

# **Big as the Sky, Better Than Candy: A Visual Exploration of Grief and Place**

Lindsey Sigmon  
Department of Art and Art History  
The University of North Carolina at Asheville  
One University Heights  
Asheville, North Carolina 28804 USA

Faculty Advisors: Robert Dunning, Tamie Beldue, Brent Skidmore, Eric Tomberlin,  
Suzanne Dittenber

## **Abstract**

The art making process can be a beneficial way to confront grief following the death of a loved one. *Big as the Sky, Better Than Candy (And Other Ways of Saying I Love You)* is an attempt to manage grief after loss. This paper examines the ways that art making has historically been employed in the grieving process. Relevant works by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Jennifer Loeber, William Wetmore Story, and Andres Serrano inform this discussion of art's role in the grieving process. The artist's process and history are examined alongside the observations of death and survivors made by David R. Unruh.

## **1. Introduction**

The exhibition, *Big as the Sky, Better Than Candy (And Other Ways to Say I Love You)* included a series of hand colored lithographs, cut and arranged into shadow boxes, collages, and a large installation piece. This series is an exploration of my personal relationship with my father, our home, and the grieving process I am going through with the loss of both. My father, brother, and I lived on a small farm, and shared a home we had both grown up in. This home and land was what we constructed our identities around, our place of work and safety. The house had been decorated by my great-grandmother, and throughout my life retained her faded wallpapers, handmade quilts, and nick-nacks. The seven acres that surrounded the home provided the perfect stage for childhood fantasy and adventure. After my father's unexpected death these surroundings continue to be the elements I can access most clearly in my memories of life with my father. While his death was the most painful loss I have endured, the subsequent loss of our home had a similarly powerful impact on my life. This work and research at times felt like the strongest connection I could establish between myself and my father when I could no longer stand in our fields or cook in our kitchen. A recreation of a world that was so sheltered and joyful has created both a reprieve from this difficult time and a way to directly confront my grief.

## **2. Preservation of Memory**

Our home has been handed down through my father's family for over one hundred years. Since he died at a fairly young age he had yet to create a will. It was widely assumed that the home would belong to my brother and I, considering that my brother was beginning a family of his own. The lack of will, however, left room for the house to be acquired by an ex step-mother, without our knowledge. This loss, in a strange way, carried a sort of trauma similar to the sudden loss of our father. My brother and I were formerly notified that to step foot on the property we still considered home would qualify as trespassing. With the opening of one letter we realized we had lost our greatest physical connection to our father and the lives we had known before his death.

This loss of this physical connection struck a sense of urgency into my artwork. After a death, physical mementos, gifts, or the home of the deceased person take on a new significance. They offer evidence of the lost connection and help memories with the deceased stay vivid. This is what makes an inheritance so significant, greater than the material sum of its parts. Almost all of my most meaningful memories with my father happened on our farm. It was where I grew up; where we had all of our long conversations and fights. It's where he buried my first dog while I cried, where he taught me how to dance, and make a rope swing. I could take a person to the exact spots on the property where all of these moments occurred, except I can't, because I no longer have access to this place. This compelled me to recreate significant sites in shadow boxes and an installation in order to preserve the memories they hold.

### 3. Conceptual Influences: Grief in Art

The significance of a lost loved one's material possessions has been explored by artists in a variety of ways. This art does not focus entirely on a person's death, but rather their life. This stands in contrast to a large percentage of memorial artwork. William Wetmore Story's iconic 1894 marble statue, *Angel of Grief*, for example, expresses the devastating grief resulting from a loved one's death.<sup>1</sup> *The Morgue (Killed by Four Great Danes)* by Andres Serrano's 1992 photographs delve into the physicality of death in morbid detail.<sup>3</sup> Artists like Jennifer Loeber and Felix Gonzalez-Torres address death by attempting to access and memorialize a person's life through their former possessions, rather than directly addressing their death and the grief it caused.



Figure 1. William Wetmore Story, *Angel of Grief*.  
<https://glistranieri.wordpress.com/2012/03/08/cemetery-of-strangers/>



Figure 2. Andres Serrano, *Killed by Four Great Danes*. From his series *The Morgue*.  
<http://andresserrano.org/series/the-morgue>

In the wake of her mother's death, Jennifer Loeber found herself clinging to "even the most mundane" of her mother's belongings.<sup>4</sup> Objects including a camera, a lighter, a pearl ring were kept and photographed. These photos

are presented alongside archived photos of her mother interacting with these objects. This juxtaposition illuminates the way that these seemingly insignificant objects are, to the artist, a powerful testament to her mother's life. A photo of a pearl ring is displayed alongside a photo of her mother wearing the ring. The images provide a connection between the artist's current reality, the reality in which her mother is dead, and a former reality, the one in which her mother was a living person.



Figure 3. Jennifer Loeber, *Pearl Ring*. From her series *Left Behind*.  
<http://www.jenniferloeber.com/left-behind/446gmhlxnbrpfia2hpn2x5ppnbgfob>

Felix Gonzalez-Torres approached the memorialization of his recently deceased lover with a similar sentiment. In 1991, Gonzales-Torres displayed *Untitled (billboard of an empty bed)* in the streets of Manhattan.<sup>5</sup> The bed in the photograph is Gonzales-Torres' own, the one he had formerly shared with his lover. Two depressions are visible on the pillows. The piece does a beautiful job of highlighting the inconceivability of death when their presence feels so recent. A person leaves behind so much evidence of their existence when they die, and this evidence sometimes becomes sacred to those left behind. A trivial depression in a pillow has clearly taken on a reverence for Gonzalez-Torres, as evidence of his lover's current absence and recent presence. This physical space is the most tangible connection he has with the deceased.



Figure 4. Felix- Gonzalez-Torres' *Untitled* (*billboard of an empty bed*). Displayed 1991.  
<https://artmuseum.princeton.edu/art/exhibitions/1576>

I find place and objects to be a powerful connection to a lost loved one. The preservation of a space that you shared with that person helps the memories stay fresh. After losing access to my childhood home, my artwork quickly became a way to document and preserve my memories of my lost surroundings. I drew a map of our home from memory in order to document the layout of this land while the memory of it was still fresh in my mind. While I can no longer visit this place, looking at this map of it has allowed me to access forgotten experiences.

This process of preserving and highlighting the importance of a lost loved one's possessions and surroundings aligns with the "Strategies of Survivors" anticipated by David Unruh. Unruh observed that survivors frequently exhibit common behaviors after the death of a loved one, including the reinterpretation of the mundane and the sanctification

of meaningful symbols.<sup>6</sup> Both of these strategies emerge in my artmaking process. Daily chores and activities are interpreted as profound acts of dedication and love. The surroundings and objects that provided an emotional connection to my father are documented and sanctified. Unruh noted that some objects are sanctified “to such a degree that their loss would be as tragic to the survivor as was the death of the deceased.”<sup>7</sup> Pieces like *An Elegy for My Dad* allow me to grieve both the loss of my father and the loss of the possessions that provided an emotional connection to him after our physical connection was severed.



An Elegy for My Dad: Map of Our Home. Woodcut, watercolor. 2018.

*An Elegy for My Dad* contains all of the sites that my shadow boxes are based on. Drawing this map brought up the memories and scenes that I recreated in all of my shadow boxes. The series *My Brother Picked Me a Flower* features flowers that grow around the perimeters of the garden in the center of the map. *Higher* references the rope swing beside our house. *If I Can't Dance With You* references the dancing lessons I get from my father by our fire pit during one of our bonfire parties. The pieces are unified by repeating elements, duplicates of the same flowers and leaves made possible through the use of lithography. The recurring elements unify the pieces into a shared landscape, the one mapped out in *An Elegy For My Dad*.



Figure 6. *Higher*. Wood, glass, lithographs, watercolors. 2018.

The large installation piece, *I'd do anything for you*, is inspired by the interior of our home. It brings together all of the flowers used throughout my pieces and reflects the aging floral wallpaper present in my childhood home. The house has been decorated by the succession of family members that have lived in the home, first my great grandparents, my grandfather, my father, and myself. The house has retained a bit of the wallpaper, knick knacks, and heirlooms that each generation contributed. The interior of the home would likely appear, to anyone with any knack for interior design, to be incongruous, poorly planned, and visually overwhelming. To me, the amalgamation of decor and renovation style provided a visual lineage of the people who had lived in the home. *I'd do anything for you* attempts to capture some of the overwhelming aesthetics of the lost home.

#### 4. Aesthetic Influence- Pattern and Decoration

Pattern and Decoration was an American art movement of the 1970's and early 1980's. The movement included artists of a wide variety of media including painting, printmaking, textiles, and multimedia collage. These artists were united by their desire to incorporate ornamental and decorative elements into their artwork. Many of the artists in the movement found an antithesis to the abstract and minimalist tendency of the day restricting. They expanded on existing ideas about contemporary American art by working outside of the limited dialogue of abstraction.<sup>8</sup> P&D artists were open to the influences of quilts, carpets, wallpapers, and other decorative works. They were not afraid to have their work called pretty, soft, or decorative- terms that had taken on a pejorative tone in the 1960's.<sup>9</sup>

My work takes aesthetic influence from the artists of this movement. The readiness of Pattern and Decoration artists to reference the imagery found in wallpaper, carpets, and other ornaments of a domestic interior has influenced the way I connect my own art to my childhood domestic sphere both conceptually and aesthetically.

#### 5. Process

The images used in my compositions are replicated through the process of lithography. This involves preparing a matrix of Bavarian limestone by graining it down to a smooth, flat surface. Once the matrix is prepared, it is drawn on with a greasy pigmented crayon.

The final drawing is etched with varying strengths of nitric acid. After the etching process is complete, the stones may be printed. The printing process involves wetting the stone with a sponge. The water is repelled by the image area so that when an oil-based ink is applied to the matrix, the image area receives ink while the negative space is protected by the water film. A piece of paper is placed on the matrix and run through the press.<sup>10</sup>

The lithographs are then painted with watercolors, cut out with an Xacto knife, and sorted. I keep a large selection of imagery on hand to inspire repetition in my compositions unrestricted by limited elements.



Figure 8. Lithographs being cut and sorted.

To create the shadow boxes, I arrange the compositions on two to four panes of glass. These panes are stacked on top of one another to allow experimentation with layering and space during the collaging phase. When a composition is decided on, the lithographs are adhered to the glass panes. These glass panes are slid into grooves in the interior of the shadow box to create small scenes that have physical depth due to the layering of glass receding towards the back of each box.

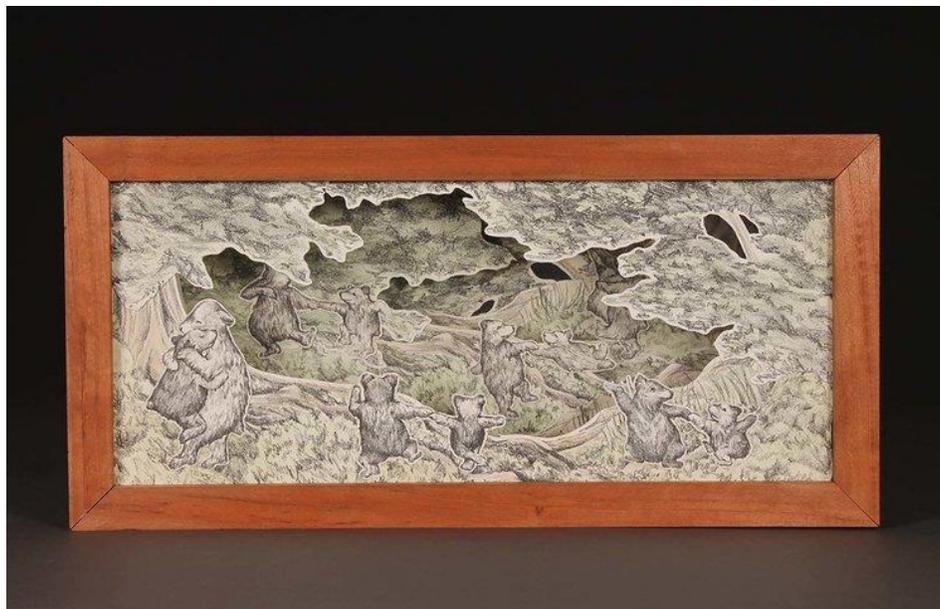


Figure 9. *If I Can't Dance with You*. Cherry, plexiglass, lithographs, watercolors. 2018.

To fill my installation piece, I needed around 2,000 individual cutouts. About half of these were cut by hand and half were cut with a CNC laser cutter at the STEAM Studio. Collaborating with the STEAM Studio provided great experience, incorporating digital technologies into my process. By working with members of the STEAM Studio, we

were able to develop a registration and cutting system for the CNC laser. This allowed me to quickly cut out the 2,000 individual flowers for my installation.



Figure 10. Installation cutouts.

The installation required four, five by seven foot walls to be built and the interior lined with matboard. Matboard provided a clean surface that could be easily pierced by the pins that hold the flowers. The walls were assembled in the gallery, with a functioning doorway that invited viewers to enter the piece.



Figure 11. *I'd Do Anything For You*. Process photograph.



Figure 10. *I'd Do Anything For You*. Installation Photos.

## 5. Conclusion

The process of preserving memories of life with my father through artmaking has been a critical part of my grieving process. The sanctification of our home and reinterpretation of mundane occurrences has allowed me to preserve memories of my father both in my mind and on paper. While these processes manifested organically in the art making process, the studies of David Unruh clarified and strengthened the intent of the work. The study of the photographs of Jennifer Loeber and Felix Gonzalez-Torres allowed for clarification of the applications of Unruh's strategies in my own body of work. The art of William Westmore-Story and Andrew Serrano illustrated a juxtaposition of my own artistic production against work that is similarly motivated. These comparisons allowed me to define the relationship between my grieving and art making processes. This art making and research process has been a way to perform and comprehend the activities that are common to, and essential for, grieving persons.

## 6. Notes

1. Gerdtts, William H. "William Wetmore Story." *American Art Journal* 4, no. 2 (1972): 16-33. doi:10.2307/1593930.
2. Story, William Wetmore, *Angel of Grief*, 1894. Marble. General Lew Wallace Study and Museum. Accessed October 2, 2018. <https://www.ben-hur.com/the-angel-of-grief>.
3. Serrano, Andres, *The Morgue (Killed by Four Great Danes)*. 1992. Photograph. Accessed September 25, 2018. <https://andresserrano.org/series/the-morgue>
4. Loeber, Jennifer. 2014. *Pearl Ring*. Photograph from the series *Left Behind*. Accessed October 15,
5. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (billboard of an empty bed)*. 1991. Khan Academy, Accessed September 30, 2018.
6. Unruh, David R. "Death and Personal History: Strategies of Identity Preservation." *Social Problems* 30, no. 3 (1983): 340-51. doi:10.2307/800358.
7. Ebid.
8. Swartz, Anne, ed. *Pattern and Decoration: an ideal vision in American art, 1975-1985*. Hudson River Museum, 2007.
9. Adler, Esther (*Spring 2008*), "Joyce Kozloff: The Dumb Blonde Theory of Art", P.S.1 Newspaper, archived from the original on 2009-07-07. Retrieved 2018-09-10.
10. Antreasian, Garo Z., and Clinton Adams. "The tamarind book of lithography: Art & techniques." Tamarind lithography workshop, 1971.

## 7. References

1. Adler, Esther. "Joyce Kozloff: *The Dumb Blonde Theory of Art*". P.S. 1 Newspaper, archived from the original on August 7, 2007. Accessed September 10, 2018.
2. "Angel of Grief." General Lew Wallace Study Museum. Accessed October 2, 2018. <https://www.ben-hur.com/the-angel-of-grief>.
3. Antreasian, Garo Z., and Clinton Adams. *The Tamarind Book of Lithography: Art & Techniques*. New York: Abrams, 1977.
4. "Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Untitled" (billboard of an Empty Bed)." Khan Academy. Accessed October 28, 2018. <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/global-culture/identity-body/identity-body-united-states/a/felix-gonzalez-torres-untitled-billboard-of-an-empty-bed>.
5. Gerdtz, William H. "William Wetmore Story." *American Art Journal*4, no. 2 (1972): 16. doi:10.2307/1593930.
6. Jennifer Loeber. "Left Behind." JENNIFER LOEBER. Accessed October 15, 2018. <http://www.jenniferloeber.com/left-behind/>.
7. Swartz, Anne K. "Pattern and Decoration." *Oxford Art Online*, 2011. doi:10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.t2214093.
8. Andres Serrano. "The Morgue." Andres Serrano - Series - The Morgue. Accessed October 28, 2018. <https://andresserrano.org/series/the-morgue>.
9. Unruh, David R. "Death and Personal History: Strategies of Identity Preservation." *Social Problems*30, no. 3 (1983): 340-51. doi:10.1525/sp.1983.30.3.03a00090.