

**“The Church is a Dog Park”**

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## Thesis Proposal

If a dog bites you, it is almost always motivated by fear. While instinct drives us to pull away from the source of pain, this will cause more damage internally. If a dog bites you, you are supposed to push into the bite to force their jaws open. I have spent my entire life around dogs. Sometimes I feel like I can read them better than people. I have Ellen to thank for that. Growing up, my neighbor Ellen was affectionately referred to as “the crazy dog lady” by our community. She fostered numerous dogs and litters of puppies from overcrowded shelters and taught me everything I know about understanding and caring for dogs. To refer to her simply as my neighbor feels inaccurate and insufficient. In many ways, she was my third parental figure. I have known Ellen my entire life. Every day she would walk her many dogs around the loop of my parent’s street with her coffee in hand and dog treats in the pocket of her overalls. When my mother was pregnant with me, they would walk together. As a baby, they would take me in the stroller. As a child, I would watch out the window for Ellen to pass by and scramble out the door, pulling on my shoes and jacket as soon as I saw her. Ellen always saw the best in me, even when I could not. She led by example and encouraged me to pursue my interests and to lead my life with care and compassion. I have never met anyone else like Ellen.

For my thesis project I propose to create a mixed media installation to honor Ellen as a very important figure in my life and to process the grief of her recent passing. The work will include relief prints, textile work, soft sculpture, and ceramic figurines. I am inspired to do this project because of my research on trauma and the psychology and biology of emotional connection in mammals. This work is especially important to me because of the positive impact Ellen has had on my life and on me as an individual. This work is a way to process loss and find closure. With this project I am exploring the questions: How does the

grieving process unfold? How can tactile artmaking help to process grief? How are animals and natural environments integral to emotional regulation and the processing of loss?

In October of 2023 Ellen took her own life for health-related reasons. I was told that her final moments were spent at church. This didn't make sense to me because Ellen came from a Jewish background and I did not know her to be a particularly religious person. It made more sense when I realized that the dog park she frequented was a wide green lawn by a creek in the back lot of a church building. It wasn't a church to her, it was a dog park. That she decided to end her life with the same forethought and consideration with which she lived is not lost on me. I was one of the last people she spoke to. I did not get the chance to properly say goodbye and I miss her everyday. I am pushing into the pain so that I can be released from it. I will process my grief and the complex emotions I have regarding her death to honor her and the positive influence that she was in life.

I am inspired by the work of Zoe Leonard, especially her installation, *Strange Fruit*, which incorporated sewing as an act of mourning and repair.<sup>1</sup> I am also inspired by Felix Gonzalez-Torres's 1991 work, *Untitled*,<sup>2</sup> which conveys loss and absence of a loved one through billboards depicting an empty bed. As part of my research for this project, I read *The Body Keeps The Score* by Bessel Van der Kolk M.D.<sup>3</sup> to gain a better understanding of the biology and psychology of trauma and emotional connection. I also read a psychological study on the benefits of tactile art making as a therapeutic model for connection, communication, and emotional regulation.<sup>4</sup> In addition, I focused a portion of my research on

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<sup>1</sup> "Zoe Leonard: Strange Fruit," Philadelphia Museum of Art, <https://philamuseum.org/calendar/exhibition/zoe-leonard-strange-fruit>.

<sup>2</sup> Kim Conaty, "Moma | Print/out: Felix Gonzalez-Torres," Inside/Out, April 4, 2012, [https://www.moma.org/explore/inside\\_out/2012/04/04/printout-felix-gonzalez-torres/](https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2012/04/04/printout-felix-gonzalez-torres/).

<sup>3</sup> Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps The Score: Brain, Mind, and Body In The Healing Of Trauma*.

<sup>4</sup> Fletcher, Tina S., and Shelby S. Lawrence. "Art Making and Identity Formation in Children and Adolescents with Differing Social Behaviors." *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health* 13, no. 2 (April 3, 2018): 185–205. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15401383.2017.1355290>.

the notion of a good death<sup>5</sup>. In the past, this term was synonymous with euthanasia, though it has since broadened in scope to refer to a practice which allows the individual to maintain autonomy in the process and timing of their death.

This project is rooted in process. I will create a number of works using tactile mediums. I find comfort in working with my hands, especially soothing repetitive motions. As I work, I will mourn and process my grief so that I am able to honor Ellen through my art. I will be mending a pair of denim overalls using patching and embroidery techniques. I will also create a weighted heatable puppy-shaped plush soft sculpture. This piece is inspired by the memories that I have of carrying the puppies in my jacket when they became too sleepy to continue on our walk. I want the weight and warmth of the object to emulate this sensation of physical contact and comfort. I will also make a series of six ceramic dog figurines representing dogs that were significant in my relationship with Ellen. In addition, I will be making two relief prints of landscapes based on locations that Ellen and I used to spend time together.

During the holidays I will be visiting my family in the town where I grew up. During this time, I will photograph locations that are significant to this project to use as reference for the relief prints. I will also be working on mending and embroidery during the school break. I will work on the puppy plush as part of my soft sculpture class that I am going to be taking during the upcoming semester. I will work on the ceramic figurines at the ceramic studio in the Glass Building during the upcoming semester using skills and knowledge from the ceramics courses that I have taken at PNCA. I have already made some small dog sculptures as mock-ups for the figurines. I will get feedback on my project by speaking with peers,

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<sup>5</sup> Alicia Krikorian , Camilo Maldonado, and Tania Pastrana, "Patient's Perspectives on the Notion of a GOOD DEATH: A Systematic Review of the Literature," *Journal of Pain and Symptom Management*, August 9, 2019, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0885392419304518>.

family members, and professors. I will also be working with my mentor, Laurel Reed-Pavic. Finally, I will edit and install my work.

The final project will be a multimedia collection of objects and prints. The collection will include one textile repair project, one soft sculpture, six ceramic figurines, and two relief prints. I would like the soft sculpture plush to be displayed in such a way that the viewer is encouraged to hold and interact with it. The ceramic figures will be displayed together as a collection of objects. The relief prints will be displayed on the walls of the space. I hope to install the work in one of the well-lit gallery spaces because the outdoors plays a significant role in this project and I think that the work would benefit from natural light.

I plan to spend approximately 100 to 150 dollars on materials with the understanding that I will most likely spend a bit more than that as the project develops and needs arise. I am already in possession of a sewing machine, sewing needles, and the overalls but will need to purchase embroidery thread and an embroidery hoop. I will need to purchase fabric and finishing materials for the soft sculpture component. I would like to source the fabric for this project in a way that is economically and environmentally conscious. I have a set of relief printing tools but will need to purchase wood or linoleum. I will also need to purchase clay for the ceramic sculptures. I will be using the PNCA ceramic studio space, sewing studio space, and print studio.

In summary, I am proposing to create this work using tactile materials so that I can connect with the process of art making and the process of grieving. The making of these objects and the processing of my emotions will allow me to honor Ellen as an individual and as the positive role model and unique individual that I knew her as. I want this collection of objects to reflect the care, love, and acceptance that characterized my relationship with Ellen. I hope that the viewer will understand that love and connection is everlasting even though life

is temporary. I hope that they will get to know a bit of who Ellen was and what made her such a special and significant figure in my life. Through this work, I will mourn the passing and celebrate the life of someone who I have been lucky to know.

### Artist Statement

My artistic practice is grounded in materials, memories, and emotional experiences. The analog nature of printmaking and drawing drew me to art school. In my time at PNCA, I've expanded my practice into ceramics, sculpture, and photography. In all media I remain fascinated by texture and tactility.

In my work, I explore how manipulating materials can serve as a conduit for processing complex emotions. Different media offer different opportunities: the repetitive carving of woodblock prints, the malleable transformation of clay, the meditative rhythm of needle and thread. The act of making can be itself a pathway to understanding.

Landscapes feature prominently across my work as anchors to memory and vessels for emotion. I am particularly interested in how natural environments become repositories for personal narratives, how familiar terrain can hold both constancy and change. In my thesis project, a variable edition of prints explores how places exist simultaneously in physical reality and emotional memory, transformed by time and perspective.

My recent project, *The Church is a Dog Park*, examines grief through multiple artistic processes, creating a multidisciplinary installation that incorporates relief prints, ceramics, textile work, and soft sculpture. This approach to mourning through tactile art-making exemplifies my broader interest in how we navigate universal human experiences through material engagement.

## Abstract

*The Church is a Dog Park* is a mixed media installation project that explores grief, memory, and the processing of loss through tactile art making. The work honors Ellen, an influential figure in the artist's life who took her own life in October 2023 due to health issues. Ellen, affectionately known as "the crazy dog lady" in their community, fostered numerous dogs and served as a third parental figure to the artist. The project's title stems from the poignant discovery that Ellen spent her final moments at what others called a church but she experienced as a dog park—a green space where she frequently walked her dogs.

The installation comprises four primary components: ceramic figurines representing dogs significant to their shared history, embroidered and mended denim overalls symbolizing Ellen's practical nature, a weighted puppy-shaped soft sculpture referencing memories of carrying sleepy puppies during walks, and a variable edition of woodblock prints depicting *The Dark Corner*, a meaningful landscape from their walks together. Each medium serves as a different avenue for processing grief—the repetitive motions of embroidery, the grounding quality of clay work, and the layered transformations of printmaking mirror the complexities of mourning.

Influenced by artists like Zoe Leonard, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and Alison Bechdel, the work examines how objects and natural environments become vessels for memory. The project is informed by research on trauma, emotional connection in mammals, tactile art as therapy, and the concept of "a good death." Through visible mending, variable editions, and interactive elements, the project explores how grief, like art making, is a transformative process—not obscuring damage but acknowledging it while creating something newly meaningful.

## Speech

If a dog bites you, it is almost always motivated by fear. While instinct drives us to pull away from the source of pain, this will cause more damage internally. If a dog bites you, you are supposed to push into the bite to force their jaws open. I have spent my entire life around dogs. Sometimes I feel like I can read them better than people. I have Ellen to thank for that. Growing up, my neighbor Ellen was affectionately referred to as “the crazy dog lady” by our community. She fostered numerous dogs and litters of puppies from overcrowded shelters and taught me everything I know about understanding and caring for dogs. To refer to her simply as my neighbor feels inaccurate and insufficient. In many ways, she was my third parental figure. I have known Ellen my entire life. Every day she would walk her many dogs around the loop of my parent’s street with her coffee in hand and dog treats in the pocket of her overalls. When my mother was pregnant with me, they would walk together. As a baby, they would take me in the stroller. As a child, I would watch out the window for Ellen to pass by and scramble out the door, pulling on my shoes and jacket as soon as I saw her. Ellen always saw the best in me, even when I could not. She encouraged me to pursue my interests and to lead my life with authenticity and compassion.

In October of 2023 Ellen took her own life due to health-related reasons. I was later told that some of her final moments were spent at church. This didn’t make sense to me because Ellen came from a Jewish background and I did not know her to be a particularly religious person. It only made sense when I realized that the dog park she frequented was a wide green lawn by a creek in the back lot of a church building. It wasn’t a church to her, it was a dog park. That she decided to end her life with the same forethought and consideration with which she lived is not lost on me. I was one of the last people she spoke to. The last text that I received from Ellen read, “I hope you are enjoying the sunny day. I love you to the moon and back.” I did not get the chance to say goodbye and I miss her dearly. I am pushing

into the pain so that I can be released from it. I am processing my grief and the complex emotions I have regarding her death to honor her and the positive influence that she was in life. This project is very personal in nature. However, in a broader sense the work is exploring the multifaceted experience of grief as a way to process loss and find a sense of closure.

The work that you see in this exhibition is arranged in such a way to create a form of narrative. The sequence begins with an image of Ellen holding me as a child on Thanksgiving, then four figurines of dogs from our collective experience. It continues at the wall in front of the window with a soft sculpture and mended overalls and finally a variable edition of woodblock prints. I want to discuss each of the pieces in turn.

The five ceramic-figurines represent dogs that were significant in my relationship with Ellen. Dakota, Charro, Legs, and Slinky were part of the original group of dogs that define my memories of walking with Ellen and my family. Skeeter was an ever-present fixture in Ellen's life until she passed.

Legs and Slinky were constants in Ellen's routine. When my mom first started walking with Ellen, Slinky became fast friends with Dakota, my parent's dog, and the pair made a sport of shocking onlookers with their boisterous play. I remember sitting with Legs in a stroller that Ellen had bought so that he could continue to accompany them on walks even when he became too old to make it the full distance on his own. When I was four years old, my family adopted Charro from one of the litters of puppies that Ellen fostered. She quickly became my best friend, a patient guest at pretend tea parties, and the subject of numerous crayola marker drawings.

I chose to create representational figurines of the dogs instead of Ellen herself because the dogs exist in my mind in a more concrete and direct form than Ellen does. If I were to make a figurine of Ellen, I would struggle to decide on which version of her to represent. Because she was such a constant in my life, my recollection of Ellen is based less on her

physical appearance and more in the context of her actions. When I envision Ellen as she was in my childhood, I picture her watching Slinky and Dakota play wrestling on the street together. I picture her throwing a tennis ball for Charro and scratching Legs behind his ears. When I envision Ellen as I most recently knew her, I picture her patting Skeeter on her fat little stomach and kissing her on the top of her head while she wagged her tail. I chose to create these representations in ceramic because I find hand building with clay to be soothing and grounding. It was a bittersweet experience remembering the dogs and the time we all spent together. I found it cathartic to work with my hands while reflecting on something as ephemeral as memory.

The soft sculpture element of this project references my memories of carrying puppies on our walks. The loop that we would walk together was long enough that oftentimes the younger puppies from Ellen's foster litters would get tired and slow down or struggle to make it up the steeper parts of the path. Whenever one of them would begin to lag behind the group, Ellen would scoop it up and plot it into my sweatshirt so I could carry the sleepy puppy against my chest. In this sculpture, I wanted to recreate the comforting sensation of physical contact with a living creature. The soft form and fabric is intended to be soothing and tactile. I designed the pattern for the sculpture with beloved childhood stuffed animals in mind. I wanted to replicate the way that years of engagement with a comfort object, like a plushie, molds the form into a unique shape that embodies both the love given and the comfort provided. However, I needed to create a balance so that the piece did not read as either too representational or too saccharine. When considering materials for this work, I knew that I wanted the fabric to be soft, but I hated the idea of using faux fur because I thought it would be creepy to look at and messy to work with. The solution came to me during a trip to the Goodwill Bins. Oftentimes, when I went to the bins I would find cashmere sweaters that had holes or had been shrunk in the wash. I would debate whether I could make

some use of the damaged but luxuriously soft garments before deciding against it and regretfully leaving them behind. As it turned out, these sweaters provided the perfect material for this sculpture. The shrunken size and holes that had initially deterred me from purchasing the sweaters were no longer problematic since I had to deconstruct the garments anyway. The stretchiness of the knit fabric was perfect for the surface manipulations, such as tucking and gathering, that I used to create the details of the face and paws.

From the beginning, the intention was for the sculpture to have weight. The weight of the form is two-fold. The sensation of holding an object with weight is more similar to carrying a living creature than a toy. It can also be soothing to hold a weighted object, since the pressure can relieve anxiety by helping to regulate the autonomic nervous system.<sup>6</sup> This calming effect is similar to that which has been observed in sensory therapeutic practices, weighted blankets, and infant swaddling. The weighted aspect of the sculpture is also a tangible representation of grief. Grieving the loss of a loved one is a weight that is carried through daily life. The awareness of their absence often feels like a weight pressing on the chest or stomach. By transforming the weight into something soft and comforting, the heaviness of grief becomes more manageable.

The embroidered and repaired overalls embody repetition and tactility as a process. As you can see in the photograph, Ellen was a frequent wearer of overalls. In my mind, they were a sort of informal uniform that she wore. They had plenty of pockets for dog treats and poop bags. They were durable enough to be chewed on by puppy teeth and casual enough to be covered in muddy paw prints and dog hair. The overalls that you see here were the first pair that I bought for myself. Over time, the denim has worn thin and ripped in some places. For this project I decided to repair the overalls and add embellishment in the form of patches

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<sup>6</sup> Penn Medicine: Health and Wellness. "4 Ways Weighted Blankets Can Actually Help You." University of Pennsylvania, March 24, 2022. <https://www.pennmedicine.org/updates/blogs/health-and-wellness/2022/march/weighted-blankets#:~:text=This%20is%20often%20called%20the,quickened%20heart%20rate%20or%20breathing>.

and embroidery. Rather than repairing the fabric in more subtle ways, I wanted the work that went into repair to be visible. Visible mending in the form of embellishment does not hide the repair to create the illusion that the damage never existed. Instead of focusing solely on the need to fix, the embellishment elevates the garment to a new form, one that does not only accept the changes associated with wear and the passage of time, but also celebrates it.

Change is an unavoidable aspect of life and nature. Well-worn garments rip, people pass away, the seasons change, and day becomes night, regardless of how we feel about it. Of course, some of these changes are more difficult to accept than others. If we resist change, for instance by avoiding wearing a favorite article of clothing in an attempt to prevent damage, then we are also denying ourselves the joy that comes with the experience. The embellishment you see on the overalls follows in the theme of natural landscapes. The imagery that you see on the right leg of the overalls, such as the mountain and the beach, is based on the landscapes in Northern California, where I spent my childhood. The corresponding imagery on the left leg represents the nature of the Pacific NorthWest, as you can tell by the clouds and evergreen trees. When I was eleven years old, Ellen moved from the street where I grew up to Silverton, Oregon. Although I was upset that I would not get to spend time with her as frequently as I always had, her move prompted my family to take yearly road trips during the summer to visit her. These trips and Ellen's proximity to Portland played a key role in my decision to apply to PNCA. I found that it was important to include scenes from both locations, since my relationship with Ellen began in one location and continued in the other.

To elaborate more on the significance of natural landscapes, I would like to discuss the prints that you see here. This series of woodblock prints depict a part of the street where Ellen and I used to walk. As a child I referred to it as 'The Dark Corner', for reasons that are readily apparent. This location has become a personal landmark of sorts, an easily

recognizable, often referenced geographical location which exists in both the neighborhood where I grew up and in my mind's eye. The corner, as it exists in my memory, is at once both constant and ever changing. My perhaps more accurate recollection of this place, as it was years ago, has been altered by the emotions that arise when I recall those memories, especially in the wake of Ellen's passing. In a literal sense, the physical location has changed over time as well. In the years since my childhood I have revisited this place a number of times, not as often as I once did, but often enough to note the changes to the landscape. The tension between physical experience, memory, and emotion is conveyed in the repetition of the same print.

While most of this project remains largely unchanged from what I proposed in the Fall, the prints are the most notable revision. Since so much of our time together was spent outside, I had initially planned on creating multiple woodblocks of different landscapes that were significant in my relationship with Ellen. By the time midterms rolled around, I had only completed the one block. The scale of this woodblock is quite a bit larger than I have worked with in the past and I had not correctly accounted for the additional time it would take to carve a block of this size. As such, I was feeling a bit apprehensive about timing in regards to creating additional blocks. I hadn't even decided which of the prints to include in this installation. During my midterm review, I showed the prints that you see here. The overwhelming feedback that I received was that multiple iterations of one block was far more effective. To say that I was relieved and pleasantly surprised would be an understatement. The consensus was that the arrangement of the variable edition of prints created a form of narrative and highlights a throughline of change. The arrangement of the prints that you see here also reveals the narrative of the making process.

The first four that I have included in the series are more traditional, single color woodblock prints. These were created by coating the block in an even coat of a single color

of ink. I first printed the block in black ink on white paper and I hated it. I found that the image seemed stark and cold with such high contrast. This led me to experiment with different combinations of colored ink and toned paper. While this did seem to improve the stark contrast, I still felt that the prints were lacking something.

The fifth print in the series is a collage created with newsprint. This piece marks an important turning point in my making process. While working on the single color prints, I found myself drawn to the newsprint castoffs left over from cleaning the press and block. Each time I printed off the ink, I was left with a number of what are referred to as ‘ghost prints’, each becoming lighter in succession. These informal ghost prints are typically regarded as waste and disposed of, but I found myself drawn to the nuance and variation of these prints. Unable to bring myself to toss them out, I kept them eventually deciding to incorporate the variety of values into one piece through collage. This version marked a significant transition in the way that I conceived of the image. I found that the collage contained depth and emotion that seemed to be lacking in the flat single color prints. The collage process also parallels the way that I have reconstructed this location in my mind time and time again. This marks a turning point in my work with the woodblock, inspiring me to move beyond single color prints and into monotype processes. Using monotype, I was able to introduce a greater range of color and texture into the work by layering ink using a paint brush. Psychologists have found that our memories become less and less accurate as time passes. They theorize that eventually we are no longer remembering the actual event or location but rather our most recent recollection of it. The collage and monotype prints from this block reflect this notion. My perception of this place has been pieced together from numerous memories. This perception has also been layered and ‘painted over’ again and again by the emotions that arise and change each time I recall it.

The tenth print in this collection is noticeably darker than the others. During the making process I experimented with printing on different colored papers. When deciding which of the prints to include in this installation, it seemed that the work would be incomplete without this print to acknowledge the darker elements, given the subject matter at hand. Though its position as the last print in the series conveys the finality of death and the darker aspects of grief, the intention is not to construe loss as an ending point. Ellen is no longer physically with us, but her legacy as a positive influence in her community and in my life will continue. Loss and grief are fundamentally human processes and are unavoidable aspects of life. The last print represents death as a part of life; much in the way that nightfall is part of the day.

Now I would like to talk through my research. For those who may not know, an edition generally refers to a number of identical prints produced from the same matrix. Variable editions are uncommon because they are kind of breaking the rules of editioning so I had some trouble finding other artists who had utilized this approach in their work. Luckily, Dieter Roth, a renowned visual artist and printmaker, is the kind of asshole who doesn't think that the rules apply to him. He created a variable edition of prints titled, *Islandscapes*, depicting natural scenes from the country of Iceland. The variety within Roth's prints reflects the artist's connection to the landscape and the psychological influence of the time that he spent there. Roth's work reveals the volatility of the landscape as it exists in reality as well as the way that it exists in memory. The concept of variable edition upholds Roth's belief that "change is a necessary precondition for creativity in general."<sup>7</sup>

Another facet of my research included looking at the work of other artists who have addressed grief through their practice. Because of my interest in textile and mending as a means to process loss, I specifically looked at Zoe Leonard's *Strange Fruit*. In 1992, Leonard

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<sup>7</sup> Hauser & Wirth. "Dieter Roth - Islandscapes."  
<https://www.hauserwirth.com/hauser-wirth-exhibitions/dieter-roth-islandscapes/>.

began obsessively mending hundreds of fruit skins as a way to process her grief from having lost friends to AIDS. Leonard described sewing as a sort of meditation, a private act of mourning:

“This mending cannot possibly mend any real wounds, but it provided something for me. Maybe just time, or the rhythm of sewing [. . .] Once the fruit is eaten, I sew it closed, restore its form. They are empty now, just skin. The fruit is gone. They are like memory; these skins are no longer the fruit itself, but a form reminiscent of the original. You pay homage to what remains.”<sup>8</sup>

Another artist whose work inspired this project is Alison Bechdel. I had read her graphic novel-memoir, *Fun Home*, prior to beginning this project and was struck by her ability to convey the complexity of grief as a nonlinear process. *Fun Home* captures the tension between memory and the range of emotions associated with the unexpected loss of a loved one. Bechdel’s book inspired me to consider how best to frame my work in relation to experience and memory and provided important insight into finding balance between art and storytelling.

As part of my academic research, I read more about the concept of ‘a good death’. Caitlyn Doughty is an author and mortician whose work explores social and cultural stigmas around death and dying. Her books, *From Here To Eternity* and *Smoke Gets In Your Eyes* investigate the concept of ‘a good death’ as a means of retaining the individual’s bodily autonomy and dignity through the end of life. She questions the pervasive cultural stigmas surrounding loss and the corresponding prevalence of artificial methods to prolong life and preserve bodies, even when detrimental to the individual. Doughty’s work opened my eyes to the way that internalized social conventions influenced my feelings regarding Ellen’s

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<sup>8</sup> “Burlington Contemporary - Journal.”  
<https://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/journal/journal/intent-in-the-making-the-life-of-zoe-leonards-strange-fruit>.

decision. Not surprisingly, my initial emotional reaction at the news of her passing was one of shock and sorrow, but beneath these emotions was an underlying feeling of betrayal. As selfish as it sounds, I couldn't help but think, "How could she do this? Why wouldn't she tell me what was going on? Why did she leave me in the dark about something so important?"

As I dove further into my research on a good death, I was able to contextualize my reaction and find a sense of understanding and empathy in regards to Ellen's actions. Ellen's decision to end her life on her own terms, rather than to prolong suffering and sacrifice her quality of life and independence for the sake of longevity, was her version of a good death.

In non-death related research, I looked at the writings of Temple Grandin. I thought that it would be important to further investigate the connections between humans and animals, specifically related to dogs and neurodivergence. Temple Grandin is an animal scientist and autism advocate who has written extensively about animal behavior and ethics. Grandin's work focuses on her understanding of animals based on her experience and intuition as someone on the Autism spectrum. I chose to read Grandin's work not only because of her extensive expertise, but because of her unique perspective. Some of Grandin's insights and her approach to animal dynamics was reminiscent of the knowledge and experiences that Ellen had passed on to me. This portion of my research served to expand upon my understanding of those who have an affinity for the company of animals rather than people, as Ellen did.

One of my greatest struggles with this project was the question of how to bring Ellen into the installation in order to make the work more accessible to the general audience. Because the work is deeply personal, and very few members of the audience even knew Ellen, there was some debate as to whether the full content and context of the work would be accessible enough to all viewers.

However, I felt resistant to incorporating Ellen's image too directly into any of the pieces. I found that it felt inauthentic and forced. I wasn't interested in making a memorial. Ellen was never someone who wanted to be front and center. She had an almost pathological need to give but not receive. I recall her often deflecting any type of favors, saying that she didn't want to be a burden, even about the smallest of things. For this project I needed to strike a balance between making Ellen the subject of this work and staying true to who she was as an individual, because she was such a deeply solitary and often private person.

If I had to choose a specific fictitious audience for this installation, it would be members of the community that I grew up in, as they would have a more complete understanding and stronger connection to the work based on social, emotional, and geographical proximity to the content. That said, the varied availability of the complex personal context should not limit the viewers enjoyment or engagement with the work.

Beyond the personal, this project is about the multifaceted universal human experiences of connection and loss. It is about processing grief in a way that allows space for emotion and reflection. This project has allowed me to consider grief in terms of tactility and process but I would consider this specific body of work to be finished. In theory I could see this project continuing in a show about mourning through tactile art processes but this work, about Ellen, is complete.

As I close out my speech I would like to thank my mentor, Laurel Reed-Pavic for all of her support and encouragement. Thank you for hearing out my crazy last minute ideas and for the best research opportunity I could have asked for (letting me hold your puppy, please thank Arlo for me too). I would also like to thank all of my professors, especially panelists Liza Reitz and Wen Noonan. I also need to thank my family and friends, I love you all so much and I wouldn't be here without you. Lastly, I would like to thank all of you for being here and taking the time out of your busy lives to be a part of my thesis defense.

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Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* is a really interesting example of utilizing multiple genres and mediums to tell a complex story that is influenced by trauma and memory over decades and generations. *Fun Home* incorporates elements of memoir, graphic novel, and creative nonfiction to effectively express the complexity and nuance of processing grief after losing a family member to suicide. This is a unique depiction of grief, loss, healing, and acceptance as a nonlinear process.

“Burlington Contemporary - Journal.” Accessed April 25, 2025.

<https://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/journal/journal/intent-in-the-making-the-life-of-zoe-leonards-strange-fruit>.

This article provided a more in-depth explanation of Leonard's work and the context in which it was created. It contains useful information on the creation and ideation of the work, as well as quotes from interviews with the artist herself.

Conaty, Kim. “Moma | Print/out: Felix Gonzalez-Torres.” *Inside/Out*, April 4, 2012.

[https://www.moma.org/explore/inside\\_out/2012/04/04/printout-felix-gonzalez-torres/](https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2012/04/04/printout-felix-gonzalez-torres/).

Gonzalez-Torres's work depicts the experience of grief and absence after the loss of a loved one. The intimacy and vulnerability of a space as private as a bed is offset by the artist's choice to display the work publicly on outdoor billboards. The choice of a bed as a location that embodies comfort and sanctuary draws is a reminder of the way that the sensation of absence can disrupt daily life.

Doughty, Caitlin. *From Here to Eternity: Traveling the World to Find the Good Death*. First edition. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017.

Doughty's book is an in-depth overview on the concept of the good death. Doughty examines the ways that different global cultures approach end of life practices as well as grief and mourning. *From Here to Eternity* is a comprehensive approach to understanding death and loss and the importance of respect and autonomy in the dying process.

Doughty, Caitlin. *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes: And Other Lessons from the Crematory*. First edition. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014.

Doughty's work as a mortician focuses on social and cultural stigmas that surround death, dying, and loss. She explains the ways in which these stigmas can be harmful to the physical and emotional wellbeing of all who are involved.

Fletcher, Tina S., and Shelby S. Lawrence. "Art Making and Identity Formation in Children and Adolescents with Differing Social Behaviors." *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health* 13, no. 2 (April 3, 2018): 185–205.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15401383.2017.1355290>.

This source is a psychological study conducted on the benefits of art making as a therapeutic tool for children with differing social behaviors. This is useful for this project as insight into the process of tactile art making in the processing and communication of emotions. I appreciated that the study was conducted specifically with children and adolescents with differing social behaviors as it made the information more applicable to my experiences.

Hauser & Wirth. "Dieter Roth - Islandscapes." Accessed April 25, 2025.  
<https://www.hauserwirth.com/hauser-wirth-exhibitions/dieter-roth-islandscapes/>.

Roth's work provided inspiration in the form of variable edition within printmaking. He also explored variation within landscape as a means to express memory, emotion, and the passage of time.

Krikorian, Alicia, Camilo Maldonado, and Tania Pastrana. "Patient's Perspectives on the Notion of a GOOD DEATH: A Systematic Review of the Literature." *Journal of Pain and Symptom Management*, August 9, 2019.  
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0885392419304518>.

This source provides a comprehensive overview on the concept of a good death. It is useful for its thorough scientific approach as well as the understanding that the specifics which constitute a good death will vary based on individual and circumstance.

Penn Medicine: Health and Wellness. "4 Ways Weighted Blankets Can Actually Help You." University of Pennsylvania, March 24, 2022.  
<https://www.pennmedicine.org/updates/blogs/health-and-wellness/2022/march/weighted-blankets#:~:text=This%20is%20often%20called%20the,quicken%20heart%20rate%20or%20breathing.>

Penn Medicine explains the physiological benefits of weighted objects. The article outlines the ways in which weighted objects provide comfort and relieve anxiety by regulating the autonomic nervous system.

Porges, S. W. *The Polyvagal Theory: Neurophysiological Foundations of Emotions, Attachment, Communication, and Self-Regulation*. Norton Series on Interpersonal Neurobiology. New York, NY: WW Norton & Company, 2011.

This source provides a biological and physiological explanation of emotional attachment and connection in mammals. I found it useful and interesting to know exactly what drives our need to connect socially and why this is so necessary to healthy development.

Van der Kolk, Bessel A. *The Body Keeps The Score: Brain, Mind, and Body In The Healing Of Trauma*. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2015.

This source includes a psychological, biological, and physiological examination of human emotions and trauma responses. Van der Kolk writes in a manner that is thorough but understandable even to those without a scientific background. He also includes many different case studies to better illustrate his points. The source is helpful in understanding emotions, attachment, and the detrimental effects of trauma.

“Zoe Leonard: Strange Fruit.” Philadelphia Museum of Art. Accessed November 19, 2024.  
<https://philamuseum.org/calendar/exhibition/zoe-leonard-strange-fruit>.

This installation was a reaction to the events of the AIDS crisis in the early 1990s. The decomposing fruit skins reflect the inevitability of mortality. Leonard uses sewing as an act of mourning and repair.

## Art Works Cited



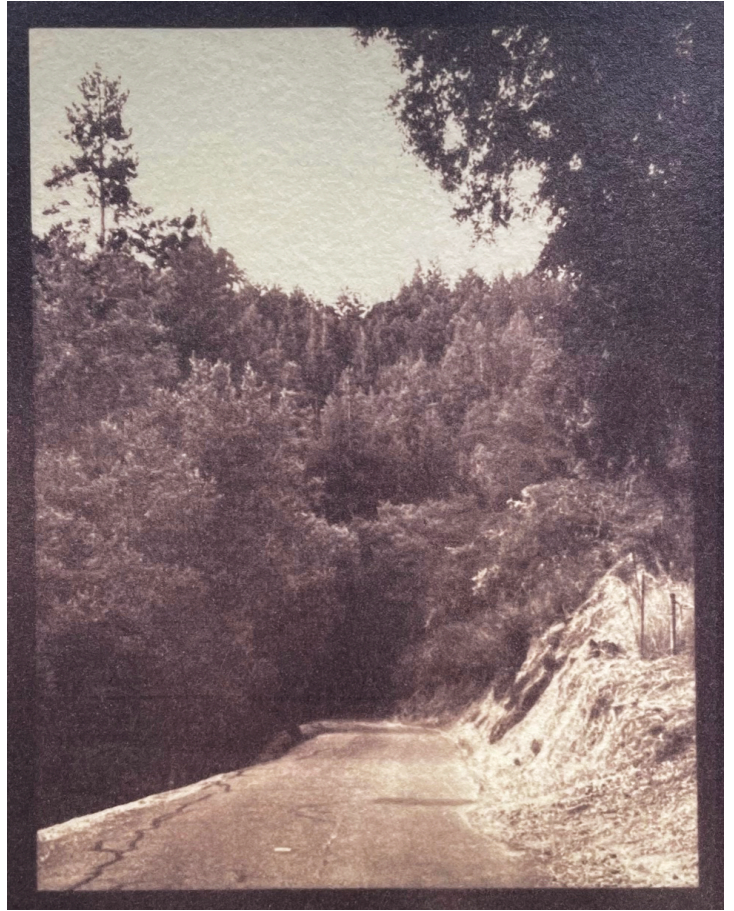
Rio Quezada, *Dogs*, Screen Print, 2023

This is one in a series of screen prints of dogs that I created last year. I initially applied to PNCA as a printmaking major. I have since changed my major to General Fine Arts so that I would be able to broaden my artistic practice by taking classes in other mediums however, printmaking is still very much a part of my practice.



Rio Quezada, *Woody and Timber*, ceramic, 2024

I created these figures of my dogs for the ceramic class I am currently taking. This class is the second ceramics course that I have taken at PNCA. I will be using the knowledge and skills that I have learned from these courses in my construction of the figurines for this project. These figurines will not be a part of the final collection but they will function as mock ups for the figurines that I will create for this project. The texture and weight of the figurines will be important to consider in the making of this collection.



Rio Quezada, *The Dark Corner*, Photograph and Cyanotype, 2023

These two images were taken from a location where Ellen and I used to walk together. As a small child I referred to this as ‘The Dark Corner’. It is a location that I have revisited countless times throughout my life and one that has remained largely unchanged despite the passage of time. The purple image on the right is botanically toned cyanotype created from the image on the left. I will be taking photos of locations such as these to use as reference for the relief prints that I will create for this project.



Rio Quezada, *Summit*, Woodcut Print, 2022

This is a relief print of a location in my hometown. I have a particular interest in scenes and environments that hold personal significance. I try to convey the emotion that these locations evoke in me by how I represent them in my work. I will be creating landscape relief prints similar to this one for this project.



Rio Quezada, *Skirt*, 2024

This is a skirt that I made as part of an assignment for the sewing course that I am currently enrolled in. This is the second sewing class that I have taken at PNCA. While these classes have been primarily garment-focused, I have learned valuable skills and techniques that will translate to the creation of the soft sculpture component of this project. I am registered to take a soft sculpture studio class at PNCA during the upcoming semester.

BETWEEN US LAY A SLENDER  
DEMILITARIZED ZONE--OUR SHARED  
REVERENCE FOR MASCULINE BEAUTY.



BUT I WANTED THE MUSCLES AND TWEED  
LIKE MY FATHER WANTED THE VELVET AND  
PEARLS--SUBJECTIVELY, FOR MYSELF.



THE OBJECTS OF OUR DESIRE  
WERE QUITE DIFFERENT.



Alison, Bechdel. *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. Houghton Mifflin, 2008.

This is an excerpt from Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. Bechdel's work is a really interesting example of utilizing multiple genres and mediums to tell a complex story that is influenced by trauma and memory over decades and generations. *Fun Home* incorporates elements of memoir, graphic novel, and creative nonfiction to effectively express the nonlinear processes of loss, grief, and acceptance.



Zoe Leonard, *Strange Fruit*, 1992-1997

This installation was a reaction to the events of the AIDS crisis in the early 1990s. The decomposing fruit skins reflect the inevitability of mortality. Leonard uses sewing as an act of mourning and repair.



Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled*, 1991

Gonzalez-Torres's work depicts the experience of grief and absence after the loss of a loved one. The intimacy and vulnerability of a space as private as a bed is offset by the artist's choice to display the work publicly on outdoor billboards. The choice of a bed as a location that embodies comfort and sanctuary draws is a reminder of the sensation of absence as it accompanies us in day to day life.

**BUDGET**

	IN KIND	PURCHASE/COMPENSATE
Materials		
● Embroidery materials		PURCHASE: \$15-\$20 depending
● Overalls		IN KIND
● Fabric and Finishings		PURCHASE: ~\$20?
● Wood panels		PURCHASE:
● Clay		PURCHASE: \$60 for 50lbs

## Equipment

- Sewing machine
- Printing press
- Kiln
- Clay tools
- Relief carving tools

## Space

- PNCA Ceramic Studio
- PNCA Sewing Studio
- PNCA Printmaking Studio

**TIMELINE and WORK PLAN****Fall (list week by week to do's)****November**

Week 1 Mock ups

Week 2 Prepare to present

Week 3 FOCUS WEEK

Week 4 Fall Break

**December**

Week 1 Work on embroidery

Week 2 Work on embroidery

Week 3 Visit and photograph locations

Week 4 Continue work on embroidery, create sketches for relief prints

**Spring****January**

Week 1 begin work on relief prints

Week 2 Work on relief prints

Week 3 Work on relief prints

Week 4 Work on relief prints

**February**

Week 1 Begin work on soft sculpture

Week 2 Soft sculpture

Week 3 Soft sculpture

Week 4 Finish soft sculpture, begin work on ceramic figurines

**March**

Week 1 Work on ceramic figurines

Week 2 Work on ceramic figurines

Week 3 Finish ceramic figurines

Week 4 Review and revise work

**April**

Week 1 Finalize all work

Week 2 Prepare to install and present

Week 3 FOCUS WEEK

Week 4 :)