why we feel ill-at-ease, schizophrenic, and discontent.

It could be that our modern, post-modern, and post-postmodern dilemma lies in the lauding of innovation above all else. We look to the wisdom of our elders far less frequently than in previous eras, choosing to place more stock in the potential in the youngest generation. The vigor of youth has been prized in every culture, but the neglect of the aged and the repression of mortality is unique to only a few.

Artists frequently address questions about the nature of mortality, spirituality, and the human condition. Curator Susan Sollins confirms the links between meaning, religion, and art:

"Whether or not we participate in formal religious practice, the human condition seems to demand that we explore the spiritual, question our existence and a possible afterlife; we ponder our connections to the world around us and examine experiences that seem to be inexplicable." ("Spirituality" 278)

Yet, studying these concerns often fragments our consciousness and leaves us searching for something we can perhaps no longer find. We can investigate the "big questions" but seldom find solace in our answers.

Too often, solutions like "finding our own myth" reinforces the individualism of our society under a different name.

What does the visual arts have to offer us in terms of coping with such weighty topics? Designers and landscape architects create memorial spaces that create an opportunity to reflect upon and conceptualize the loss of the deceased. Memorials can be a literal gravesite or a commemoration of multiple lives lost, but its aim is to allow for the expression of grief and a space for the living to mentally process death. According to Anna Petersson, the memory object and passage landscape are both practical and theoretical tools that allow for different expressions and experiences of grief. (61)

When it comes to the layout of public memorials, designers attempt to create a space where it is possible to reflect upon a loss. The aim is to facilitate public and private mourning in a functional manner using spatial relationships as well as concrete objects. For example, the cypress trees planted along the pathway to the public memorial garden Fossar de la Pedrera at Montjui'c in Barcelona, are meant to use a length of space to change the state of mind of those walking to the site. (Petersson 62) Public memorials share this idea with personalized gravesites, though the latter focuses on the idea of continued care, or a way for the bereaved to find comfort and solace by tending to a specific grave. (58) Actively participating in a ritual of laying flowers or the leaving of mementos on a gravesite keeps the departed in an active role in the lives of the living. (59) "The self-image of the living is also reflected in these activities, but chiefly functions as an expression of the personality of the deceased," says Petersson. (59)

Video art and performance have been used to memorialize loved ones in exhibition settings. Teiji Furuhashi of Japan's Dumb Type collective orchestrated a piece called *OR*, which contrasted the pain of a loved one's death with everyday life: Within the piece, the grieving loved ones "wonder what to wear" amongst their "despair...despair...despair." (Neave 95) Furuhashi's work placed different times and spaces in relation to one another while also conveying a truth about the passing of time and human mortality. This speaks to the facts of life in the face of loss. Rather than just tell a sad story, the collective portrayed the

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¹ Ideas such as "memory objects" and "passage landscapes" are terms and ideas used by designers as ways to address public loss. Passage landscapes are akin to threshold rites. The memory object is a tangible item that helps facilitate a narrative for loss. (Petersson 62)

experience with accuracy, authenticity, and poignancy. The spatial and temporal aspects of video and video installations allow for worlds to be experienced simultaneously.

Lens-based work also has the advantage of capturing something—or someone—in a lifelike manner that acts as both insurance and assurance that the subject in the image can remain intact forever. French film theorist André Bazin tells us "...by providing a defense against the passage of time it satisfied a basic psychological need in man, for death is but the victory of time." Bazin claims that the image helps us remember the deceased, saving him or her from a "second spiritual death." (8) This speaks to the power of the photographic and cinematic image to preserve life by representing life—It is able to rescue an image from time's "proper corruption." (8) Those who mourn, says James Moran in *There's No Place Like Home Video*, have two contradictory needs: to accept the reality of their loss and the desire to keep the memory of their loved one alive. (Moran 95)

In my current work, I use these themes of mortality, memory, and time. My thesis piece began with the simple idea of creating art in memory of my grandmother. It existed in several iterations, from an extremely media-centric glitch piece with live roses and projections to the more refined version shown in the student show. Gone From My Sight, the title of the piece, references the well-known pamphlet often provided by hospice care and is meant to function in at least two particular ways: It is partially a meditation on a suspended moment in time and also an expression of my own particular loss. The video is of a rose, which has specific relationship to memorials and was documented from cut bloom to its inevitable decay, suggesting the passage of time. It is also meant to be a metaphor for mortality, a memento mori. Additionally, the rose was my grandmother's favorite flower and favorite scent, so the content is also particular to my situation and therefore functions as an expression of her, something that conveys her personality.² Flowers and the rose motif in general have an extremely long and complex history in Western art, myth, and symbolism, which is also referenced. My spliced cable system, which is output into a tube television (Illustration 1, p. 15) suggests the pathos of loss and becomes a kind of electronic viscera. Televisions of varying scale invite the viewer to explore the messiness and unstable images. The sounds are field recordings from my grandmother's home in Cascade, Montana, as well as outside my current home in North Hollywood, a suburb of Los Angeles. The video is looped, and the mechanical sound of the pause and replay is evident.

Moran writes, "video's capacity for the instant replay...is pathologized as a repetition compulsion, reconceived of life as something that can be rewound, indefinitely deferring the inevitable loss of signals at the end of the tape." (95) He adds, "Video represents the success of a communications technology to keep the human being alive, despite the failure of medical technology to do the same." (95) This, in part, is like

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² In an article on *praesentia*, Professor Kevin Hetherington explains the term as "both a form of the present and a form of presencing something absent". (Petersson 60) What is lost and what is recovered? Is *praesentia* at play in the discordant, ephemeral image of the rose? During the creation of the piece, it became important that the rose be documented via video rather than exist as the rose itself. In this particular piece, we see something, a life, but it is no longer present in any other form than looped, repeated piece of time and image. The object is at risk, at the end of each loop, of being gone from our sight.—yet we can replay and repeat its presence almost endlessly.

the looped rose in my piece—The moment is arrested; the object is forever in full bloom, lightly spinning as though just placed in freshly poured water or touched by an unseen, yet still present, human hand.

CONCLUSION

I am ambivalent—I understand and cherish the freedom of choice that comes with prizing individualism and innovation, yet feel disappointed that I cannot completely anchor myself to a belief system—it is almost impossible to give oneself over to a tradition when the world has been disenchanted. It is vital, I believe, that we find ways to properly grieve our losses as well as face our own mortality. My current work does not function as a passage landscape within a memorial space, but instead portrays my own loss while serving as an example of how art can express the grieving process.

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APPENDIX A

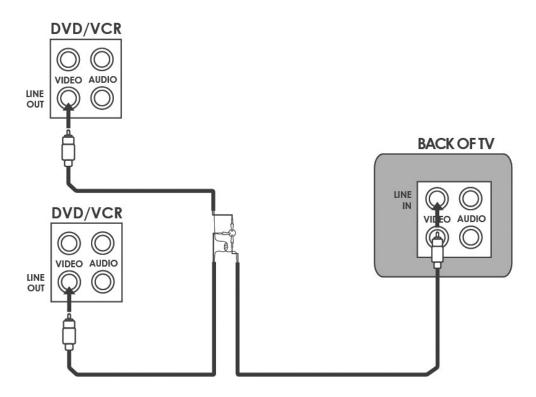
My glitch system came about as I was trying to figure out a way to create a live glitch, not just something that functioned as an effect. While mulling over my own anxieties and thoughts on cognitive dissonance, it occurred to me that glitch functioned in a similar way. I began splicing cables together, starting with coaxial cables, hoping I could find a way to mimic the feeling of being overwhelmed and confused. When coax did not produce the desired results, I began splicing RCA cables, which gave me the clearer signals that I was hoping for. By tying the grounds together to get rid of the noise and wrapping the signal wires around each other, I was able to produce a raw analog mixer that relied on inexpensive and outdated materials. The system was simple but illustrated my point successfully. It also was a way for me to express my own visual sensibility through the machines. It allowed me to use the outmoded technology as art, as an expression, but as always, one also heavily influenced by design.



1. "IsItReallyAsBadAsAllThat," 2013



2. Close up, spliced RCA Cables.



3. Drawing of spliced RCA Cable hook-up.

APPENDIX B:



1. Memorial pamphlet, front view. May 11, 2010.



God saw you getting tired and a cure was not to be. So He put His hands around you and whispered, "Come with me." With tearful eyes, we watched you suffer and watched you fade away although we loved you dearly, we could not make you stay. A golden heart stopped beating, hard-working hands laid to rest. God broke our hearts to prove to us He only takes the best. It's lonesome here without you we miss you more each day life doesn't seem the same since you've gone away: when days are sad and lonely and everything goes wrong we seem to hear you whisper "cheer up and carry on." Each time you smile and say "Don't cry, I'm in God's keeping We'll somehow meet again one day."





August 9th, 1922 to May 11th, 2010 Age 87 years, 9 months, 22 days

Place and Time of Service Methodist Church of Cascade, Cascade, Montana Friday May 21st 2010, 2:30pm

Officiating - Pastor Dick Pugh Order of Eastern Star Pianist - Charlene Moug Soloist - Shannon Fuller

Music Selections Old Rugged Cross How Great Thou Art Just A Closer Walk With Thee Amazing Grace

Burial Chestnut Valley Cemetery Cascade, Montana

> Reception Education Building Cascade, Montana

Memorial Arrangements Croxford Funeral Home

Our beloved Jean...how many different hats you wore: Wife, Mother, Grandmother, Great-grandmother, Sister, Daughter, Outfitter, Rancher, Cowgirl, Cook, Hostess, Postwoman, Caregiver, Colleague, Patient, Patron, and Friend.



Honorary Pallbearers "Friends & Family too many to name, Honorary Pallbearers just the same."

Roland Durocher Cees Holcombe Tom Klock George Kreis Dan Mortag Roger May Tracy Marquis Dan Shannon Bob Zimmerman et al.

Special Thanks To:
Those who cared for her physical needs.
Those who made her last days more comfortable.
Those who helped her look and feel her best.
Those who gently cared for her spiritual needs.
Those who lifted her spirits through their visits.
Those who eased her worries.

2. Memorial pamphlet, back view. May 11, 2010.

APPENDIX C:

Caregiving documentation: http://imovetoes.blogspot.com

Thursday, February 18, 2010 Are You Okay?

The doctor's words are still ringing in my ears. She doesn't have much time left. We need to prepare for her dying comfortably, with dignity, at home. Her body is wearing out. Pneumonia could take her. Her heart might just stop beating. She is tired.

I pushed her wheelchair through the hallway at the clinic, feeling hollow at the idea of planning her funeral...possibly in just a few short months.

We stopped in the waiting area and I saw her reflection in the mirrored wall. She was bundled in several layers of clothes. Mittens. That enormous fur hat. Those big dark glasses, worn to keep out the glare of the snow. Her face was gaunt and pale. Her body was leaning off to the right. She was motioning for something. I couldn't understand what.

To be taken across the room, away from the draft of the door.

"Are you okay?" Friends and family ask. You've invested so much.

No, I am not. I don't think so. But maybe I am. I don't actually know.

How would I know?

I assume that because I am only crying non-stop that I must be at least somewhat okay, since that seems like a reasonable response to the news that a loved one may only have a few months left to live. If I was rolling around on the ground or trying to light myself on fire, I would know that I was definitely NOT okay. Those are not reasonable responses to this news, to this circumstance. However, I still don't feel "okay."

I am sad. Very, very sad. I feel like my heart is breaking. It isn't even that I am unable to say goodbye. I just don't want to. I still want her in my life. I wanted her to be at my wedding, I wanted her to see my children. (Even though she'd have to wait about ten years.)

I know these things aren't realistic. I have been by her side for most of this last year. I know what the reality is. I know she is declining steadily and has been for a long time. I see how tired she is, how hard it is to get a sentence out. I see that each word is formed with maximum effort and how each breath is so shallow...

I see it. But I don't want to say goodbye. Not yet.

I know that I have a religion. I love my religion. I believe in it...but I have no idea what happens when we die and it scares me that I don't know what to tell her. I have clung to the belief over the past few years, that no matter what happens to us, whatever it is, is not bad. I do believe that there is a force in the universe, something that we must return to after we pass. Do we see our dead relatives? I have no idea. I'd like to hope so, since I certainly like the idea. If it doesn't happen that way, I don't think I particularly mind that, either. (Though it does take a little bit of detachment to be okay with it.)

Of course, I can't say any of this to her. Even though I hate the movie and everything it stands for, Ricky Gervais' Invention of Lying may be half-right. In the movie, he tells his dying mother that she'll see all those loved ones that passed on before her. It is presented as a lie that he tells her to assuage her fear of death. Perhaps that IS what it is. Maybe it isn't. I really don't know. All I do know is that whatever happens is not bad. It can't be. I've experienced enough myself to know, to really feel, that something happens. We reunite with the force that made us or we get reincarnated in some fashion or we walk around in a bliss of

our own making...I have no idea.

Even with these feelings, I am still scared and I don't want her to leave me. I want her to be a part of my life for just even a few years more. See me get married, Gramma...see my children...please...

I know these things may not happen. I just always thought they would. Gram was such a FORCE...such a part of everyone's life. She raised her kids, other people's kids...saw them grow up and then raised those kids' kids, too. Can I have here there for my life events, too?

Maybe I want her there because I know how much she'd like to be there, herself. However, she is...so...tired. She may even be ready to let go. Do I want to ask her to hold on just to make me happy? Death is another part of life, I think...there is something holy there, something I don't understand fully. I can't ask her to stay around because I want her here. She needs to go at her time, when she is ready.

I sigh. None of this makes me feel better. That's not the point.

Am I okay? I have no idea.

Posted by Miss R at 1:44 PM No comments:

Labels: dying

Tuesday, December 1, 2009 Some Nights...

...are so bad, all you can do is cry. When frustration overwhelms you after hours of trying in vain to get your loved one comfortable and to sleep, all you can do is sit somewhere where no one can hear you and let it all out. Frustration leads to guilt, then to sadness. Cleaning and cooking all day, in addition to back pain, lack of sound sleep and general stress does not mix well with the late-night routine your loved one has somehow acquired.

Would that I could just get her comfortable and to sleep before 1 am and perhaps through the night till at least 9 or 10 without any interruptions. Both for her and for me...really. I am not just saying this for myself. She has been exhausted, depressed, and extremely needy all day long. Adequate sleep could perhaps fix that.

I wish these days didn't happen...days when you are sure that you simply cannot do it any more. Days where you can't stand to hear the sound of her cries that come literally every 60 seconds for something that she doesn't actually need or even remember once you come to her side after working on something else that she had just asked you do a minute prior. Nights where you don't even want to go near her door because you know you will have to do something crazy like move toes or move the sheet a literal half-an-inch in order to make her happy until she calls for you again in 30 seconds after you've already laid down and then asks you to cover her mouth with the blanket because her mouth opens during the night and gets all dry but you can't of course because she may suffocate since she doesn't get a lot of deep breaths in anyway but she insists and you have to come up with increasingly creative reasons not to do the crazy things she is asking you to and you can't say no to her because hey, let's face it, this is your Grandmother, the lady that raised you half your life and all you want is for her to be happy and comfortable but no matter what you do you know you can't because not only do her crazy demands never actually do any good or even make her happy, you cannot really control someone's happiness and then it is just all too much again.

But I suppose that if we didn't have these days we would never appreciate the good ones. The ones where you get to laugh with her and watch Pride & Prejudice again and take her shopping or to a restaurant with the best quiche in town. The ones where you feel so lucky to be able to spend this time with her, knowing that others may regret the time they did NOT spend. Then, with this perspective, it becomes slightly more bearable.

Posted by Miss R at 11:38 PM No comments:

Labels: bad days, nights

Monday, November 23, 2009 A Trip To The ER And Then Some

Well, after two or three days of battling very high blood pressure, I finally decided to take Ms. J to the hospital. I let her decide whether to travel via ambulance or Yukon, and she chose the latter. So, I loaded her up with a bit of help from my mother, and took her in. We were admitted right away, which was nice, but we ended up in the ER till about 4 a.m. They admitted her because of her--ahem--constipation and her high blood pressure. I stayed with her as they got her a little situated, but she was so upset and so tired. I just couldn't bear to leave her. She was so emotional from lack of sleep and I think from also being so frightened at the general situation. I told her I'd stay with her for as long as she wanted me to after she looked up at me from the hospital bed with such worry in her eyes. I haven't felt such anguish in a while. Sure, I've been stressed with all of this, but seeing such acute fear in her just tore my heart in half. She was so weak and stiff that she couldn't press the call button on her own. And with the Lactolase working on her, she was having to call the nurses about every 2 minutes. (If anyone has had experience with that stuff, you know that it takes about 30 minutes to work. Well, with my grandmother, it took about 4 hours, And when it works...it...works.) I talked with the CNA and we rigged the button with an EKG sticker so she could feel it. I tried in vain to calm her and get her to stop crying for a while longer, but finally her tiredness overcame her and she started to relax. I tucked her in and decided to head back home (a 30 minute drive) to get the toiletries, robes, etc., that she requested. On the way, I realized I was much more tired myself than I had realized. I suppose several nights of limited or no sleep will do that. Still, I'm lucky that my absent-minded reveries didn't land me in a ditch, and that I didn't run out of gas. I had been on E for the whole trip and completely forgot to fill up before I left town.

As I drove, I made several calls to friends and family to let them know what was going on, and arranged for people to go up and spend time with her. I had to...I kept seeing her fearful, scared face, and thought about how stressed and frightened she probably was. What if the nurses didn't get to her in time and she choked or something? I have lost one grandparent to a situation like that before. Never again.

Anyway, my dear, wonderful mother (who has been so amazing during all of this) went up and sat with Ms. J until another friend arrived, who was then followed by my aunt and my grandmother's caregiver. After that, my formerly estranged cousin showed up and fed Ms. J some dinner. Meanwhile, I was fielding calls from more friends and family and attempting to catch some zzz's. I was able to get a few hours in, but the whole time I had stressful and scary dreams about things spiraling out of control. It wasn't good. When I awoke, I realized my mother had been there the whole time, fielding more calls and hoping to help me out when I finally came 'round. She's so awesome.

I am so blessed. Really, I am. I think my grandmother is starting to realize that she is, too.

I finally made it back to town, after having deliriously packed several bags of things into the Yukon. I'm notoriously bad at accurately packing suitcases, and almost always pack more than I need. (You just never know what you might want on hand!) By the time I got back to the hospital, Ms. J was out like a light and sleeping peacefully. I taped up some pictures of family to the wall and brought my cousin's flowers so that she might enjoy them before they wilted completely.

Now, I am tossing back a glass of wine, half a chocolate bar, and watching a Gossip Girl. My kitty made the trip in to my mother's with me, where we will stay until Ms. J is out of the hospital. It's only a few blocks away, which is highly convenient. Tomorrow I hope to get to the hospital around 9 or so. For now...I must sleep.

Oh, and did I mention that the hospital has lost my grandmother's wheelchair? Yeah. Posted by Miss R at 9:04 PM No comments: