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Prevail: In the moment...

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Nicole Stahl
Extended Artist Statement

Memory

I was born as a child starving for attention with a lavish imagination and better story-telling ability than many of my peers. I enjoyed telling tales so keenly and with such detail even the adults could not tell where the line of fact ended and fiction began. This proved a poor quality on occasion when friend's parents would ask my mom to elaborate about something I had made up, and I eventually grew out of trying to pass my tales as the truth.

One day, the attention craving proved to be life saving when I discovered a slightly painful lump in my neck. I enjoyed going to the doctor and being doted upon, so after dramatically (the only way to do it) convincing my mom I was in dire pain, she reluctantly took me to the doctor. To our surprise, it was then that we discovered that at only four years of age, I had cancer.

What followed was nineteen months of chemotherapy, intermittently speckled with bouts of isolation because quite literally, my friends could kill me. I remember being sick, fighting with my mom over not wanting to take my medications, not being allowed in the playroom, the way the nurse looked standing in the doorway carrying her tray of needles toward me for bloodwork, and of course multiple painful surgeries. But I also have a child's view memory of the time and tend to recall the positives even clearer. I can remember picking a toy prize from the box after the completion of a spinal tap, the way my finger would glow with red, “like ET”, while one of the monitors was clipped to it. I remember Lori the nurse letting me parade my Playskool Doctor kit around the
Oncology/Hematology floor, my dad giving me a light-up My Little Pony on my birthday that my uncle against my will renamed “Spark Plug”, and I remember balloons. Lots and lots of balloons. I learned at this young age that toys were my best of friends, and my imagination was a grand escape.

When I recall a memory from any time period, my brain only pictures snapshots or short scenes. How does my mind choose which exact scenes to recall? What makes that scene more significant? And I also consider how time has naturally distorted these memories—are these even true recollections or are they a juxtaposition of memories?

Anxiety

As an adult, my delight in play and narrative live, and through this grew a sense of anxiety. An imaginative brain can conjure up all sorts of mishaps and what-ifs. It is said that anxiety is a common long term effect of childhood trauma. I do not know if this is truly the reason for my worry, or if it is just how I am.

I stress about normal things; school, health, traffic, but then it was pointed out that I stress about things that don't matter. For instance, one day I was walking and saw a large tuft of matted fur on the sidewalk and immediately thought, “Oh no! What happened to the neighbor’s cat!?”. I was sure it had been gobbled up by something monster-like the night before, and I continued to worry about its well being until I saw it later that day, completely unharmed hanging out on the stairs. I indeed over-stress about regular day scenarios. Then when something truly stress-worthy happens, it can become overwhelming.
Anxiety and dreaming are a part of every person's life, occurring in varying thresholds, and thus make them both relatable. Many have had the out-of-control 'teeth falling out', vulnerable naked in front of the school, and shake-you-to-your-core death dreams. It seems even as adults many withhold a sense of insecurity and paranoia that plays out during dreaming.

I consider dreams my mind's way of coping with my imagination, my daily happenings, and my emotions. This has made for quite the action filled slumber. I have kept a dream journal for years and found that many dreams are filled with grand pursuits, treacherous weather, and flying (usually away from the 'bad guys'). I am not even a character in all of my dreams, and sometimes even someone entirely different than myself, yet the overall theme tends to be the same: trying to get away and survive.

My dreams often are so vivid that I have recalled a happening I thought was a memory, and everyone involved denied the recollection and it was labeled as a dream. This especially happens with childhood dreams/memories further pushing the question: where do dreams end and reality begin?

Coping

Though my dreams channel some of this energy, I still find myself trying to equalize and balance in my conscious life through art. In my early career, I did this by making goofy, lighthearted work that was often inspired by children's toys or the act of play. Toys brought me joy, stability and companionship at a young, and continued to do so by making them in my adult life. I was rebelling against all of the negativity I saw in
both my head and the world around me. As my work progressed into exploring more of a
dream realm, I found that the aesthetic began to turn slightly macabre. With this growth, I
am working towards embracing both this aspect of the work, and this part of me. My
imaginative narratives have become a way to further cope and accept who I am. I now
allow myself to be positive, negative, or even sometimes both, depending on what I need
at that moment, and have found myself in a phase of reality yet contentment.

The subject matter of the cast glass utilizes a mixture of imaginary narrative, real
life memories, and the swells of emotions I encounter on a daily basis. I have become
attached and identify with certain objects tied to my childhood like teacups and bugs, and
tend to fixate on them. I can still picture the tea set my sister and I would fill with our
own 'tea'(watered down Coca-Cola), and the giant shoebox packed of Creepy Crawlers
and twenty-five-cent machine crickets and worms. I was very attached to my toys as a
child- it seems natural these themes would reoccur in adulthood.

I strive to pique a childlike sense of wonder and imagination yet balance it with a
sense of caution and warning. My dramatic glass sculptures act as a diary of a mixture of
dreams and memories, and utilize a balance of delight and doom by creating an enticing,
beautiful, precious object that is also slightly sinister. These sculptures create a sense of
loss or of something missing, and can touch on the reality of mortality. Some pieces are
cute and fun, with a hint of darkness. The fact that these ideas have become a recurring
theme in my artwork became unavoidable and natural, as does glass as a medium of
choice.
Process

The process of lost wax casting literally freezes a memory. I start by forming a sculpture out of a soft, moldable wax. This object is then covered in a plaster/silica mold material. The solid wax sculpture completely melts away, only leaving an impression within the plaster. The molten glass flows into the void, and as the temperature in the kiln cools, the glass hardens and memorializes the shape. The uncertainty of this process could even be seen as mimicking life. I identify with the technical challenge of creating with this material. I can spend weeks or longer preparing for a single casting that could break, crack or even completely explode in the final stages of working.

I am attracted to how any mark pressed in the wax- even a fingerprint will translate and be immortalized into glass. The weightiness of the material, the soft surface and cool temperature feel like a memory, frozen in time. Glass holds a natural transparency that I can control. It can conceal, hint, or completely display; all metaphorical for life.

In an effort to control the deluge of information, I often choose to cover the surface of my castings in a pigmented black. Because of the transparency of the material, surface detail can be easily lost. This also gives the glass an old, almost dirty, nostalgic feeling, furthering the notion of a memory. Then add the archival quality of the material. Glass does not decompose and will far longer outlast me- however long my life is. I'm leaving behind a legacy of personal treasures.

Purpose

Though others have not lived the exact path as myself, a rocky childhood is
relatable. I hope viewers can find solace in my work; a sense of balance and belonging. I portray a sense of wonderment and awe; a sense of meshed imaginary and reality; a sense of self-reflection and acceptance. Everyone is coping with something. Everyone has periods of feeling off, and it’s okay.

Because of my past with facing an unavoidable circumstance, I have a heightened sense of mortality. I will forever hold a strong connection to the worldly escape of toys and the innocence of childhood while retaining a looming sense of danger. These experiences can become a heavy weight on my psyche, and I am slowly coming to terms with how these events in my past have shaped me and still affect me. I consider why I have strived to keep this information from most, and I settled on because I never want to be seen as weak or sickly. My emotions are heavy, potent, fragile, yet resilient. This is another reason glass is such a beautiful metaphor. Thick castings take a weak material and make it strong—yet it could still be broken. By making art for my needs, I am coping and taking control; regaining power over a situation I really have no control of. I often feel like I’m slipping, grasping at the edge, or a ticking timer I don’t know what was set to. It is how I cope with the anxieties, accept them, and survive.
Nicole Stahl

*Prevail: In the moment...*

Artist Statement

This body of work is composed of sculptural mixed media objects and scenes that heavily utilize cast glass. These pieces are physical representations of my quest to seek mental balance by focusing on what brings me happiness and comfort while still honoring mortality.

Moldmaking and repetition of process innate within casting and other aspects of this work makes me focus and revisit an idea, repetitively, like a meditation or a prayer. The intense focus required helps combat my anxiety and translates anxious energy into a more positive, productive, balanced way of living.

Part of this balance requires the acknowledgment of the opposition. In this work, I confront some of these dualities by exploring my understanding and interpretation of life, death; beauty, grotesque; reality, fantasy; happiness, and depression. References to and use of ecology like the human form, animals, insects and flowers acknowledge the natural cycle of life. Peonies specifically symbolize my personal request for health and healing.

Replicated items are used to honor the original object or memory and give figurative power to concepts I wish to emphasize. Some works resemble a memorial and become monuments to a memory or an emotion.

When presented as a body of work, my intention is to create an experience and thus a memory for the viewer. A memory is more likely to be impactful and longer lasting when more than one sense is activated. With this in mind, a calming scent of peony is diffused throughout the area as the viewer navigates through the space and interprets anthropomorphic creatures, wilting flowers, and a vignette of metamorphosing butterflies. Viewer's memories are activated with my references, and a personal narrative manifests. It is
my pleasure to share my experiences, understanding of life, and to create a new memory with them.

*Prevail: In the moment*... is a story of resilience. It is a petition for balance, health, and healing. It is a mark of gratitude for the positive moments, and an honoring of mortality. It is the creation of a new memory and a manifestation of looking forward to the future.
In the moment, she let her feet guide her (Journey), 2017. Cast glass, peonies, pigment, 14x40x5".
In the moment, she sought comfort (Embrace), 2017. Cast plaster, 13x15x13”. 
*In the moment, she tried to let go (Surrender),* 2017. Cast glass, quail wings, copper, 20x20x5”. 
In the moment, she let the sun sink into her skin (Seeking), 2016. 10.5x11.5x4".
In the moment, she gave herself strength (Petition), 2017. Cast glass, 7x10x10".
In the moment, she looked forward to the future (Release), 2017. Cast glass, Painted Lady Butterflies, vitrine. 20x20x38".
In the moment, she looked forward to the future (Release) DETAIL, 2017. Cast glass, Painted Lady Butterflies, vitrine. 20x20x38”.
In the moment, she felt the world was at her fingertips (Triumph), 2017. Glass, copper, transfer, 2x8’.