I AM NOT ABANDONING YOU, BUT YOU HAVE CHANGED

A Thesis submitted to the College of Arts
of Kent State University in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts.

by
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INTRODUCTION

*I Am Not Abandoning You, but You Have Changed* (fig. 1) was my Master of Fine Arts Thesis Exhibition that used my lived experiences related to my gender and sexuality. By visually exploring my sense of identity(s) and place that utilizes narrative formats and the creation of personas to portray these lived experiences. Viewers would also become immersed within the environment and landscape created within the gallery space to project their own lived experiences to create a dialogue between the two. The works within *I Am Not Abandoning You, but You Have Changed* were created from processes and materials within printmedia and drawing.

In the words of filmmaker, writer, literary theorist, Trinh T. Minh-ha, “I am a stranger to myself and a stranger now in a strange land.” Minh-ha’s *Elsewhere, Within Here*, examines the complexities of nation and borders within the context of pre- and post- 9/11, home and exile, immigration and the boundaries created not only by these events but of interactions and displacement created by interaction with euro-centric societies, in the United States of America. Trinh unpacks theme of home, identity, and place using cultural meaning and relevance by defining and re-defining boundaries specifically in material and immaterial ways that manifest within, outside and physically of ones’ own body and the effects that incur from existing and living within the elsewhere, in-between.

As I transition between two genders and develop more masculine traits, my consciousness becomes dysphoric. I am disconnected, emotionally and physically from home and present. Struggle is internal and external with gender, as well as place. I am a stranger to the flat land of Northeastern Ohio, yet when I return to the Kentucky mountains, I feel like a
foreigner. Today I reside in my body, my mind and soul it continues to move through boundaries tangible and intangible.

I was born Sunday, July 1st, 1990 to Jennifer Faye Hamilton-Kirk and John Frelin Howell. I am a child of the mountains, a daughter to a coalminer and struggling mother, and the young sibling nuisance to my sister, and a granddaughter to two loving grandparents.¹ To walk down a mountainside and the hollow (holler) is commonplace. I learned quickly that the abusive actions that would occur in the house I grew up wouldn’t be publicized yet people in the holler knew what happened behind our closed doors because they to generally shared similar lifestyles as my family. This lack of communication and awareness created a normalization of marriage, sexuality, gender, religion, health, race, education, and politics within the holler.²

My art practice addresses sexuality and gender through my personal experiences, the lived experiences of youth and early adulthood in Central Appalachia and Eastern Kentucky. Videos, photographs, books, and journals for me are records, a moment that is verified because it has a type of materiality that also holds a preciousness, because of the connection to memory, a time; nostalgia to a past/time that we seek to recreate – that feeling of complacency.³ I have lost these photographs and videos from floods, fires and by them becoming outdated forms of technology and not able to withstand the test of time. I would quickly move my fascination from those materials to stories of my family that was just spoken by simple exchange in conversation with me and specific family member. My imagination takes my memories, stories about other

¹ Recently, in present day. I feel displaced from being a child of the mountains. I struggle with my tense in language because these moments are both in the past and present.
² Recently, this has been described to me as “holler mentality” by cousin, who currently lives in the holler that I describe within my writing.
³ There is a VHS tape that captured my first days as an infant. I hold this tape as validation for my existence and proof that I am the child for Jennifer Hamilton-Kirk and John Howell. There have been days that I question my legitimacy.
family members’ experiences and construes, exaggerates each of these components which resulted in the creation of these highly illustrative and romanticizations of my existence, history, and place within these mountains.

Due to these failures, I have learned how to exist, not only regarding my body, but to my gender, and to my mind. I found alternative ways of thinking and observing the world around me. I understand the necessity of creativity and problem-solving. I can be critical and constructive with art and society because my failures have continuous and compounding – like layers to a cake. My failures have aided in my understanding of the gray, that life, in general, is not black and white. Our actions, our thoughts, our projections are not fundamentally right or wrong. They are built on our experiences, our families’ experiences, politics, race, and identity. Fused and interweaved together are the amalgamations of the past, the concerns of the present and the hope for the future. It blends and bleeds together, it is the gray, it is the in-between.4 My failures succeed in my ability to exist within what Trinh calls the “elsewhere, within.”

I grew up a failure of the social constructs of the holler because I failed as a girl. I didn’t conform to gendered binary. I fail my sex and abandoning my responsibilities to motherhood. I fail my sexuality because I am not committed in my attraction to the opposite sex. I am a failure of not only of holler mentality but that of the hegemonic heteronormative narrative that has and is structured throughout the U.S. As children, our experiences are unique, they’re strange, off and odd, and through policing and training children, they then become fixed into the heteronormative.5 If we are normally this, then we at a young age would not need to have these specific ideologies placed. This experience of growing up queer and learning lessons in humility,

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limitation, awkwardness and isolation, and what theorist and author Kathryn Bond Stockton called “growing sideways.”6 I Am Not Abandoning You, but You Have Changed exhibition, is an exploration of moments that can be described as “growing sideways”, or my queer experience of growing up.

This exhibition explores “growing sideways” and separating myself into multiple selves. I am rooted within two main figures, Illy and Nel. My life and experiences are separated by the sex-based binary (male and female) and the gendered traits of masculinity or femininity. This divide has created several internal struggles and fallacies of my identity, body, and place. As I continually walk my current path of transitioning, I have become aware of moments in my past that now seem unique and different from others that grew up in the Appalachian Mountains that identify with their cisgender and heteronormative upbringing. These tendencies to merge the two factions into one, categorizing and compartmentalizing them as one unit, as one being.

Forbidding myself the ability to grow. I placed restrictions on myself that would limit my social interactions, as well as exploring my natural limitations in my body and mind. I would continue to disregard my own well-being in gender and sexuality. I felt fixed and constricted making me feel impenetrable to the outside environmental and cultural factors had been detrimental and to a degree harmful to my well-being. I failed because my gendered identity is complexity to my physical body.

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6 “Growing Sideways” is addressed in Halberstam’s The Queer Art of Failure and utilized in Halberstam’s context. “Growing Sideways” is coined by Kathryn Bond Stockton and is explored in their book, The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century.
PERSONAS
Representations of Identity

Author, cultural theorist and feminist philosopher, Gloria Anzaldúa, speaks about how our identity is always in process – it is shaped consciously and unconsciously by the people and the world around us. For Anzaldúa, she is Chicana, she is woman, she is queer – she is all of these things at the same time, or be one more than others, vice versa. They are parts of her, but they aren’t the identifiers of her. My experiences are different, but recognizing and owning the multiple identities that I embody is similar. Since I am constructed from fallacies and live within borders, both physical and psychological; I am more than one self, more than one culture. I am American, I am Appalachian, I am female, I am gender nonconforming, and I am queer.7

Our identities are multilayered and are continually in progress, ever-changing, it is past and present – timeless.8 Yet, we continue to carry, merge, or even transition between these moments of progress. Not necessarily a regression, but as placeholders of sorts – we can ever not be, what we have already been.

*It was me, it is still me and it will be me.*

Identity is a narrative that can be linear, spatial, and is intangible.9 I visualize myself as something more than a corporeal substance(s). I portray the many sides of myself, the parts of me I appreciate, parts that I love, parts that I hate, and even parts that I desire to reject. The

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7 I currently still recognize myself as female because I am at a place that I don’t have the confidence in myself to recognize as male. I have lived 26 years as female and only a few months towards an idea of male. I am uncomfortable in this thought of choosing one, especially as male and the effects of that sex means within my society.
multiple of identities are personified and these personas are trying to coexist with one another, much like how I try to exist and cope with my history of abuse, poverty, family’s religious beliefs, and that of the differences within social interactions of the geographic regions that I have lived and visited through my life. These histories and experiences are factors that are woven and layered within my identity.

Creating personas to represent multiple versions of myself originally began as a daunting task and an isolating experience. Through research and insight, I looked at the drawings and prints made by internationally known, contemporary New York artist, Amy Cutler. Her subject matter derives from personal experiences or current political events. Opal’s Departure (fig.2), depicts a woman sitting on a barrel with bags and suitcases. Yet the woman’s head is detached and lays underneath her feet. Cutler utilizes a cheeky humor to her work that aids in keeping her work from being morbid or daunting. It rides a fine line in its depiction. Cutler also uses space around the figure to create a visual openness that allows the viewer to breathe. Cutler also leaves her work open to interpretation, there is a specific message but with vagueness in space, and limiting us to the pieces of a puzzle. Cutler creates these characters, are based on herself, prints like Opal’s Departure that the main figure’s head is displaced comes from her own anxieties that take over her mind, wishing she could just take her head off and move those anxieties from her body so she can perform tasks that her mind prevents her from accomplishing.

I Am Not Abandoning You but You Have Changed, focuses on two personas, Ily which is the shortness of my birth name Cec(Ily). Ily is also the dearest term to hear from those significant to me. Words that we desire to be communicated toward us. Wearing a house on her head

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implies a need for stability, a need for safety, and a need to belong. Nel is a persona that represents the masculine form of myself. His name is a nickname of my self-given name, Nelvin. Both Ily and Nel are an essential part of me their existence separates my genderqueer into the binary form (feminine and masculine). Ily and Nel’s interactions follow similar experiences and depictions of siblings’ relationship, which poignantly explains the notion of two halves of the same self. Within the large prints in *I Am Not Abandoning You but You Have Changed* exhibition, Ily and Nel’s interactions are limited. Ily and Nel do make any physical contact except for *Family Portrait* (fig.3). Ily’s hands are placed on Nel’s shoulders, yet it doesn’t look natural, it looks staged; a forced action. This suggests that a level or awkwardness or foreignness of interacting by touch. Their portrayal in most pieces have a feeling of isolation and of loneliness, yet together they attempt to battle boredom, or more importantly “stillness”, that of complacency, lack of growth, or to be stuck/bound in place (literally and/or figuratively.)

Several prints in *I Am Not Abandoning You, but You Have Changed*, such as *Dress Up* (fig.4) and *Radio Flyer* (fig.5), were drawn as 7x10 inches graphite sketches. I then scanned these drawings at a high resolution, so I then could print them at a larger scale (roughly 30x40 inches) on Arches Cover paper. The color components of these prints were screenprinted as flat shapes to push certain features and to prioritize specific areas of the prints. By utilizing both the analog and digital technologies of print I have created a relationship between these two defined processes that I correlate being the gender binary. This use and layering both digital and analog processes are replicates of my own physical body being layered with being male and female.

*Dress Up*, Nel and Ily participate in a common game of exchanging clothes, to wear each other’s identity. *Dress Up* is simple yet effective in the idea of dressing up, the creation of this visual depicts the play of gender roles. At a young age, the societal constructs of gender roles
that benefit the heteronormative are inscribed into us. As a child, we are to fit in one (masculine) or the other (feminine) but those traits must correlate to our gender- which gets decided by what genitals we are born with. Currently, I am re-learning and experiencing the difference in gender roles in social settings. This process placed me back into a teenage mentality of observing and learning. I become more aware of the restrictions placed on roles, more so that of femininity, for Nel to wear a dress brings up specific strength and a contradiction to the belief that dresses are for girls, and what really defines something as being “feminine.”

Their interaction shows the inquisitive nature and natural curiosity in exploring one’s appearance, or simply their exploration of identity. *Dress* Up suggests a level of comfort between the two personas and a subtle conversation using simply through body language. Nel lifts the dress up, but only enough that he doesn’t disclose his sex, but this gesture is a light nod to the act of curtsying. A formal gesturing, specific to women, especially to young girls and married women – a sigh of difference. Ily’s gesture of holding the straps of the suspenders away from the body and outwardly is a masculine performance – an assertion of power and confidence.

The viewer will recognize either consciously or subconsciously that Nel and Ily to some extent have been taught or observed these specific heteronormative actions within the place that they exist in. Since they are exchanging not only their clothing but specified gender roles, their interactions become in-between of the gender binary.11 In addition to her house head, she is wearing Nel’s mask. This is to signify the awareness of both persona’s acknowledgment of their face – central in the expression of emotion and that in which we all connect with so easily. Nel understands that his mask, is truly a mask, a façade to hide his true self since he is aware enough

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and able to freely remove his mask. Nel’s face though isn’t clear to the viewers due to my lack of
knowing what my face would have looked like as a child. I want to portray as much honesty and
vulnerability to the viewers as possible. Ily fundamentally recognizes her house head as her face,
not able to distinguish it from her true human face that hides underneath the house. As much as
her house is a home is it also a trap, an enclosed space that can’t be left and must be forced to
grow in fixed space.

Radio Flyer created in the same manner as Dress Up, isn’t about the placement and
experimenting with gender roles. It is a visual interpretation of the burden of being both, “boy”
and “girl.” There are days and even moments within my day that I will feel more of one gender
than the other. I remain frustrated, exhausted and saddened when my physical appearance that I
visually project to society isn’t seen, recognized, or gets acknowledged by either my self-given
name, preferred pronouns or actions that aren’t Cecily’s mannerisms/gestures. The smallest
micro-aggression against my gender is painful and as I continue to learn and experience the
world as this new part of my identity. I depend on my other self (Ily) quite often for strength,
stubbornness to keep moving along, to live day by day.

Radio Flyer portrays this burden of both genders through gesture, and once again
interaction between Nel and Ily. Neither need to talk to each other, to understand the severity of
stress occurred(ing) to Nel. Ily relentlessly continues to pull the wagon. Refusing to leave Nel
behind. Nel has his face covered by his hands. Nel is physically able to move due to him being
overwhelmed with anxiety and sadness. He relies on Ily and the Radio flyer wagon to move him.
Which requires for the Ily to have a level of motivation and determination to move this non-
battery powered vehicle. Ily’s posture and placement of her foot is rooted in place demonstrating
her power and strength. Pushing herself to the limit by her exertion and the placement of her upper torso being far over to the right of her feet’s location.

Nel and Ily do not represent society’s beliefs of its’ placements of personal traits within masculine and feminine. Nel is openly sensitive, delicate and emotional; traits typically reserved as being feminine. Nel in *Radio Flyer* is vulnerable, his pose leaves him open to the environment. He is huddled together, as if he may fall apart or become liquid. I grew up in a matriarchal family, it fostered women to be independent, vocal and stubborn (there are contradictions that exist within this mentality). Men were to be disciplined and orderly; not quite vocal or too opinionated in topics of domesticity, family, and community involvement. Men and women, both were not too distraught and to cry; this was weakness of men, and not only was it a weakness for women but it was also not beautiful. I place my subtle nature, instability, sadness is placed within the masculine.
Figure 1

*I Am Not Abandoning You, but You Have Changed Exhibition*

2017

Digital and screenprint prints, book, video with audio projection, and moving panorama structure

Crawford Gallery in the Center for Visual Arts, Kent Ohio
Figure 2
Amy Cutler

*Opal’s Departure*

2011

Lithograph in colors on Fabriano Artistico Hot Press white paper
Figure 3

*Family Portrait*

2017

Large format print, screenprint onto Arches Cover paper

44”x30”
Figure 4

*Dress Up*

2017

Large format print, screenprint onto Arches Cover paper

44”x30”
Figure 5

*Radio Flyer*

2017

Large format print, screenprint onto Arches Cover paper

30x44”
Identity is being created consciously and unconsciously, a process that doesn’t stop, and our “self” continually interacts with different communities and worlds. Because of this, my portrayal of the narrative constantly changes, it is a direct but realistic representation of my experiences, body, and soul. Not only am I queer and transgender, I am also gender-nonconforming, that my existence is an “in-betweenness” state that occurs in the physical realm (outside of my body and my body, itself), mental realm (inside my body and soul), as well within language (visual, written or oral).

In a recent visit to New York, I visited the International Center of Photography, that had an exhibition titled Public, Private, Secret. This exhibition wasn’t trying to define the line between public and private, instead, it was implying that the line no longer exists. The works of art in the exhibition range from the 1800’s to 2016. The works of art were from artist like Nan Goldin, Weegee, Nancy Burson, as well as celebrities such as Kim Kardashian and Phil Collins. Public, Private, Secret encapsulate the medium of photography, videos, film, recorded performances, and in-time live feeds from social media sites like Twitter and Instagram.

I gravitated to this room, secluded to the side that had a row of seating that came from the wall. Across was a video created by internationally known, contemporary New York artist Shelly

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14 Kent State University’s Center for Visual Art offers a course that allows students to travel to New York every semester for roughly a week. A lot of shows and housing is provided for students enrolled in the course.
Silver titled *What I’m Looking For* (fig.6). This video was fifteen minutes in duration, and I felt fixated to stay and watch it to its completion. *What I’m Looking For*, is a compilation of photographs that narrates in a documentary format. A woman desiring to photograph moments of intimacy with strangers. Utilizing a dating site, Silver creates a profile to meet people to photograph them in “revealing” moments to whatever they defined as revealing.\(^\text{16}\)

*What I’m Looking For* holds an honesty with the viewer during its exploration in revealing moments of intimacy. The voiceover by Katrin Sigudardottir is humorous, confident, demanding and vague within moments of the video. Silver would become defiant with some on people was photographed. Specifically, when they would demand on what should be photographed which may be due to control that she desires in the video.\(^\text{17}\) *What I’m Looking For* creates a space of comfort with the viewer by its informal and personable approach to storytelling. The video does have moments of intimacy but the conversation doesn’t change in tone. I felt connected with her, this woman on a mission of understanding and want to expose moments of intimacy. Silver, “wanting control, seeing the same movements over and over, I want time to be liquid, flowing forward and back, and then to stop.”

*Gendered* (fig.7), uses video and bookmaking as a pair, I created a dialogue within language that is written and spoken. The book component, *Gender Story* (fig.8) was manifested within the first months that I became aware and acknowledge that I was transgender. During this time and before the creation of Nel’s person, I could not connect to either the female or male

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figures that I would draw. My mentality had begun to shift between the binary. I didn’t feel either male or female. I felt that I couldn’t portray myself with one without the other.

I left the figure and pursued a form of abstraction by creating atmospheric visuals and creating substance through text. Gender Story is a dos-à-dos styled book, that holds two stories. They are back to back but share the same spine. The body of this body reflects my own physical body, I am separated mentality, yet I exist in one body, this body. Two stories, both an experience with gender, lived experience depicted in a stream of consciousness style that starts from my infancy to my current state in adulthood.

The background of the pages were once large monotypes, created solely from my emotional reactions to inner turmoil for the changes created internally and externally. All prior to me beginning the transitioning process using testosterone as well as reflecting on my past experiences. I felt were crucial in the decisions I made to survive and to exist. These monotypes originally 22x30 inches on hosho paper, would be torn into smaller prints that would extenuate the abstraction. It is also to reference a correlation between the fluid of space, time, and events because they are interconnected and exists within each other, neither element ever dissipates or disappear.

The text screenprinted on the pages. Each fold describes a year of my life. They encompass internal dialogue on the left page that short and honest that spoke of my stability. The right side of the page gave you a year. It was also separated by sayings, responses, and conversation that I had at the top of the page, while the bottom I reserved as a reflection of that year, some held bitterness, a melancholic language with some level of regret and sorrow.
Gender Story isn’t fully legible; some may say it isn’t at all. Living is hard, growing up in a space of restrictions and limitation is difficult and suffocating to ones’ soul. I continually lived in a mental miasma, never clear, nothing fully transparent or fully understood. I had to instill within myself the ability to push forward, to find glimmers, not of hope but of the tangible. If I made this journey easy for the viewer that would be a disservice not only to my experiences but to them on the visual honesty of struggle. Many individuals are well accustomed in some form of convenience and gratification. Some viewers may only give this book a quick glance. They may not see the journey and exploration of this text worth the investment. That reaction is just as important than someone who would continue attempting to differentiate the text from the background. Both actions suggest a relation of struggle and define our willingness.

The second element of Gendered is the animation that is projected on the exhibition wall. This video projected every page from both sections of Gender Story. The video starts with the Cecily Brooke: A Gender Story, every page before stitching them together, a slight pause at the end using just a short amount of black space of frames, before continuing to Nelvin Brandon: A Gender Story that follows the same narrative format.

The book’s placement was in front of the projected video created a confrontation for the viewer. There becomes an awareness between the projection and the physical book that the expression occurs with a non-expression created by the viewers own consciousness. Due to the moving images being the pages of the book as well as the scale of the projection was larger than the viewer. This was to imitate the nature of one facing their own mental thoughts. The audio

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narrates and defines the space. It became a whisper, a voice that became constant within the experience of the space, like intrusive thoughts that occur due to anxiety.

*React, Dispute, Resolve* (fig.9) was a new exploration in utilizing narrative, creating a structure called a “crankie” due to having to physically crank the handles for the images to move. A crankie is also known as a moving panorama, an invention created as a form of storytelling. Storytellers would turn the handle so the scroll would move, this would animate the images, and the story would begin to unfold along with the storytellers’ theatrics. Crankies were the analog form of its successor; digital animation.

*React, Dispute, Resolve* captures specific actions between Ily and Nel similar in the notion of snapshots. They are not completed images in regard to visually creating space or placement. Their actions are not constrained within the confines of the of the paper, just of the physical structure. Unlike *Dress Up* and *Radio Flyer*, the drawing elements of *React, Dispute, Resolve* are crayon drawings that had been exposed to a screen and printed using the same base of gray with slight modification in its transparency, used in the text in *Gender Story*. By using similar or same materials is a succinct way to connect the works within *I Am Not Abandoning You, but You Have Changed*.

I explore Nel and Ily’s relationship by making them older, roughly set in their teenage years. Ily and Nel continue to learn about placement within the binary gender roles throughout different scenarios depicted in *React, Dispute, Resolve*. One image of the scroll illustrates them square dancing. This is a reference to my time when in my early years of high school, it was a requirement to take a course for appreciation and teaching of practices within the region’s culture. Square dancing is a group dance with the participants in a two - partner group, with a caller; someone that calls for the next change formation of the dance.
In this moment, there isn’t a group of other individuals as they dance, only the two of them. They continue to take on the burden of existing alone with each other. Their dance leaves open space for more participants yet it is still only them. They continue to know or be aware of certain social constructs. Their ability for self-reliance to learn, to and play and to interact within their space is inspiring. Since in this case, they refuse to wait or expect someone or something to be the caller to instruct to perform the next move in the dance this is a reflection on my reality of issues on expectations to follow specific hegemonic standards of discipline as a citizen.

Nel and Ily are not impenetrable from aligning to the typical association of masculine and feminine traits. Nel is the leader in the dance, a sign of dominance since he holds the direction and control in their dance. As the dance term in square dancing suggests, he will “promenade her home.” Ily holds her pose and becomes second in the dance, the submissive individual who will follow and not lead. There had been a shift in Ily’s mentally since her adolescence, especially to compare both to younger selves in *Dress Up* and *Radio Flyer*.

Gender is disciplined as we age and grow, even the most resilient of people will have tendencies or conform to some heteronormative constructs. This is true to my own lived experiences, even now as I transition. I catch myself thinking, “do I look enough of a man, today? Is it still appropriate to smile at people as I walk past them? If I start a conversation with someone that is cisgender as female, does that have a new implication? Should I change the way I interact with those who do not know me before I was Nelvin?” Questioning one’s actions and interactions even those that are subtle in nature displays the strength and severity of the heteronormative constructs, even in something such as dancing.
Figure 6

Shelly Silver

*What I’m Looking For*

2004

Projected video with audio
Figure 6

*Cecily Brooke: A Gender Story*

2017

6x16” page detail, monotype with screenprinted text
Figure 7

*Gendered*

2017

6x8” book with video projection and audio
Figure 8

React, Dispute, Resolve

2017

16x24” screenprinted image on hosho paper in a moving panorama box
PLACE

Experience within a Space

When I refer to place, I am speaking about Eastern Kentucky, the holler I grew up in that resides in the Appalachian Mountains. Place is more than a location, it is built with history, holds my experiences, and enforces my cultural upbringing.19 This place is difficult for me to write about, while I write, I find myself marking out and revising these words and sentences. Place is a subject I have known the longest and have familiarity with due to my experiences living in those Mountains.

The treatment of I Am Not Abandoning You, but You Have Changed exhibition space was influenced by internationally known, contemporary Switzerland artist Pipilotti Rist. The New Museum in New York held an exhibition of Pipilotti Rist’s works throughout the decades, titled Pixel Forest. Each floor of the New Museum was a different installation, a different type of environment that made the viewers immersed within the arts’ space. Rist’s created a new installation space specifically for the New Museum. Located on the fourth floor, 4th Floor to Mildness is a space that is only illuminated by the projected screens in the room. Walls painted a dark tone, the floor covered in an organically shaped carpet. On top of the carpet stood single and double beds. The video is split into two screens of similar amoeba shapes as the carpet and is attached to the ceiling, and audio plays throughout the space.

There is a calming effect within the space, it is foreign but the materials such as the beds are familiar and inviting. The space gives you the choice to interact, to sit, or lay on top of a bed. Unguarded and vulnerable within a public space to take in visuals and auditory; an overload on

the senses. Your attention set on the projections, it becomes almost a hypnotic state that for me and my experience in this space was relaxing to a point of drifting off to sleep. It was an environment that gave its viewers pockets of privacy and the ability to shut off other areas of our life, such as phones, social commitments, responsibilities that we must do. A rest for the mind. I Am Not Abandoning You, but You Have Change took this notion of privacy, intimacy, and comfort to create not just installation pieces but to build an environment that would be fitting to producing a sense of place.

Art critic, activist, writer, and curator Lucy Lippard talks about landscape being gendered, Lippard states “gender affects our experience of the four walls we return to as well as our experiences of the “outside world,” defined by mobility or lack thereof, as well as by boundaries.” Lippard’s Lure of the Local: Sense of Place in a Multicentered Society encompasses the history, geography, contemporary art and interrelates them with cultural meaning and contextualizes the notion of place and our desire for belonging. Lippard’s ability to differentiate the differences in place, landscape, and home connects with my exploration within these words and my own connection to place and to the land.

I was shaped by the land, by the mountains that my family’s double-wide sat on top. My family’s well-being was provided by the mountains. Yet, I find myself lately struggling with calling my Kentucky home, a place. That place becomes more distant yet my attraction and desire for belonging continues through its landscape. When I think of home or just the sense of place. I always return to the past, to a specific time and with specific figures; my Nanny and

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21 My father was a coal miner. He would go underground and extract coal for nearly two decades before quitting due to a mining accident.
Pawpaw.\textsuperscript{22} Since their passing my feelings of “sense of place” had diminished and I struggle in the search for peace within the landscape; their home, garden, and trees in their front and back yard. Land and environments are not permanent, they change, either naturally or by force from humans. Their home and landscape they created became remnants of our shared time and existence together. The home burned to ashes, the landscape would then be split into separate properties by their children, which eventually all plots were bought by my mother. The landscape manipulated, flatten and removed of all its previous features.\textsuperscript{23}

Lippard states, “the incomplete self longs for the fragments to be brought together. This can’t be done without a context, a place.” As discussed in prior sections I have a multivalent identity. A multitude of layers and facets that create me; Nelvin Cecil Howell. Each of those identifiers seeks a sense of unity. I have yet to find “a place” that creates this unity; a sort of peace or union. I find that certain locations bring forward specific parts of my “self.”\textsuperscript{24} I am always me, in the sense of what encompasses me. I am always Appalachian, queer, female, non-binary in gender. Yet when I visit Eastern Kentucky, I am more Appalachian and female. As I currently reside in Northeastern Ohio, I am more queer, non-binary in gender, and then female. This is how I feel in my actions, manners, and interactions with those around me. Place and its inhabitants alter our actions and how we perceive our space and body. I am skeptical of ever finding a place that will complete my incomplete self.

\textsuperscript{22} I grew up in an abusive household and found safety and stability with my maternal grandparents. They would sadly pass in the mid-late 1990’s. I would not get to have at least a decade with them.

\textsuperscript{23} My mother purchased the separated plots from her sisters. My father then re-scaped the land and removed the trees that had been rooted in that space for several decades. It no longer had any features that would tell its age and history.

I find myself in the landscapes that surround me. *Mirrored* (fig.10) and *Home in the Mountains* (fig.11) exist together in the same narrative and space. They hold a conversation between them and viewers will notice the difference between these two landscapes but will find a sense of place between their similarities. *I Am Not Abandoning You but You Have Changed* exhibition walls were treated to redefine the space. I wanted to immerse the viewers within this space by creating landscapes from my history that I recognize as being a part of my identity.25

Minh-ha conveys that “In the middle where possibility is boundless. Gray is composed of multiplicity. When the two can’t be distinguished.” The making majority of the works being black and white is to represent the assumption of something being this or that, there is no option for an in-between. By utilizing gray for its “multiplicity” in the landscape (wall drawing installation), it creates a visual of the in-between, that has a serious tone yet emotional context within the mark-making. *Mirrored* and *Home in the Mountains* illustrates a trauma that doesn’t need to be replicated with literal representation to be treated as a fetish. It also holds a somber-like calm due to the use of scale, spatial flatness, and for space to have an absence of specifically controlled marks.

*Mirrored* is a wall drawn piece that is an amalgamation of my lived experiences that had been re-interpreted into nature, using elements from Central Appalachia. *Mirrored* is a not a realistic representation of my Appalachian home or roots. It served to create a sense of place, not only because of its resemblance in general of a landscape but of its arrangement in layering and the movement created in the trees that give them a “lively” appearance.

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Mirrored’s geographic terrain is visibly separated in layers, yet it still lacks a level of dimensionality and is flat. The roots of the trees can be seen, yet they aren’t rooted into the ground. Symbolizing my own struggles of place. I feel committed to any location I reside in. I continue to grow and be nurtured as a person, community member, student, friend, and partner. I don’t feel permanent, only temporary. If you would ask me, “what part of nature do you feel connected to or saw yourself as?” I would have in the past said a mountain but lately I can no longer relate as being a mountain. Maybe that has changed because I am no longer surrounded by any mountains or maybe I no longer feel “fixed” in the sense of the holler mentality. No longer restrained or confined, but fluid. The mountains are not well defined and the markings that do exist on these mountains are loose and drawn with compressed charcoal which is a temporary and non-fixed drawing material.

Home in the Mountains existed on the wall across from Mirrored and had similar treatment in drawing and mark making of the piece. Home in the Mountains trees have structure and their details are more defined and controlled in their marks. Home in the Mountains holds a more “real” representation and is an interpretation of Central Appalachia, yet Home in the Mountains isn’t a reflection of myself, it is more of a letter to myself.

This letter is a letter to my past and future self. If it were words, it would be an apology to my past for not recognizing moments that were beautiful and would be the short lived. I would tell myself to appreciate and hold on to that feeling that resembles nostalgia and love. Because life would become hell and at my lowest points I’ll wish to have something to help me float and cease that feeling asphyxiation from drowning. It is also a list of grievances to those that have hurt me, familiar as well as strangers have I yet to meet. They are also grievances to those I have hurt with my words, actions, and choices. It is a letter that does have some sliver of hope,
aspirations, and dreams of what my future will become but of what the past had given me to arrive to this point.

Overall, it isn’t a letter that holds any romantic notions of myself or place. It is a letter that holds a level of appreciation, the hope of what exists. What may exist for me in regards of home, place, and identity? It is an appreciation of the past, depicted as mountains. An acknowledgment that I am not alone in the desire of belonging to a place, hence the cluster of similar trees. A hope of my future represented by the charcoal drawn houses. They all may be temporary like the material used to draw them but there are multiple houses to be my home.

As much as I have failed, I have succeeded by being present and to continue existing as Nelvin Cecil Howell. Because some of my lived experiences have granted me joy, love, safety, support, and acceptance. This a visibility that I want to continue in my writings and with my artmaking practice because that visibility is what will continue to push forward my identity and create a sense of place not only for myself but to those that view my art, read writings, and to whatever other forms of dialogue that I create.

Figure 9

Pipilotti Rist

_4th Floor to Mildness_

2016

Whole room installation with beds, carpet, video projections, audio, and LED lighting
Figure 10

*Mirrored*

2017

10x20’ wall installation with latex paint and charcoal
Figure 11

*Home in the Mountains*

2017

10x15’ wall installation with latex paint and charcoal
REFERENCES


