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The Door in the Threshold

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A thesis  
presented to  
the faculty of the Department of Art and Design  
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art

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by  
Ani Volkan  
May 2010

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Ralph Slatton, Chair  
Pat Mink  
Catherine Murray

Keywords: memory, heritage, impressions, stains, stitch, quilts

## ABSTRACT

The Door in the Threshold

by

Ani Volkan

This paper is the supporting document for the Master of Fine Arts exhibition, *The Door in the Threshold*, held in the Slocumb Galleries at East Tennessee State University from March 15-19, 2010. The exhibition contains twelve pieces of artwork, mounted on the wall. The paper expands upon such themes as memory and family as explored by the work in the gallery. The title of both the paper and show reference the impact of my Armenian heritage on my creative process. Doors in Armenian folklore were sacred places containing the threshold to the spiritual. Thus, my pieces are meant to become doors to the threshold of my past. Also discussed in the paper are the influence of the quilt form and connections to the work of artists Arshile Gorky, Whitfield Lovell, and Karen Hampton.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my parents for making my education possible and for encouraging me to go far with it.

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I would like to thank my committee members Pat and Catherine for helping guide my work and for pushing it to become better.

Finally, I would like to thank my chair Ralph for giving me the freedom to explore what I found inspiring and for believing in me. Not only are you an amazing thesis editor, but also you helped turn a former painter into a versatile printmaker.

## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this paper to my grandparents. Although they are gone, their life and impact will always be felt and remembered. For the richness of my heritage and the meaning of my past, I owe them much.

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CHAPTER 1  
INTRODUCTION, SINEWS OF SELF

“The sinew of identity compels the imagination; our ancestors find us as we find them.”

-Peter Balakian

The exploration into the sinews of my identity fueled my creative process. It was this discovery of ancestors that I was seeking, truly hoping to find that connection.

My Armenian-American heritage has a profound influence on my work, instilling a love of history and family and a value of memory. The history of the Armenian people is one of persecution, genocide, and dispersal. Dispersal and genocide truly impact the Armenian psyche causing enormous value to be placed upon interconnectedness and remembrance. The need to connect with my Armenian heritage led to further exploration of my family with at look a how my grandmother’s quilts unfold in my life. Using stitching and a more abstract application of quilting, I illustrate the impact of this history. I print old photographs onto cloth fragments, then quilt and stitch. Stitches are not only used to assemble the pieces but also serve as a drawing tool to enhance the designs. I weave history and memory, where fragments of cloth parallel fragments of memory. I seek to create an active past, which is celebrated, although not directly experienced.

I keep this past alive by creating works that are objects of memory, serving as memory enhancers. These memories are rich with symbolism, folklore, and superstition, where doors and thresholds hold spirits of the past. The quilts become narratives used to hold presence and express ideas of memories. In the following chapters I describe my Armenian roots, the historical and cultural influence, as well as detailing some more contemporary artistic influences. I detail

the narrative of my grandmother's quilt in my work and the vital role fabric plays. Finally, I discuss the exploration of the pieces as dealing with the concepts of memory and also the processes involved in my work. I show the physical and symbolic uses of staining, and sewing: how the stitch "draws" together. In discussing the vibrant and sorrowful history of the Armenian people, I begin with the traditional opening to an Armenian folktale: "Once there was and there was not..." (Wingate 220).

## CHAPTER 2

### THE IMPORTANCE OF HISTORY AND WHY WE MUST NEVER FORGET

“For the Armenian-American child, entry into Armenian culture presents yet another set of challenges. It is a journey haunted by memories and traditions of his elders, and a past he may not often understand” (Wingate 222). For me, to gain an awareness of the Armenian culture really means to gain self-awareness. I am the young Armenian-American described in the quote, unknitting a past that overlays my identity. I am connected to a culture that values remembrance of the past above all else, and Armenians have long memories and a legacy that spans back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. (Bobelian 20).

The development of my work began first with an exploration of my heritage. My father is an Armenian immigrant from Istanbul, Turkey. He arrived in this country to finish his education, met my mother while in school, and stayed to make the United States his new home. By choosing to stay in this country, my father left his family and his culture behind. As a result, I was raised as an American, without the Armenian upbringing of grandparents and an extended family. I was quite unaware of this whole other side to myself until recently when I began researching the Armenian Genocide. What started out as a personal inquiry into my past, eventually became the driving force behind my work. To gain a true understanding of my work, it is important to understand where I began and what I discovered as I found my way back to Armenia.

The Armenians were subjected to several attempts at genocide under the Ottoman Turk rule. It was not until World War I that they actually succeeded. On April 24, 1915, the Ottoman

Turkish government started to ethnically cleanse their country of the Armenian people and forcibly removed them from their ancestral homelands. The Ottomans began by arresting the intellectual leaders of the Armenian community, sending them to the countryside to be slaughtered before turning their attention to the Armenian villages. “Armenia’s leading men, the patriarchs, community leaders, intellectuals, and even artists, were lost for a generation” (Bobelian 26). The Armenian men in the villages were rounded up by Ottoman death squads and killed, leaving the women, children, and elderly to be marched from their homes to the Syrian desert. One American missionary described the plight of the deportees:

Sometimes, the Ottomans killed with bullets. Other times, they used axes, knives, or clubs to bludgeon victims or chop off body parts. In coastal cities and rivers, they drowned Armenians by dumping them into deep waters or forcing those who could not swim into the water. At one point the number of corpses in the Euphrates clogged the river (Bobelian 26-27).

The Ottomans killed as many as 1.5 million Armenians and evicted 500,000 from lands occupied by their ancestors for 2,500 years (Bobelian 28). Even in the midst of a world war, the plight of the “starving Armenians” was a popular charity here in America and abroad. But with the formation of a new democratic secular Turkish republic in 1920, there began the systematic denial of the Armenian Genocide by the Turkish government. Also, with the Armenian Genocide came the absorption of Armenian lands into the Turkish Republic and the reduction of Armenia to one fourth of its original size. The genocide caused the widespread dispersal of Armenians, as there is an estimated three million in exile from their ancestral homeland (Bobelian 27).

The Armenian Genocide is still central in the lives of the Armenians today. Its memory remains vivid as the stories of those who are lost are passed down from generation to generation.

Because the world has forgotten the Armenians, we must be the keepers of our once rich and vibrant homeland and we are taught never to forget. For many Armenians, the “ideology remains that of a sojourner”, always feeling as if they will return to their ancestral Armenia once more (Bakalian 53). The continuing denial of the Turkish government has caused the Genocide to become a wound that will never heal and one that still inflicts continual pain. “In sum, the Genocide is shared by all three generations; it is the quintessential Armenian experience of the twentieth century” (Bakalian 353).

The Armenian Genocide had also come to be a defining point for me in terms of creating my artwork. Because so many Armenians are in exile, no longer having a common land, their strongest connection comes from their shared history and tradition. The physical homeland is gone but the memory still remains and memory is valued above all else. For Armenians, it is not simply a matter of history, but rather who we are; even the young have old memories. This attitude toward memory and the nature of memory is the focus of my work. It is the use of memory as a bridge to the past that ties all that I explore, especially the connection with my family. As one Armenian states: “If you meet any Armenians it’s like meeting a member of your family, as very few of us are left” (Bakalian 340). Grandparents are the most tangible link of that human chain that extends to the spiritual homeland, to the ancient Armenian forebears, and to fellow Armenians, past and present (Bakalian 442). My Armenian heritage has helped create the underlying concept in all of my work.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE DOOR IN THE THRESHOLD TO ARSHILE GORKY

My investigation into the past also caused Armenian folklore to have symbolic meaning in the expression of my work. In this chapter I discuss not only how the metaphor of Armenian folklore impacts my work but also the influence I draw from Armenian artist Arshile Gorky.

“The old Armenians clutched at sanity and selfhood by telling their children the same stories that had been passed on to them...” (Bedrosian 105). These folktales were packed with the geography, agriculture, and domestic life of Armenia. Even the slightest anecdote was told with detail, planting seeds in the child’s imagination. In an attempt to follow my path back to my Armenian heritage, I employ the symbols and imagery part of the identity.

In Armenian folktales, doors and chimneys hold great significance and it has been said that this is where the spirits dwelled (Essabal 266). “The door is an important strategic point in the fight with the devils who could enter the house through it” (Essabal 266). The threshold was an auspicious place where luck was gained, good or bad. Friendships could be lost merely by shaking hands over a doorway and sickness could be brought about if sacrifices were not made to the spirits. But the door could bring good fortune as well: “The propitious moment for getting good luck is during sunset when good and bad luck are distributed; at that time the grandmother opens the door to let the good luck enter” (Essabal 268).

My pieces are meant to mimic this aspect of Armenian folklore in that they symbolically represent the metaphor of the doorway as a spiritual place. While the folklore symbols and

superstitions are not readily recognizable in my work, they nevertheless inform it. The pieces are doors to the thresholds of my past and are meant to become the place where the spirits of my Armenian heritage dwell.



**Figure 1: *She's long gone, snapshot 2*, Intaglio on cotton batting with tea staining, 2010.**

The door aspect of the work is physically manifest in the shape and size of the pieces. The rectangular shape suggests a doorway. As seen in Figure 1, the inherent grid found in the piece, whether easily recognizable or subtly there, also indicates the window. Either door or window, the work becomes thresholds allowing the viewer access to each piece.

The work and writings of artist Arshile Gorky have had the most impact on how I think about and create art.

Armenia was Gorky's altar of art, his

starting point, and he took an

Armenian attitude in

integrating his ancient sources with the modern techniques. Gorky's work constantly contains Armenian symbols as he sought to merge the best of the Armenian traditions with modern ideas about art. Therefore, it is impossible to gain a true understanding of Arshile Gorky's work without first understanding his relationship to Armenia and its culture.

Gorky's work is forever linked with his childhood in the Armenian countryside. Everything from his home to the religious art that his mother exposed him to, provided the images and symbols consistently found throughout his paintings. One must view his life not as a series of events but an inherent part of his art, and then "we find that his main subject matter was a meditation, a deep-seated examination of his own history" (Rand xxi). His artwork replaced all he had lost in his beloved homeland, and they were the pieces of Armenia that he carried always in his imagination. "Though Gorky's paintings were in a sense surrogates for people, they also expressed his love of tradition by extending it" (Bedrosian 215). Thus Armenia was constantly an influence for Gorky.

Armenia was always Arshile Gorky's starting point, as he considered "nature in Armenia an inexhaustible paint tube" (Bedrosian 213). He even considered Armenians to be a race of artists. His childhood years proved to be most influential in terms of art. What Gorky created was not only a series of highly innovative paintings but images to commemorate his Armenian homeland. His experience with modernism allowed him to translate his past. He related "both to Modernism and to the medieval painters of Van, whose work he had first seen under his mother's tutelage at the age of six. The way forwards was the way back" (Ash 121).

Like Gorky, I seek to express my heritage in my work. In Gorky's childhood, he saw that farming was a sacred act containing many religious traditions from the way they cast the seeds (in the sign of the cross) to the way the farmers left the first handful for God (Herrera 29). During his exile in America he longed to recapture such simple traditions and express his love of the land. His painting, *The Plow and the Song, 1947*, emerged with abstract shapes formed by his childhood memory of plowing and singing. The painting was done in oil on burlap with brushstrokes forming loose shapes. Therefore, outsiders may not have seen Armenia or





**Figure 2: *Gathering the pieces*, Screen printing on fabric with rust dyeing, 2009.**

Armenian symbols but the symbols were there as well as being the catalyst for the creation of his work. It is in such a manner that the Armenian influences are present in my work. With *Gathering the pieces*, Figure 2, the stitch and lace in the piece refers back to the tradition of Armenian lace embroidery, something girls as young as three learned with great proficiency. The color of the rust, a variation of red, is a suggestion of the red found on the Armenian flag, alluding to

the blood of the Armenian people. The blank spot in the work speaks about loss and something missing, feelings associated with the Armenian genocide. I am influenced by what I have heard, what I have read, and what I now know. My work is not about being Armenian and not meant to be Armenian work, but rather it is about what has been impressed upon me by having an Armenian heritage. The value of memory and remembrance, and the folk culture, are what I have

gained from my past. Therefore my Armenian heritage helped shape the concept by placing importance on memory.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONTEMPORARY INFLUENCES

As I researched my Armenian heritage, I sought to combine historical influences with contemporary ones. To further the development of how to express my concept of memory using family history in my own work, I looked at contemporary artists. I am most influenced by artists who incorporate their history and heritage into their work. Because I deal with my history and memory, for me the old photograph is a key starting point. I look to artists who do the same, whether the photograph is merely the inspiration or an integral part of the piece. I share the most kinship with work of Whitfield Lovell and Karen Hampton. Each artist strongly evokes feelings of family or cultural heritage.

Whitfield Lovell is an artist working with his African American heritage. His installations are windows into the lives of anonymous African Americans. Using images taken from the end of the Civil War to the beginning of the civil rights movement, “Lovell provides these obscure figures with identity and dignity” (Younger 1). From the photograph, he accurately draws these portraits life size or larger on walls, fencing, wooden boards, etc. He then places these portraits in room settings, imagining what objects would have gone with these individuals: beds, chairs, plates, etc. In this way, he gives a very physical presence to these people. He shows the significance and history of them. Thus his portraits move beyond the realm of mere imagery to become representation of a community of people. Lovell’s pieces are informed by the folk art practice of the African American community. “Creating remarkably

elegant works, Lovell evokes memories of the past while transcending the specifics of time and space” (Younger 1).

Using photographs of African Americans, Lovell is trying to show the lives of these people. The life-sized people, the formality of their clothes, and the way in which they physically occupy the installation space created with furniture and other household objects, “quietly

redresses the pronounced social, cultural and material invisibility of blacks during prolonged years of segregation” (Younger 2). Whitfield Lovell’s tableau pieces and full room installations evoke the material presence and humanity of African Americans.



**Figure 3: *Don't you hear the whistle blowin'*, Intaglio on cotton batting with tea staining, 2010.**

Lovell’s work creates presence from history and invites people into the work. Likewise each work I create is intended to evoke the presence of the individual in that piece, as seen in Figure 3. My printed, quilted pieces, like Lovell’s work, become objects that bear the mark of the person imprinted upon them. They are meant to give a hint of those who came before.

In refining my concepts, I found Karen Hampton’s work, her writings, and her artistic processes to be particularly helpful.

She describes her work as research, intuition, and vision, reflecting on issues of slavery and her history as an African-American. Her work involves cloth and photographic imagery, which she combines with marks made by stitching into the fabric and burning it. All this is done to create a story and a memory out of each piece. She uses the term “re-memory” to discuss her work. “Re-memory” is intuitive empathy and speaks to the process of remembering that is referenced in each piece (Hampton 1). She explains how it allows access for the spirits to speak. I too wish my ancestors to speak through my work. Just like Hampton’s “re-memory”, I want my pieces to go beyond mere memorial. They are an exploration of what is left behind, which is the physical imprint a memory of person can leave. It is important to note and honor what remains.

## CHAPTER 5

### HOW MY GRANDMOTHER'S QUILT UNFOLDS IN MY LIFE

A search for my father's family led to the discovery of my mother's family as well, including the rediscovery of my maternal grandmother's quilt. My grandmother's quilt, like my Armenian heritage, is something that directed my artistic process, informing the physical appearance of the work. As a little girl, I first found my grandmother's quilt tucked among the blankets in the hall closet. Although I did not immediately associate it with either quilts or my grandmother, I was always fascinated by it. It was made of different colored triangle fabric pieces (which I later learned were actually from my grandfather's old shirts) arranged in star formations on a white background. I studied it often and even added my own stitches to it in a very amateur attempt at preservation. Even though this quilt was nothing special in the world of antique quilts or even that finely crafted, to me it was part of my grandmother because it was something she made. It became an object that retained her memories.

The quilt form and the significance of objects being made by or about certain individuals became recurring themes in my work. For the past few years, I have printed my images on fabric. Fabric for me is intimate and tactile, with qualities suitable for my exploration of memory. Because images were already printed on fabric, the next logical step was to sew them together. The memory of my grandmother's quilt resurfaced, and once again centered itself at the forefront of my intentions. I had always toyed with a quilt representation that would be more of a simplified version of an actual quilt. This representation would serve as a homage to the

domestic tradition of my grandmothers. The pieces are to me the essence of a quilt and not meant to be evaluated on a traditional quilting level.

The use of the quilt form became a reference to my grandmothers and their grandmothers before them. The quilt as art is historically significant but also representative of an ongoing tradition (Senft 144). The fabric used in my pieces, the tablecloth, bed sheet, curtain panel, and batting all tie the work back to the tradition of the family. It is very important to me that all the fabric used lends a very physical presence to my family. Quilting or rather the quilt form was a very natural way to explore that aspect of my family and their heritage. The simplest quilts, also called “comforters,” were made exclusively of the remains of old clothes, very much like my grandmother’s. Also like my grandmother’s quilt, their fronts were assembled of geometrical forms, mostly rectangles and squares.

In trying to balance the use of the quilt reference, I experimented with how much of the quilt to indicate in my work. At first the pieces looked more like traditional quilts, the largest even fitting a twin bed. Like most traditional quilters my “starting point was the bed, whose rectangular form set the basic pattern for the bedcover. Playing with colors and shapes finally produced the effect of a surface pattern...” (von Gwinner 121). I intertwined photographic prints with different images (some repeating), organized in the quilt block pattern. I wanted to create the idea of a memory of events rather than that of an individual. *Studyin’ about that good ol’ way* was one of my first quilt inspired pieces (Figure 4). The piece contains different colored fabric squares, each with its own printed image. Following more closely the traditional methods of quilting, the fabric squares were pieced together using the chaining method of sewing. The quilt has the three layers of top fabric, batting, and muslin backing.





**Figure 4: *Studyin' about that good ol' way*  
Intaglio on fabric with rust  
dyeing, 2009.**

of my grandmother. I stripped the quilt down to its essence in an effort to recall the simplicity of the comforter quilts.

Instead of a traditional block quilt pattern, I relied on the variation of printed image and colored fabric square to create patterning. By using a repetition of multiple images, I am recalled the idea a memory of an event rather than an individual. Using multiples of the same image, allowed me to demonstrate how an event can become fixed within the mind. Placing different images next to each other symbolizes how the mind pieces together memory fragments. Impressions of time and memory were enhanced by the use of rust dyeing. This act of staining creates marks of the past winding throughout the piece. But I still sought a greater

connection to the simple geometric pattern, as found in the t-shirt fabric quilt





**Figure 5: *Didn't leave nobody but the baby*, Intaglio on cotton batting with tea staining, 2009.**

The essence of the quilt to me was always the cotton batting, an essential inner lining. I removed the fabric patterns and top layer of my pieces, and simply printed on the batting. Like the stains found underneath furniture or on the underside of fabric, the printed batting echoes ghostly stains, an impression of memory. With

*Didn't leave nobody but*

*the baby* (Figure 5), I simplified the piece to express this essential impression. By reducing the process to intaglio printing on cotton batting, I hoped to highlight the imprint quality of memories. With these quilts, the image or impression became the emphasis. Also in *Didn't leave nobody but the baby*, the stitch became a more important tool, used now to draw rather than simply hold together. In this way, I referenced the act of remembering by not only retracing the image, but also by manipulating it.

The basic influence of the quilt is still there; it appears as a subtle impression of the “nine patch”, a traditional quilt block pattern. Although no longer outwardly patterned, each one of my quilt like pieces is created by impressions printed from different intaglio plates. The prints are then pieced together to make the final image, having the effect of a nine patch.

In discussing the tradition of the American quilt, German author von Gwinner said: “American folk art is not an inept form of high art. It lives in its own world and reacts to its own surroundings. It was created by dilettantes who worked for their own satisfaction and the praise of their families and neighbors” (von Gwinner 169). To understand my grandmothers, the women in my family, I explore the quilt and the cultural significance it lends to my work.

## CHAPTER 6

### OBJECTS OF MEMORY: THE PHOTOGRAPH AND IMPRESSIONS

The quilts are works that function on the level of a memory. Like memory, they are real and not real. The quilts contain the images of a person or event but not the facts. They are not a literal representation of that person or event. It is not the reality of a memory that is important but the ideas and feelings associated with memory. For me, the feelings associated with the pieces are more important than creating an actual recollection. The physical manifestation of



**Figure 6:** *She's long gone, snapshot 3, Intaglio on cotton batting with tea staining, 2010.*

feelings of memory and not an actual memory is what I continually strive for. The feeling of something precious yet impermanent must come across, the sense of the half-remembered (Figure 6).

My work expresses my family's presence and impact. The pieces move from the realm of pictures to tangible objects as they invite the viewer to investigate the residue that memory leaves behind. By having this residue of memory become the focus of the pieces, I am demonstrating the impact my family history has had on my

work. "Memory also transforms objects

into symbols, infusing them with meanings they did not have on their own, before memory possessed them” (Stallybrass 28). Because they are meant to be the physical implications of memory, the pieces are transformed into symbolic items mirroring the idea stated by author Peter Stallybrass in the aforementioned quote. In his article on memory, which discusses clothes as the vehicles of memory, he touches on a fact central to my work. He describes how items owned by or associated with individuals, even after they are gone, contain their essence and their memories. My pieces are not meant to become literal visual recordings or documentations. Rather, they are about the inherent qualities of a memory, the feeling of piecing together a recollection, and the impression people or things leave behind. As Pierre Nora states in his writings on memory: “Memory, he said, relies “entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image” (qtd. in Zelizer 137). In working primarily with the figurative image, I am hoping to materialize this trace of memory by transforming my work into objects of memory.

“Memory, collective and individual, transforms our social and material surroundings into a language that tells about the past” (Ben-Amos 298). My pieces are not about contemporary or recent events but instead investigate feelings and ideas associated with memory through family history. They are fragments of a past of which I have no firsthand knowledge. Thus, the pieces are my attempt to create a link to that past. By using memory as a bridge to my past, I am creating those connections. By piecing together recollections, I am actively engaging in remembering. The work is not about recreating actual memories. Rather the pieces allow me to experience the moments or people in the work through their contemplation. The pieces remind me of certain family members and I can connect with them further. “Memory is not an unchanging vessel for carrying the past into the present; memory is a process, not a thing and it

works differently at different points in time” (Olick and Robbins 122). Thus, with my work, I seek to entice the viewers in this process of actively engaging with the past, of using their own feelings of memory and family as a link.

“A piece of clothing can stand for the human body...but it can also become a residue or ruin of sorts, a site of mourning” (Weissberg 18). In this statement, Stallybrass explains the mark left behind by the individual and describes how because a certain person owned a certain item of clothing, that imprint left behind on the clothing serves to enhance memories of him or her. By creating work that explores the imprints left behind by a memory, the work itself becomes a memory enhancer. In highlighting what remains, they call attention to what may have come before. They speculate on what event or person did indeed leave their mark. This invites the



**Figure 7: Photograph used in *I'm going home no more to roam*, family photograph of the Brewers, 1920.**

viewer to question what caused the image found on my quilts. By inviting their own inquiry into the work I am hoping they will participate with their own personal interpretations and recollections.

In turning the work into physical representations of memory, I give the viewers a concrete image

because “memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects...” (Katriel 100). The concrete image I refer to is, of course, the photograph (Figure 7). I relied on old photographs given to me by my mother, and these old photographs of family members were



essential to the creation of my work, in that they served as both starting point and subject matter. Often we rely on photographs to serve as records of time and keepers of the past. In a way, they create memories for us and serve to enhance our memories. In working with photographs, I explored their role in our memory process; once we have a photograph of a person or event, can we remember independently of it? Thus, I used the photographs not only because of their function in recording but because of the way photographs shape memory. Visual representation directly affects the shape of a recollection (Zelizer 158). In exploring memories tied with family and heritage, I started by looking at family photographs and then reproducing them, through printmaking techniques. The photograph then becomes not only the recorder of a memory but the creator of one as well.

In my latest exploration of the photograph, I have also created altar-like pieces (Figure 8). These pieces are made of enameled copper that I have inset in wooden frames. Each piece also contains an image taken from a photograph that I have applied using a material called Lazertan.



**Figure 8: *The Altar of Art*,  
enamel on copper  
with wood, 2009.**

The image is printed on this material and then the material is adhered to the metal by baking in the oven. This work demonstrates another

representation of the ideas found in the quilts.

The altar pieces speak of memories, like the quilts, but are different in that they are a physical manifestation of an actual memory. The memories they reference are of icons found within my grandmother's house as a child. Armenian Episcopal religious art is very similar to Eastern Orthodox and religious icons feature prominently in both. These pieces mimic those icons and are created to pay homage to my family and past. My process for the enameling of the



**Figure 9: *She's long gone, snaphot 1 (detail), Intaglio on cotton batting with tea staining, 2009.***

copper was similar to the quilt pieces. I layered the pieces with different colors and types of enamel along with handwritten text and enameled fabric. I included stain like marks much in the way I do in the quilts, working instead with powdered glass. The muted color choices are meant to invoke a passage of time and a fading or hazing of memory. The photograph still plays a prominent role within the work, serving as the image of iconography.

The impression created by the photograph is one of ephemeral image and material impermanence. My pieces use printed photographs that simulate a stained-like appearance. These images in the work offer a fleeting glimpse of the residual impressions that create memory. These stained images of faces

and people transform the work into very shroud like objects (Figure 9). Because many of my printed quilts contain only images of faces, the Shroud of Turin comes to mind As shrouds were

pieces of fabric that once contained physical remains, they are a fitting association to my stained portraits, transcended shrouds of my family and past.

In Daniel L. Schacter's book *Searching for Memory*, the author discusses the impact of memory on sense of self: "We cannot hope to understand memory's fragile power without examining what happens to memory as time passes, and considering how we translate the residue of experience that persist across time into tales of who we are" (73). It is with pieces like *She's Long gone, snapshot 1* (Figure 9) that I attempt to examine this residue. The titles of my pieces also highlight how memory persists over time, as they are fragments of songs. Each title is a line from a song that reminds me of my grandmother's sisters. Her three younger sisters were a trio of singers who performed on the radio in the 1930s. The song lyrics in the titles are taken from songs they would sing, and in this way recall memories of them. As they sang in the 1930s, I didn't actually hear them sing. But by giving my pieces those titles, it reminds me of them and helps make a connection. In this way I am creating a memory of my great aunts in a time or place that I was not there for but now can imagine. The pieces now speak more of how certain memories or thoughts can persist. I hope with my work to allow the viewer to contemplate the image as residue of a person or event and wonder simply what happened and who they were.



## CHAPTER 7

### FABRIC AS TACTILE, INTIMATE, AND PRECIOUS

To convey the concept of memory as discussed in the previous chapter, I needed to create my work with a material that contained its own inherent and powerful associations. Working



**Figure 10: *You and me and the devil makes three*, Intaglio and screen printing on fabric with rust dyeing, 2009.**

with fabric seemed an obvious choice. I embrace the quote by Peter Stallybrass, “to think about cloth, about clothes, was to think about memory” (29). I have always connected people with the items they wore or the things they owned. “Cloth thus tends to be powerfully associated with memory. Or, to put it more strongly, cloth is a kind of memory. When a person is absent or dies, cloth can absorb their

absent presence” (Stallybrass 30).

Fabric contains its own memories so to

print my images on fabric was to further embed the pieces with memory associations.

Fabric has weight and texture, and for me is the ideal choice of substrate. Picking up or even seeing the material can be the catalyst for recollection. In Figure 10, the piece contains one large image created with the use of multiple prints from different plates. To include variation within the piece, I printed the images with both intaglio and screen printing techniques to mimic variations within memories. The layer of lace was meant to demonstrate the effects time has on memory by further obscuring the image in the piece. Again, rust dyeing was used as a mark making tool to imply what had been left behind.

On fabric, stains become glimpses into the past. They are signs of use and wear and give the material a history of its own. To me, fabric suggests clothing, bedding, and table linen, all things that people use and interact with on a daily basis. This allows the fabric to become a material that contains the essence of its owners. It is this quality of fabric that I seek to employ, and by printing on fabric I want to suggest the presence of a person who might have been involved with the history of one of the pieces.

Fabric allows the print to become integrated in the whole piece. Although I am working with 2-D imagery, I am not interested in merely making flat prints but rather objects that must be viewed dimensionally and holistically. Fabric also contains a kind of intimacy that invites the viewer for a closer investigation. As stated by metals artist Melody Oxarat on working with fabric: “there is an immediacy, a control that few other areas of art offer. That gives rise to a kind of intimacy which makes it easier to convey emotion” (Oxarat 1). The intimacy arises not only from the accessibility of the material to the viewer but the way in which I am able to work directly on it. I work closely on and with the fabric and thus I develop an intimate relationship with material, an intimacy I wish to pass on to the viewer. The quilts are engaging and should be inspected up close. The personal experience of my work is meant to trigger memory and

connection. I exploit all the connotations that come with fabric as my material: family, heritage, tradition, and comfort.

## CHAPTER 8

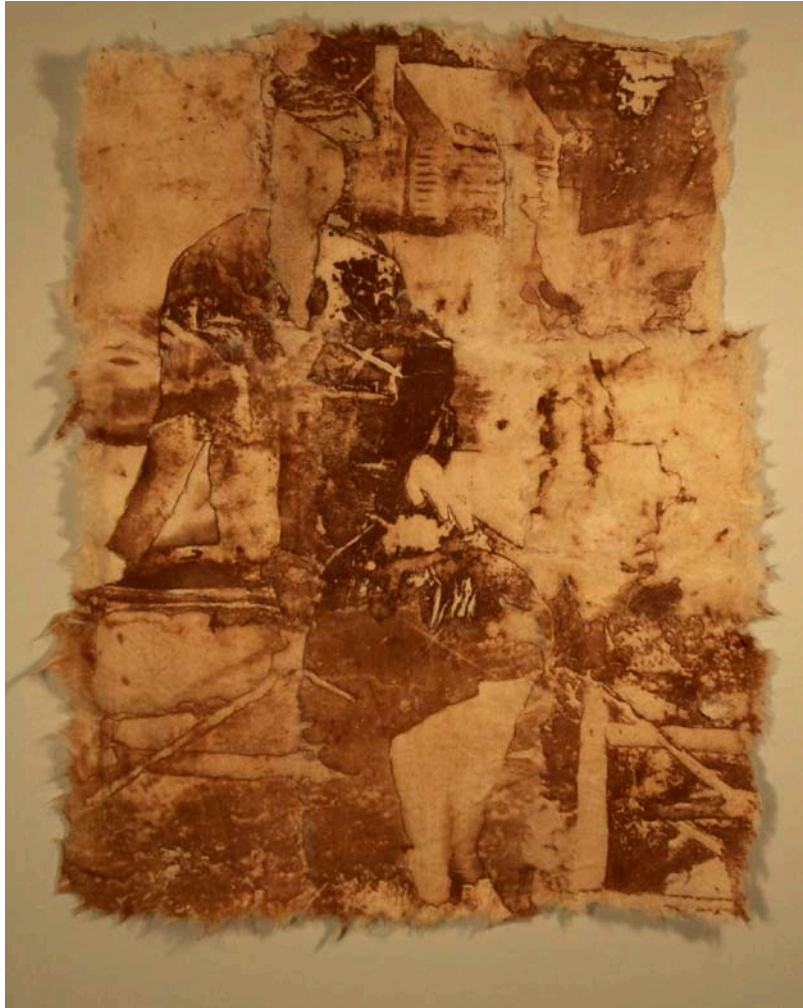
### PROCESS AS STAINING AND SEWING

The two most basic essentials of my process are staining and sewing. Staining is a way of actually creating the images in the work and sewing is the way of physically connecting it all together. Staining refers to the ways the materials are treated and most importantly to printmaking. The act of sewing not only pieces the work together but is a tool to recreate the images. The stitch is used as a means of drawing together and as a tool to draw and create connections and fill in the gaps.

There is a strong connection between the mark of a stain and the physical representation of memory. The stain, whether food, drink, or rust, suggests something that once was but now is gone. Though there is a link between age and time with stains, it is not that aspect of staining that I want my work to focus on. The stains instead are meant to show that although something is gone, it has left its mark. The staining of the fabric becomes a physical representation of the effects of memory. The stains demonstrate how memory acts much like a scar, vivid at first but soon fading over time. By having my prints mimic stains and containing actual stains, I am showing that the mark left by memory is important and worth investigation.

The stains are made using rust and tea. With rust, I employ the idea of marks made by memory using actual objects. The screws, nuts, and bolts, once in contact with the vinegar soaked fabric, leave an actual impression of where they once rested. Placement of the metal pieces allows me to leave marks that weave throughout the piece. On the other hand, tea stains indicate a memory of a person or event that might have left the drink stain. Before printing on

the fabric, I soak it in tea to allow it to take on variations of color depending of the amount tea and the length of time the stain sets, as seen in Figure 11. The associated smells of this process



**Figure 11: *She's long gone with the red shoes on,* Intaglio on cotton batting with tea staining, 2010.**

lend themselves to familiar memory associations. Smell is one of the strongest senses tied to memory, and therefore the tea also becomes a memory enhancer.

Like the stains used, the printmaking processes used to transfer the imagery to the fabric also reference feelings of memory. The prints create impressions, physically and metaphorically. The marks made through the printmaking

have the look of impressions. The prints physically recall impression

through the embossing of the fabric by the plate as it is run through the press. Through the process of printmaking, the image becomes integrated into the fabric, not a picture merely floating on the surface, but a part of the material itself. Like the rust dying, the intaglio printmaking processes are active processes that continually affect the piece even after the work of art is “finished.” These are in fact corrosive processes that, over time, will eat holes in the

fabric. Screen-printing is also another printmaking technique that I use to transfer imagery. The fabric pigment used in the screen-printing process further serves to enhance the integration of image and material. The printmaking medium also allows for easy manipulation of the image. One characteristic of printmaking allows for both, clear and faint, dark and light images. In this way, I can illustrate the impermanent, and sometimes fragmentary qualities in our memory.



**Figure 12: *Didn't leave nobody but the baby (detail), Intaglio on cotton batting with tea staining, 2010.***

Sewing is also an important element in the construction of my work. Stitching allows me to join image to image or part of a print to a larger whole. With sewing, I piece the quilts together and this piecing is meant to reference the reconstruction of a memory (Figure 12). Sometimes the piecing is obvious, with noticeable variations between the pieces that make up the quilt. These noticeable variations represent the more difficult memories to recall. Yet, at other times, memory is seamless, like the more vivid recollections in our psyche. This

piecing, while on one level recalls the block pattern and nine patch of traditional quilting, references how we put together a

memory. The type of stitching mainly used in my work is called free-motion stitching. I allow the stitching to follow the contours suggested by the printed image and its stains (Figure 12). In this way, the free-motion stitch becomes a drawing tool, allowing me to recreate various parts of

image that did not come out in the printing process. It gives me the flexibility to add additional information or highlight selected marks and stains.

By drawing, and “drawing” together with the stitch, I simulate remembering. The adding of the line with stitch mimics adding to a memory and tracing the marks already made suggests retracing of a memory. The stitch serves to both create and preserve. Sewing also brings its own tactile quality; fabric speaks of the family. Sewing is the link between the images, material, fabric, and family, “stitching” together process and concept.



## CHAPTER 9

### CONCLUSION

“Art is grounded in the realization of our interconnectedness and intersubjectivity—the intertwining of self and others...” (Gablik 4). The quilt form is a representation of human experience by showing our value of memory and a desire for connection with family history. It is this universality that is inherent to my work. Even though my pieces contain imagery that is personal, they also speak of a shared human experience. They represent moments common to all. They contain an open narrative, one that is subtle enough to allow each person his own interpretation and the ability to insert his or her own memories. The pieces are about my family but only insofar as they demonstrate a greater desire for human connection.

“Quilts exert their great force in our lives and imagination because they combine in single objects so much information important to us...” (Senft 144). Each piece I make is a story from memory, completed upon the act of viewing. The photographs, materials, and processes are merely tools the viewer uses to cobble that story together. They move from the realm of pictures to actual objects, as they evoke the material presence of family and heritage. They bring tangible existence to their life. The images are meant to be the threshold to both my past and history, as family history is the tool used to discuss feelings of memory. The photographs invoke a sense of the familiar, allowing the obscured image of my grandmother to become yours as well. As Armenians traditionally say when closing a folktale: “Their hopes were realized and so shall ours be.” (Kirwan 29).



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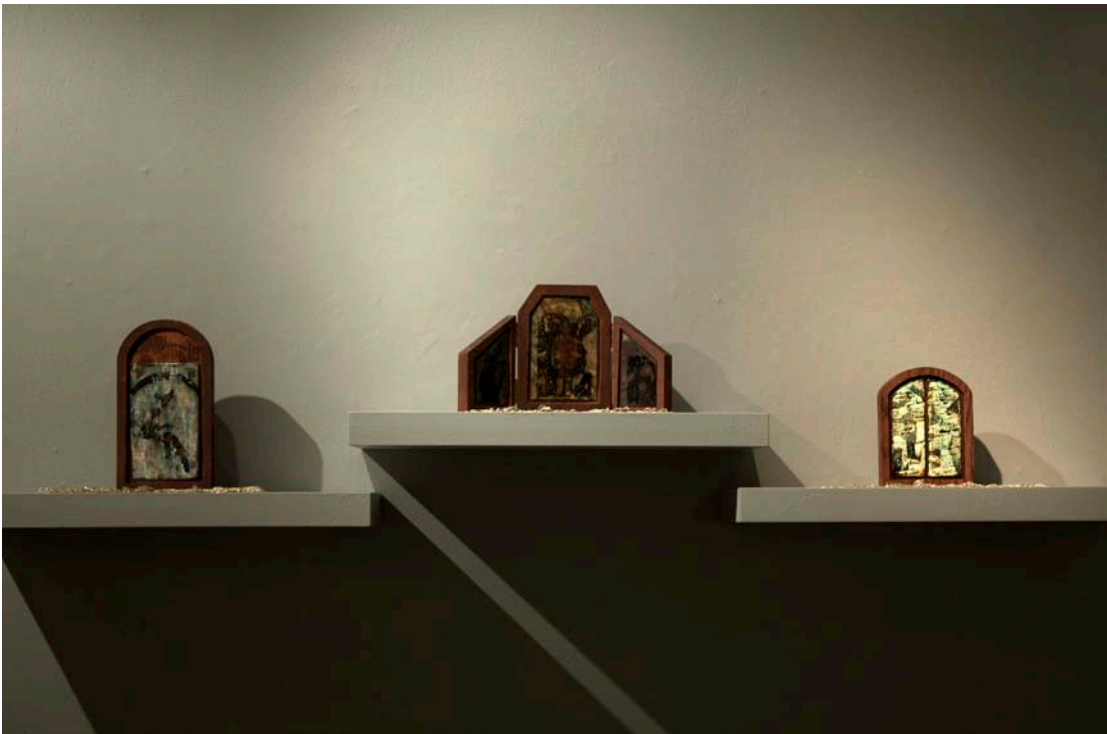
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CATALOUGE OF EXHIBITION





*The Door in the Threshold*

Enameled copper with wood

2009





*Altar of Art*

Enameled copper with wood

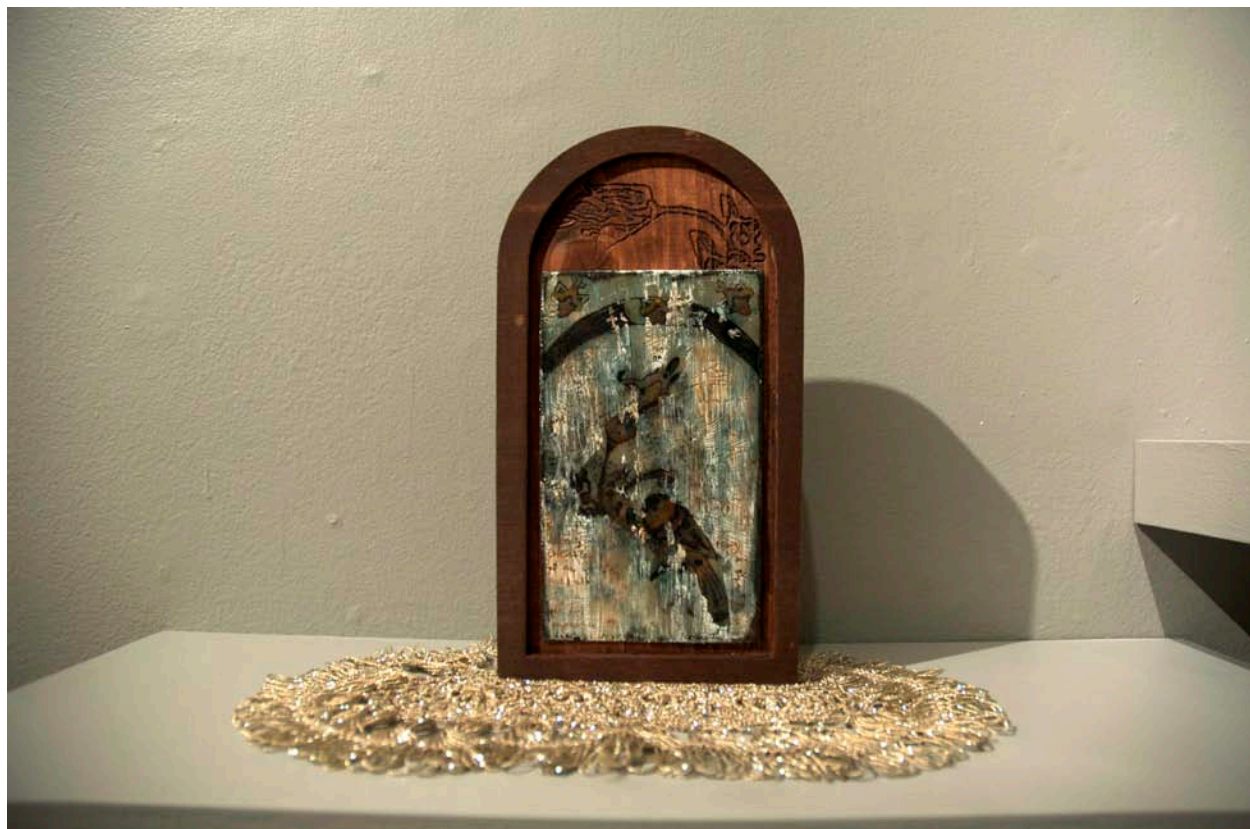
2009



*Sojourner*

Enameled copper with wood

2009

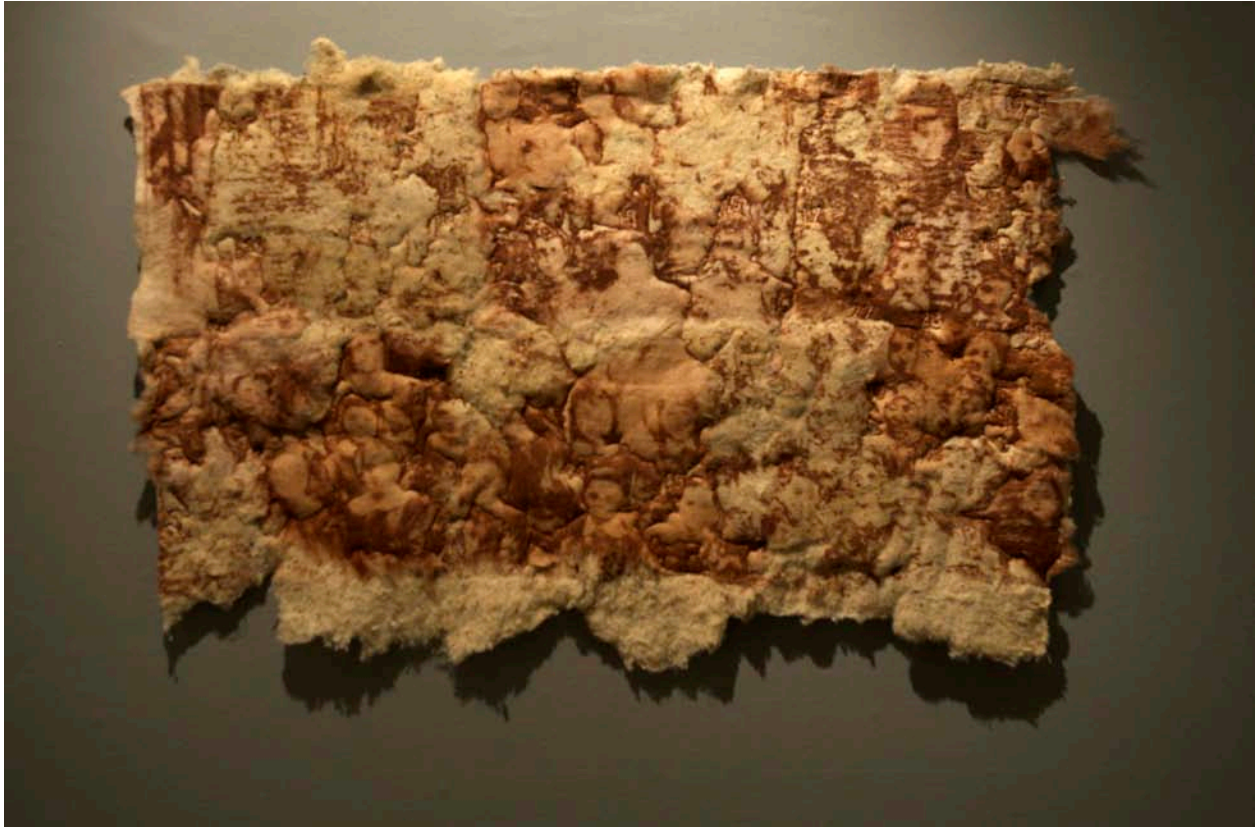




*Number 8*

Intaglio on cotton and chair batting with tea staining

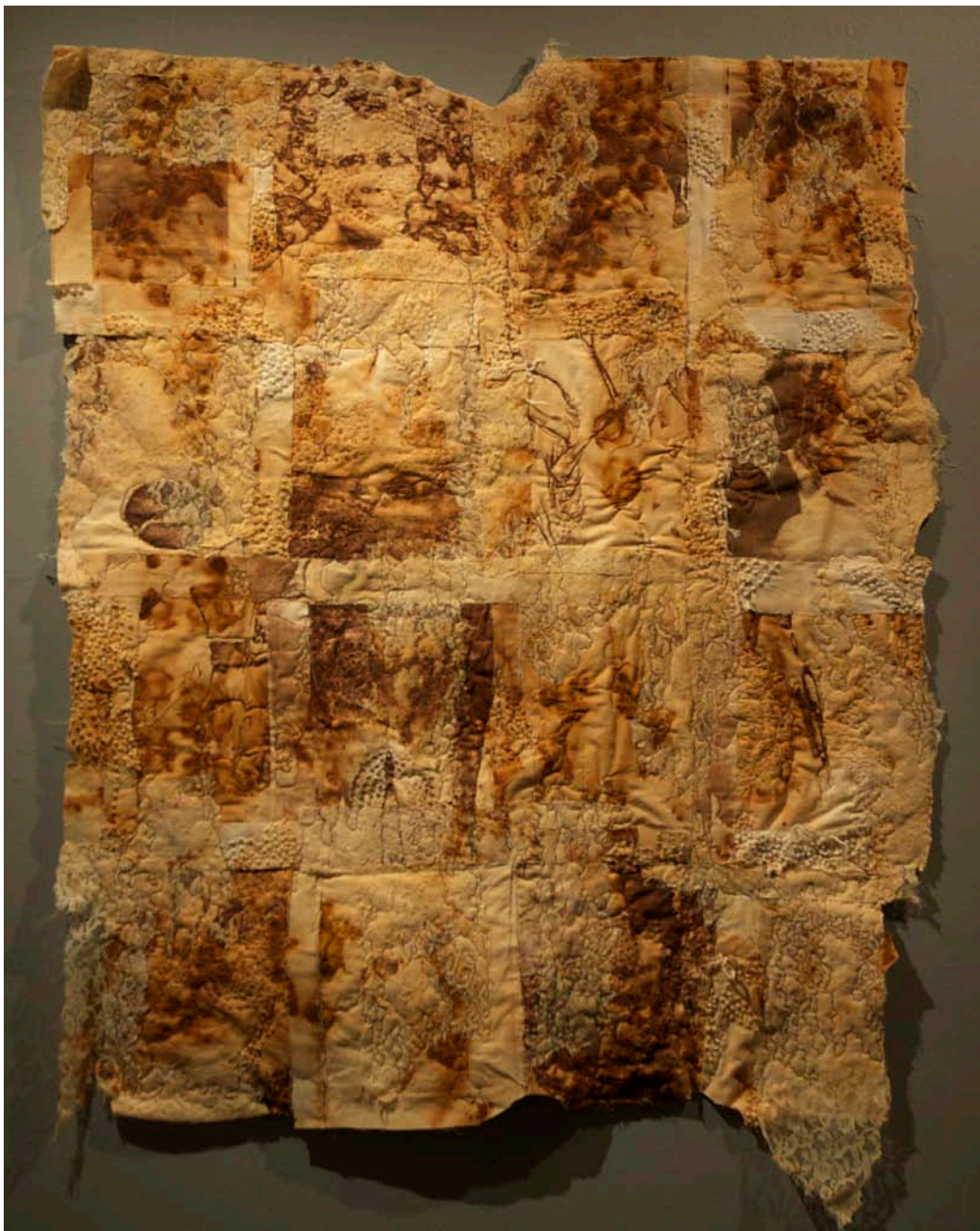
2010



*You and me and the devil makes three*

Intaglio on fabric with rust dyeing

2009

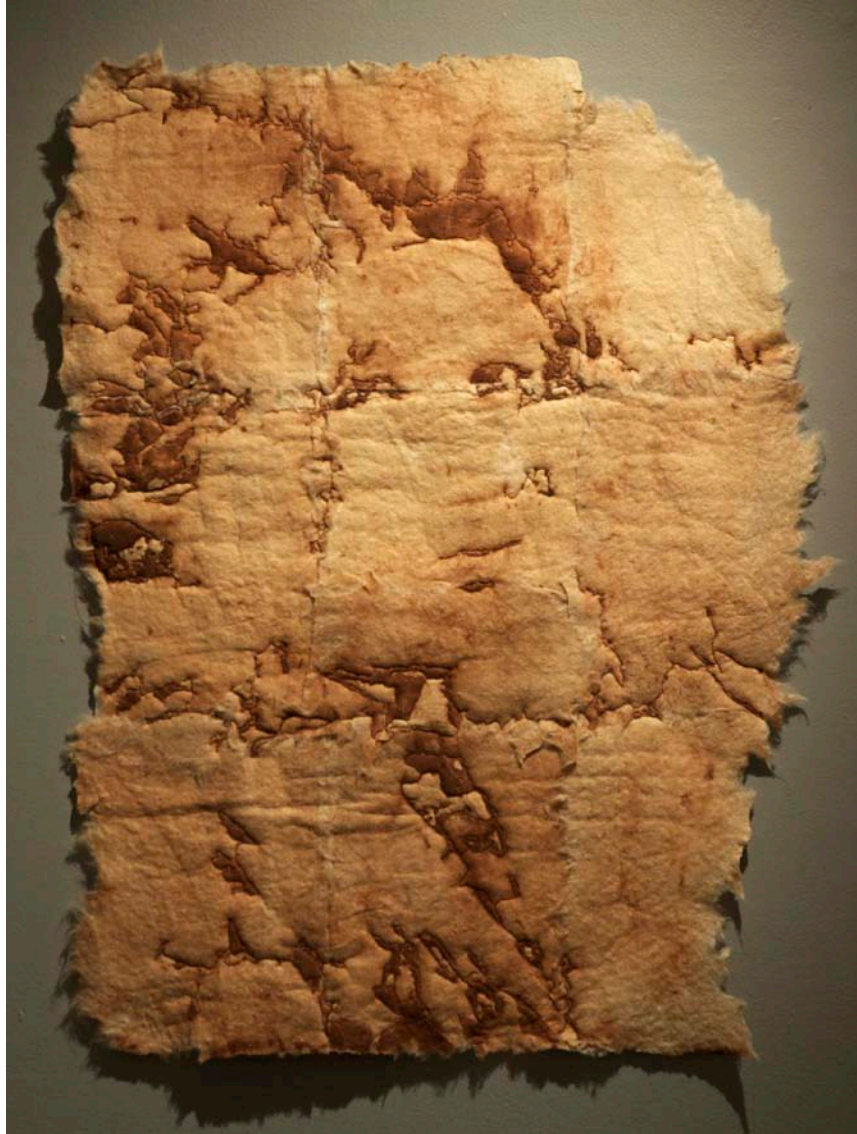




*She's long gone, snapshot 3*

Intaglio on cotton batting with tea staining

2010



*Don't you hear the whistle blowin'*

Intaglio on cotton batting with tea staining

2010





*She's long gone, snapshot 1*

Intaglio on cotton batting with tea staining

2009



*Good lord show me the way*

Intaglio on cotton batting with tea staining

2010





*She's long gone, snapshot 2*

Intaglio on cotton batting with tea staining

2010



*Didn't leave nobody but the baby*

Intaglio on cotton batting with tea staining

2009





*Be my ever lovin' babe*

Intaglio on cotton batting with rust dyeing

2009



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“Impressions”, juried by David Mazure, Tipton St. Gallery, Johnson City, TN—  
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2009

“Look at the Mess You Made” an Annual Graduate Exhibition, Reece Museum,  
East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN—2009

Annual Postcard Exhibition and Silent Auction, Solcumb Galleries, East  
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Texas National, Stephen F. Austin University, Nagadoches, TX—2008

Louisiana Tech University Juried Show, Ruston, LA—2008

“Sound Transitions”, MFA Exhibition, Enterprise Center, Louisiana Tech  
University, Ruston, LA—2008

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