NOISE OF EYELIDS:
THE PRESENCE OF ABSENCE

A thesis submitted to the
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by

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to acknowledge my thesis advisor, Gianna Commiteo, for her support and fresh insight in my studies towards my Master of Fine Art. The questions she presented to me about my work encouraged conceptual growth and a stronger visual expression than I thought capable of. Our studio visits were vibrant and positive experiences.

I am grateful to Darice Polo and Martin Ball for their valuable input, critical analysis and persistence for me to push the boundaries of my art, which I continue to do. They have been wonderful mentors to me since I began the graduate program.

I would also like to acknowledge the scholarly expertise of Dr. John-Michael Warner who helped me understand what it is that drives my art practice, as well as my thesis work. His compassion in our discussions of critical theory was invaluable.
The noise of eyelids is not silent. The opening and closing is a strike upon the plane of perception, as if it were an ocular frieze of the present tense. It is the residue of what one experiences, whether implied or actualized, an emotionally charged layer of response and retention. I combine phenomenology, the concept of subjective interpretation of an event, with visual marks of how dreams and images of loss can be iterated and inferred. These are my visual expressions of personal loss and the emotional residue that offer oneiric and meditative openings in the sepulchral landscape. The past tense can be ritualized, but in my explorations, I hope the viewer can share with me the idea of contextualizing that which is absent, yet present and itinerant in frequenting all of one’s senses.

I began my time in the graduate program at Kent State reflecting on how botanicals in an expired state can be a metaphor for loss or absence of a sacred space. When I started the body of work for my thesis, I strayed from much of the earlier explorations and the aesthetic of once known natural beauty. I used the grasses and flowers as stencils, which I activated with spray paint to leave the negative space of the botanicals. These were done outside in inclement weather, with wind and rain informing my control of the spray paint. In my later work, specifically for my candidacy review, I chose to use the inspiration from these, such as the indications of a former life of a leaf, flower or tall grass seen in eclipsed contour with the delicacy spray paint could afford, but with photograms. I wanted a little more of a photographic capture, with the artist’s hand less evident. I produced photograms in the darkroom using the same subject matter, dead grasses and flowers, with a slow gesture by moving these elements. I
then had them enlarged to 20” x 30” and then Xeroxed. With this Xerox, I transferred them to Stonehenge art paper with photo transfer medium, erasing parts and adding fanciful cursive handwriting, as an archived memory. With the element of life and death, I felt that this duality was less about the subject matter and more about how I see and create a space one can enter into, having he or she contextualize their own experiences. However, I wanted to embody the idea of the presence of absence, not illustrate it. This took me to my current thesis work.

I have utilized two processes in my thesis work, photograms and fumage. Photograms are a photographic technique in which one uses light to directly transfer an image onto light sensitive paper, eliminating the camera and negative. The three-dimensionality of the subject matter is captured onto the paper and is then developed. I used my hair as a subject, which I manipulated by gestural movements. I chose to use my hair, because of the implications and significance hair has in our culture: the lioness full with fringe, the loss with illness, age and genetics, a keepsake of babies and loved ones. The second process I used is fumage, a technique developed by the Surrealists in 1936. By holding a sheet of paper above an open candle flame, one can catch layers of carbon, which is sensitive and vulnerable on cold press paper. I can then blow away the carbon and continue to manipulate the surface with erasure and additional marks. These layers of soot are indicative of how I experience loss as a landscape in which I visit to interpret emotions.

The aspect of “nothingness” can be equally deceptive, as a depiction of “nothing” suggests that there was something there, but no longer is due to expiration, extirpation, or the fact that it never existed. To visually manifest a trace compels me to recognize such
significance in latent and sensuously archived material. What inspires me haunts and expresses that which is vagrant in mark making and touch explores the spatial relationship I have with the element of time, that which is present and that which is the future present tense, vetting and suspending these moments. The representation of absence intrigues me. To iterate something lost that can only I can recall, without using language, warrants introspection and allows an emptiness to fill in negative space. My thesis work is asking questions about how vestiges of emotional loss can be manifested visually and without maudlin sentimentality, which has the potential to erase emotion.

My visual art is a letter, be it the ocular silence I hear often, that in which the eye rests within a composition. Communication drives my art practice. My thesis exhibition is more about hope than despair. To refer to this in visual terms, I mention trace, that which outlines or implies lucidity. Emotional recall is usually fecund with color in content. I use black and white colors in my art, or nearly that in regards to the dark sepia of the fumage paintings, in order to have all viscera translated, without the distraction of hue. Black and white is a deliberate language. I eliminate the need to innately translate what one’s response is to a particular hue, giving a needed space for the viewer to assimilate and be present in regards to their own interpretation. ¹

Alluding to a solace one may find after a storm, my work has used natural templates such

as botanical and floral specimens. A landscape often reveals environmental and historical alluvium after heavy rains. For me, this symbolizes an agitation necessary in order to have calm and visual repose. Entering calm, one can enter quietness.

I suggest an overlapping of senses by using several processes and materials simultaneously. I use photographic paper, botanicals, hair and smoke as subject matter. Slight ambiguous movements create a ghost or phantom gestures of what has expired. In my imagination, a spectral image makes clear that which I feel is less effective in writing about emotional feelings of loss. The layers of images I perceive to be real rather than imagined allow me to authentically relay the infinitesimal riot of visual, aural, sonic and olfactory elements, which I experience. The residue of recall and subsequent indexical representation can be seen in nature, with alluvium, the particles of sand, soil, pebbles or tacit pools of water left from a moving stream or river.

Framing my images within phenomenology\(^2\), the study of what can be perceived as real within each individual in personal experience and actuality, has complexities for the viewer. How I have attempted to negotiate this is evident through my use of aesthetics to invite, but not complete, an experience. I lead the viewer into my own depiction of life events, implied or explicit, sensuously evocative, in order to for the viewer to feel enveloped in images through quieter mark making and a potential for inclusion, lending to meditation. The viewer can proceed with his or her perceptions of what can be present and still be invisible within their

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emotional iconography.

Jeffrey Todd Knight’s essay, "Invisible Ink: A Note on Ghost Images in Early Printed Books," talks about archival ghost images.

“Instead, I would like to make three brief methodological points specific to textual studies that, to my mind, emerge from this sort of evidence — evidence that is invisible, or “ghostly”, in that it points to books (or in this case, patterns of books) no longer physically present. Faint ink transfers and referentless contents lists, I imagine, make up only part of what is available in archives.”

I did not want to use images of ghosts as subject matter because I wanted a subtle effect of a spectral image to suggest presence once seen, a symbol of loss, instead of a literal interpretation. The soft erasure in the soot paintings could be read as an orb or uneven light source, whereas the sharper linear contours, scratched into the surface of the paper between boundaries of soft and hard, could be interpreted as being a loss of control over events which led to absence. This balance of mark making is important to my work because it acts as a threshold to a yielding, an immersion in an experience the viewer can interpret. I believe that silence speaks volumes, and in my visual expressions, I allow this quiet pause to convey time between looking and seeing.

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There are two pieces from my thesis exhibition that I feel strongly represent my process and execution of concept. The first one is *Chypre* (Figure 1.) This large drawing on paper has a quality of embodied loss with subtle marks made in delicate traces. It also has a sweeping, smooth waterfall like mark that symbolizes a catharsis. I referenced the surfaces of the moon’s seas, erroneously named because they hold no water, because for me these represent that which is seen, unseen and felt in a space where time has transcended the event of loss and its remaining trace. As the moon’s seas were perhaps strikes of a meteor, leaving an empty space or loss, the physical landscape appears to be interpreted as a body of water. This deceptive landscape has its place in the viewer’s perception, as I hoped to express this in *Chypre*. The work is titled as such because the word is French for Cyprus, the island thought to be the birthplace of Aphrodite, the goddess of love. This work is about love lost and found only again in imagination, blurring the lines and smoothing over pain with a mark similar to water, as in the waterfall traces I mentioned. Other works from my thesis exhibition have subject matter from a recollection of childhood imagination. One work, *Rasputin II*, (Figure 2.) includes a horse emerging from a barn on fire. The horse was an imaginary horse I owned and even named, Rasputin II. As it escapes from the barn, away from danger, it is safe within my imagination. Trauma and loss can influence the imagination of children, seeking sanctuary in imaginary friends and pets, but quite real to them at that time. The fumage work in my thesis show is large, 50” x 38” on 90 lb. Stonehenge paper, which is thick, but not as heavy as 300 lb. Arches cold press paper. I wanted a substantial weight of paper, but with a slight yield to pronounce sliced surfaces and smooth yield.
The second piece is a more austere representation of present absence, *Noise of Eyelids*, named for the entire thesis exhibition. (Figure 3.) This larger scale photogram is a blur of my hair, captured by a strong light source. The sinewy traces are similar to the fumage paintings, but have a cooler tone of black and white and a capture of actual subject matter using photography. The scale is larger than a standard, commercial photograph, thus eliminating any reference to an eight by ten portrait. In this scale, it becomes more of a space in which to enter. The reference of hair is universally recognized. The subject matter was moved slightly in the short exposure time, creating a subdued gesture. The calm it depicts is due to movement and a reference to wind or a cooling breeze.

My thesis exhibition has strengthened my connections to medium and how to explore with conceptual ideas within their boundaries. The seduction of a newly revealed medium and process can be one dimensional, if not fully parsed and absorbed into a practice initiating ideas as well as aesthetics. My thesis review has led me to other unexplored areas that I feel need to be illuminated as well, such as a more descriptive and pointed reference, however subtle I might portray this. To make art in which the viewer finds a contextual reference means I need to be mindful of direct references. I also desire more control over the images wrought from the mediums I am exploring, such as fumage and photograms. I would like to create my own stencils or matrix instead of using the whim of travelling carbon from a candle or a wisp captured in light in the darkroom. With this additional control, I have more to say in its dispersion.
My work continues to change and sharpen the edges of my ideas. My reticence regarding visual expression has been addressed and is moving towards a freer space. This transformation has been remarkable for me, having come from a place where aesthetics were offered little space for a conceptual backbone, a corollary perhaps of a romantic anachronistic compulsion. Having freedom in visual expression, one needs to lessen reins on medium specificity and allow that which is natural to emerge in transformation.

*Valerie Buynak*
Figure 1. *Chypre*, 2017, fumage, 48” x 34”
Figure 2. Rasputin II, 2017, fumage, 48” x 34”
Figure 3. *Noise of Eyelids*, 2017, photogram, 40” x 30”
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