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Witness, Revival, Testimony

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A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Art & 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

Laura Ann Schroeder

May 2023

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Patricia Mink, Chair

Dr. Michael Anthony Fowler

Dr. Tao Huang

Keywords: textile art, craft, childhood, memory, family

## ABSTRACT

Witness, Revival, Testimony

by

Laura Ann Schroeder

The artist, Laura Ann Schroeder, discusses her Master of Fine Arts thesis exhibition, *Witness, Revival, Testimony*, which was installed at Tipton Gallery in Johnson City, TN from March 2, 2023 through March 31, 2023, with a public reception held on March 24, 2023. The exhibition consisted of a collection of sculptural works and installations that evoke scenes and memories from the artist's childhood. This body of work deconstructs the traditional family dynamic and the private domestic space through recreations of everyday life. The artworks are primarily made with repurposed consumer textiles and techniques like stitching and quilting that have historically been considered "women's work." Through the process of creating this body of work, the artist analyzes how past moments culminate to affect her understanding of gender, spirituality, and personal identity.

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## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

### *Organization*

The purpose of this paper is to document and explain the exhibition of artwork, *Witness, Revival, Testimony*. In the following chapters, I will discuss the personal background, foundational research, historical context, relevant creative works and ideas that have informed the making of this work. Next, I will explain the materials and processes that I have employed in my artistic practice, describing each work and the design of the culminating exhibition. Finally, I will reflect on the outcomes of the exhibition.

### *Religiosity*

The title of this thesis – *Witness, Revival, Testimony* – serves as a description of the process of its creation. In my work, Each of these words has a dual meaning: one in the evangelical vernacular and one that is based on my own experience. For evangelicals, a “witness” is a person who shares their faith with another for the purpose of converting them to Christianity. For evangelicals, a “revival” is a church event for the purpose of renewing the faith of the congregation. For evangelicals, “testimony” is a story that one recounts about their journey to belief in Christianity. For me, “witness” is seeing and remembering the events of my past, “revival” is recreating those memories for current analysis, and “testimony” is the narrative that explains those memories.

Decoding religious language and experiences has been a crucial part of creating this body of work, in which I analyze the past’s effect on my present self. In my deeply religious family, God was an equal member, just as important as my father or mother. As I remember the formative aspects of my childhood, religion is interwoven throughout every memory. *Witness,*

*Revival, Testimony* consists of sculptural artworks made from found materials to conjure these memories. The purpose of creating this body of work is to better understand myself and project my findings outward for others to experience and learn from and perhaps even reflect personally upon.

In addition to weekly church attendance, my parents devoted time to developing their spirituality through reading the Bible and consuming Christian books and radio shows. Sometimes the entire family would be involved in listening to or discussing this media. James Dobson was a family favorite for his *Focus on the Family* radio show and numerous books about faith-centered relationships and parenting. It is my belief that the evangelical media consumed by my parents, particularly Dobson's works, affirmed and sustained the family dynamic that my parents put into practice.

Because my parents identified so strongly with their faith, they sought advice from other Christians almost exclusively. It was very important that the leaders and experts in our lives were Christians. Our pediatrician, scout leaders, and counselors were all professed Christians and/or affiliated with our church. These individuals' status as brothers and sisters in Christ gave my parents confidence to trust them with important family matters, because having a shared faith established an understanding that they were on the same "side." Moreover, any source of information or media was given more authority and approval if it came from a Christian source. We were encouraged to listen to Christian music, read books written by Christian authors, and seek advice from other Christians. Therefore, when my parents needed advice about raising their family, they sought sources like James Dobson and *Focus on the Family*.

The catalyst for Dobson's brand of parenting advice is the perceived attack on traditional (Christian) family values. He published his first book, *Dare to Discipline*, in 1970 after seeing

what he believed were the results of a collapsing society, rising divorce rates and the sexual revolution, in his office as a child psychologist. *Dare to Discipline*'s swift success was due to Dobson's credentials as a child psychologist, but also to his evangelical perspective on parenting. He "saw children as naturally sinful creatures, inclined toward defiance and rebellion" and promoted the biblical idea of "spare the rod, spoil the child"—a reference to Proverbs 13:24 (Kobes Du Mez 78-80).

Dobson also proclaimed the critical, *essential* differences between males and females in his books. In *Bringing Up Boys* specifically, there was great focus on the biological differences in boys and girls, which was all in "God's careful design." Dobson advised families to resist liberal ideas of raising sensitive and emasculated boys to be more like girls (Kobes Du Mez 176). These ideas of men and women having distinctly different characteristics and roles was not new when Dobson published *Bringing Up Boys*. Other evangelical leaders such as Billy Graham have enforced a patriarchal family hierarchy, believing that "God had cursed women to be under man's rule" as a consequence of "The Fall" (Kobes Du Mez 26). Graham elaborated upon the biblical command of, "Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord" (*New International Version*, Ephesians 5:22), as he believed, "A man was 'God's representative'—the spiritual head of household, 'the protector' and 'provider of the home' (Kobes Du Mez 27). The higher leadership role of men and fathers relegated women and mothers to subservient roles in ideal evangelical families.

Ideas like those disseminated by Dobson and Graham served to create division and discord in my family's relationships. My parents' constant conflict was not helped by the uneven power dynamic borne of the assertion that my mother should submit to my father. The idea that children are inherently rebellious instilled in my parents a constant sense of suspicion toward

their children. Their expectations for my brothers were markedly different compared to those for my sister and me when we were children and persist into adulthood. My choice to pursue graduate school instead of the role of faithful wife and mother is perceived by my parents as a choice to fail as a woman.

In my process of deconstructing all these influences and instructions put upon me from such a young age, I have formed an identity out of rejecting them. Over the course of a decade, I had opportunities for independence: I moved out of my parent's home, went to college, experienced my parent's divorce, went to therapy, entered the workforce, enrolled in graduate school, and lived through the COVID-19 pandemic. These experiences provided the needed physical and mental space away from my highly spiritual upbringing to form my own opinions and beliefs. This situation is certainly not unique to me, as research has shown that entering college is a critical time for individuals to explore aspects of identity with greater freedom (Smith 223). Each of these periods of my life allowed me to meet new people and build social structures independent from my family. This was a key part of my deconstruction journey because religious identity hinges upon social group membership (Smith 231-2).

Even in the moments of my childhood that were spent outside the family home, God was there. School, a friend's house, summer camp, the YMCA: all of these places still enforced a religious (and Christian) culture upon me. In the United States, being religious is so entrenched in the culture that it is inescapable. Belief in God is ubiquitous, the understood "default" characteristic of moral society. In *Becoming an Atheist in America*, Jesse M. Smith states, "...belief is so pervasive, most people born and raised in the United States experience socialization toward theism" (Smith 220-1). In my midwestern, suburban hometown, this was

certainly my experience growing up. The omnipresence of God meant that rejecting my religious upbringing also required me to actively reject my identity within my family and community.

Forming my identity as an atheist is to develop a sense of self around something that I am not, or something that I have rejected. Smith refers to this type of identity as the “not-self” because it is an identity formed around identifying what is “fundamentally *inconsistent*” with one’s true self (Smith 228). Because religion was so ingrained in my family life, this “not-self” identity is also an identity based on the rejection of my family and my childhood.

My goals for this exhibition are to understand myself and my past with more clarity, to create artwork that resonates and sympathizes with others raised in similar situations, and to construct a demonstration that presents a learning opportunity for viewers who may not relate to the work at all. The aim of this final goal is to increase compassion for others with different beliefs or family structures. The United States is an extremely religious country with 84 percent of Americans identifying themselves with a religious belief (Smith 216). While this aspect of the culture seems to be universally accepted, its effects are not always openly discussed. Rejecting theism, in my case fundamental Christianity, can be met with hate or aggression. By revealing the dysfunction and distress that characterized my childhood home, something kept private and unacknowledged, I intend for viewers to come away from the exhibition with the understanding that sometimes people become estranged from family members, hometowns, or spiritual beliefs for very good reasons that are not immediately clear to others.

### *The Domestic*

Domestic items such as furniture, home textiles, decorations and keepsakes have private relationships with their owners. Each day we come into contact with these items in the privacy of

our homes, a space reserved for family and invited guests. These items witness the most intimate moments in our lives when we are at our most habitual and vulnerable, when a family behaves in their truest forms, behind closed doors and within walls. This version of ourselves is often much different from the versions we show to our communities at work, at church, or in social gatherings.

“The Domestic” also refers to the space to which women in traditional family structures are exiled. Confining women to the home causes their experiences in work, communication, and relationships to be limited compared to men. Placing women in this space with the responsibility of household maintenance and beautification leads women to have stronger relationships with the home and domestic space. This was the case in my childhood home—my mother ran the home, and my father just lived there.

There are relationships between us and objects that we use every day. The longer we spend with an item, the more it “imprints” on us and a stronger relationship is formed. In this way, personal objects have the ability to contain memory through the associations we make with them and the effects of wear on the material.

The functionality of clothing and household objects gives them meaning and establishes context. We wear specific clothes to go to work, to relax, and to worship. We wear different clothing to suit our gender and age. Styles change to reflect the present time or personal expression. All of these details are crucial to the signification of one’s identity.

### *Clothing and Textiles*

I choose to use textiles in my artwork for many different reasons. The flexibility of fabric and the intimate relationship humans have with it makes it well suited to explore the concept of

memories. Cloth as a material is so closely connected with garments, and as garments function as our “second skin,” making fabric as a material is apt for implying the presence of the human body. Representing the nuances of the body is an important way to represent emotions in my work. Fabric has the ability to imply the slightest of movements, to twist and transform to represent the complexities of the skin that it covers. As we experience emotions in our bodies and as our bodies hold onto our memories, our clothing reflects what our bodies experience (Celant 14).

I am fascinated by how objects imprint onto my memory and thus function as reminders of a specific time or place. I started noticing this especially through my design education and experience as a fashion designer. Articles of clothing have personalities based on their intended purpose, fabric, color, or pattern. The process of designing clothing for a specific customer, occasion, or location made me especially attuned to the nuances of textiles. I have found that I am able to use this skill with more freedom in my artistic practice than I could in the fashion industry.

My background in the fashion industry also taught me about waste. Trends change so quickly with time, especially now in the information age. Outdated clothing is discarded at high rates, which has resulted in a seemingly endless supply of pre-owned textiles that I can use as material in my work. I am proud that my material recycling practice generates a smaller carbon footprint than it would if I only worked with new materials. I also have access to a wider variety of materials to represent nuanced situations and characters through my use of repurposed consumer waste.

I see connections with materials and objects that I find in thrift stores, being sold by neighbors, or given away by friends, that remind me of my past. Household materials are

ubiquitous because they are mass-produced. It is possible to find objects that resonate with me or seem identical to what was in my childhood home twenty years ago. The commonality of these items means that viewers will be able to create their own associations and look back upon their own memories, as I have, when viewing the artwork. Even though these objects were not actually in my childhood home and I do not have a history with them before gathering them, they instill a sense of familiarity. Trends in interior design, consumer products, and clothing are markers of time that I use to date my artwork and place it in the past. Just like archeological artifacts provide information about how people lived their lives throughout history, objects within my work provide contextual information about a specific time or place referenced within my work.



## CHAPTER 2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

### *Craft and Fiber Art*

My work would not be possible without historical critical craft discourse and fiber artists that have come before me. Contemporary fiber art is now widespread and given a place among other types of fine art, but this was not always the case. For centuries, women across cultures performed most of the labor in fiber and textile production. Over time, the skills required to weave, sew, and knit were easily dismissed because of their association with women. Textiles have also been closely linked to “craft” as a distinction from “art.” This separate category exists to create a hierarchy between the two categories of making in which “craft” techniques are used to create functional objects and “art” techniques are used for aesthetic purposes only (Gipson 7-8). The hierarchy of craft and art has been challenged by artists engaging with craft and fibers, with an especially important period in the 1960s and 70s. This period generated significant change in the attitudes toward fibers and other “craft” arts. As Elissa Auther describes, “...the women’s art movement revealed the hierarchy of media as an arbitrary construct that limited the definition of art” (Auther 163-5). This is not to say that fiber art and craft technique is fully accepted within the category of “fine art” now, or that “the hierarchy of art and craft and its injustices were resolved by artists using fiber in the 1960s and 1970s.” However, the work of these artists paved the way for contemporary artists using fiber like myself to have a place within fine art spaces (Auther 164).

### *Autobiographical Artwork*

In my research, I discovered celebrated artists who made work about their own lives. This was not a topic that I had ever considered before, especially since I had grown up in a busy

household without time for differing opinions or emotions. (And I was raised to keep family life extremely private.) These artworks resonated with me at a time when I was starting to open up to others about my personal story and, through this process, learned that my experiences were not entirely unique. Many other people have grown up in similar family dynamics. These realizations inspired confidence to explore my own past in my thesis; this change of direction generated a refreshing enthusiasm and excitement for my work that I had not felt for some time.

The work of Louise Bourgeois was key in provoking me to explore my family history in this body of work, to be discussed in detail in Chapter 3. *Destruction of the Father* (1974) is one of Bourgeois' artworks which is a direct expression of resentment toward her father but represented in abstract, corporeal forms. The emphasis on the bodily nature of emotions was powerful to me as I considered the ways in which emotions can become tangible in artwork and as I experience them. Bourgeois' works also demonstrated to me the potential in referencing and constructing domestic spaces in order to discuss family dynamics. Studying Bourgeois' work and identifying with the dynamic presented in it gave me encouragement to explore my own family dynamic through my artwork, and not be afraid to be critical about it.

In addition to *Destruction of the Father's* references to a dinner table and bed (Celant 41), Bourgeois' series of *Cells* (1991-2008) represent domestic spaces as theatrical scenes full of tension. This tension is what resonated with me and my own experience. The cells reference rooms within a house, which Bourgeois has identified as the "storage place for memories" (Qualls 41). The cells are intimate, giving the viewer the sense that they are seeing something private. The strange familiarity of the objects and disembodied limbs within the cells creates a connection with viewers, "that unites the past, past lives, past experiences, [and] the psychological dimension" (Qualls 43). This confusing, yet fascinating, place between the present

and the past is the same setting in which I find my own work. Accessing one's childhood self through memory and projecting it outward is time travel, an act of release, and the start of a conversation.

Mike Kelley's works addressing the nuclear family have been especially interesting to me for their sense of repetition and critical perspective. His piece *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid* (1987) engages abandoned objects in a way that I especially appreciate. It consists of a canvas covered entirely by handmade stuffed animals and crocheted blankets that he found discarded at thrift stores. The experience of seeing a handmade item at a thrift store is often disheartening because the time, labor, and love required to make the item is clear yet was disregarded and cast away by its original owner. My grandmother made teddy bears, dolls, and quilts for me that I would never give away because I love her, and these are tangible representations of her love for me. However, this piece questions the emotional labor required as we hold on to sentimental objects from our childhood. Are parents owed continued love from their children? Or, as the title suggests, do children incur debt to their parents from parental love and care? These questions are extremely relevant to me and my most recent body of work as I push past nostalgia to analyze my own childhood.

### *Ecofeminism*

In addition to referencing artwork in my research, studying ecofeminism was another path that I took in order to explore my own identity outside my family history. Ecofeminism brings together feminism and environmentalism to critique the domination of women and nature by the systems of patriarchy and capitalism. Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* series of novels (2003-2013) presented a crucial opportunity for me to analyze relationships between nature, women, and spirituality. In the series, the God's Gardeners are a nature-focused, neo-Christian

religious organization. The Gardener's reverence for female leaders and their horticultural talents resonated with me because I have strong memories of my family matriarchs and their gardens.

In my family it was the woman's job to keep the house looking beautiful. This included not only maintaining the cleanliness of the home, but also decorating painting, and tending a flower garden. My father would help my mother with the garden on occasion, but most of the time he did not care to offer his opinion or labor. Like the God's Gardeners, growing plants was the woman's domain and source of pride. My mother, grandmother, and aunts all labored over their gardens to make them beautiful. During family gatherings, the host always gave a tour of her garden to the other women in the family. I always tagged along as a young girl, picking up on plant names as I listened to my grandmother marvel at how well my mother's Hostas were doing that year, or admire my aunt's ten-foot Clematis. Sprinkled in these garden updates were always updates about the family. From marital conflict, drawn out job searches, to births and deaths, the garden was a safe place for women to talk freely.

Like the God's Gardeners, I feel a strong connection with the natural world. The bonding experiences that I shared with my family matriarchs as a child created a foundation for joy and accomplishment in growing plants. Today, part of my artistic practice is natural fabric dyeing with flowers, leaves, and other plant matter. I enjoy the process of growing plants in my own garden, and dyeing material for my artwork connects my artistic practice with my family's matriarchal tradition of gardening.

## CHAPTER 3. MATERIALS AND PROCESS

### *“Women’s Work”*

Using skills of “women’s work” in my practice is key to my perspective on the family and to establishing a domestic context for my artwork. Traditional utilitarian skills such as sewing, weaving, and needlework were also used to decorate or enhance the home and practiced by women. Historically, these activities were considered to be “appropriate” pursuits for women (Gipson 9), as they could be practiced alongside women’s traditional occupations within the home to clothe their families, cover their beds, and decorate their homes (Auther 165). I was taught to sew by my grandmother when I was a child and being able to use these skills now to construct an environment that reflects the emotional information of my past has been an illuminating experience for me. Sewing my artwork is a way to claim my femininity and the domestic origins of myself as an artist. As I explore my childhood and family dynamic, the role of gender is especially important to consider because my family held traditional, evangelical Christian values regarding gender roles. My mother stayed at home with her children and my experience as the oldest daughter in the family influences the way that I remember my childhood as I shouldered the burdens of turbulent family emotions.

In my practice I transform my materials through the traditionally feminine or domestic techniques of sewing and weaving. Additionally, I use alternative methods like deconstruction, and assemblage of found objects. Even when I use a traditional technique, I will apply it in alternative (non-practical) ways such as weaving around objects in *Self Care (Ritual)*, quilting over entire garments in *“The Old House”*, or weaving and knotting through garments in *Family Tree*. I often deconstruct garments in order to deconstruct the nostalgia that I might associate with the past and to affect these objects in ways that mirror how the past has affected my

emotional self. Taking these “normal” materials and distorting them represents the effects of my childhood environment, but also my changed perspective on the past. As I create my work, I am able to develop a deeper understanding of my childhood and my family dynamic. It is beneficial for me to process the emotions I have about my memories through the tangible practice of creating art. Physically bringing the past into the present through my art practice has been a tool for me to make connections between my current understanding of myself and my memories of the past.

The following sub-chapters will discuss each artwork in the exhibition individually.

### *“The Old House”*

This sculpture is a scale model of my childhood home made of rust-stained textiles. *“The Old House”* serves to create a context for the rest of the exhibition. The memories that I referenced as the foundation for this body of work all occurred within the house depicted in this sculpture. My family calls this “the old house” because we left the home at a pivotal point in our family history. This house is the “container” for the memories, stories, and emotions that viewers will encounter in the exhibition. A house also functions as a metaphor for the family—as a literal “container” for the people within the family unit.

By gathering clothing with a variety of patterns and designs ranging from checkered to floral, printed and embroidered, masculine and feminine, I sought to liken the different parts of the family unit to the materials that make up the house. Included in these materials are men’s shirts, women’s blouses and skirts, sheer scarves, lace tablecloths, floral pillowcases, cross-stitched placemats, doilies and embroidery. All of these reclaimed textiles were stained with rust to visually unify them and to give the appearance of age .

Next, I quilted the textiles into panels that would come together to build the walls and roof of the house. In this stage of the process, I used free-motion quilting to indicate different surfaces of the house through a different thread color and stitching pattern for stone, stucco, shingles, garage doors, and windows. Before moving on to piecing these panels together, I realized that, like these panels, a house is made up of a collection of materials. These materials, cut into rectangles and triangles, do not possess meaning or memory on their own, but are given these characteristics over time by the people who interact with them. After I sewed the panels into the house shape, I draped the soft sculptural form over a PEX pipe structure. This structure was purposefully built to appear precarious, as if a strong wind might blow it over. The house leans and curves as a distortion of a structurally-sound building. The rust stains and precarious-looking structure of the house are physical manifestations of the instability and degradation of my familial relationships.

Creating this sculpture was extremely emotional for me in the beginning. When I looked up photos of the house on the internet, it was the first time I had seen it in many years. However, through the process of seeing the flat panels of clothing, sewing them together, and manipulating the structure of the house in miniature form, I was able to feel control over my relationship with this place and the memories contained within it.



Figure 1. Schroeder, Laura Ann, *"The Old House"*, 2023, front



Figure 2. Schroeder, Laura Ann, *"The Old House"*, 2023, detail





Figure 3. Schroeder, Laura Ann, "*The Old House*", 2023, back

### *Gardeners*

Recalling my maternal connections to nature and the garden at “the old house,” this sculpture acknowledges parts of my childhood that I accept and am proud to have as part of my identity. *Gardeners* is a tribute to my family matriarchs, other female gardeners, to Margaret Atwood and her *God’s Gardeners*. In this sculpture, I draped garments that I dyed with my own flowers over the forms of two figures.

The vaguely human forms are a reference to my mother and grandmother. These forms lack detail because my experiences with each of them in their gardens span many years and have blended together to form a blurry vision of figures in the garden. What does have detail is the variety of dyed and printed garments covering the figures. The garments are clearly feminine

with lace trim, floral patterns, and soft denim. Prints and washes of color from the botanical dyeing process create richness in the surface of the fabrics with their natural colors and highlight the worn quality of the garments when the added color is reminiscent of grass stains or dirt.

The process of dyeing fabric with plants is labor intensive and requires a great degree of care. The plants used for dyes in *Gardeners* were either grown from seed in my own garden over a summer and harvested in the fall or gathered while on walks in my community. The fabrics of each garment were then treated with tannins and potassium alum, or mordanted, before dyeing and printing. To print with flowers and leaves, I thoughtfully arrange the plant matter over the garments and bundle them up with rubber bands and yarn. After submerging these bundles in dye pots, the textiles can be unrolled, revealing prints of each flower and leaf. This process is just as magical as the process of growing beautiful flowers from seed. The labor of tending to my garden, and to my natural dye practice, connects me to the earth and elicits a strong sense of satisfaction.



Figure 4. Schroeder, Laura Ann, *Gardeners*, 2023, front



Figure 5. Schroeder, Laura Ann, *Gardeners*, 2023, detail



Figure 6. Schroeder, Laura Ann, *Gardeners*, 2023, back

### *Self Care (Ritual)*

This artwork is an exploration of identity through the practice of dyeing my hair, an outward construction of a “not-self” identity by experimenting with making my appearance different from the rest of my family. *Self Care (Ritual)* is an assemblage of hair dyeing supplies and my own stained T-shirts and towels, woven together with brown and pink yarn. The various colors of yarn represent the many different outcomes of these experiments and iterations of my outward identity over the years. The objects collected within the weaving are supplies needed for the ritual of hair dyeing.

Weaving these objects together is significant because weaving of cloth is a similarly meditative and ritualistic activity to dyeing one’s own hair. Each of these activities, hair care and weaving, take many hours and days. The time that each of these processes consumes provides an opportunity to think about the repetitive actions and what they mean to me. These practices are also opportunities to process emotions through working with fiber material.

Additionally, this artwork is representative of both deconstructive and reconstructive processes in my identity. Like the deconstruction of my childhood memories and my faith, I strip away the natural color of my hair with bleach, and I cut apart the stained textiles that make up this artwork. After the deconstructive process, I am able to reconstruct my identity as an atheist, like I add a new color to my hair, and like I weave these objects and textiles together to form *Self Care (Ritual)*.





Figure 7. Schroeder, Laura Ann, *Self Care (Ritual)*, 2022



Figure 8. Schroeder, Laura Ann, *Self Care (Ritual)*, 2022, top detail



Figure 9. Schroeder, Laura Ann, *Self Care (Ritual)*, 2022, bottom detail

### *“The Comfy Chair”*

This sculpture is made of an old, thrifted chair layered with garments and fabrics over the surface of the upholstery. *“The Comfy Chair”* represents a physical part of the domestic space that changed as my family unit began to disintegrate. “The Comfy Chair” in our house was a well-used, comfortable reading chair that was used for homework after school, family Bible studies, and group photos of the kids when we were young. When my parents’ marriage began to deteriorate as the kids grew up, my mother decided to recover “The Comfy Chair,” as its condition had become poor—not unlike the state of our family relationships. After the chair was recovered, it was no longer comforting or inviting. The new upholstery was stiff and sterile, and the “spirit” of “The Comfy Chair” was lost.

The outer upholstery in the sculpture is cut and pulled back to reveal another layer of upholstery underneath. Layered on top of the “old” upholstery are textiles representing different members of my family to visualize how the chair was used over the years. These textiles include a man’s pajama shirt, a woman’s pajama shirt, men’s jeans, women’s acid-washed jeans, men’s cargo shorts, a baby blanket, a knitted blanket of scrap yarn, a little girl’s tie-dye t-shirt, a boy’s flannel shirt, a girl’s printed thermal, a young child’s uniform polo, and a baby’s pair of bib overalls. The variety of colors, prints, textures and materials in each of these items shows the extent of use that “The Comfy Chair” enjoyed. The garments are placed on the chair as if they are being worn by bodies sitting in the chair. However, the garments are empty and flattened against the chair’s original upholstery, their wearers having grown up and abandoned them and the chair.

This ghostly representation of this chair is a metaphor for the conflict of nostalgia. The familiarity of the vintage-looking floral fabric of the “original” upholstery and the textiles

representing various members of the family evoke the safety and coziness of home. On the contrary, the strange arrangement of all of these elements at once arouses a melancholy over these fond memories of the past that cannot be recovered in the present.



Figure 10. Schroeder, Laura Ann, "*The Comfy Chair*", 2023



Figure 11. Schroeder, Laura Ann, "*The Comfy Chair*", 2023, front



Figure 12. Schroeder, Laura Ann, *"The Comfy Chair"*, 2023, detail

### *Disciples*

This artwork is a hanging assemblage of textiles that represents the church community or “church family” within which I was raised. The assembly consists of men’s and women’s “Sunday best” clothing that could commonly be seen at a contemporary Christian church like the one I attended in my youth. This group of garments was quilted over to form a flattened panel, which connected so closely that the garments start to lose their individuality, just like the individuals of my church community were so affected by the influence of the church that they lost their individuality.

The panel of garments is interrupted by twelve vertical stripes of maroon fabric, a reference to Christ’s twelve disciples, which extend towards the heavens and are used to suspend the work from ceiling mounts. These stripes of fabric are also a reference to my grandmother’s practice of sewing vestments and altar cloths for the church throughout my childhood. These



projects were often juxtaposed with the sewing lessons I received from her and set an example of using one's talents to serve the church.

*Disciples* represents the inconsistency and unreliable nature of my church “family” despite the grand promises of a strong community made by the Bible and by church leaders. Broken promises are represented by the visual breaks in the group of garments and the uneven surface that does not fully reach the ceiling (or enlightenment). The assembly appears to be precarious and unstable, like it could not accommodate any extra weight. Likewise, the maroon stripes are transparent in the gallery lighting, which calls attention to the cheapness of the fabric despite its opulent-looking, shiny surface, just like the promises of a wonderful life within the church sounded inspiring at first but did not amount to anything for me personally.



Figure 13. Schroeder, Laura Ann, *Disciples*, 2023



Figure 14. Schroeder, Laura Ann, *Disciples*, 2023, detail

### *Family Tree*

Explaining my (lack of) family structure has always been a difficult subject. For a multitude of reasons, there are many spots on my family tree that are essentially empty. *Family Tree* is a suspended assembly of garments arranged in genealogical order to represent my parents and grandparents. Vertical lines of red yarn connect each of the garments and extend toward the floor. The garments have been deconstructed in different ways to represent the status of my relationship with each individual.

Some of the garments are cleanly cut apart to show a person who has been deliberately “cut out” of my life through an estranged relationship: the white shirt represents my mother’s father, the sheer blouse represents my paternal grandmother, and the black shirt represents my

own father. Other shirts are completely intact to represent an ongoing relationship: the seafoam green sweater represents my maternal grandmother and the olive-green sweater represents my mother. One shirt has been distressed over time by wear, ripped and unraveling to the point of transparency. This shirt represents my paternal grandfather who was dear to me but passed away when I was a young adult from a long-term illness. This distinction between different methods of damage and removal is important to distinguish the different reasons why an individual is not present in my life anymore.

The purpose of this work is to visualize and express the despair of having “holes” in my family tree and how it feels to explain these absences. It is clear that the male members of my family are not present for one reason or another, an absence that emphasizes the maternal members of my family. *Family Tree* also shows that although these people are not present in my life, they are still part of who I am—through biological relationship, or the literal “bloodline” of the red yarn, as well as the effects that my memories of them have on my current identity. The garments that are “cut out” or damaged are not functional as garments anymore, but the remaining seams and details recall their original forms like I am able to remember these people even though I have not seen them in many years.





Figure 15. Schroeder, Laura Ann, *Family Tree*, 2023



Figure 16. Schroeder, Laura Ann, *Family Tree*, 2023, detail

## *Spiritual Transformation*

The first piece that I completed in this series of work converts the emotional effects of my former Christian faith into a tangible form. The sculpture is composed of a cruciform wall-mounted sculpture connected to a wooden table standing eight feet away from the wall with multicolored yarn. This sculptural installation explains the feeling of losing myself to intense expectations of evangelical worship. The crucifix, a primary symbol of the Christian religion, is pulling yarn from the sweater to grow its form. Brilliant colors of yarn are pulled from the inner structure of the sweater, to represent religious practice diminishing the most special, sacred parts of myself.

I created this artwork by first unraveling a sweater that represents my body and my emotional self. There is only a small portion of the sweater remaining with the collar and knitted construction of the material left as the visual indications that it was once a sweater. Next, I sewed vibrant colored yarns into the inside of the sweater to represent the personal and private parts of myself—my creativity, my dreams, my personality, my joy.

The wall-mounted sculpture was constructed first with a chicken wire form, which I intentionally distorted into an organic blob that vaguely resembled a crucifix. Then, I created tufted pieces of fabric to cover the wire form, by draping fabric over the form, drafting patterns, and then applied yarn to the surface of my patterns with tufting. The process of tufting was an opportunity to use many different colors and textures of yarn layered around one another. I incorporated the yarn from the sweater as well as many other yarns. In addition to giving the crucifix depth and variety of color, this also suggests the accumulating process of this “spiritual transformation” that the artwork’s title refers to. Over the surface of tufted yarn, I added a variety

of beads and buttons, which also hints at the duration of this transformative process, implying that these notions came from other garments worn at other times in my life.



Figure 17. Schroeder, Laura Ann, *Spiritual Transformation*, 2022



Figure 18. Schroeder, Laura Ann, *Spiritual Transformation*, 2022, wall detail



Figure 19. Schroeder, Laura Ann, *Spiritual Transformation*, 2022, table detail

### *Dad's Home for Dinner*

An installation consisting of a wooden dining table and six chairs is the final work in my exhibition. One of these chairs is distinct from the others as a captain's chair, sitting at the head of the table, and overlooking the gallery, to represent the head of the household: my father. The surface of the table and the other five chairs have all suffered damage over time from a force apparently originating from the head of the table. The wood and laminate are gouged, punctured, and burned to varying degrees. The apparent target of the violence is two chairs in particular: the other head of the table and the chair next to it: my mother and the scapegoat child.

The process of creating this work consisted almost entirely in deconstructive acts. I damaged the surface of the table and five affected chairs by using a variety of tools such as angle grinders, chisels, hammers, saws, utility knives, and a butane torch. Many of these tools were

very active and aggressive in their application, which is a characteristic that does not usually describe my working methods. Inflicting damage to the table and chairs was also different from my other works because I felt as if I were stepping into my father's shoes as I worked. As I made directional marks with my tools, I imagined myself sitting in my father's place . This was uncomfortable for me; I felt myself apologizing to the material as it became increasingly scarred by my actions.

As a child, I knew that I should not dread eating dinner with the family as intensely as I did, but I did not realize how unhealthy that attitude was until I became an adult. Creating *Dad's Home for Dinner* solidified this conclusion for me, as I saw the artwork come into being. My family ate dinner together every night, at six o'clock on the dot, when my father arrived home from work. Eating dinner together every night is a habit that most would agree is a characteristic of healthy families, and that is surely why my mother insisted on this nightly gathering. However, my father used this gathering of the entire family as an opportunity to assert his dominant position and inflict emotional abuse on everyone else. The intensity of this experience was heightened by the fact that this was the only time the family spent time with my father most days because he retreated to the den immediately after the meal was eaten.

Like other works in the exhibition, *Dad's Home for Dinner* is an example of how the objective characteristics of a "happy family" do not always indicate a healthy family dynamic. A dinner table can evoke nostalgic memories, but that is not necessarily everyone's experience. Just like the veneer on the surface of the table looks like a quality wooden material, the actual material may be a cheap imitation like the particle board that the table is actually made of.





Figure 20. Schroeder, Laura Ann, *Dad's Home for Dinner*, 2023



Figure 21. Schroeder, Laura Ann, *Dad's Home for Dinner*, 2023, back

## CHAPTER 4. EXHIBITION DESIGN

The exhibition of this body of work was installed at Tipton Gallery in Johnson City, Tennessee from March 2 through March 31, 2023. It consisted of the previously described eight works combining multiple materials and techniques in the artistic disciplines of fibers, sculpture, and installation.

As viewers enter the gallery, they occupy a small area sectioned off by a dividing wall. “*The Old House*” and *Gardeners* fill this initial portion of the exhibit. There is natural light streaming through the large windows at the front of the gallery, giving this area a sunny atmosphere. The bright light also matches the outdoor setting of both of these works. Once viewers advance beyond the dividing wall, they enter the second half of the gallery, where the majority of the work is displayed. This section of the exhibition feels intimate and private compared to the front half of the gallery. The dividing wall partially blocks the front gallery windows, which compresses viewers into this second space and creates a darker, moodier, artificially lit atmosphere. The purpose of this contrast is to create the semblance of being a private domestic space within the open gallery.

The nostalgia of childhood is increasingly deconstructed as viewers advance toward the back of the gallery. Correspondingly, the amount of textile materials also gradually decreases as viewers approach *Dad’s Home for Dinner*. Pieces like “*The Comfy Chair*” and *Self Care (Ritual)*, which viewers encounter first when proceeding through the back portion of the exhibit, rely the most on nostalgia and positive experiences from my past.

In the center of this rear section are the two large-scale hanging pieces, each representing different types of “family.” These works mirror one another but are not placed equally across

from one another within the space. *Disciples* represents my church community and *Family Tree* represents my biological family. Each of these works utilizes red linear elements to show the method of connection, by spirituality or by blood.

Next to *Disciples* is *Spiritual Transformation*. These works are installed next to one another because they both address the spiritual parts of the exhibition most directly. The concept of *Disciples*, that my church family was unsupportive, contributed to the conclusions that can be drawn from *Spiritual Transformation*, that my evangelical faith was damaging to my sense of self.

The two artworks installed at the back of the gallery, *Spiritual Transformation* and *Dad's Home for Dinner* both address patriarchal forces in my life—my biological father and my heavenly father (God). Each of these works demonstrate the negative outcomes of my relationships with each of these patriarchal figures. *Spiritual Transformation* communicates the personal effect that my relationship with God had on me as an individual, and *Dad's Home for Dinner* materializes the collective family experience of emotional damage from my father.

*Dad's Home for Dinner* is the finale of this exhibition because my father's emotional abuse is what spurred me to revisit my family dynamic through a critical lens. At the rear of the gallery, this is the piece associated with the least amount of nostalgia—it is also the piece with the least amount of fabric. Tucked into an alcove at the back of the gallery, the table and chairs seem like they are installed in the dining room of a house. A brass light fixture from the 1990s is hung above the table to illuminate every detail of damage to the scene and beckons viewers towards the conclusion of the exhibition.



Figure 22. Schroeder, Laura Ann, *Witness, Revival, Testimony*, 2023, front



Figure 23. Schroeder, Laura Ann, *Witness, Revival, Testimony*, 2023, "The Comfy Chair" and *Disciples*





Figure 24. Schroeder, Laura Ann, *Witness, Revival, Testimony*, 2023, back section



Figure 25. Schroeder, Laura Ann, *Witness, Revival, Testimony*, 2023, back view

## CHAPTER 5. FURTHER DISCUSSION

As I progress in my career as an artist, I plan to continue pursuing this type of work. Processing my childhood will never be finished. I am learning and healing every day that I work with my memories. The examination of my past through *Witness, Revival, Testimony* has only revealed more opportunities to better understand myself and my past. To quote Louise Bourgeois, “What does time inflict—dust and disintegration? My reminiscences help me live in the present, and I want them to survive. I am a prisoner of my emotions. You have to tell your story, and you have to forget your story. You forget and forgive. It liberates you” (Celant 260). The process of this work has not only helped me understand myself better, but it has helped me relate to my family and others in a more sensitive way.

Sharing my “testimony” and revealing what has happened in the privacy of my childhood home has presented an opportunity for conversation about family dynamics and American theist culture. This culture being so integral to my childhood will always be of interest to me, and as I continue to live in the United States and be at odds with this culture, I am sure that there will be more aspects of this source of conflict to further examine in future works and draw on my experiences from *Witness, Revival, Testimony* to refine upcoming projects.

## CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSIONS

Creating *Witness, Revival, Testimony* has caused me to be more confident in my identity. It has been emotionally healing for me to recreate my childhood memories and see them with a more mature perspective. I have been able to let go of negative emotions like guilt, anger, and resentment as I have come to better understand the dynamics that combined to create the childhood that I lived through. As I continue in my artistic career, I will be moving forward with a clearer understanding of my identity within my family unit, with respect to spirituality, and as an artist. Now that I have spent this time recognizing and rejecting the parts of my past that I choose to not identify with, I intend to focus future projects on the identity that I have constructed for myself.

As I have received feedback from others and observed reactions from viewers of my thesis exhibit, I am certain that my work has also affected others. My work has contributed to discussions about family dynamic and American Christian culture, as well as to the discipline of fiber art.

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