If I forget you, it doesn't mean I didn't love you

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

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August 2017
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M.A., Kent State University, 2017

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LIST OF FIGURES</th>
<th>iv</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTERS</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. BACKGROUND TO THE INVESTIGATION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. ON UNDERSTANDING GRIEF</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. SERIES ONE</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. SERIES TWO</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. IF I FORGET YOU, IT DOESN’T MEAN I DIDN’T LOVE YOU</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Vase, 2015</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Eva Hesse. <em>One More Than One</em></td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. <em>You can’t be sure, in fact, when it’s really over</em> Installation View</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. <em>Stubbornly holding on to nothingness</em> Installation View</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. <em>Stubbornly holding on to nothingness</em> Detail</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. <em>I didn’t know what to do without you</em> Installation View</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. <em>I didn’t know what to do without you</em></td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. <em>Feelings we can never get back again</em> Installation View</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. <em>Feelings we can never get back again</em></td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. <em>If I forget you, it doesn’t mean I didn’t love you</em> Installation View 1</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Samuel Verplanck. 1760</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Locket. 1706</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. <em>If I forget you, it doesn’t mean I didn’t love you</em> Installation View 2</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. <em>A little of you, a little of me</em> Detail 1</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. <em>Once lost they can never be the same, never quite fit</em> Detail 1</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. <em>A residual sense of something</em> Detail 1</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. <em>A little of you, a little of me</em> Detail 2</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. <em>Once lost they can never be the same, never quite fit</em> Detail 2</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. <em>A residual sense of something</em> Detail 2</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. <em>A residual sense of something</em> Detail 3</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first and foremost like to thank Rachel Suzanne Smith for everything that she has done for me during my time at Kent State. Her hard work and dedication to this department has fostered an environment, which allowed me to learn about myself, both personally and as an artist, and grow in more ways than I could have imagined. Rachel has been a vital part to my success here at Kent State, and I am incredibly grateful to have her as a mentor. I would also like to thank Davin Ebanks. His thoughtful feedback and asking me questions to which we both did not know the answer encouraged me to push through into the unknown. Thank you to Janice Lessman-Moss for her attention to detail, process, and materiality. Her perspectives were incredibly beneficial during the making of my work. Thank you to Peter Christian Johnson for pushing me to realize as many ideas as possible and helping me distill out the ones that showed promise.

Many thanks to Zac or his friendship, support, and multitude of pep talks during the emotional roller coaster of my thesis year. To MDB, without whom I would have never imagined being capable of going to graduate school. Thank you to Sofia and Susan for coming in and helping the department by taking on classes and for their willingness to give feedback on my ideas and in progress work. To Kristi for her fabricational wizardry and encouragement, especially in the moments I needed it most. Thank you to Melis and Nelvin for all of their assistance and for reminding me that I do know how to write. I would also like to thank Kent State, especially the staff in the art office. Lisa and Linda have been so understanding and accommodating of all the changes during my time here. To all of you, and all those I forgot, thank you for being a part of my experience, I am humbled to be a part of this community.
INTRODUCTION

*If I forget you, it doesn’t mean I didn’t love you,* was created in response to researching and experiencing personal and societal mourning, recognizing the importance of community in the progression through grief. Death is as much a part of life as living. For those left behind, the grief felt after a loss can be debilitating. I have experienced an inordinate amount of loss, spanning from elderly relatives and friends, to classmates and teammates around my own age. My work stems from my experience with grief – both the intense, heavy mourning typically surrounding a death, as well as the confrontation and processing of the fading memories of that person.

BACKGROUND TO THE INVESTIGATION

There is a stark difference in the experience of a grandparent or great uncle passing than the death of a friend, especially in youth. Someone with a long life, while they may have regrets for how they lived, had the opportunity to have their desired experiences. While they themselves will ultimately have to confront the stages of death, their friends and family will be able to go through a time of preparatory grief, expressing the loss before it happens, which makes the process more bearable after the death.¹ Death brought

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¹ Kübler-Ross, Elizabeth, M.D. *On Death and Dying.* p 176
about by more traumatic means, like suicide or an accident\(^2\), “is so far beyond the everyday in its shocking, violent and crushing violation that our ‘psyches’ are wounded and we feel as if we have been physically, emotionally and spiritually attacked”\(^3\) by the loss. The departed have no chance to process their own mortality and their loved ones experience the despair felt with knowing that this person was unable to have all the experiences they wanted. The overbearing grief weighs down on the body and soul.

Seagar died sixteen days before my seventeenth birthday; he took his own life. He and I met on a mission trip, journeying to repair houses in low-income areas of West Virginia. Both of us passionate musicians, our personalities blended well and we spent the remainder of our free time on the trip together. Because we lived seventy miles away from each other and maintained an online relationship, it was hard for the people surrounding me to understand the extent that his death affected me. Without another person in my immediate community to share the mourning process, I learned to hide my grief in order to prevent awkward interactions with my peers. I became so used to hiding the pain that I buried, bringing the progression of my grief to a halt. Over the past ten years, my stifled grief for the death of my first love

\(^2\) The first time I attended a funeral for someone my own age, I was nine years old. Though not my first funeral, I had not experienced the loss of a peer before this. Kristen and I were teammates on a co-ed soccer team, outnumbered by the boys. She died in a crash involving a drunk driver. She and her cousin had taken off their seat belts, unbeknownst to her aunt who was driving at the time. I still have vivid memories surrounding her death and funeral, though most memories of our friendship have faded.

\(^3\) Mallon, Brenda. *Dying, death, and grief: working with adult bereavement*. p 49.
has compounded with other life events, causing unexpected bursts of emotion and hurt to push up to the surface.

It became more challenging for me to grieve and heal from each subsequent loss. I was stuck and could not overcome the fear and pain caused by watching loved ones fade away from Alzheimer’s, dementia, or other illnesses. Each death came with unbearable grief, as if it was compounding over time. As my grief remained a burden to be controlled, not processed, it maintained an undeniable presence in my artwork. One of the first completed pieces I made discussing loss, *Vase*, was created by a violent end to the original form. The purpose now removed, the missing pieces vital to function, it is a reflection of our own mortality and fragility.

Like the sense of absence within my work, I looked to other artists with work in similar themes. Much of Hesse’s work utilizes materials “imbued with a melancholic sense of loss.” Within her piece *One More Than One* the hollow spaces of this work allude to absence and sadness. Acknowledging the presence of mourning in my work sparked an obsessive research on loss and memory to break through to the root of my grief and its seemingly perpetual presence in my studio practice. This process of gaining better understanding was one of opening myself up, re-living the mourning that I was not able to complete in my youth.

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4 Figure 1
5 Ibid. p 115-116.
6 Figure 2
The frequency of and experience with death has declined in modern day. Life expectancies lengthened, fluctuating between thirty and forty years pre-nineteenth century and rising to nearly eighty years over the last two hundred years. Without seeing how a society experienced with grief copes, I would be unable to find the most effective way to process my own grief. I began to research the Victorian era, a time in the Western world in which death was far more frequent and grief was handled in a communally accepted series of behaviors. I compared the gathered information to trends today. Digesting this information, I was able to comprehend why we grieve the way we do. Reflecting on those grieving norms throughout history, I discovered that my halted mourning process partially stemmed from the taboo of talking about death in today’s Western society. Additionally, my lack of community support during this period coupled with the remorse and guilt I felt surrounding Seagar’s death created an internal barrier. By exposing myself and re-living this grief I was able to create this body of work, serving both to acknowledge Seagar’s importance in my life and to process and morn.

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7 Roser, Max. "Life Expectancy."
Grieving is a multifaceted process. While individual experiences are distinct, there are overarching trends, which place labels and standards upon each stage of mourning. Such trends are connected to both cultures and time periods, and adapt to fit within societal norms. Once the themes of loss and memory were identified as a common thread within my studio practice, the need to better understand the process of mourning through a historical perspective arose.

In the Victorian era, phases of mourning were established with accompanying statutes for behavior and dress. In Europe, the general rule was that a widow must mourn her spouse for twelve months, while colonial America extended the morning period to between eighteen months and two years.\(^8\) Mourning requirements were also different based on the relation of the bereaved to the deceased. Parents were mourned for a similar length as a husband, but children were mourned for less time, generally about nine months.\(^9\) Since most families had multiple children, and the probability of childhood death was high, mothers were expected to move on quickly for the sake of their families. If a mother spent too much time dwelling on the loss of a child, it could have negative effects on the rest of the family. Men

\(^8\) Brett, Mary. *Fashionable mourning jewelry, clothing & customs.* p 86.
\(^9\) Ibid. p 87.
experienced fewer stipulations during their bereavement periods, much due to their position as the figurehead of the family. The death of a wife only merited three months of mourning (though if desired, it could be continued up to a year) after which a man should find a suitable replacement for the mother of their children.  

The experience and customs tied to death, dying, and mourning have adapted to what we now experience in modern American society. In a nation that pushes for productivity, with many working longer than 40 hours a week, there is little value given to self-care and processing the loss of a loved one. According to the Fair Labor and Standards Act, put into place in 1938, there is no required payment for time not worked, including attending a funeral.  

For those who do not make enough money to be able to incur the loss of income, attending a funeral for family or close friend may not be possible. As of 2007, only 69% of private sector workers got paid funeral leave.  

In addition, there is no regulation in place for bereavement periods, though “two to three days of paid bereavement leave is the norm for most U.S. businesses.” Depending on the location of the funeral, that two to three day period might be consumed with planning and travel, not allowing significant time to process the loss. While certain companies are more lenient and understanding, 

10 Brett, Mary. Fashionable mourning jewelry, clothing & customs p 86.  
12 Tahminicioglu, Eve. “Worker’s bereavement benefits often fall short.”  
13 ibid  
14 Kel & Partners, a marketing firm in Massachusetts, and Legacy.com, an online obituary and condolences service, had employees interviewed as a part of this article. Each employee was allowed a full week of bereavement leave.
giving their employees a week of leave, grief does not follow a strict order of processes. Having no societal standards for mourning, we are now left largely to navigate on our own.

Phases of grief are further challenged when dealing with loss due to a suicide. Categorized as a traumatic loss, death by suicide shares similar grieving difficulties as other instances of sudden death, both natural and unnatural.\(^\text{15}\) Despite suicide ranking in the top ten causes of death in the United States,\(^\text{16}\) it is often sudden and unexpected. In addition to the lack of warning, the stigma surrounding mental illness and death by suicide can make it difficult to share grief. According to Brenda Mallon, author and professional counselor focusing on grief, “someone bereaved through suicide tends to experience greater self-blame, feelings of guilt and more self-questioning”\(^\text{17}\) than those who lose someone too less traumatic events. These feelings can be incapacitating and quite difficult to overcome, creating additional challenges to processing and overcoming grief.

SERIES ONE

My own mourning frequently forms as extreme grief, coming in tumultuous waves bearing down upon my soul, capable of making those around me uncomfortable and keep their distances. I experience a buildup of energy that becomes so overwhelming I feel the

\(^{15}\) Mallon, Brenda. Dying, death, and grief: working with adult bereavement. p 57
\(^{16}\) “National Center for Health Statistics: Leading Causes of Death.” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
\(^{17}\) Dying, death, and grief: working with adult bereavement. p 57
need to rid myself of it, resulting in an outburst. I intentionally isolate myself from others and attempt to purge from myself from this overload of negativity. In other moments, attempts are made to counteract my loss by surrounding myself with substitutions or replacements to fill the void, but they can never be the same. There is no going back. From this, series one is created.

As one way to process my grief, I set out to count the days since Seagar’s passing, coming to terms with the length of time. This passage of time and presence was expressed in You can’t be sure, in fact, when it’s really over, a physical and tactile timeline constructed out of pearls. The strand was completed using traditional pearl knotting techniques to create the ongoing passage of days. The first stage of the piece comprised of expressing the time that had past; one pearl knotted for each day since his passing. The second stage is an ongoing one of mindfully knotting a pearl to the strand each day after “catching up” to the present. In mourning jewelry, seed pearls were used to symbolize tears shed over the loss. Pearls are created when a grain of sand or bacteria enter the shell of an oyster. In order to defend itself from infection the mollusk builds up layers of calcium carbonate around the invader, eventually creating a pearl. Using a mix of grey and peacock colored ungraded pearls, colors which reference the Victorian period denoted as second mourning, I am able to quantify the days, and install the work in such a way that demonstrates a passage of time. Every day of grief is different.

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18 Figure 3
19 Brett, Mary. Fashionable mourning jewelry, clothing & customs p 148.
21 Brett, Mary. Fashionable mourning jewelry, clothing & customs p 87
Unlike the timeline given to the Victorian mourning process, this piece also references my seemingly never-ending process of mourning. Some days it may seem like the grief has subsided and the next it rears its head, coming back into my life and causing me to re-experience the whole process.

_Stubbornly holding on to nothingness_\(^{22}\) is comprised of copper forms set in steel to create a cage-like structure that surrounds the upper chest, shoulders, and back. Each form is created from pouring wax into a variety of molds that had been taken from the boulder marking Seagar’s grave. Once the wax replicas were made, a few were selected to melt a portion with a heat gun or the flame of the alcohol lamp in order to distort and obscure the forms. Seeing baby shoes and other childhood mementos preserved in layers of metal throughout my youth, I was able to learn about this process, called electroforming, during graduate school. This process was utilized to preserve my own mementos from Seagar’s grave. The electroformed copper pieces, left hollow once the wax is removed, are set in such a way that allows the viewer to see the imprint of the cast stone. The portions of the back act as a frame surrounding the open space left once the wax is removed.\(^{23}\) Each copper piece has a built in frame, which emphasizes the importance of what was once there and creates a curiosity to discover.

The objects are secured in mild steel prong settings, customized to fit snugly. A non-standard material for this otherwise fine jewelry technique, the material

\(^{22}\) Figure 4
\(^{23}\) Figure 5
properties and vocabulary of steel allows one to see it as long lasting, impervious, and the ultimate protection for the memorials in copper that the prongs clutch. It alludes to strength and industry, and adds a visually dark, gritty tone to the work, a modern day allusion to Victorian grief sensibility. The pieces are arranged in layers, the non-melted grave impressions closest to the body and the furthest from view, obscured by each additional layer which contain exponentially less information. The forms readily available to view are significantly altered, so much so that it is difficult to infer what is represented or memorialized, much as memories fade and mutate over time. Using a liver of sulfur patina, the outermost layers are left black, further obscuring the forms. Each regressing layer has patina removed, brightening the textures left by the boulder. The clearest iteration of the texture lies at the bottom layer, so it cannot be seen without the mindful investigation of the viewer.

Also referencing Victorian mourning, I didn’t know what to do without you is made up of a long, messy braid that wraps around the body, enveloping the figure in over nineteen pounds of hair. “As a material, human hair is a strong medium for creating sentimental significance, and it has therefore been an important material used particularly in sentimental jewelry.” I did not have any of Seagar’s hair to use, nor would my own hair be suitable for the amount I needed, so I imported Mongolian stallion tail from China. The replacement can never be quite as good as the original. This substitution for my own hair has a coarser, thicker texture and its

24 Figure 6
Scratchiness acts as an irritant to my skin. This material is predominantly used for cello and bass bows, a reference to Seagar’s musicianship. This material evokes this personal memory while also referencing my own hair’s similar color. When worn, it is challenging to see where my hair ends and the piece begins; my form is enveloped in this outpouring, which seemingly comes from myself. With loss there is often the urge to find security, sometimes latching on to something or someone that is similar in quality. Even so, there are marked differences. Whatever comfort should have been found while being enveloped by this piece is removed, making it more problematic and burdensome, much like the guilt and self-blaming phases of grief.

*Feelings we can never get back again* is comprised of cones, which emulate the unexpected outbursts of emotion that come from bottling up grief. While the other works in this series speak to traditional formats and materials of mourning and commemorative jewelry, this piece relies on form and materiality to express an upheaval of grief. Constructed in steel, the cones are welded together becoming a unified mass, each additional cone building off of and becoming one with the previous. Apex pointed inward, the widening forms transfer energy away from the body. When donned, one’s view is affected by the cage-like structure, isolating the wearer. Separation from the living makes it more challenging to face the reality of

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26 Figure 7
27 Figure 8
28 Figure 9
the loss.\textsuperscript{29} This piece enables the viewers to be witnesses to my own emotional spectacle, much like one might experience in the presence of grief. When all the works are viewed as a series,\textsuperscript{30} they express many of the highly emotional aspects of grief. Touching on confusion, stubbornness, outbursts, and overwhelming emotions, this series gives a visual representation to my personal experience. These works aim to constructively diminish my own feelings of guilt, shame, and remorse while processing the initial stages of mourning that I have been reliving.

SERIES TWO

A phase of the grieving process includes the realization that memories of the person are fading. While “accepting the loss is not a betrayal”\textsuperscript{31} of the departed, the loss of memories can call into question the meaning of life. If we forget those that die before us, what does that mean about them? What does that mean about us? These emotions raise new feelings of guilt, loss, and inner conflict.

Lockets are generally used to keep an image or object of importance close on a permanent basis. Throughout history lockets have been used to keep an image or object of importance, such as a loved one’s portrait\textsuperscript{32} or a lock of their hair,\textsuperscript{33} close to

\textsuperscript{29} Kübler-Ross, Elizabeth, M.D. \textit{On Death and Dying}. p 184
\textsuperscript{30} Figure 10
\textsuperscript{31} Mallon, Brenda. \textit{Dying, death, and grief: working with adult bereavement}. p 22.
\textsuperscript{32} Figure 11
\textsuperscript{33} Figure 12
the wearer. By creating a series of lockets, one viewing the work can understand that while it is possible to access the contents in the gallery setting, conceptually the jewelry is intended to be one’s private keepsake. Each work constructed in this series references that desire to protect meaningful mementos, but is ultimately designed with an opening or feature that allows for the removal or loss of items over a passage of time.

This series is fabricated out of sterling silver, which adds a preciousness of materiality. Each silver component is textured with eggshells, achieved through a process that involves using steel rollers to press them into the surface of the metal. Eggshell, a strong material only when it is in its original state, becomes a symbol of ephemerality. While created to nurture and protect a developing life, it loses its value once no longer in use. The shell eventually breaks down into its elemental form, as the human body does once it is no longer living. Notably, eggshell contains a comparable chemical make-up to pearls, tying back in the notion of tears and defense mechanisms in *You can’t be sure, in fact, when it’s really over* from series one.

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34 Figure 13
36 “Very early in the study of the shell, chemical analyses showed that it is composed of about 97% calcium carbonate.” Hunton, P. "Research on eggshell structure and quality: an historical overview."
37 Figure 3
Each locket has a matching exterior, a design based off of the modern casket. A rectangular format, each of the locket lids contain a center-formed piece framed with thick silver stock, creating a stepped down profile. Most of the volume of the lockets come from the back, the depth purposefully chosen based on the chosen mementos the piece is to contain. The chains are handcrafted using rectangular links and sheet, which echo the format of the locket. Each reflects loss and the finality of that loss, whether through materials that can fall out, such as in Once lost they can never be the same, never quite fit, or the act of losing over time, as in A residual sense of something.

A little of you, a little of me was the first locket displayed in the series. This piece contains a prong set fragment of shale trapping a tangled mass of my own hair. “Disembodied pieces of hair reveal an absent body. They can be retained and used in order to preserve and signify memories of a person, as hair has the capacity to persist.” Using of my own hair to encapsulate myself, so to does the shale reveal an absent body in its own way, a piece of a decorative rock resting atop Seagar’s gravestone. Both materials were acquired at the end of their own natural cycles, from the shedding of hair and the splitting off of shale. As shale exists in the elements, it naturally starts to fracture and chip. The hair growth cycle includes

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38 Figures 14-16
39 Figures 15, 18
40 Figures 16, 19, 20
41 Figures 14, 17
42 Castaño, Carla. "Loss and Memory: Doris Salcedo and Mourning Jewelry."
shedding, losing between fifty and one hundred strands per day. These cycles of loss and erosion will continue as the work is worn, within the context of lockets.

Hair escapes the edges of the locket; when closed it is still possible to see strands struggling to escape. A cutout in the back of the locket similar in shape to the shale allows the wearer to feel the tangled hair brushing against their skin. Through the opening and closing of this locket, the hair will catch and tangle, being pulled from its place and the shale will eventually degrade either due to the force of the prongs holding it in place or when enough hair is torn from the locket that it loosens. Once loose, it can shift, chipping away at its fragile edges. While I have more hair growing upon my head and can gather the shedding strands as needed, the shale no longer exists at his gravesite, having already deteriorated. Regardless, newly shed strands that can be re-collected would no longer hold the essence of grief the way the original clump has. I have continued to move away from that moment, unable to recreate it.

*Once lost they can never be the same, never quite fit* is the largest locket in the series. It contains a jumble of loose steel cones much smaller than those that make up *Feelings we can never get back again*, but the cone geometry is made up of fewer wires connecting the base to the apex, causing the brain to fill in the rest of the form like it does for missing portions of memories. This locket only holds the cones safe by staying closed; the wearer must make the conscious decision to keep

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43 "Do you have hair loss or hair shedding?" American Academy of Dermatology.
44 Figures 16 & 18
45 Figures 8-9
the lid closed, or lose the contents by opening it. When closed, one understands that the contents are safe, but one also will never know if their memory of what is inside is accurate. If the wearer feels the compulsion to open the locket and validate those memories, the risk of losing some or all of the contents is high. If some of the cones are lost, there is no chance to regain or reconfirm the exact memory of its nuances. Even if none are lost, when the lid of the locket closes, the loose objects will shift, forming a new arrangement, rendering the formed memory obsolete. According to memory researcher and psychologist Elizabeth F. Lotus, the act of remembering “is more akin to putting puzzle pieces together than retrieving a video recording.”

The third locket in the series is the smallest of the three. Inside, it contains the ash of burned eggshell. As Zygmunt Bauman states, “Ashes, of course, are what are left of us humans once we die.” The ashes within the locket are precisely placed under a layer of plexiglass which serves not only for its protection but also permanently trap it within, as the plexiglass piece has no means of being removed. Entitled *A residual sense of something,* this locket was constructed with ten small holes in the bottom, one for each year since Seagar died. As it is worn the eggshell ash breaks down further, slowly sprinkling from the bottom of the locket. Similarly to our inability to control when memories fade, the wearer is not in control of how much is lost or when. This loss will happen imperceptibly at first until one day the

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47 Archer, Michael and Bauman, Zygmunt. Mirosław Bałka: 17 x 23,5 x 1,6.
48 Figure 19
49 Figure 20
locket is empty, leaving only the residual sense that something important was once inside.

IF I FORGET YOU, IT DOESN’T MEAN I DIDN’T LOVE YOU

To support this body of work, the gallery was painted a deep grey, bringing a somber tone into the space and mimicking the serious note of the work. It not only created a more appropriate environment for the work, but also pulled in references to the end of the first year post death in the Victorian era. In exiting full mourning, wardrobe colors shifted from black to greys and purples.\textsuperscript{50} Lighter grey areas created shadow box effects, framing the timeline of pearls\textsuperscript{51} on the far wall and each of the lockets.\textsuperscript{52} The large wearable pieces from series one were installed hanging at average body height from the ceiling by monofilament, allowing the viewer to imagine themselves wearing the work. For those who were more adventurous, the suspension method allowed people to physically insert themselves into the piece, giving them more than an imagined experience in wearing the objects. Tactility is important to the work, so access to each piece when installed the viewers a chance to develop a new understanding of the materiality and function. They are invited to partake in my grieving process, witnesses to these normally private moments.

\textsuperscript{50} Brett, Mary. \textit{Fashionable mourning jewelry, clothing & customs} p 87
\textsuperscript{51} Figure 3
\textsuperscript{52} Figure 13
This work stemmed from my own experiences with death and researching how we grieve, both historically in times of high death rates and today. Grieving is as much a communal and societal process as it is personal and private. My goal with this work was to give the audience a better understanding of how I have grieved, while also reflecting on mourning in today's society. I created two series of work; the large-scale works, which express the overpowering emotions of grief, and the lockets, which address the preciousness of memories of loved ones and how they fade.

Allowing myself to finally identify and feel my emotions surrounding Seagar’s death, I was able to pass through stages of mourning. This experience was painful as I began re-living this trauma. Welcoming the outside world into my private moments made me feel incredibly vulnerable but sharing the importance of Seagar’s life in my own helped me properly grieve his loss. This work is a testament to my own grief and the importance of mourning in a society that gives little time to the process.
Figure 1

*Vase*, 2015.
Found ceramic vase, mild steel, and oil pen.
3.75” x 4” x 8”
Figure 2
Acrylic, papier-mâché, wood, plastic, rope.  
8.5” x 15” x 5.5” (without rope).  
The Estate of Eva Hesse. Courtesy Hauser & Wirth.
You can’t be sure, in fact, when it’s really over, Installation View
Freshwater pearls, silk
48” x 48” x 122”
Figure 4
*Stubbornly holding on to nothingness*, Installation View
Electroformed copper, mild steel, liver of sulfur patina
19” x 9.5” x 6”
Figure 5
*Stubbornly holding on to nothingness*, detail
Electroformed copper, mild steel, liver of sulfur patina
19" x 9.5" x 6"
Figure 6
I didn’t know what to do without you, Installation view
Horsehair, sterling silver
264” in length
Figure 7
*I didn’t know what to do without you*
Horsehair, sterling silver
264” in length
Figure 8
Feelings we can never get back again, Installation view
Mild steel
38” x 44” x 31”
Figure 9
Feeling we can never get back again
Mild steel
38” x 44” x 31”
Figure 10
*If I forget you, it doesn’t mean I didn’t love you*, Installation View 1
Figure 11
*Samuel Verplanck.* 1760.
Watercolor on ivory, gold locket. 1.25” x 1.125.”
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
Figure 12

Locket. 1706.

Gold, hair, and crystal. $9/16" \times 13/16"$

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
Figure 13
If I forget you, it doesn’t mean I didn’t love you, Installation View 2
Figure 14
*A little of you, a little of me*, Detail 1
Sterling silver, human hair, gravestone
10.5” x 1.5” x .5”
Figure 15
Once lost they can never be the same, never quite fit, Detail 1
Sterling silver, mild steel
11.5” x 2.5” x 1”
Figure 16
*A residual sense of something*, Detail 1
Sterling silver, eggshell ash, plexiglass
10” x 2.25” x .5”
Figure 17
*A little of you, a little of me*, Detail.2
Sterling silver, human hair, gravestone
10.5" x 1.5" x .75"
Figure 18

Once lost they can never be the same, never quite fit, Detail 2
Sterling silver, mild steel
11.5" x 2.5" x 1"
Figure 19
*A residual sense of something*, Detail 2
Sterling silver, eggshell ash, plexiglass
10" x 2.25" x .5"
Figure 20
*A residual sense of something*, Detail 3
Sterling silver, eggshell ash, plexiglass
10” x 2.25” x .5”
REFERENCES


