

OH, HORSE HOCKEY!

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by  
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## I. INTRODUCTION

Loss is a major component of my lived experience and informs much of the work in my thesis exhibition, *Oh, Horse Hockey!* In this body of work, I explore my personal and familial relationship to grief. I engage the viewer through a working narrative of symbolic, metaphoric, and literal interpretations of grief. Through the use of recurring visual symbols of addiction, childhood, and celebration, I call attention to avoidance. These symbols are paired with imagery containing smoking, drinking, and television. Additionally, I employ abstracted figures, objects, idioms, and Polish/personal symbols to further communicate my experience. Most glaring, however, is the inclusion of party ephemera. Its significance enlivens a contrapuntal<sup>1</sup> read of this body of work, wherein the seemingly oppositional concepts of loss and celebration are made interdependent. In this spirit, I offer the viewer a visual analysis of this sardonic concept, one that demonstrates how, ultimately, I cope with loss.

## II. SOMETIMES MY FATHER WOULD REFER TO ME AS “NUMBER SIX”

I am the youngest of six children. Consequently, the number six is a recurring symbol used throughout *Oh, Horse Hockey!*. Anecdotally, the number represents myself and my siblings. Personally, the number is a conceptual entry point for interpreting complicated familial relationships and the dynamics therein. As it is echoed throughout the exhibition, the viewer learns to note the number's significance, prompting curiosity surrounding its relationship to my broader working narrative.

In the piece, *Cataloged: #1, #2, #3, #4, #5, #6* (fig. 1), the number six is most overt, wherein six analogous portraits are collectively exhibited as a series. The following visual

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<sup>1</sup> Contrapuntal, or counterpoint, is a term traditionally used in music and has been adapted in critical art theory vernacular. I will address this framework more explicitly in chapter V. PARTY'S OVER

characteristics can be noted throughout: a Savonarola<sup>2</sup> chair (fig. 2) printed on transparent paper, the color yellow, and various party decorations<sup>3</sup>. As the primary figure in these compositions, the chair is at the center, often shown upside down, referencing a specific Polish death practice wherein turning the chair upside down deters spirits from lingering<sup>4</sup>.

This specific chair was a staple piece of furniture in my childhood home. I always found the chair to be unsettling; its overall design was gaudy and harsh, making it uncomfortable to sit in. As a disciplinary action, I was often made to serve “time out” in the chair. Carved into the chair's arms were exasperated lion’s faces, and I started having recurring nightmares about the hostile lion heads torturing me in a dark and inescapable cave. This nightmare sets the tone for why I chose to render the chair as ambiguous and black. I attempt to personify the chair’s presence in my childhood by referring to this work as a portrait. . Additionally, the use of transparent paper further supports a spectral-like depiction of the chair. It obfuscates additional layers of printed matter and party material situated behind the diffused and transparent paper, which abstracts the media behind it. In this way, the chair assumes the role of a barrier. With this in mind, I explore the relationship between memory and abstraction. The value of a memory is often contingent upon how we emotionally relate to it. In this series, the chair’s memory is a marker of fear, abandonment, and loss, and furthermore, assumes the role of a barrier to relationships.

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<sup>2</sup> The Savonarola chair, also known as an *X* chair or *Scissors* chair, is a type of portable stool. Historically, they are crafted from wood, bronze, and iron. *Savonarola* derives from a chair found in the convent of San Marco in Florence, and used by the 15th century Italian Dominican priest Girolamo Savonarola.

<sup>3</sup> The use of party material is addressed in chapter V. PARTY’S OVER

<sup>4</sup> The use of Polish symbols is addressed in chapter VII. DON’T FORGET TO COVER THE MIRRORS: AN INFORMAL RECITATION

### III. MEMORY, MATERIALITY, AND FAILURE

Memory and failure are interconnected themes that I explore throughout *Oh, Horse Hockey!*. One way in which memory and failure are related is through the concept of material memory<sup>5</sup>. In the series, *Catalogued #1, #2, #3, #4, #5 #6* (fig. 1), I use a large format printer<sup>6</sup> as a tool for exploring material memory and how it fails to produce a true representation of the original object. Instead, I suggest that material memory renders the original like an apparition, one that I interpret through vellum and mark making as ashen, lucent, and abstract.

In this series, six upside down Savonarola chair prints are compositionally located in the foreground and center of each piece on a transparent sheet of vellum. Although the image of this chair is sourced from a photograph, the reproduced prints do not appear photographic in nature, but rather, gestural like a drawing or painting. I achieved this analogue aesthetic through randomization. I purposefully programmed the Epson to print using the incorrect ink and paper settings, and printed onto vellum, an irregular paper-type not compatible with the printer. This chaotic programming methodology rendered a range of unexpected mark marking. Sometimes the ink printed too heavily, causing the chair to appear as a silhouette, and other times, there was fading, smudging, or dripping that occurred after the chair was printed. This was due to the ink's vulnerable state, as the silky quality of the vellum prolonged drying. Subsequently, I became more curious about the materiality of the ink itself. This led me to reflect on the physical quality of ink in analogue printing, such as monotype and relief, wherein ink is a substance that the printmaker can physically move, mix, and alter by hand. In an effort to continue to explore this materiality, I sometimes used a spray bottle filled with isopropyl alcohol, to directly spray onto

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<sup>5</sup> I use “material memory” to refer to the way in which physical objects, media – such as paper, and images, can embody, incite, and even preserve, the original memory of a person, place or event.

<sup>6</sup> Epson SureColor P8000

the printed chair's surface. This action caused the ink to repel in the areas where the drops of alcohol touched, therefore creating a stippling-like mark. (fig. 3)

As the programming was unstable, each chair printed in a different and unexpected manner. In many ways, these prints were the result of technical failures due to my decision to randomize the printer and paper settings. In this way, I see my process as a metaphor for the ways in which my mind fails to preserve and recollect that which is lost. While all six chairs were printed on the same printer and from the same file, none of them were perfect representations of the actual chair itself, but rather, a phantom of its original presence.

#### IV. HELLO, NEWMAN

As a child, teenager, and young adult, my parents were sometimes tired and emotionally unavailable. Television at the dinner table was commonplace, and I grew up with *Seinfeld* and *Frasier* humming in the background during meal time. When I was in the third grade, my mother filed for divorce. That particular shift reinforced palpable changes in my environment that exacerbated existing tensions. This fluctuating notion of home and unity impacted my mental, emotional, and physical relationship with grief. Acknowledgment of this grief was often repressed or denied within my family's ethos. Therefore, in my working inventory of symbolic and visual language, I utilize cigarettes, alcohol, and television sets as a proxy for avoidance. Ultimately, these indulgent devices were used to avoid vulnerability and grief associated with loss.

In the screen print, *Oh, Horse Hockey!* (fig. 4), the namesake of the exhibition, the use of personal symbolism is visible. Several figures gather around a kitchen table with a hole in the center; various hands belonging to the figures are shown smoking cigarettes and reaching for the

hole; a ghost with 1980's style aviator glasses floats at the head of the table while the television behind him shows a crude, smiling face. Also represented is a child wearing a mask, a man sitting in a pool of water, a woman standing and peering downward, and three partially hidden individuals. These figures are characterizations of my family members. Most central is the characterization of my father who is depicted as the ghost. His presence and relationship to our family is noted through a symbolic indication of absence and escapism; cigarettes and a television. The hole at the center of the table underscores themes such as emptiness, the unknown, and absences, all metaphors of grief. Michael Cholbi, author of *Grief: A Philosophical Guide* reinforces this sentiment stating that:

In order to understand grief, we must confront some of the more unsettling realities of human life: that our emotions can sometimes prove difficult to comprehend or manage, that the people who matter to us are impermanent, and that because of this impermanence, our relationships with others are both sources of, and threats to our sense of security, safety, and predictability. There is, then, much to be feared both in grief and in investigating grief. (Pg. 2)

In other words, confronting impermanence is required in order to properly investigate grief fully. This sentiment in Cholbi's writing resonates strongly with my art practice because it emphasizes the notion that there is a detrimental fallout to avoiding grief in the long term.

## V. OH, HORSE HOCKEY!

Idioms can be a particularly effective way of expressing complex emotions, as they tap into shared cultural and linguistic experiences. Within a family culture, idioms communicate direct and indirect social norms and expectations surrounding how family should behave and relate to one another. In my exhibition, I incorporate idioms used by my family, such as, “horse hockey” to reflect and reinforce certain family dynamics and values from my childhood. For example, the idiom “horse hockey” translates to mean, *nonsense* while the more abrasive counterpart to this phrase is, “horse shit.” Other less abrasive synonyms for “horse hockey” include “baloney”, “hooley”, and “hogwash”. My mother would often use this idiom when she believed an assertion or act was absurd. In my thesis exhibition, I use “oh, horse hockey” as a point of entry for addressing dismissal and gaslighting.

As a child, I struggled in grade school, and I was also hospitalized for recurring and severe asthmatic episodes. I have substantial recollections of my siblings invalidating these asthmatic episodes, asserting that they thought I was fabricating the severity of my symptoms. My experiences of masking neurodivergence in school and being gaslighted about my asthma are just two of many instances that led to my burgeoning feelings of internalized shame, abandonment, mistrust, and depression. Consequently, I often represent myself as alone, hidden, or secluded within my compositions.

In the print *Oh, Horse Hockey!* (fig. 4), I situate myself on the left side of the composition with most of my face obscured behind another figure. Most visible is my ear, which is depicted as red and radiating. I am interested in emphasizing the ear as it is the mechanism for receiving verbal communication. Ultimately, I seek to explore how I learned to see myself

through my family's vernacular, the inferred dismissiveness that I associate with the idiom, "horse hockey."

## VI. PARTY'S OVER

I utilize party material as a visual language to distract from the uncomfortable, and specifically, to bridge the liminal space between grief and happiness. I explore this duality through a contrapuntal, conceptual framework. The term contrapuntal, or counterpoint, originates from classical, European music theory wherein an independent and sometimes oppositional melody, or melodies, work to support the main harmony to create a cohesive whole. In the context of my exhibition, I use counterpoint to impart a sardonic tone in the work. I see sardonicism is contrapuntal; humor is the harmony, while mockery and sarcasm are the oppositional melodies.

Celebratory wares like metallic fringe and grief may seem like contrasting concepts, as these party devices are often associated with joyous occasions such as birthdays, weddings, and graduations, and therefore, serve as symbols of happiness and achievement. For me, they also function as reminders of what I have lost. Throughout the exhibition, I use cheap party materials to entice the viewer to interpret the work through a celebratory lens. However, upon further investigation, they are met with a set of conflicting perspectives that intermingle.

The piece, *Dunce-Cap-Party-Hat* (fig. 5) demonstrates my effort to harmonize conceptual and material opposition. The "dunce cap" and "party hat" are both types of hats, but contain different meanings and functions. While both hats share a similar cone shape, the dunce cap is a symbol of punishment and humiliation, while the party hat is a symbol of celebration and



joy. In *Dunce-Cap-Party-Hat* (fig. 5), I conflate the “dunce cap” and the “party hat” into one object.

The cap/hat is made out of an inkjet print that features my face as a repeated motif. Large, yellow letters spell out the word “DUNCE” vertically along the cap. The dunce cap is an object marked by a particular kind of shame; the shame of being seen as stupid or intellectually inferior. By making the proverbial “bad” student wear the cap, the teacher or authority figure essentially isolates them from the group, as they are “unfit” to meet the authority’s standards and expectations. Consequently, this form of punishment generates feelings of worthlessness and lack of confidence. Unconventional to my “dunce cap,” however, is the inclusion of garish metallic fringe, glitter, jewels and a pink pom pom at the point of the cap. This decorative language corresponds to the materiality of a “party hat.” The party hat, on the other hand, is a marker of unity. The significance of the party hat lies in its association with celebration and joy. It is a simple yet effective way to signify that a special occasion is taking place. Wearing a party hat is often seen as a fun and lighthearted way to participate in the festivities. It can also be used to center the “guest of honor” (fig. 6) of a celebratory event. *Dunce-Cap-Party-Hat* (fig. 5) centers me as the guest of honor at my own hypothetical party, wherein I subvert the device used to elicit correction, and instead celebrate reclamation through the use of cheap craft and humor.

## VII. MY MOTHER TAUGHT ME HOW TO DIE:

### *TALKING ABOUT THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM*

My mother taught me how to die.

How to let go of all the tethers

we believe to be eternal

Fraying, she became  
 Wiry and bloated–  
 She taught me to fall apart  
 Her eyes are watery  
 when I remember  
 her sick  
 Chartreuse-transparent Pupils,  
 tiny from medication to make her more  
 docile  
 Sad and sedated for a while  
 I was also  
 Today, I've woken up and realized this truth:  
*My mother taught me how to die.*  
 For the first time in years, I feel connected to her, now  
 I can sense a presence sitting with me, reminding me  
 That she's never left,  
 only changed form

#### VIII. RESEARCH: PART I, J.CAMPBELL

There are many visual artists, philosophers, writers and academics that address loss and the cultural, spiritual and personal significance of this topic. Two individuals I have researched in preparation for my thesis exhibition are writer and scholar, Joseph Campbell, and artist, Ana Mendieta.

Joseph Campbell's research and career centered on the mythology and archetypes from various ethnic groups, cultures, religions, and texts. Campbell was interested in understanding how humanity interpreted and viewed the relationship we have to ourselves, our community, and the universe at large. In considering death, loss, and ritual, all tangential themes in my thesis exhibition, *Oh, Horse Hockey!* I look to Campbell's literature on these subjects. In his book, *The Power of Myth*, Campbell states the following about death, "You don't understand death, you learn to acquiesce in death [...] The conquest of the fear of death is the recovery of life's joy. One can experience an unconditional affirmation of life only when one has accepted death, not as contrary to life but as an aspect of life." (Pg. 187) What Campbell's quote asserts is that there is an inseparable relationship between an "unconditional affirmation of life," and the "acceptance of death." In my thesis exhibition, *Oh, Horse Hockey!* I aspire to represent this type of relationship. Metaphorically, symbolically, and literally, I give loss a great deal of importance. Through the use of party ephemera and color, I juxtapose and incorporate materials not commonly used in American, Christian, and Eurocentric death rituals. Conversely, I utilize familiar materials like metallic party fringe and confetti. This opposition in my subject matter, through my choice of visual language, is what aligns my work with Campbell's sentiment, and informs my use of a contrapuntal framework, wherein celebration and loss are two parts of a whole.

## IX. RESEARCH: PART II, A. MENDIETA

Cuban-American artist, Ana Mendieta, approached her practice from a place of loss and longing. After her father joined Anti-Castro forces<sup>7</sup>, Mendieta was sent to the United States and lived as an orphan in the foster care system for five years, after which, she reunited with her

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<sup>7</sup> The rise of Fidel Castro to power in Cuba, from 1959 - 1979, incentivised a large number of Cubans to flee their home country of Cuba to live in the United States. Consequently, various anti-Castro organizations arose, as they were receiving generous funding from right-wing leadership to support their efforts.

mother and brother. Her experience gave way to a great deal of trauma, specifically around displacement. I am particularly inspired by her “earth-body” sculptural practice, a body of work titled the *Silueta Series* (fig. 7). In this series, Mendieta used and alluded to her body as a means to address her feelings and experiences with displacement. Ephemeral in nature, Mendieta created imprints of her body in a variety of different outdoor environments. Additionally, she would perform rituals from the Santería faith as part of her artistic practice. These ritual performances spiritually and metaphorically embedded her to the site in which the act was performed. Her artistic practice served as a way for Mendieta to reclaim a sense of belonging and home that had been taken from her during her childhood.

Like Mendieta, I am interested in the idea of reclamation through ritualistic action, implied figure, and ephemerality. *I Only Smoke When I'm Drinking* (Fig. 8), demonstrates this effort clearly. Seemingly frozen in time, a black, circular, and plastic ashtray holds six lit cigarettes. Unlike actual lit cigarettes, however, these cigarettes are “gag” cigarettes I purchased on the internet. Because the individuals who are smoking these cigarettes are absent, it is as though the viewer has walked into a scene that the smokers abandoned preemptively. The ashes dusting the bottom of the ashtray are my parents' cremated remains. In many ways, I attempt to preserve an inevitably ephemeral state, or more explicitly, the state of smoking, indulgence, happiness, and celebration. Group smoking refers to an aspect of my family's social culture, and the incorporation of my parents' ashes memorializes this connection. Accordingly, it renders the piece, *I Only Smoke When I'm Drinking* (Fig. 8), as a relic of my family's ritualistic tendencies around this behavior.

## X. DON'T FORGET TO COVER THE MIRRORS: AN INFORMAL SOLILOQUY

My mother was half Polish. I think a lot about her relationship to her cultural identity and how it may have directly and indirectly influenced what she “brought to the table” at home. I suppose Catholicism is an example of this. Catholicism was strictly practiced in her childhood home and most of her adult life. However, by the time I was born, only some Catholic rituals carried over; most notably shame. I’m curious, how did my mother’s familial dynamics shift over time? Did they change as her role changed, from daughter to oldest sister of six, and again, from wife to mother? Her passing continues to leave an impression of curiosity for me around these questions, and I find myself sifting through vague memories and family photos trying to recant stories told to me by my siblings. This informs why I am intrigued by her Polish identity, because ritual practices informed by one’s culture serve as maps that transcend time. When you lose someone, it is easy to get caught up in the absence of a person. Especially as time passes and major events transpire: the birth of a child, a marriage, a graduation. When my mother died, there was a thick animosity that hung in the room. We did not have a memorial service for months after she departed (this world). I thought it was strange, and simultaneously normal that my family avoided the immediacy of acknowledging her death. My mother’s death has haunted me, and it inspires my research of Polish death rituals and the symbols therein. As author and academic Joseph Campbell aptly states, “The main theme in ritual is the linking of the individual to a larger morphological structure than that of his own physical body.” (pg. 90) With that in mind, I believe that my interest in Polish cultural identity serves as a thread connecting me to my mother and all of the Wyzykowski women before her. In my thesis exhibition, *Oh, Horse Hockey!*, I include Polish symbols that are specific to cultural death practices as a guide for letting go and moving on.

The gromnica,<sup>8</sup> or the “thunder candle,” is a Polish / Slavic ritual candle that was traditionally used to celebrate the spring equinox. Over time, its pagan association and ideology was adapted to suit Catholic use and narrative. In Catholic practices, the candle is featured during various significant rituals, such as christenings, weddings, and vigils. When a person has passed, the candle can be placed in the hands of the deceased as a tool for ensuring the soul’s passage into the afterlife. In this way, it is a guiding light for the deceased individual.

In my thesis exhibition, I refer to the candle indirectly through the use of artificial light. In the screen print, *HAHA* (fig. 9), light emitting diode (LED) “fairy lights” illuminate hand-poked holes through the figure’s teeth and the text, “haha.” I use light to draw in the viewer’s attention to the significance of these lit components. Like the gromnica, the light serves to guide. It is not imperative that the viewer understand the meaning of the teeth and “haha” explicitly, but rather, that they infer a contrapuntal relationship between the screaming figure and the playful pulse of the illuminated forms.

#### XI. I LEAVE YOU WITH THIS:

The culmination of my thesis exhibition, *Oh, Horse Hockey!*, confronts grief through personal narrative. I use a range of materials, metaphors, and symbols to interpret my grief, including light and party ephemera. These devices also call attention to a sardonic tone, as I employ a contrapuntal framework to address seemingly oppositional forces, such as celebration and loss. In this way, I reveal the ways in which my family coped with loss; addiction, smoking,

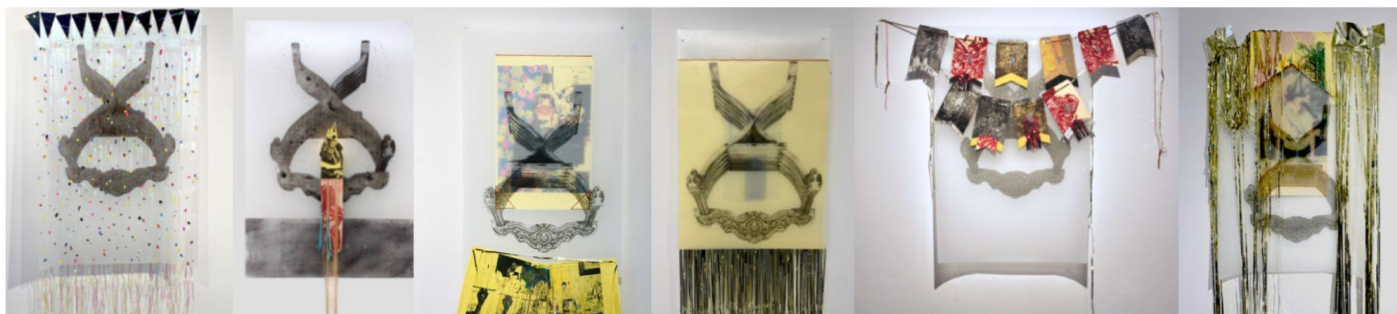
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<sup>8</sup> It is difficult to find scholarly literature about the candle. Most of my information was collected from various autodidacts that have an interest in Polish folklore and culture. The historical and modern day use of this candle is expansive. For that reason I am interested in both the various Pagan and Catholic uses for this candle. I am not interested in using the candle in an exacting way, but rather, a poetic one.

drinking, and watching television. Throughout the exhibition, these coping mechanisms are represented in both printed matter and found objects.

Most significantly, however, this body of work has provided me with the opportunity to heal. I have showcased it, and subsequently, let it go. I am turning the chairs upside down, covering the mirrors and lighting a candle.

Figure 1



AlexAnthes, *Cataloged: #1, #2, #3, #4, #5, #6*, 2023, mixed media, Kent State University, Kent, Ohio.

Figure 1 showcases (6) 22" x 30" inkjet prints on a gallery wall in succession. Central to each print is an upside down chair. Each print contains various collaged media including party fringe, confetti, thread and vellum.



Figure. 2



Artist unknown, *Florentine Savonarola Chair*, (date unknown), Hand carved walnut (restored and wax polished), 1stDibs: online marketplace, [https://www.1stdibs.com/furniture/seating/chairs/florentine-savonarola-chair-all-hand-carved-walnut-restored-wax-polished/id-f\\_8530573/](https://www.1stdibs.com/furniture/seating/chairs/florentine-savonarola-chair-all-hand-carved-walnut-restored-wax-polished/id-f_8530573/).

Figure 2 is a foldable wooden chair with two points of contact on the floor. The chair's "top rail" has a uniquely carved pattern containing round forms. The arms of the chair extend straight out with two lion heads carved into either end.

Figure. 3



Alex Anthes, *Cataloged: #1, #2, #3, #4, #5, #6 (detail)*, 2023, mixed media, Kent State University, Kent, Ohio.

Figure 3 contains a 22" x 30" piece of vellum paper that is hung 2 ½" off of the gallery wall. There is an image of an upside down chair in the center. On top of the print, two sets of party banners with fringe and other collaged media are displayed with the words, "Party's Over."

Figure. 4



Alex Anthes, *OH, HORSE HOCKEY!*, 2022, Screenprint, Kent State University, Kent, Ohio.

Figure 4 shows a family of six figures surrounding a dining room table and reaching for a hole in the center. Three of the six figures are smoking cigarettes. A television set with a woman's face floats in the background. Made up of tiny hand-poked holes, the phrase, "OH, HORSE HOCKEY!" sits slightly to the right of the center.



Figure. 5



Alex Anthes, *Dunce-Cap-Party-Hat*, 2023, inkjet print, mixed media, Kent State University, Kent, Ohio.

Figure 5 is a 2' tall dunce cap with party hat material collaged onto the surface. The artist's face is printed and repeated around the outside of the hat. On the side of the hat, embroidery thread, party fringe, and craft jewels decorate the seam. Glitter and a bow adorn the pointed top of the hat.

Figure. 6



Manufacturer unknown, *Birthday Girl*, 2023, mass produced paper party hat, Ebay, <https://www.ebay.com/itm/134318340299>.

Figure 6 is a child's party hat. There is tinsel on the hat's bottom rim. The phrase, "Birthday Girl" is written in glitter in the center of the hat.

Figure. 7



Ana Mendieta, *Siluetas Works in Mexico*, 1973–77/1991. Pigmented inkjet prints, four parts, 13 1/4 x 20 inches (33.7 x 50.8 cm); eight parts, 20 x 13 1/4 inches (50.8 x 33.7 cm), The Barbara Lee Collection of Art by Women.

Figure 7 contains six photographs from Ana Mendieta's *Siluetas Works in Mexico*. In these photographs, a single image of the body's silhouette is depicted in different outside spaces. The placement of these implied bodies appear in different media such as, fabric, stone, sand, flowers, roots and pavement.



Figure. 8



Alex Anthes, *I Only Smoke When I'm Drinking*, 2023, mixed media, Kent State University, Kent, Ohio.

In Figure 8, an ashtray containing six gag cigarettes appears lit and in mid use. The bottom of the ashtray is dusted with the artist's parent's ashes. The tray sits on an 11" x 14" piece of masonite that is covered in floral tablecloth.

Figure. 9



Alex Anthes, *HAHA*, 2022, screen print, mixed media, Kent State University, Kent, Ohio.

Figure 9 depicts a bust of a screaming girl. Stiff embroidery thread depicted as hair covers the sides of her face and ears. Her eyes and nose appear non-existent, and instead, depict six candle sticks in their place. Across what would be the chest are three drooping poppy flowers with the phrase, “HAHA.” The letters are reinforced with hand poked holes that penetrate the surface of the text and paper.



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