

HOME SWEET HOME: AN INFINITE GRID OF MEMORY AND REPRESSED  
ABUSE TRAUMA

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

Incorporating traditional craft mediums of crochet and embroidery, I use digital technology to experiment with wording to graphically represent my abuse trauma. Due to the severity of the subject matter and the work ethic I employ in my art practice, using my hands and being completely involved is a form of masochistic pleasure. My process takes on a Sisyphean approach of penance for the sins of others in my work. During my studio practice, my process reaches a meditative state where my mind is clear and free of the burden. Once I've completed a panel of trauma, the burden is transported into the art and a state of enlightenment is achieved.

I began this program taking an analysis from an external perspective, gradually shifting my focus of artistic practice to my internal struggles with memory and repressed abuse trauma. Since I have selfishly focused on my personal tragedies for inspiration for the past three years, my work can now address a more universal subject matter in the future.

I would like to dedicate this thesis to all the wrongs I made right. To all the family, who doubted my dedication and who never thought I would make something of myself due to my circumstances. I refused to become a statistic, even though the temptation was always on the back of my heels.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I offer my sincerest gratitude to my thesis committee chair, Dr. Maria Cristina Santana, for taking on this endeavor, keeping me motivated and walking along side me throughout this journey.

To my committee members, Robert Reedy...I love ya man! Thank you for a great time these past two years as your GTA. You've given me the greatest opportunity; the gift of teaching and this is only the beginning. Theo Lotz, thank you for being the fire under my butt to do more work and to think of other ways of executing my vision.

Wanda Raimundi-Ortiz, I don't have to say much, you already know.

Last, but not least, to my cohort, you are the best family I've never had. I wouldn't change anything or anyone of you. Well, maybe Skippy, but then we wouldn't have all these great jokes. We've all had our moments and we stuck it out and made it. I love you all more than hugs and words can express. Best of luck and well wishes for the future. HERE'S TO US!

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## INTRODUCTION

Early in the graduate program, my studio art practice had minor significance until I began to pull inspiration from memory and repressed abuse traumas. At a young age, I experienced sexual abuse from my father, who committed suicide warranted by the guilt associated with his actions. My mother, as a result of the added stress of becoming a widow and a single mother, physically and emotionally abused me for years afterwards. The physical abuse became known to local authorities and I was removed from her custody at the age of nine. Placed in the temporary custody of my maternal aunt, I became a victim once again of physical abuse by her hand as well. A court decision was made at that time which placed in the permanent custody of my maternal grandparents. The stability of my grandparent's home was comforting, but the strict nature of their authority left me in a state of isolation and yearning for a place to belong. A few years later, I was reunited with my mother and I forgave her for what she had done. This moment of renewal was short lived. Due to complications associated with her diabetes, my mother passed away in 1996. At that time, I just finished my junior year in high school and I was an avid golfer on the varsity team. Regretfully, I was not able to continue my golf career and was anxious to get my last year of high school completed. When high school ended, I ran — as far as I could, away from any existence of family and authority. I felt free, yet full of anger and rebellion.

From 1997 to 2009, I lived in isolation and answered only to myself. After receiving my BFA in Graphic Design in 2009, the strength of the economy didn't allow for employment opportunities in my field. I was obligated to move back under the roof of my grandparents, once again given an ultimatum to figure out a new direction. Acceptance into the graduate program gave me a new sense of freedom; however, I struggled with the transition from a linear, project-

based methodology of graphic design to creating process-based conceptual pieces of art. I felt unprepared in this graduate program until I used my memory and repressed abuse traumas as the focus of my conceptual ideas. I invested time into handcrafted textiles and traditional craft mediums to elicit a nurturing connection directly associated with womanhood, femininity, domesticity and a woman's role within a family unit — a feeling I have no solid concept of in a healthy environment. I felt these domestic skills of my past generations demanded a place in my studio practice. The meditative nature of the haptic investment manifested itself in several bodies of work, which resulted in a steady purging of emotional connections tied to memory and the absence of the maternal.

Due to my ordeal, I've created a wall of inaccessibility that excludes others as a means of protection, which is evident in my work. I feel a disconnect now in social interactions due to my isolation and depression from my past, which sparks emotional connections to my trauma. Recently, I have come to the realization that I have grown tired of being the victim that is often reacted to with pity. It is not my motivation or intent to be pitied, but to use my art practice as a vehicle to allow admission into my emotional and internal conflict with identity and belonging.

## PROCESS & DEVELOPMENT

### *What don't you like about yourself?*

*What don't you like about yourself?* is a nude endurance performance. I created the 'sterile' performance space in the front gallery of the MFA studios. The space was divided equally in half so participants could enter and exit at either end of the space. As you enter the space, you are greeted by one of my 'nurses' who instructs you to put on one of the six lab coats that hang on the wall on either side of the space, put on a pair of purple nitrile examination gloves and choose one, or all three of green, red or brown surgical markers shown in Figure 1.

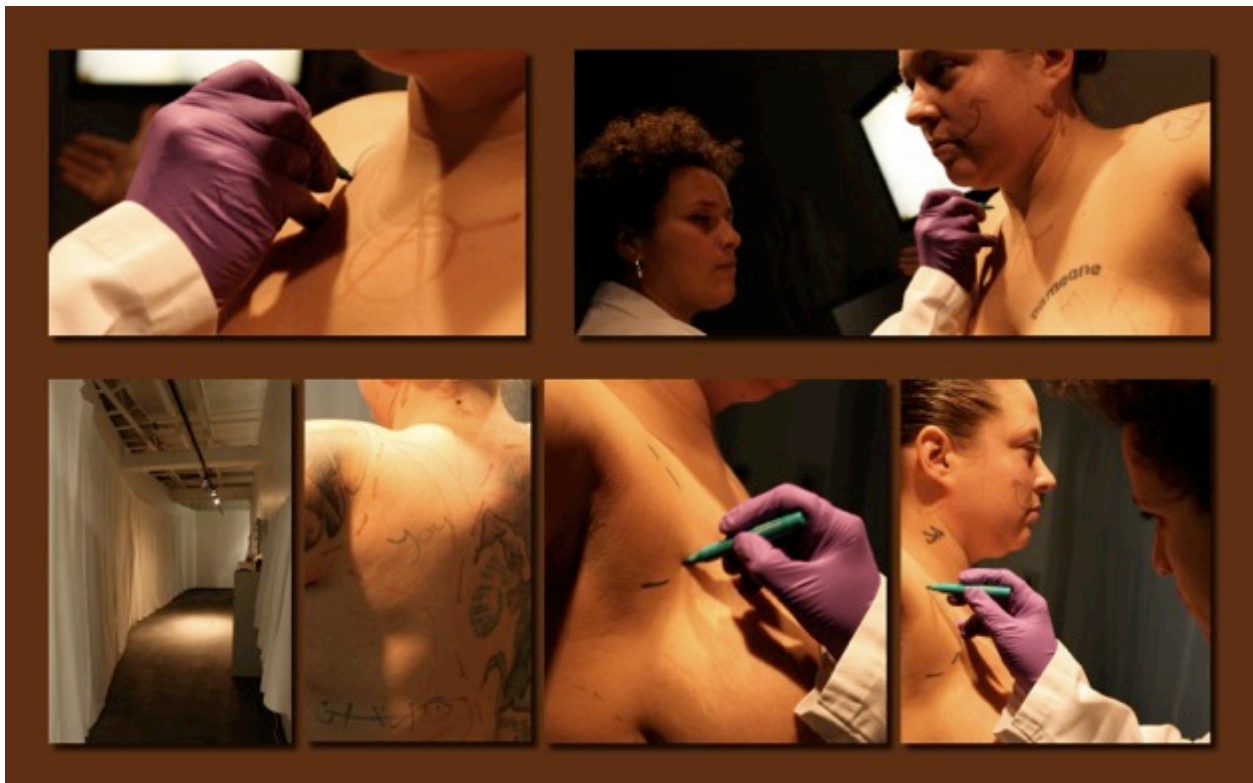


Figure 1: *What Don't You Like About Yourself?* Documentation photos, Photos by Author, 2010.

You have now taken on the role of plastic surgeon and are forced to interact with my body as your subject and apply surgical cut marks where you think I need plastic surgery, while a mixed version of the NIP/TUCK theme song echoes in the distance. The performance is allotted twenty minutes of interaction, at which time the theme songs ends. You hear the heart monitor alert you I'm going into cardiac arrest and flat line. The hospital curtains are drawn closed and all that is left is my dead corpse filled with these markings.

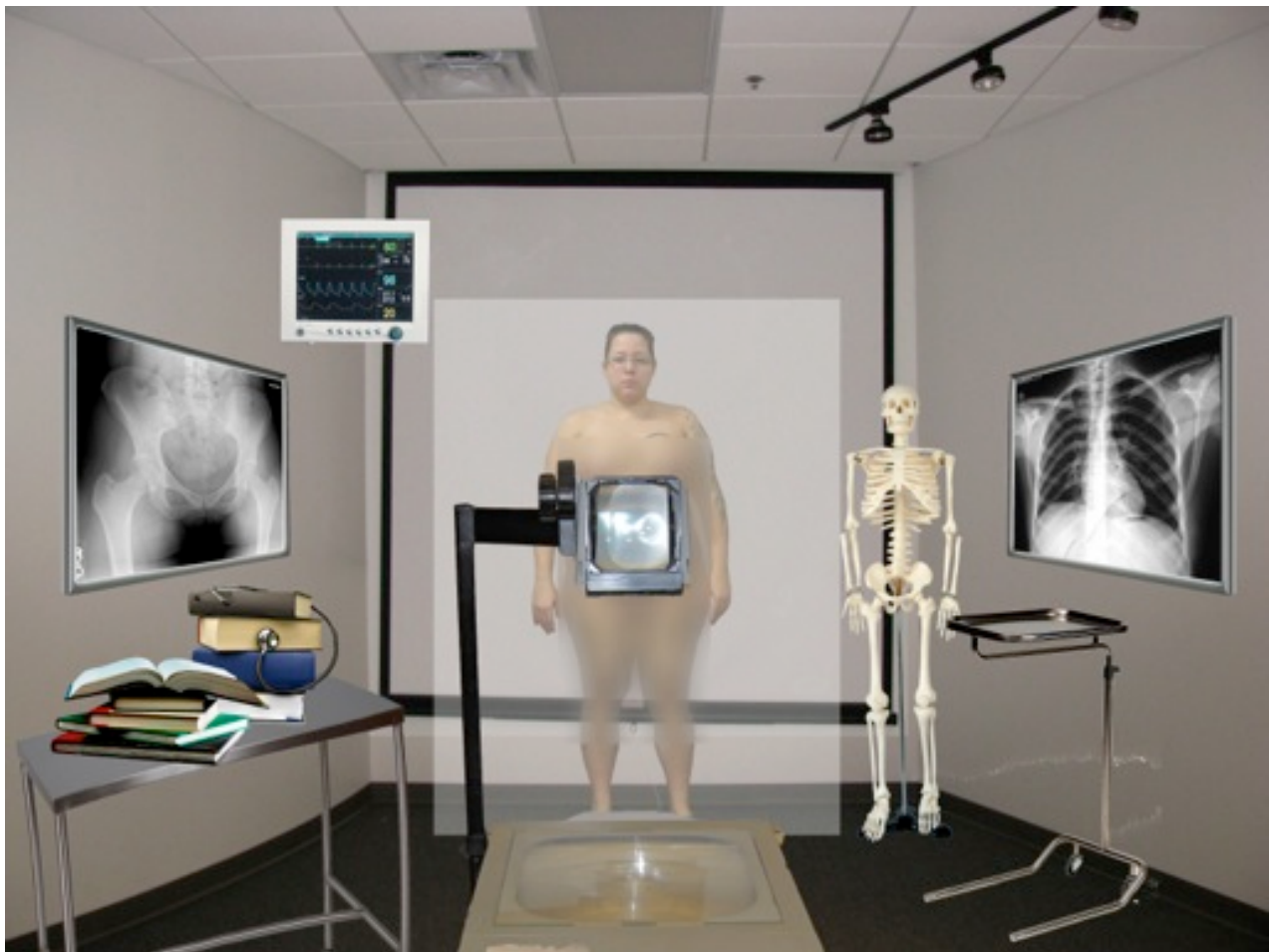
With a passion for surgery and my obsessive interest with NIP/TUCK, a fictional medical TV drama based on the practice and personal lives of two plastic surgeons. I began to explore how I could merge my two passions into a performance and visually represent how society views negative body image and the extremes individuals will go to conform to these ideals. I analyzed my external shortcomings and envisioned myself as one of the patients entering a doctor's office, having a consultation and proceeding into surgery to have parts of my body nipped and tucked.

The process that intrigued me the most is the awkwardness of the consultation. Envisioning yourself in a paper gown that doesn't even cover your body — waiting. Staring at the ceiling tiles, trying to count all the holes in them, but you can't concentrate because, most likely a man, you've never meet before — is going to see you naked and judge you objectively. The vulnerability I experienced during this performance was, in contrast, with the modesty I feel exposing my body to others for medical purposes or intimately close to me.

To redirect my feelings of anxiety and judgment associated with this vulnerable performance, I wanted the participants to experience the same level of discomfort. I felt using performance art as the medium was an appropriate choice to view the work due to the relationship between the artist and the spectator/participant within the space. The interaction

created a dialogue of reaction, impulse, and awkwardness, which prompted an evaluation of the participants themselves and how they view their own bodies.

Before the performance, I started to sketch out ideas of how I wanted the space to look and the objects I would need to give the feeling of a surgical space shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2: *What Don't You Like About Yourself?* Mock-up sketch, Photo by Author, 2010.**

I wanted the performance space to reflect everything that is associated with a surgical procedural room. Heart monitor, medical light boxes, surgical trays, and hospital curtains. At the

time, I didn't know how I was going to have participants come up and apply surgical cut lines. I thought an overhead projector would be an ideal solution to project the surgical cut marks, while the overhead transparencies could be an art piece as well. I did my research, I went to local hospitals where I lived and asked if some items could be borrowed, or donated, for the performance. Most officials didn't understand why I needed these items for and I ran into some dead ends.

The performance space ended up being very minimal. Six packages of white, Ikea twin bed sheets were sewn together and hung from a suspension wire, representing hospital curtains shown in Figure 3.



**Figure 3: Performance space installation, Photo by Author, 2010.**

Instead of the heart monitor, I purchased two iStock audio files; one of a heart beat, the other of the sound of scissors. I was able to find a remixed version of the theme song for Nip/Tuck. I then combined all three audio elements in Garage Band and made my own audio clip for the length of my performance.

In addition to the performance, I considered the graduate programs name, Studio Art and the Computer. Most professors were not able to attend the performance, so I incorporated an interactive live broadcast video platform, UStream, to stream live video and record the performance via the Internet as it took place. Prior to the performance I invited professors via Facebook Events to join the live broadcast and provided them with a username and password to UStream, since the performance was of a mature nature.

Throughout the semester, I was heavily inspired by Nao Bustamante's performance, *America, The Beautiful*. Her performance addresses the expectations of the ideal body type and women as an object of desire. Bustamante, a voluptuous Latina, performs nude applying layers of red lipstick and gold shimmery powder to her face, donning a long, curly blonde wig while applying an entire can of hairspray to the point of vomiting to suggest the rigorous make-up application techniques women use to look desirable. The most notable for me in this performance was after the application process, she wraps her body in duct tape while playing "Someday My Prince will Come" on an old record player in a very comical yet serious acknowledgment to body modification.

Bustamante's performance has been described as, "...Nao's embodiment of the blonde sex-kitten archetype. Binding her voluptuous Latina physique into a packing taped-up hourglass, Nao's cartoonish incarnation takes us through appropriately patriotic travails, Severely



handicapped by her requirements of feminine guile and beauty pageant pretensions, America precariously climbs the metaphorical ladder of success in high heels...." from "Wobbling in High Places" (Topiary).

I would have liked more audience participation, but what I learned from this performance was not everyone in the audience will interact with the artist. Perhaps this may be due to the participants' own insecurities. I am incredibly interested in the reactions and interactions between generations, genders and artists. The younger generations are more likely to participate than the older ones and will question the artists' intent rather than dismiss it.

## *Expectations*

After numerous accounts of rejection from potential love interests, *Expectations*, succumbs to the breaking point of sanity for myself. Fed up with conformity and idealism, I typographically investigate and compare descriptive words indicative of a female, both derogatory and pleasant.

I wanted to increase my knowledge of time-based media and vent my on-going anger of the male expectations of women. In response to this anger, I created this motion graphics piece called *Expectations*. As part of my process, I took a series of words that correspond to names of what you call a woman, pleasant and derogatory, and defined each. I have a very strong attachment to the definitive meaning of every word that I'm working with. I have used this method in my graphic design process to convey the meaning of a clients business visually by defining the words associated with their company name to create a logo and brand identity based on the meaning. I also like to define words for myself, so I know I am conveying the right message in anything that I do. This interest in definitive meanings reminds me of a memory I have of my grandmother. When I was younger I used to always say, "I'm bored." Her response would be, "If you're bored, go read a dictionary." Funny thing is, I would and copy the definitions down on paper. I would get down to aardvark and find myself not bored anymore.

*Expectations* was inspired by Bruce Mau, a graphic designer based in Toronto, most noted for his rebranding of the MOMA in 2011. His motion graphics campaign for Arizona State University, shown below in a video still in Figure 4, sparked my interest, and I wanted to emulate his transitions one frame to the next in my piece, while going back to my comfort zone of designing graphically.



Figure 4: Bruce Mau, *ASU Campaign*. Video still image, Internet, 2011.

Jacob Gilbreath, a digital design student of Oklahoma State University, created a kinetic typography piece based on Conan O'Brien's farewell speech to NBC, shown as an image still below in Figure 5, was another form of inspiration for *Expectations*.



Figure 5: Jacob Gilbreath, *Conan O'Brien's Farewell Speech to NBC*. Video still image, Internet, 2011.

I never attempted motion graphics before and I was instantly discouraged. I didn't know how to use the software and loathed the fact that key frames were involved in After Effects. This instantly brought back feelings of frustration from my undergrad, when I was a computer animation and graphic design double major.

I introduced aspects of color theory in this digital work, shown below in Figure 6. For the definition of pleasant terms associated with a female; the text was white, representing purity, cleanliness and sterility. In the second half of the design, I used red for the derogatory definitions to represent anger and sexuality.



Figure 6; *Expectations*. Video still image, Photo by Author, 2011.

I received good feedback at final critique, but I was told it had been done before and I was asked where did I see this being viewed if I had no budget constraints. I'm a printer by trade and I have worked with large format signage before and there would be no limit to size or technology. I am truly inspired by Barbara Kruger's and Jenny Holzer's text installations, if I had the capabilities, I would fill an entire room with adhesive vinyl showcasing the definitions of this piece and that would probably spark a new line of work for me since I love typography. It may happen in the future with greater experience and networking capabilities.

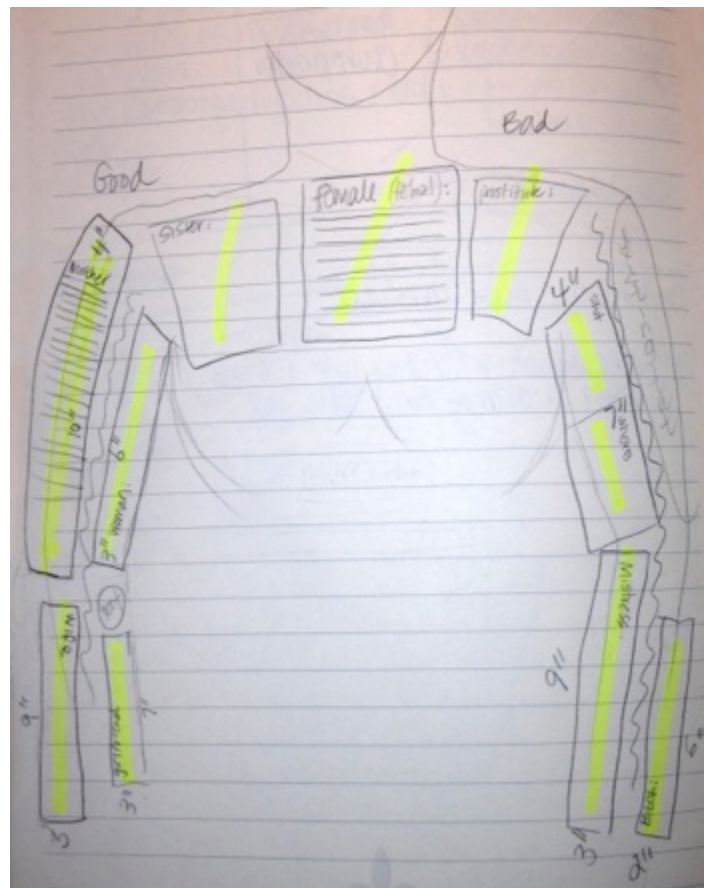
## *Blood Lining*

With an intense attachment to the words associated with pleasant and derogatory names of a female as seen in *Expectations*, *Blood Lining* is an experiment on the tolerance of pain associated with tattooing and the meaning of carrying around these words for all to see — as a badge of honor, or scarlet letter, for instance. Through my own personal correlation between depression and tattooing, *Blood Lining*, brings back painful memories of why I adopted tattooing as a coping method for depression in my personal life.

Once I presented this video for *Expectations*, I was done with it for the time being until I was introduced to Mary Coble's work, *Blood Script*. The Brooklyn Museum describes *Blood Script* as, "...a live performance piece that took place at the PULSE Art Fair at Pier 40 in New York City, New York in 2008. The artist meticulously documented inscriptions from three previous Marker (DC, NYC and Madrid) Performances and compiled a list of over 200 hateful words and phrases written...by viewers, in various languages. For *Blood Script*, the artist had 75 of the most common words tattooed onto her skin, without ink, in a very ornate script" (Connersmith).

I was floored by what I saw and immediately made an appointment with my local tattoo artist. I didn't want to appropriate the same concept as Coble, I wanted to wear these words of anger as pages of a dictionary. As part of my process, I defined the words associated with the work to make sure I am correctly conveying the definitive meaning of my concept. I had 10-12 words that I wanted to get blood-lined; the process of tattooing with no ink, just the person's blood, or water is typically used to create an implied outline.

To determine placement, I measured sections of my body where I wanted the words to be placed depending on their length and width, as seen in Figure 7. I was very particular about how the text was going to be positioned, so I prepared printouts of the definitions in a specific font for my tattoo artist.



**Figure 7: Mock-up sketch for blood lining tattoo placement, Photo by Author, 2011.**

The last time I was tattooed was about ten years prior to this session. The pain and healing process was a reminiscent reminder of the pain I went through many years before and the reason why I originally started tattooing resurfaced again.

I went into a deep depression for six years after the death of my mother in 1996. To cope with the depression, I inflicted pain on myself by getting up to eight tattoos within a three-year period, two of those taking up significant space on my body. During this time, I could withstand up to ten hours or more of continuous tattooing due to the trauma associated with her passing. This trauma left my body and my emotional state so numb, that this type of actual pain didn't hurt, it was a form of body scarification for me, a way of healing my emotional pain through actual pain.

The documentation photos of the *Blood Lining* tattoo session was compiled and put into a coffee table book form. During the healing process of the blood-lined tattoo of "slut" and "whore", photos were taken to show the progression of healing. What some people don't understand; blood lining uses no ink, so when the tattoo is completely healed the after some time, the tattoo is no longer visible, as seen in the photos in Figure 8. This process has become the metaphor of my healing, both internally and externally.



**slut (sluht):** 1. a dirty, slovenly woman.  
2. an immoral or dissolute woman; prostitute.  
**whore (hôr):** 1. a woman who engages  
in promiscuous sexual intercourse, usually  
for money; prostitute; harlot; strumpet.

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Figure 8: *Blood Lining*. Documentation photos, Photos by Author, 2011

## *Digital Composite*

*Digital Composite* is a digital experiment on personal identity. I recovered photographs of five generations of my maternal lineage, which include myself, digitized the photographs and extracted the figures from the background. I lowered the transparency so I could align, size and place the photographs in descending order generationally, to fit each other's facial features. At the end, I converted the photographs to grayscale to represent a dream-like state, memory and age. *Digital Composite* takes an emotional journey through over a hundred years of history and five generations of my maternal lineage to discover a blueprint of my future self.

Since my father committed suicide when I was young, my nationality is still unknown. For social purposes, I associate my nationality with my maternal lineage since I have never interacted with the paternal side of my family. With the passing of my mother, there is now a gap in the lineage and I have no basis for comparison for what I will look like when I mature.

Depression, identity and isolation are emotional manifestations of my internal conflicts with family and tradition. I crave familial love; yet reject it in the same instance as an emotional barrier to protect myself from additional loss and pain. I realize I have to compromise my selfishness to allow others access to me emotionally in order to experience being loved, but there is a vulnerability that is associated with allowing anyone that close. I have never allowed myself to experience this and I feel intimidated by this type of vulnerability and its uncontrollable aspect in my life.

The full weight of this digital experiment with personal identity manifested itself when all the layers of photographs produced this composite. The emotional charge presented by the composite, shown in Figure 9, produced a visceral response that compelled me to share this

experience with my mentor. In that conversation, I was first exposed to the term catharsis, which is the process of releasing or purging, providing relief from strong, repressed emotions. This new term began to fuel many of the conceptual ideas that was manifesting itself in front of me.



**Figure 9: *Digital Composite*. Photo by Author, 2011.**

## *Composite*

*Composite* is a three-dimensional representation of *Digital Composite*. The original image was pixelated to further distort the recognizable features of a true form to represent memory, or in this case, a projection of my future self. *Composite* is made up of six hundred and sixty-three, die-cut, glued and hand constructed, 1.25” cubes in five shades, consisting of white, black and gray paper.

My intention was to break away from the digital realm and integrate a more hands on approach. I was motivated to make the cubes when a fellow colleague mentioned she had access to a die-cut machine that cuts and scores the paper. Artist WBK has influenced this work by explaining the difference between working with the textile and the digital, shown in a Facebook conversation in Figure 10.

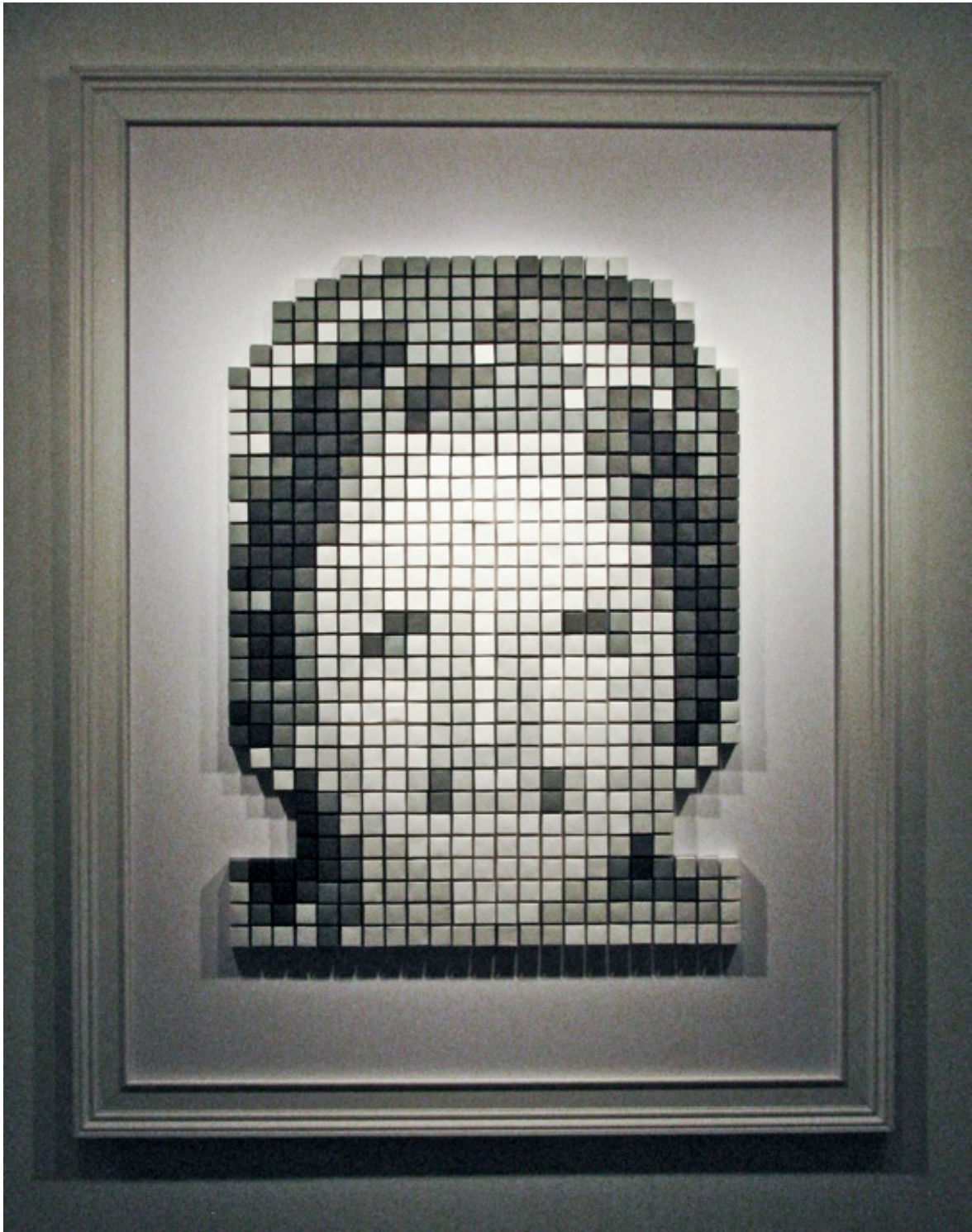


**Figure 10: Facebook screenshot of conversation with artist, Photo by the Author, 2012.**

The connections between the cubes in the grid format represent the simplest form of visual communication — the pixel. With my background in graphic design, I am drawn to perfection and detail-orientated craft and I find myself attracted to the grid because of its exact angles and infinite continuation with time. The cubes are arranged in such a way that gives the

composition a pictorial syntax to the original image. When viewed from a distance the composition visually merges into the original image.

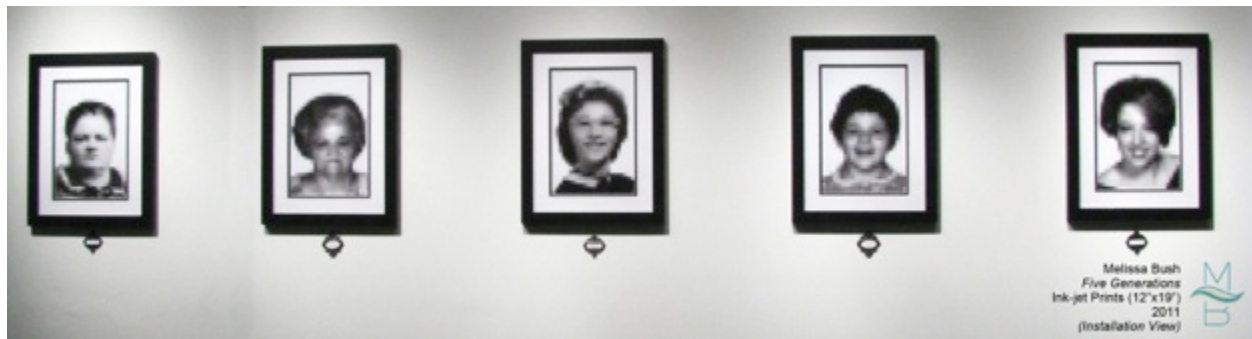
The piece is visually interesting and lures the viewer into the piece by the sheer construction of all the boxes, shown in Figure 11. It is important to note it's hard to talk about this piece because I don't have a personal connection to it. Whether its because the process of reducing the original to a non-existent form that now becomes a sculptural element where the focus is placed on construction separates me from the piece.



**Figure 11:** *Composite*. Photo by Author, 2011.

## *Five Generations*

To further investigate the concepts of *Digital Composite*, I incorporated the loss of memory as a platform in *Five Generations*. In the installation of the piece, shown in Figure 12, the new photographs are 12” x 19” digital, ink-jets prints, matted and framed and displayed from left to right in ascending order. Underneath each frame is an ornate nameplate, presenting each woman’s married name, with their maiden name in parentheses and their relationship to me, i.e.: great-great grandmother, etc.



**Figure 12: *Five Generations*. Photo by Author, 2011.**

I utilized the same technique used to pixelate the photographs in the previous investigations with personal identity, but show each layer separately to signify the importance of each woman. I added a traditional effect to the frames by including an ornate nameplate with each woman’s married name and maiden name in parentheses. Its important to interject and mention that looking at these women and seeing both names, implies that women are not validated until they are associated with a man. The fifth photo of myself displays just my maiden name in the nameplate and feels desolate compared to the other four generations.

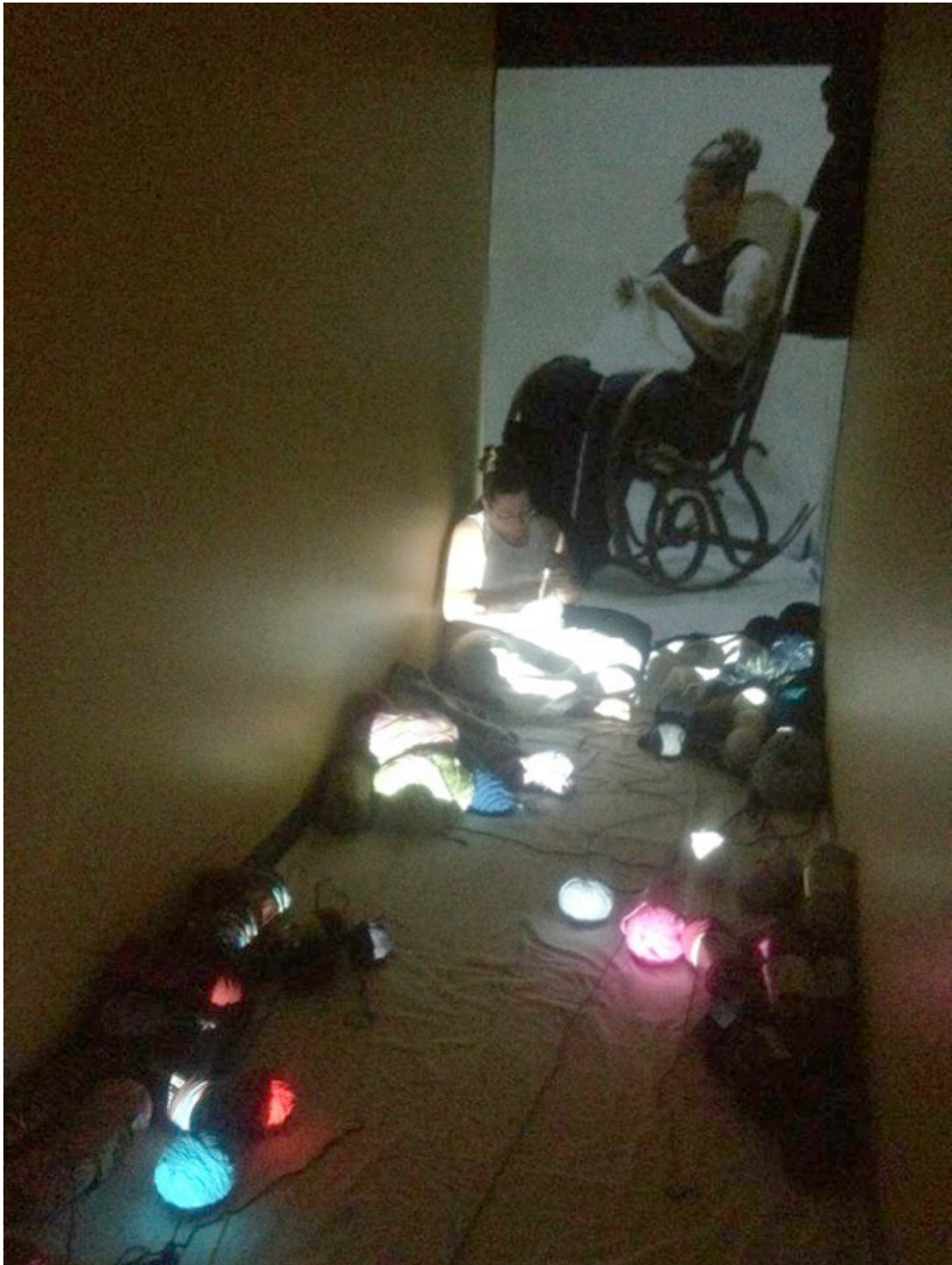


Most women raised families in abject poverty in the coalmine town of Shenandoah, Pennsylvania, where my family is from, in the early 1900s. I wanted to show my respect for the tenacity of my maternal lineage and their tradition by creating this body of work. Many of their memories have been lost and not passed down just as their artifacts and personal effects were sold or dismissed as garbage and discarded. Memory, tradition and family are more important to me now more than before when I was a reckless teenager because I have questions about being a woman, a wife, a mother. Because of my circumstances, I fear marriage and motherhood because of the absence of family and traditions. How good of a wife or mother could I be if I do not have these values instilled in me from my family?

I felt proud but still empty after creating this work. I can recreate and manipulate the photographs of my family, but I can never get their physical self back and ask these important life questions.

## *Absence (Performance)*

*Absence* is a performance that reiterates the foundations of tradition and how being shown a craft that is passed down from generation to generation is non-existent in my situation with the absence of my mother. This performance was staged in a tight, narrow hallway, with the lights off, only lit by a projection of myself crocheting a blanket in a rocking chair, shown below in Figure 13. I sat in the front of the rocking chair projection on a walkway of white linens, surrounded by balls of yarn to represent the desolate, private space I feel when I crochet in the evening.



**Figure 13:** *Absence*. Performance image still. Photo by Author, 2012.

Over the winter months, I learned how to crochet by my mentor. I was instantly attracted to the repetition of the hand movements and how time passed by and became a key factor in the construction of an artifact. I became obsessed with making a scarf in certain amount of time and if I took too long, I got mad at myself for getting too slow.

Crochet became a logistics solution to my art making practice. Storage of the material could be put in bags or boxes and easily transported. If I was working on a piece it could be stashed in my purse and worked on during my lunch break. The cost of yarn for crochet is fairly inexpensive. The low-fi quality of the traditional medium played a nostalgic role and connection to my maternal lineage and my childhood of craft making. Most importantly, my hands were busy at all times. After a long day of pushing a mouse around and my wrists stuck in one place on a keyboard, my hands came to life and did the work in the evening. Janice Paine, freelance writer of contemporary arts and crafts, also the program manager for United Arts Council of Collier County in Naples, Florida; interviewed artist Frances Trombly who states, “Behind every object in the world, whether mass-produced or individually crafted in an artist’s studio, there is a pair of hands that deserves to be celebrated” (35). It was a great release of the mental exhaustion I was experiencing during the day due to teaching, school, and my studio practice. However, I started to notice how much of a recluse I was becoming.

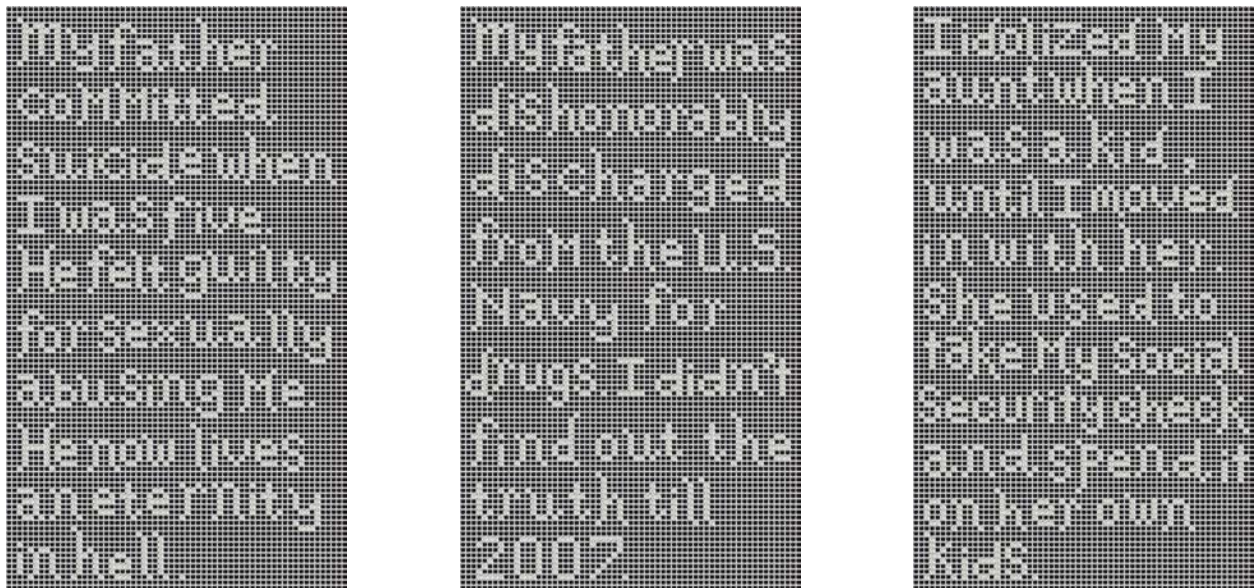
I started to ponder on the idea of desolation. Through my experiments and investigations I found out who my family was, but I still did not know who I was. The repetition and meditative properties of crochet became an important aspect in my art practice. It started to represent something more than creating an artifact and the more I crocheted, the more consumed I became with the process.

I was asked to unravel the crochet and record myself doing it. The unraveling process sparked a conversation about the Greek myth of Sisyphus and how my process reflected that of the King that was punished to roll a boulder up a hill, only to watch it roll back down and repeat the process for eternity. This punishment reflected my internal conflicts with myself of my OCD desires to overcome the loss of my childhood due to my abuse traumas. During this creation process, I felt stuck in the middle of a world where I have the past trials and I have the new work I was making, but I couldn't make a connection between the two and I didn't see a solution to an end.

I believe the unrefined expectation of the performance was a hindrance on the overall interpretation. I feel since I did not have an artistic influence associated or referenced during the creation process, this was also a detriment to the piece. During the performance, if the audience walked in front of the projection, their shadow would be cast into my private space. I was indecisive on interacting with my audience and in turn, the participants didn't know whether to interact with me. In the future, creating a plan to incorporate the audience in my performance will make this work stronger.

## *Digital Crochet*

*Digital Crochet* is digital representations of filet crochet panels containing typographic memoirs of repressed abuse trauma from my childhood. I used this digital process as a means to determine proper language, wording and spacing before a panel was to be filet crocheted by hand as shown in Figure 14.



**Figure 14:** *Digital Crochet*. Photo by author, 2012.

It is important to note that filet crochet is a form of crochet that uses only two stitches, and instead of yarn, a smaller thread is used along with a smaller needle. Also, filet crochet references the simplest form of communication, binary code, by activating a square on (closed) or off (open). I wanted to keep the size consistent and restricted for each panel to measure sixty-

three boxes wide by one hundred and eight boxes tall. There is no significance to the number of boxes.

To make the digital crochet, I started a panel of filet crochet by hand and photographed the open and closed squares that make up the grid in the panel. Enhanced, sharpened and clarified in Photoshop, I saved the images and used them as symbols in Illustrator to construct the panels digitally. The first panel took the longest amount of time, approximately six to eight hours, since an alphabet wasn't created prior to the start of the digital versions. Once an alphabet was established and common words were repeated in other panels, time was significantly reduced to four hours or less per panel of digital representations.

I had very specific memories that I wanted to create with the filet crochet. The content of each panel is extremely personal and are real accounts of my abusive childhood. Due to the graphic nature of these events, I have forced myself to forget most of them to be able to carry on with every day tasks. This work opened up an internal investigation with repression. Most of the phrases were too long to fit in the restricted size I wanted to adhere to, so they were set aside for later use.

The digital representations were an integral role of the editing process to determine proper language, wording and spacing before a panel was to be crafted by hand. Even though the digital versions are quickly executed, the time invested in an actual panel crafted by hand is more valuable and significant to me. Labor and time are two parallels in this body of work and the digital representations do not carry the same weight, they are merely for the purpose of editing. "Much of contemporary art is machine-made—computers and digital imaging have forever changed the face of artmaking. Some artists' choice (including my own) to return to a handmade

aesthetic is significant in the light of these changes. The choice to use craft may be a reaction against the ubiquity of the digital aesthetic in art” (Poser 81). Aesthetically, *Digital Crochet* could stand on its own as an installation on large monitors, but without seeing the material and the time that is invested in each piece in person, the digital lacks the tactility of the handmade.



### *Stitch-n-Bitch (Performance)*

*Stitch-n-Bitch* is a social interactive, participatory performance of women crocheting in a group setting. The active space was warm and inviting with a large, floor rug, side table with a table lamp, and benches for the participants to sit and crochet, while I sat cadi-cornered facing everyone in a rocking chair. I crocheted a large, white blanket, while six panels of digital crochet was projected on the wall in the center of the gathering as seen in Figure 15.



Figure 15: *Stitch-n-Bitch*. Performance image still. Photo by author, 2012.

I introduced *Stitch-n-Bitch* in the fall of 2012. I was still questioning the personal content of *Digital Crochet* on whether it was appropriate and too revealing. For this performance, I recreated a series of song lyrics in digital crochet called *Easier to Run* by Linkin Park, because it still alluded to my personal traumas, but vague enough to leave room for audience interpretation. I have been struggling with conveying my concept of time and labor associated with crochet in a performance setting and how long it takes to do and how to visually present this without words.

Since the outcome of the performance, *Absence*, didn't meet my expectations or have any expectations, I was determined to do another performance. This time I wanted to be approachable and open to social interactions with my participants, not necessarily the audience in this case. I wanted to recreate this social group of women, sitting around bonding with each other in a gallery setting as a commentary on the social interactivity between women over a traditional craft medium. Periodically during the performance, I would look up at the participants and noticed their heads down, feverishly engaged with their yarn, sub-consciously counting stitches and conversing at the same time.

It reminded me of the term obedience, a submission to the act of crochet. In fact crochet, or any type of fabric medium, has this quality to it, where you are "sucked in" to its repetitive and meditative qualities of creating an object many generations have before you. It felt like a reenactment of these knitting groups from the 1940s that got together and made artifacts and personal effects to be sold or serve a purpose in the home while the men were off at war.

I welcome all opinions and criticisms when it comes to discussing the effectiveness of my art. I had some negative reactions to the performance because of the exclusion of the audience that was meant to view the interaction between the women of the performance only. Too many

elements were going on at the same time, the social interactions between the women that participated in the performance and the projection was difficult to read on the wall because of the sunlight coming in from outside. A particular criticism was from a female professor who couldn't stand the fact, as I was talking to her, I kept crocheting and it reminded her of her grandmother who would do the same thing in her presence. These types of reactions, whether negative or positive, I embrace. If I'm causing that type of emotional response, I must be doing something right. However, with my continued frustration with conveying the message of time and labor in this performance, I made an executive decision to exclude the performance from my final thesis exhibition.

## HOME SWEET HOME

*Home Sweet Home* is an internal investigation of memory and repressed abuse trauma of my childhood represented in the domestic craft medium of filet crochet. Unfortunately, the term “Craft often inhabits a marginalized and frequently feminized and domesticated realm among the modes of production often done for and within the home, and runs the risk of being thought of as handiwork or busywork”...”question(ing) longstanding divisions between domestic production and fine art” (Poser 81).

It is important to note that filet crochet is a form of crochet that uses only two stitches, and instead of yarn, a smaller white thread is used along with a smaller needle. Also, filet crochet references the simplest form of communication, binary code, by activating a square on (closed) or off (open) and is created in an infinite grid format. The three framed panels, shown in Figure 16, each measure thirty-two inches wide, by forty-four inches high and are adhered against a flat black mat for easy visibility and placed behind glass.

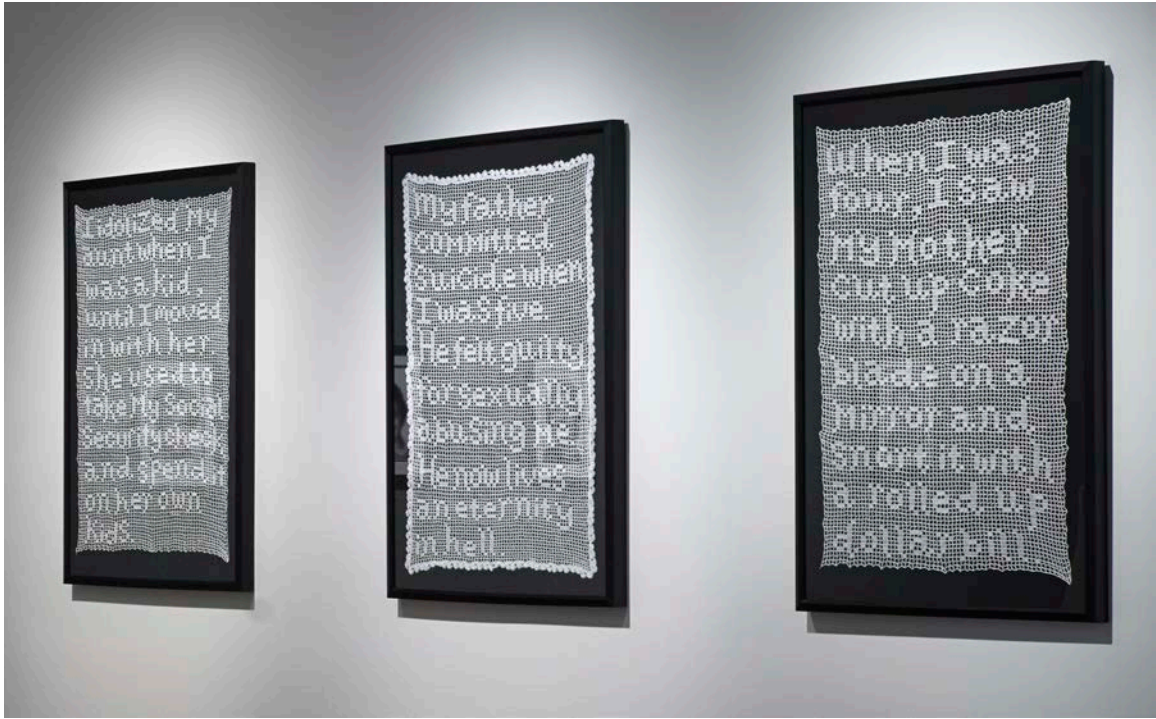


Figure 16: *Home Sweet Home*. Photo by author, 2013.

Once a digital crochet panel is successfully edited, I then move on to the labor-intensive handmade process of creating each panel. Every waking hour not consumed by work or school was spent on these panels. After a long day, I would work on these at night in the privacy of my home, no television, just alone in my apartment lit by a lamp. The process of creating these panels provided a sense of safety, warmth and meditation against the harsh subject matter. The tactility of the material and the labor of my hands subconsciously provided a satisfying need, for this work had finally come to fruition.

The first handmade panel I created in filet crochet took approximately three months or more. The subject matter had to deal with the sexual abuse and suicide of my father at age five. I chose to use crochet as a medium to represent the softer side of me as a person internally while

juxtaposed against the harsh reality of my experiences to represent my callused demeanor. The second panel was about my mother and only took two weeks to construct. I was taken back by the short amount of time, but shortly realized this may have been due to the fact I forgave my mother for what she had done when I was twelve. With the wave of excitement of the quick turn around time of the second panel, I was disappointed the final panel took almost two months to complete.

Olek, a crochet artist based in New York, has been the main inspiration for all of my crochet pieces. I've messaged her on Facebook to ask her about her stitches and so on, shown below in Figures 17 and 18.



**Figure 17: Facebook screenshot of conversation with artist, Photo by the Author, 2012.**

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September 24, 2012



**Melissa Bush**

6:54pm

Olek,

This is Melissa Bush, 2013 MFA Candidate at the University of Central Florida. I was wondering if you have ever outsourced any of your crochet work? I have some filet crochet that I'm working on and it takes forever and I'm getting reprimanded for it for not producing enough work. Any suggestions will be greatly appreciated.

Best



**Crocheted Olek**

7:13pm

just get faster in it. i crochet about 16-17 hrs a day. there is nothign else besides making art. there are some tricks like scissors you use, even a chair but you have to find it on ur own. and good diet and excercises to keep the body strong!

good luck

**Figure 18: Facebook screenshot of conversation with artist, Photo by the Author, 2012.**

I can truly understand why she makes panels of crochet and pieces them together later, the sheer size and transporting this blanket is exhausting.

This body of work was ground breaking for myself personally. I have been burdened with these thoughts for so long, desperate to get rid of them. After the completion of the first panel about my father, I had an intense feeling of release and relief. My memories and repressed abuse trauma now exist in a frame or box where I leave them for others to interpret and ponder, they no longer define me and now I've finally found who I am through this process.

## *The Secrets That Women Keep*

*The Secrets That Women Keep* are embroidered phrases of repressed abuse trauma associated not only with my childhood, but with domestic violence as well. All nine cases, shown in Figure 19, are sized fourteen inches square by four inches deep and are installed in a three by three grid format. Each case is lit by nine LED lights that provide visibility but doesn't take away from the interest of the work. The phrases were embroidered with transparent thread as a metaphor for secrets.



**Figure 19:** *The Secrets That Women Keep*. Photo by author, 2013.



Phrases that were made in *Digital Crochet* that didn't get used due to language or size were used here. I was having difficulty communicating the trauma, I wanted to have a well-rounded storyline, but they were too long for the *Home Sweet Home* panels. I felt I was limiting myself by only using one traditional craft medium and wanted to introduce another that I was akin to, but I was intimidated by adding a different medium at such a late stage.

I was grappling with many decisions on content for *Home Sweet Home* — what was important? I wanted to make them strictly about physical and sexual abuse, finally realizing abuse is abuse and some events needed to exist but not be seen. This is where the transparent thread was successful representing symbolism in *The Secrets That Women Keep*. I could really say how I felt without restrictions on size or content. I chose the thread for the text as a metaphor for secrets. The phrases are not meant to be readable immediately or from a specific distance, they exist for me.

For the viewer, the thread also gives the opportunity to invest time into the labor that was involved with the embroidery. “Karen Reimer, a Chicago-based artist who frequently uses embroidery to explore themes of value and labor in her work” (Poser 85)...states, “I was raised to think that work is of value in and of itself, whether or not it has a product. Using hand embroidery is extravagantly inefficient in terms of time and labor. So I end up with an object whose value is the work that's been put into it” (Hung & Magliaro 122). In relation to accessibility, the depth of the display case enclosed by a glass frame still provides a safety layer from the viewer completely having access to me emotionally.

This body of work took me through a roller coaster of emotions. During this process, I remembered two specific events that were erased from my memory, both of the memories

involved being choked in an abusive and deathly manner. The idea of completely forgetting this abuse of the same caliber terrified me and honestly, terrified doesn't even scratch the surface of how I feel about this repressed memory. Scientifically, there has been many studies regarding repressed memory and a new term called 'motivated forgetting':

“According to psychoanalytic theory, repression operates unconsciously on threatening mental contents, especially those related to primitive sexual and aggressive instincts, so that the person can avoid conscious conflict and anxiety. Moreover, the ‘repressed’ material must continue to affect the person’s ongoing experience, thought and action implicitly, outside of awareness (Freud called this ‘the return of the repressed’). Finally, repressed memories have to be recoverable (this was what psychoanalytic interpretations was all about)” (Kihlstrom 6, 502).

In reaction to this statement, Anderson and Levy of University of Oregon’s Department of Psychology, state this about their study on motivated forgetting.

“Not all scholars believe that Freud intended repression to be an exclusively unconscious process...when people encounter reminders to memories that they do not wish to think about, what effect does pushing the memory out of awareness have on their later ability to recall it? People confront this situation all the time, whether one’s goal is to simply avoid a mildly distracting thought, or to prevent oneself from being overwhelmed by unpleasant reminders...With time, and repeated effort, trying to keep an unwanted memory out of awareness does under

some circumstances render that memory less accessible, even when people want to recall it” (Anderson and Levy 6, 502-503).

## *Infinity Blanket*

*Infinity Blanket* is an artifact produced from two previous performances, *Absence* and *Stitch-n-Bitch*. The blanket is a representation of time, labor, warmth and safety and makes a connection between the historical, traditional and maternal longing associated with my work. The blanket was displayed, draped over the rocking chair I've previously performed with, flowing over the edges of the pedestal, completely open to the viewing public, as shown in Figure 20.



**Figure 20: *Infinity Blanket*. Photo by author, 2013.**

No glass or acrylic display case confining its infinite dimensions. My intention is to continue working on this blanket until I am physically unable; it is an ongoing and open-ended representation to the dedication of my maternal lineage. Oliver Herring, a German artist, has influenced *Infinity Blanket*, because he started knitting to mourn the death of his friend, "...Ethyl Eichelberger, a transvestite, actor, and performance artist who killed himself in 1991 when he discovered he had AIDS..." (Sichel 113). Herring continued with his knitting practice and with "...what began as a liberating experience took a physical toll on Herring. After close to a decade of such repetitive activity, a pinched nerve in his arm from a slipped disk led him to put aside knitting..." (Sheets 97). In an article in September 2009 ARTnews, Hilarie M. Sheets interviewed Herring where he stated, "The knitting was very diaristic and therapeutic at first and freed up my mind to meditate" (97).

I started this blanket two years ago when my best friend just found out she was pregnant and I wanted to make her a handmade blanket for the baby. *Infinity blanket* started out as a test piece of stitches. Again to reiterate, I would do most of my crochet at night, privately in my home. This blanket was actually made while I sat in bed. It was much easier to make in the winter months; working with acrylic yarn in the summer is unbearable. I have noticed the larger I get with the blanket the harder it is to transport and maneuver. One section currently was put together in five panels. Working on individual smaller panels speeds up the creation process, is easier to transport and can be worked on outside of the home.

The previous performances did not translate the importance of the size and weight of maneuvering the blanket back and forth and the traditional aspect of making a blanket by hand instead of a commercial produced object. Color was an important decision in the piece. I selected

to work with white acrylic yarn so it will show the dirt and grime that will collect during the life of the piece. The rocking chair itself symbolizes the memory and nostalgia of my lineage and its own ties to the maternal. To come to a conclusion whether or not *Infinity Blanket* is, or will be successful, can't be determined at this point.

## *Five Generations, 2013*

I felt including *Five Generations* in my thesis exhibition was vital to the connection between a woman's role within a family unit and domesticity. However, the original images of sharp, rigid pixels felt cold and disconnected from the rest of the pieces. The pixels uniquely play an important role in relaying the overall feeling of how I relate to the maternal side of my family. Viewing the pixels up close provides an intimate experience between each individual box; however, due to the segmented nature of the pixels the personal connection is faded. In contrast, giving myself distance from the frames provides a familiar place of foggy memories where I have to squint to focus.

*Five Generations, 2013*, shown below in Figure 21, is a continuation of the original. I have included a crocheted border on the mat of the frame to create emphasis, as it's juxtaposed against a perfect digital print of pixels. The correlation between the soft and loose crochet displayed with the perfect, crisp edges of the digital print is unified by the elements of both pieces displaying a square grid format. *Five Generations, 2013* is where the analog meets the digital.



**Figure 21:** *Five Generations, 2013*. Photo by author, 2013.

## CONCLUSION

Oddly enough, the work I've done throughout the graduate program is clearly not as difficult as what I'm going here; having to talk about the work and how it relates to folklore, the history of the craft movement and metaphors and symbolism. Naturally, this is not how I operate as an artist. I'm inspired by materials, solutions, other artists' work, or items I pass by in the store. The work that I have produced during this program has my soul in each stitch and pixel, every concept comes from a personal place, regardless if it stems internally or externally.

I have been criticized and questioned, "Is my work art or art therapy"? I believe all artists make art as some form of catharsis for the artist. We (artists) are compelled to create; it's our muse, our comfort zone, a place where we can play or purge. Many things trigger creativity; loss, gain, transition and growth, among many other factors. The process may be therapeutic (for me), but the product is art and some artists use the process as art as well.

When I attended the University of Arizona from 2001-2003, I took ART119 — Contemporary Art & Theory. Our required text was, *Art with a Difference, Looking at Difficult and Unfamiliar Art*, by Diepeveen and Van Laar. This book addresses many of the questions viewers; scholarly or not, have, when addressing a "difficult" piece of art:

"Duchamp's *Fountain*, a porcelain urinal displayed at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, clearly asks viewers to do something other than urinate in it. It asks them to consider it as a work of art, a step that leads to yet another question: *Why* should this be considered art? The answer is disarming and, to some, infuriating: this is a work of art because Duchamp (the artist) *decided* that it was a work of art" (98-99).



I struggled at the beginning of this journey because I didn't know how to incorporate my graphic design knowledge to make it my own and start using it in my art practice. Just by curiosity, I stumbled upon crochet and it became a passion for me. This methodic, repetitive, obsession is comforting and satisfies the nurturing absence of a maternal presence in my life. I feel confident that this will be something I will be doing for some time to come. My past will always be a burden but I no longer allow it to define me.

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