

“When the Veil is Lifted”
Honors Day art presentation

By June Koehler

I am most recently from Alaska. However, my family hasn't lived there too terribly long; in fact, as a military family, we haven't lived anywhere too terribly long. In preparation for speaking with you all this morning, I telephoned my mom, in Alaska, and she and I, for the first time, assembled “the list.” That is, the list of all the places we have ever lived. I'm not sure why we had never bothered to compile this inventory before, but I suspect that we were probably just too busy moving. I knew there would be more than a few entries on this roster, but even I was a little taken aback by the final count. In twenty-one years, I have lived in twenty-nine different “homes.”

Though I hadn't known this exact number until just a few weeks ago, the concept of home has weighed greatly on me from a very early age. For years, I didn't know exactly how to respond when asked where I was from. I felt very little connection to any one place in particular. More than anything else, I thought of myself as a person intimately acquainted with the language of goodbyes.

As I'm sure all of you are familiar with, the college years roll by quickly. After a few changes to my major, I found myself all of a sudden in my junior year with the senior review for the art department looming ahead of me. In a bit of a panic, I began to wonder what I would possibly have to say with my senior exhibition. What was it that I wanted to communicate with this opportunity?

Since my move out of my parents' house and into a dorm room at the age of seventeen, I had uncovered many of the misconceptions I had held about the word “home” and all that it had implied to me previously. I realized that it was less about geographic

proximity or even familial obligation, and more about sharing time with the people I love in the places that I love. With my exit show before me, I began to think again about my preoccupations concerning this subject. I knew that I wanted to explore the idea of home, in particular how it informed the individual and provided a sense of identity. I thought it would be presumptuous of me to create images that weren't specific to my own life journey or that of other members of my family, but I wanted the works to be ambiguous enough that viewers would be able to relate their own experiences with my imagery. My chief concern was to showcase human commonalities rather than differences.

As my concentration is in Photography, I had initially tried to visualize my thoughts in silver gelatin prints, but trying to create the nostalgic mood I was looking for with modern models and sets grew increasingly difficult for me. Professor Marling, who I had briefly showed a few of my collages to, suggested that I try to express my ideas along this theme in that medium. Even after I had finished the first few pieces, I knew this was a project that would one, work for my senior review, and two, be extremely meaningful on a personal level. For me, the use of remnants from real existences showcased the connectedness of the human experience much more than a photograph could. So, with that, I'd like to share with you a few of the portraits I have created.

This first piece is called *Everybody Was So Young*. I named it after a book of the same title about one of my favorite painters, Gerald Murphy. My intention was to create a carefree mood that brought back the playfulness and ease of childhood. As with most of the selections you will see today, I scanned original family photographs and pages from antique books and added three dimensional items such as ribbon, thread, and buttons. The young boy in the portrait in the foreground is my grandfather at about the time he began school in rural west Texas.

The next piece, *Letters Home*, also features my grandfather. I cannot begin to sum up an entire existence on a few small sheets of paper, but what I have tried to do is to capture some of the things that are quintessentially him. He was a career Navy pilot, and his service to our country is one of his defining attributes, but first and foremost he was, and still is today, a devoted husband and father. During his time on the aircraft carriers, he sent a great deal of letters and to this day he remains a prolific letter writer. The letter in the background of this collage is one that he wrote to my mother when she was just a girl.

Continuing with the theme of military men, the next piece is called *Yet if Hope Has Flown Away*. This was one of the first pieces I completed in the collection and the inspiration came from Edgar Allan Poe's poem "A Dream Within a Dream." This is one of my very favorite of Poe's works and I think it aptly expresses the almost dizzying fog we can find ourselves in when we lose someone who is dear to us. My great-grandfather was killed when my grandmother was still quite young. During all the years I have known her, she has seemed burdened by the weight of losing her father prematurely. I placed her portrait here, looking at the group of soldiers, as if she were wishing and waiting for their return, because I think that is something a lot of us have a tendency to do when someone close to us dies.

Another distressing moment in my grandmother's life occurred after her father's death when she found a portrait of a little girl among his possessions. Upon asking her mother who it was, her simple response was "Oh, Daddy has another little girl." This piece is entitled *The Other Daughter*. I used the contact sheet from a photo shoot I did of windows to create a literal separation between the groups of girls, but my intention in using clear glass windows specifically was to suggest their common link, the possibility of association, and to illustrate that the distance between them was not impassible. One of my favorite artists is the photographer Nan Goldin, who says that it is important in her own work to present a

non-revisionist image of the past. Though there are episodes in all of our personal histories that are difficult to endure, I think it is wise not to omit them as we look back, for they inform us as individuals. Information like this would have surely alarmed me, but my grandmother used the revelation as an opportunity to locate a half-sister she hadn't known about. It was difficult and took over forty years before her hope became a reality, but all the sisters are now in touch.

The next piece is called *1 for Sorrow*. The title comes from a nursery rhyme that you may be familiar with which juxtaposes entities like sorrow and joy, girls and boys, silver and gold, and ends with a line about secrets, which are, of course, never to be told. This piece is about the death of a specific child in my family, but more generally speaks to the sadness of unrealized potential and the responsibility I feel as a person who has been given a life to live, to live it to the fullest and not waste precious time.

This piece is called *A Rose by Any Other Name* and its title is obviously a nod to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The young girl is my great-grandmother, who was born in Hungary and later immigrated to the United States. As a woman who also left her home country, as I am preparing to do, I feel a great sense of solidarity with her. I chose the title, because just as a rose by any other name would smell as sweet, it doesn't matter so much what or where you call home as long as you know it when you're there.

The next piece, *Between Countries*, goes along the same lines, but is about my great-grandfather. Included in the collage are several different portraits of him at varying ages, documents in a number of languages, and stamps and coins from around the world. Of particular interest to me are his passports issued from both Hungary and the United States.

The next two pieces were created using old slide carries which I wrapped with metal repair tape and sanded. I then rubbed black India ink and pigmented pastes into the

hollows. I used seventy-two carriers; so needless to say, this process was a lengthy one. The first of these is called *Kindred Spirits Abound*. The title came from a favorite hymn of mine, a copy of which is actually included in the collage. Images of several women in my family, representing five generations, appear in the windows created by the slides. Also included are pieces of old fabric, bits of wallpaper, buttons, newspaper clippings, sheets of music, and engravings from a book of fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm that was recently passed down to me. With the exception of the fabrics and buttons, which I have a large supply of, the other items were scanned from the originals, but the integrity of the colors and textures were not sacrificed in this process. The second of these pieces is called *Now, Voyager, Sail Thou Forth*. The title comes from a line of my favorite poem by Walt Whitman, "The Untold Want." The portraits in this work show four generations of men in my family, most of whom were soldiers. Like me, they were very mobile people, but I expect they had a touch more bravery than I do. I look up to them a lot and find encouragement in their many successful ventures.

The next piece is called *Princess Betty* and is about my grandmother who is also an artist. She is a very regal woman and I tried to capture her general character in this piece. The large photograph of her in the ball gown was taken by a fellow art student during their college years in California.

The last piece, *As Having Nothing, Yet Possessing All*, is of particular significance to me. The title comes from 2 Corinthians 6. In this chapter, Paul writes about dualities of existence. The people he was writing to were being perceived as sorrowful imposters who had nothing, but they themselves knew their own joy, truthfulness, and wealth of experience. For many years, I felt people's judgment when I tried to explain my background, as if they neither literally nor metaphorically understood where I was coming from. I feel that no

more. I have found not only contentment within my circumstances, but joy as well. In the background of this piece, is another of my favorite hymns, which was actually the inspiration for the name of the entire collection. In conclusion, I will leave you with a few stanzas of the hymn:

*We often grow weary and lonely and sad,
The sky with clouds is o'er cast,
But all will be beauty and gladness and love,
When the veil is lifted at last.
How the jewels now hid from our weak mortal sight,
Oft won with tears falling fast,
Will shine in each crown in yon heaven's pure light,
When the veil is lifted at last.*