The Feeling of Being Ok

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THE FEELING OF BEING OK

by

BEN LEE

Under the Direction of Nancy Floyd, MFA

ABSTRACT

The Feeling of Being OK is an exhibition of appropriated imagery from unknown abandoned collections. Using the tension found in the enigmatic aspects of these materials, I investigate the fragility of the photograph and its capacity to fabricate memory and narrative. Designed to be a meditation on William Faulkner’s 1930 novel As I Lay Dying, this series focuses on themes including empathy and indifference, instability of identity, and life’s inevitable fate. By incorporating found materials such as vernacular objects and text into the installation, the potential for meaning is broadened. The work is installed in constellations or vignettes, allowing for metaphorical and poetic readings of the newly recontextualized material.

INDEX WORDS: Photography, William Faulkner, Death, Empathy, Fate, Identity, Family album, Memory, Funerals, Loss
THE FEELING OF BEING OK

by

BEN LEE

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

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Georgia State University

2017
THE FEELING OF BEING OK

by

BEN LEE

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Georgia State University
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DEDICATION

To my mother and father, Rebecca and Ronald Lee, whose advice has saved me more than once: life is always to be taken one day at a time. To my siblings, Sarah, Ryan, and Suzie, their friendship made sure that I never felt alone. To my Anna, I’ve loved you since the first day we met and I always will, thank you for standing by my side. To my oldest friends, Steve, Stephen, Luke, Travis, and TJ, I’m glad we were never arrested. And to my grandfather, the late Robert Bowden, who inspired me to make this work and will unfortunately never see it.
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From the bottom of my heart, thank you to those teachers, faculty, and artists that made this exhibition and thesis possible. Thank you Nancy, Conne, Jill, Matthew, Rylan, Craig, Michael, Keisha, Adrienne, Susan, Maria, William, Tim, and Dave, as well as all the graduate students who were right beside me in galleries and critiques. Thank you for supporting me, pushing me, and believing in me, without you I wouldn’t be here.
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1 INTRODUCTION

“… Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe.”
- Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography

1.1 Family and Funerals

My family began somewhere between the small towns of Texarkana, TX, a city split in two on the border of Texas and Arkansas, and Atlanta, TX, not to be confused with the much more notable “Dogwood City” capital in Georgia. I was born in the prior, December 1, 1990, to a family of now six. My father, Ronald Lee, was in the funeral home business, working as a director, servicing families in their times of need. He was not the first of my family to be in the business of death. My mother’s father, Robert Bowden, and his father before him, Benjamin Bowden, of whom I was named, lived and operated their funeral home in East Texas not far from Texarkana. My grandfather would tell me stories of how he and his siblings would play hide and seek throughout the visitation rooms when services weren’t being held, hiding in the unused caskets ensuring they wouldn’t be found.

As the youngest in my family I was privileged with the gift of observation, seeing what my oldest siblings did from a distance and whether it was right or wrong in the eyes of our parents. One of my earliest memories of death goes back to when I was a young child, seeing my mother through the swinging café doors of our kitchen, leaning against the sink with one hand holding the crème colored, dial-tone phone with the knotted cord shakily to her ear and the other covering her mouth. I did not understand what it meant when she told me “Mamaw has passed away” nor did I understand the tears and isolation I saw in her for weeks after. That was my first funeral, Jo Bowden my grandmother, Texarkana, TX 1996. My father told me “Jesus had called

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“her home”, “it was her time”, and “that this was God’s plan”. The way he explained death to me wasn’t something sad or abysmal, but something to be celebrated. Now as I look back on it, I can tell he said the same things to me he must have told countless families in need. Things that help smooth our sudden collision with reality, with the inevitable. He tried to instill in me the spiritual support of our Savior, not just in times of grief but also in our day-to-day lives. Raised under the fire and brimstone sermons of the Southern Baptist church, salvation from sin was the only true concern in life, eternal life or eternal damnation, that was our choice. It was a way for us to cope and understand the things that are so much bigger than ourselves, things beyond our control.

Since death was a constant in family conversation, either in God’s Word or in the passing events at my father’s work, it was no surprise to those within my family that it would often be brought up in the most casual of circumstances. At the dinner table my father would bring little things up like “Did you know that kid from Northside High School? He was drunk and hit a tree last night, his family came in today” or “You know it’s not that uncommon to see the wife, ex-wife, and mistress of a CEO sitting in the front row at the service”. The solemn nature of the cemetery often escaped me. It was the place where I could visit my father for lunch, work odd jobs in the summer, and learn to drive. My dad told me “Don’t worry about crashing, you’re already in the graveyard.” As I grew older I thought that after the first funeral and my exposure to the inner workings of a place most people avoid, I’d be immune to the effects of loss, like antibodies forming a resistance. This was not the case.
1.2 Death Comes in Threes

When visiting my grandparent’s home off Pine Street in Texarkana, I would explore the empty rooms and offices. Flipping through books and photo albums, asking Mamaw and Papaw Bowden a litany of questions of this and that. To keep me busy, or to avoid unintended damage to the house, my grandfather would play a game with me. He would place a stack of paper and markers on the kitchen table, which was set off in the corner by itself like a booth at a diner. I’d sit there quietly, watching him shift his eyes from me to the paper, tapping the marker until a smirk emerged and he’d make a mark. Nothing in particular but a shape or line or pattern of dots, then he’d slide the paper and marker towards me and say “Now your turn”. He wanted me to make something from nothing, to take whatever he drew and recreate it into some exquisite corpse. I’d sit and think until I could morph the drawing into anything new and creative: a squiggle into a hairdo, a triangle into a cheese, dots into a freckled face, etc. Then I’d make a new mark and slide it to him to see if he could be stumped, we called it “Stump the Artist”. There was no point system, winner, or loser. Just stacks and stacks of paper marked up and down, saturated in solvent inks of every color imaginable, bleeding together and through the fibrous surface.

Some time after my grandmother passed, my grandfather remarried. Her name was Merle and she was not my grandmother, but we’d play the part because we knew he must’ve been lonely. It’s difficult to tell when exactly Alzheimer’s began to wreak havoc on my grandfather because it made itself known with a whisper not a boom. Short-term memory seemed to be the beginning of his struggle, little things we all blew off as benign happenstance. However, the diagnosis was just a formality of confirmation to what we already felt in our gut. He often didn’t recognize me. Coaxed into vague remembrance he went with the flow of conversation accepting
the facts given. After some time catching up during a visit I asked if he’d like to play *Stump the Artist* with me like we used to, but it was not the same. Trudging through the performance we worked our way through a single sheet of paper, reminding him of the way we should play after each pass until he said he was tired and wanted to stop. I don’t know what I was trying to prove, or disprove, by getting him to play, I just wanted it to last a little bit longer.

They say death comes in threes, but I don’t believe in hokey superstitions. In the fall of 2011, I lost two friends to suicide, exactly one month apart from each other. I felt a strange presence amongst my friends, many fearing it would happen again. But I don’t believe in things like that. The first death had a private family service. Friends and classmates were asked to respect their privacy and a school memorial was held. The second funeral I did not attend. Later that summer, my mother left for Texas to be with her father during what she felt to be his final days. July 23, 2011 he passed away at his home. This was the suspended death of Robert Bowden, beginning long before when his mind faded and all that was left behind was a ghost. My third death in under a year. I’d like to think I don’t believe in superstitions.
2 THE FEELING OF BEING OK

“Memory believes before knowing remembers. Believes longer than recollects, longer than knowing even wonders.”
- William Faulkner, Light in August ²

2.1 The Gold Cigar Box

A couple of years after my grandfather had passed, and a feeling of normalcy began to set in, my mother handed me a small golden cigar box, pulled from a collection of things she had put away since the funeral. “Here, you’d probably get a kick out of these,” she told me as we continued to dig. She knew I was a pack rat, especially for things photographic in nature. Inside the box was a small collection of photographs, postcards, and negatives crammed and folded to fit inside. They were of my grandfather, a younger man in the pictures than I was. There he was, before the war, before he had married my grandmother, and before his brother Travis crashed his Italian sports car in the Alps while on leave. One thing that became apparent relatively quickly was the amount of posed women, risqué for the time, dressed in anything from pseudo sailor outfits to nothing at all paired with slightly suggestive notes written on the back: “With Love”, “Two in the tub is better than one”, and “This side up”. The last one wasn’t explaining the frame’s orientation but rather describing the woman in the two-piece outfit with her ass in the air. (Figure 2.1)

Figure 2.1 Ben Lee, Selections from Grandfather's Girlfriends, 2016
These women, and friends, and places, all of them foreign and familiar. We spent hours trying to decipher handwriting and locations to stitch together the story left behind. Our best guess was that these were just pieces of evidence from my grandfather’s wild years. How would I ever know the truth anyway? My grandfather, my grandmother, and great aunts and uncles had all passed on by the time we found these family relics. Even Merle, my not-grandmother whose funeral I skipped, was no longer around to put through the ringer. Even if I somehow had access to the truth, I think I’d rather let that sleeping dog lie.

I was fascinated by the stories and mysteries of the unknown that rose to the surface as I gazed deeper and deeper into a past tangentially connected to my own. It wasn’t just with these photographs, but other snapshots, books, and objects people left behind that I rescued from some dust-covered oblivion. All of these held some kind of connection to the past that intrigued and inspired me. The act of repurposing and recontextualizing these materials into my work became a cathartic experience. I felt these things had value and deserved to be reconsidered for their inherent worth.

During a critique with Nancy Floyd, we discussed an early iteration of my work set up as a large-scale installation. The wall was pinned with photographs, illustrations, and lines of literature. Nancy pointed out a single torn page, a colorful illustration from the self-help book titled *Staying in Love* with a childish cartoon man stamping the word “OK” onto his forehead, it read: “The Feeling of being O.K. does not imply that the person has risen above all his faults and emotional problems. It merely implies that he refuses to be paralyzed by them.” She pointed out that the phrase “The feeling of being ok” summed up an overall mood and theme to my work. A sense that I was concerned with the physical and emotional pain we as individuals and communities experience and how we try to cope with the day-to-day tragedies of human
existence. Another page present on the wall was used as parenthesis for the installation, the same page from two of the exact same books. It simply read: “My mother is a fish.” This short statement, void of any build up or conclusion, was from William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*. It comes from a young boy named Vardaman, who despite his young age, has come to realize the significance of his mother’s death when looking at the fish he has just caught for supper. This novel, which discusses the various ways a family deals with death and fate, became a guiding force of inspiration in the evolution of my graduate work.

2.2 The Bundrens

The main plot of Faulkner’s tragic tale depicts the events leading up to and surrounding the eventual death of Addie Bundren, the matriarchal center of the clan, and her family who dwell in the fictional town of Yoknapatawpha, Mississippi. As she lies on her deathbed, the reader is shown how her passing affects each character and how they try to cope with a household on the brink of collapse.³

Written from the perspective of multiple characters, including family members and neighbors, each subsequent chapter takes on a new character’s voice. As the novel progresses, we gain access to the inner thoughts and feelings of each character, filling in the story piece by piece. However, this multiplicity of viewpoints does not guarantee honest portrayals of the characters or recollections of the events. The reader is left to decipher whether or not the character is embellishing aspects of themselves in attempts to avoid admitting to personal flaws. Faulkner used a stream of consciousness technique while writing the story, allowing for

moments of conflicting viewpoints, flashbacks, and imagination to merge into a composite image. This shaky foothold on reality places the element of truth on a precarious ledge. He even allows for alternative narrative structures, opting for chapters being made up of single sentences or numbered lists. While unconventional at the time it was written, this variety allows for the reader to gain useful insight to the characters’ individual psychological states.\(^4\)

Faulkner mirrors the overall mood and lack of morale felt during the Great Depression through the pain and failure of this poor, Southern family. Their attempts to fulfill Addie’s dying wish to be buried in the town of Jefferson forty miles away proves to be an odyssey of doom and despair. As the family moves closer to their dark conclusion, Faulkner builds on three key themes: empathy and indifference in the face of tragedy, instability of identity, and life’s inevitable fates. I have emulated these themes in my own work, striving to use the influential text as a means for creation.

### 2.3 Empathy and Indifference

One would assume that the Bundrens would gain strength and support through each other during their time of grief. However, their dysfunctional nature prevents any true healing to occur. Instead, a series of indifferent acts and misguided empathy drives the family further apart. Empathy can be defined as the ability of setting ego aside and deeply understanding someone else’s emotions, and indifference being the apathetic lack of care towards the condition of others.

As Addie slips away from this world, so does the gravitational power she had that kept the family together, as Eric Sundquist put it: she is “the center that no longer holds”.5

Misguided empathy can be seen in the actions of the three sons of the Bundren family, while not intentional, their actions cause more harm than good. Cash tirelessly builds his mother’s casket, repressing his pain and grief through methodical building. These efforts keep him from communicating and bonding with Addie during her final moments. Darl sets fire to the barn housing Addie’s body while en route to Jefferson. Intending to save her from a continued humiliation, his efforts destroy the neighbor’s barn and gets him admitted to an insane asylum. Vardaman, the youngest of the family, drills holes into the casket’s lid in order for his mother to breathe while being buried, unaware he has damaged her face in the process. While his actions could be overlooked due to his age and recent trauma, they nonetheless add to the number of violations done to the defenseless body of Addie Bundren.6

While the lack of empathy, can be seen in the sons of the family, the indifference exhibited by father and daughter, Anse and Dewey Dell, make for some of the more deplorable acts in the novel. Dewey Dell fans Addie as she clings to life, but her thoughts are not on her mother, but on her love affair with a local boy named Lafe. Darl, who was hated for being the most insightful member of the family, reveals Dewey Dell’s inner feelings towards Addie, “You want her to die so you can get to town … why won’t you say it, even to yourself?”7 Dewey Dell’s affair with Lafe has gotten her pregnant, and in order to maintain some type of youth and independence she seeks an abortion. Dewey Dell is understandably scared, but her lack of

6 Faulkner, As I Lay Dying.
7 Faulkner, As I Lay Dying, 24.
honesty forms rifts in her relationships with other family members. Anse on the other hand has less of an excuse for the cruel indifference he displays towards the family. Relying on the work of others: he takes Dewey Dell’s abortion money, sells Jewel’s horse, neglects to pay for proper medical care for Cash’s leg, and remarries the new Mrs. Bundren all on the day of Addie’s funeral. Faulkner’s use of internalized narrative vignettes allows the readers to judge for themselves any empathy felt for the characters. In my own work empathy plays a vital role not only in subject matter but in decision making as well.

Utilizing deserted photographs, text, and objects found during my searches, I am constantly peering into the lives of others. While their original context and meaning have been lost, I still find value in them. This empathy connects with the concept of Punctum developed by Roland Barthes in his book Camera Lucida. Barthes defined it as, “[…] that accident which pricks me but also bruises me, is poignant to me.” He explains that small details contained within an image can deeply affect the viewer. Acting as the more subjective side of the photograph’s ability to communicate, Punctum keeps the viewer’s attraction fixed on the image. For me, the act of finding a picture or object isn’t necessarily an immediate knowing, but rather the image speaks louder and louder until I understand its new purpose. Sometimes, the Punctum and the decisive moment emerge in the act of the search, sometimes through the interactions with other pictures or objects. When considering the very personal nature of Punctum, one must understand that what is for me may not be for you.

The identification of that which is poignant to me is crucial for the image to evoke some kind of empathetic response. Some would argue the photograph is incapable of true empathy,
Ow-Yeong states that the photograph distances the viewer from reality, viewing a fragmented, mediated form of representation, “a neat slice of time”, as Susan Sontag put it.\(^{11}\) I would argue that the devil is in the details. This would be true when considering magazines saturated with a multitude of ads and photojournalism, blurring our perception on reality. I find it significantly different when considering a family snapshot or hand written note. Even when looking at an individual slice of time, even a time not of your own, it’s possible for one to touch the past and form an emotional bond with a photographic relic. That being said: there will always be a photograph that I find and rescue from oblivion that in all honesty I have no connection with at all. This does not discourage my practice, but rather fuels my desire to discover the next photographic gem. When the story is lost, and the only thing left is what can be seen in the image, my imagination takes over, filling the void of the object’s lost identity.

### 2.4 Instability of Identity

Identity in *As I Lay Dying* is not set in stone. Throughout the traumatic events, each character goes through at least one small crisis of identity as they try to escape fate. A character can have their identity transform internally through self-discovery as well as externally by a shift in their perceived identity by others. One of the most poetic identity shifts comes in the form of Vardaman stating, “My mother is a fish”\(^{12}\), which can be read either as a child confusing the dead animal for his actual mother, or metaphorically as a child understanding his mother’s body as now being lifeless, like the fish. And like his cut up pieces of *not-fish* prepared for supper Vardaman now sees his mother’s body as no longer being his mother. This perceived identity


shifts back and forth throughout the book. The true tragedy for Vardaman is not that his mother has passed, but that in his time of grief he is often over looked by his family as they become increasingly concerned with personal issues.\textsuperscript{13} Another overlooked identity shift comes from Darl, who we see as the highly intuitive Bundren capable of reading the inner thoughts of others. As the novel reaches its climax, when he sets the barn ablaze, his speech become dissociative and switches to third-person as men carry him off to the asylum. This internal struggle is hypothesized as spurring from some form of PTSD during World War 1 where he was exposed to the carnage of death and destruction.\textsuperscript{14} Lastly, the coup de grâce is when Anse introduces his new “Mrs. Bundren” just moments after the funeral and Darl’s capture. Without explanation, Faulkner ends the novel on the phrase “Meet Mrs. Bundren.”\textsuperscript{15} This subtle shift from Addie being known as Mrs. Bundren to the unnamed woman is a complete 180 in identity. The woman whom the book was dedicated, suffered, and fought over is suddenly a new individual, leaving the family little time to grieve. Faulkner’s use of fragile or fluid identities in his characters emphasizes the effect of death on the family. “Death” can be seen as the literal death of Addie or as the changing of times, a progression from one stage of life to the next.

Identity’s role in my own work comes into play when considering the origin of my materials and the function they gain as Art. Since the materials I use have been salvaged from oblivion, their original meaning and purpose have been lost from lack of available information. The ‘before’ and ‘after’ is obscured in the picture. If the characters of the novel experience transformation through traumatic events, the abandonment of my found materials permits a transformation of identity or purpose. For example: the piece titled 8x10 (Solid Oak) is a

\textsuperscript{13} Taylor Lemaire, “‘My Mother is a Fish’: All Encompassing Inadequacy in William Faulkner’s As I Lay Dying,” \textit{Verso} (2015): 22-25.
\textsuperscript{14} Neal Hallgarth, “‘The worry that you are yourself’: Darl’s unforgivable neurodiversity in As I Lay Dying” (MA Thesis, Eastern Washington University, 2013) 12-14.
\textsuperscript{15} Faulkner, \textit{As I Lay Dying}, 149.
advertisement photograph of a woman that is was placed inside a frame for sale, used to act as a placeholder for one’s own image. (Fig. 2.2) Its original purpose is to allow the customer to project his or her own image or desires into the frame, replacing any true purpose of the already existing image. For me, I was drawn to this picture for its connection to Vardaman and Addie’s relationship as well as a humorously cruel moment from my own childhood. I see Vardaman’s reaction to his mother’s death by stating she is a fish as a poetic understanding that what once was is no more. Witnessing the death of the fish and the death of his mother helps Vardaman understand the finite nature of life; the body of his mother is now his not-mother. The other reason I was drawn to this image is from a moment when I was a 5 years old, walking through Target with my oldest sister, Sarah. As we passed the photo frames, she points out a boy in the placeholder picture. “That’s your twin brother who was sent to Mexico for being bad … you better watch out.” Needless to say I was gullible enough to fear for my life from that point forward, until my mother reassured me that the little boy in 5x7 frame was “Not your twin”. The idea of a placeholder image and Vardaman’s not-mother speaks to the power of an image’s direct or indirect representation, can be strong enough to skew our perception of identity, of ourselves and others.
Figure 2.2 Ben Lee, 8x10 (Solid Oak), 2016
If the original purpose of 8x10 (Solid Oak)’s placeholder photograph was doomed from the start, the traumatic event of discarding it allows for it to become more than just informational advertisement. I see it as the idea of a “not-portrait”, of a “not-woman” to paraphrase Vardaman’s linguistic understanding of his “fish” “not-fish” mother. When enlarged to 24x36” and assessed for its visual value, the image becomes something more. The woman’s smile, the beautiful flowers, and everything about the image is hollow, fabricated to be used and consumed, it becomes less inviting and more despondent. A certain ambiguity exists as it represents the potential of a happy moment or a happy life that is not present. For art critic John Berger, ambiguity is present in every photograph, as explained in his essay *Appearances*:

No meaning, however, comes out of computers [a series of facts without meaning], for when we give meaning to an event, that meaning is a purpose, not only to the known, but also to the unknown: meaning and mystery are inseparable, and neither can exist without the passing of time.16

Within my work, the images and objects I use are never exactly as they appear. They ride a thin line between meaning and mystery, but through the process of recontextualization their meanings shift, identities change, and purposes are reborn.

2.5 Life’s Inevitable Fates

The final theme of *As I Lay Dying* is the idea of the inevitable fates we as humans must face during our lives. If one were inclined to believe in *Fate* as a supernatural force, guiding us through a pre-determined series of events, then one would feel as if their life had meaning and was crucial to the big picture. However, if one were to believe in something more secular, then they would see life as somewhat meaningless and only they would have sole responsibility over their own destiny. Putting aside the major debate over the existence of God or some higher power, one must recognize that there are indeed some *inevitable fates* tied to any and all living things. While most experiences in life are plentiful, things like: love, friendship, joy, success, and purpose, are not guaranteed. To paraphrase Benjamin Franklin: *the only two things certain in life are death and taxes.*

Faulkner recognized death as an inevitability. Addie’s physical death is the most obvious, but the resulting tragedies that follow depict the cruel nature of existence with *death* seen in many forms.

Death, beyond the literal understanding, can be seen as the end of one thing and the beginning of something new. Throughout *As I Lay Dying*, each character experienced a shared death, the death of the mother, as well as a personal and figurative death. For example, Dewey Dell experienced the death of her youth as she faced pregnancy and the fear of becoming the caretaker to her family en lieu of independence and freedom. Symbolically, death followed the family members, alive or otherwise, as their funereal caravan headed towards Jefferson, illustrated by the circling vultures looming above,

17 Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*. 
foreshadowing the tragedies yet to come.\textsuperscript{18} In fact, Berger describes storytelling as being intrinsically tied to death, that a storyteller is the ‘secretary of death’, being that when we think of narratives as taking place in the past, it is a time and place that no longer exists.\textsuperscript{19} However, this is a linear viewpoint, a start and stop of one story (or life in this case) butting up against an entirely separate start and stop. Another way of understanding this is through a cyclical viewpoint. Seeing the beginning and end of something as essentially looping as they push and pull one another in an everlasting cohesive bond. Darl reveals his epiphany and understanding of life as being cyclical in nature through his observations: “Life was created in the valleys. It blew up onto the hills on the old terrors, the old lusts, the old despairs. That’s why you must walk up the hills so you can ride down”.\textsuperscript{20} His realization of life being repetitive, pointless, and inevitable troubles him throughout the story. His sense that past events are perpetually linked to future events is where fate comes into play, a \textit{bootstrap paradox} of sorts, generating an unending chain of cause and effect.\textsuperscript{21} In this theory, Darl sees the pain and suffering of his family as yet another set of actions and reactions, a Purgatory of human destruction and desecration. In order for him to break the cycle, and hopefully end the suffering of his family, he un成功fully attempts to burn the barn along with Addie’s body. However, unable to erase the evidence of death and pain, he is caught and locked away physically and psychologically, fulfilling his own inevitable fate.

\begin{description}
\item[\textsuperscript{18}] Faulkner, \textit{As I Lay Dying}.
\item[\textsuperscript{19}] \textit{Voices}. “To Tell A Story.” Directed by Mike Lloyd. Written by John Berger and Susan Sontag. BBC, February 9, 1983.
\item[\textsuperscript{20}] Faulkner, \textit{As I Lay Dying}, 131.
\end{description}
The inescapable force of fate, especially death, has captivated the imaginations of humans since the beginning. In Barthe’s *Camera Lucida*, he speaks extensively about his mother’s death; in an ironic twist of fate his own death happened just after the book was published. In *Camera Lucida* he describes the ways she would appear as being both the past version of herself as well as the present version. He searched for a photograph of her that would provide him “truth of the face I had loved” and he found it in a portrait he called the *Winter Garden*. He describes her, as she was, young and gentle, which is how he wanted to remember her. An important detail in his discovery is that he dared not show the reader the image, because “It exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture.” Barthe’s wished to control her fate, her death, by keeping the image to himself, and in a way try to turn back the hands of time if only for a moment. Similar to Burger’s response about storytellers being the ‘secretaries of death’, Barthes describes photographers (and their photographs) as being ‘agents of death’, showing us only what once was and shall never be again, a *memento mori*. He provides a somber, yet touching account of how a photograph can remind us of the inevitable while also comforting us.

A project by writer Michael Lesy provides a much more disturbing viewpoint. In his 1973 book, *Wisconsin Death Trip*, Lesy depicts the haunting photographs, from local photographer Charles Van Schaick, with news reports of Jackson County, Wisconsin during the 1890’s. They do not romanticize the past, but show the harshness of frontier life. Focusing on accounts of crime sprees, insanity, witchcraft, sickness, and death, the portraits include photographs of the recently deceased, institutionalized, or accused. The

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images, despite the newspaper accounts, give very little information and haunt the viewer with the tragedies and mysteries of broken narratives from the past. In his series sequenced imagery we are reminded of the seemingly repetitive, looping history of violence and tragedy cursed upon humanity. Lesy’s interests in the macabre fascinated me in my early iterations of my work, providing an affirmation of sorts to explore subject matters like death and tragedy, despite its uneasy tone. His work demonstrates that some of these “indifferent” pictures of funerals or individuals can completely shift in tone and atmosphere when attached to new context like the newspaper clippings. While my own work does not always depict death directly, one image illustrates its indirect effects. As part of a larger vignette, *Children Graveside* is a found snapshot of young children gathering by a flower-covered casket at a funeral for a group portrait. The absurdity of the scene provides a tinge of sadness and dark humor. (Fig. 2.3) Unlike the postmortem portraits from Lesy’s *Death Trip*, there were no corpses propped up for the camera’s documentation. Still, the meaning of this picture to the original owner is lost to me. I only have a sliver of their pain and experience, and while Barthe’s refuses to show his *Winter Garden*, I give some kind of life back to found photographs, so they can live to see another day.
Figure 2.3 Ben Lee, Children Graveside, 2015
3   A SHAPE TO FILL A LACK

“The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”
- William Faulkner, Requiem for a Nun

3.1 Bargaining and Acceptance

“You really shouldn’t do that Benjamin, you know good and well what could happen!

What if there were drugged up homeless people in there? Or worse, the police saw you carrying stuff out of that house? You never know!” During my teenage years, much to my mother’s dismay, I would go into abandoned buildings and houses to take pictures or find interesting things left behind. Sometimes they’d be empty, and other times it felt as if the owners just up and left. I loved feeling like a ghost walking up and down the halls, moving through another time or place. When I was really young, I would just walk into houses where my friends lived, even if they weren’t home, since nobody locked their doors in that neighborhood. I’d wait for them to come back and play with their toys and stuff in the meantime, either to see how the other half lived or to just be alone for a while. If they were gone for too long I’d get up and go back home, and they were never the wiser. Now that I’m older it’s becoming less and less of good idea to make breaking and entering a hobby, but my lust for discovering dust-covered relics burns just as bright.

My obsession with the “found” laid dormant in my artistic practice until graduate school when I began using my old family pictures to “digitally paint”, spurred by seeing the manipulated works of Lucas Blalock or Daniel Gordon and thinking about how photography could be used differently, become something new. (Fig. 3.1) I had made a series of

“manipulations” by distorting them with Photoshop overlays as a way to visually represent failing memories, like with my favorite of the series *Ex-Aunt Jennifer*. (Fig. 3.2) My interests in photographic manipulation and intervention began to quickly fade when looking at the works of Joachim Schmid and Jason Lazarus. They utilized found photography in ways that seemed so simple and poignant, so hands off yet emotionally touching. Something changed the way I thought about photography when I saw Schmid’s 1989 proclamation: “No new photographs until the old ones are used up.”

At first it seemed too bold, too militant, but if every photograph takes place in the past and no photograph offers any real sense of truth, why not use up the old ones? Why are they deemed less important than the new? Using various means to obtain his images, Schmid’s work has evolved from dumpster diving to scouring the treasure trove of the Internet. He has made series after series using pictures made by others, some seemingly random; others tightly grouped in smartly categorized vignettes. These groupings of direct and indirect connections fascinated and inspired me to make my own uncut collages of grouped or sequenced images, such as the triptych *Darl’s Epiphany*. (Fig. 3.3) Here I explored Darl’s frustration with repetitive, cyclical living represented in a group of found photographs taken of a carousel at some unknown amusement park. The people riding simply go round and round, much to the camera’s irritation in trying to capture whoever the subject might be. Schmid usually has a sense of humor throughout his work, maybe a slight middle finger as well, and I felt that the simplicity seen in the carousel pictures would carry a tinge of lighthearted humor before the bitter truth could set in.

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Figure 3.1 Daniel Gordon, Portrait in Orange and Blue, 2010
Figure 3.2 Ben Lee, Ex-Aunt Jennifer, 2015
Figure 3.3 Ben Lee, Darl's Epiphany, 2016
Another artist that inspired me to seek out the photographic moments of others was Jason Lazarus, whose last name seems quite fitting, since he brings back to life painful memories from the past. His series *Too Hard To Keep* consists of voluntarily submitted photographs from people near and far. Asking them to mail in photographs that for one reason or another are too hard to keep. This subjectivity allows for things like jilted lovers, painful teenage awkwardness, to images that embody loss so strong the original owner would rather let go of the reminder. This cathartic social practice allows people to willingly give a piece of their pain for the world to see, without giving specific or personal details, a confessional not necessarily of sins but of heartache. The arrangement seems like its formed in constellations, floating in tight clusters or lonesome voids, rhythmic in approach and grand in scale. (Fig. 3.4) They are reminiscent of Aby Warburg’s *Mnemosyne Atlas*, a series of black panels covered in disparate images, texts, maps, and artifacts all in varied arrangement used to study art and history beyond linguistic means. (Fig. 3.5) The loose associations of Warburg’s images required meditation and thought, but the clues were hidden in plain sight. As it is with *Too Hard To Keep*, the feeling of discovery that takes place as you suddenly find someone else’s photograph, someone else’s memory that hits you like a Mack truck. For me, that picture was one of a man holding his cat who seems to be asleep. The cat is obviously in a vet’s office and is surrounded by comfort items like a bed and toy duckling. I couldn’t see the man’s face, but the box of tissues made it clear he had just put his beloved cat down. There is something inherently sad about looking into the past through photographs, but not even the gruesome pictures of Lesy’s *Death Trip* could have made me tear up as much that damn picture. (Fig. 3.6)

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Figure 3.4 Jason Lazarus, Too Hard To Keep (Syracuse), 2013
Figure 3.5 Aby Warburg replica via OSA Archivum Budapest, Selections from Mnemosyne Atlas, 2008
Figure 3.6 Jason Lazarus, Selection from Too Hard To Keep, 2013
I do not need to know the person in the photograph for me to keep it. I don’t need to know their story or their names, although sometimes I find out. The photograph or object speaks to me visually, in ways that move beyond language, even when I use text or handwritten notes, I am not so much looking at what is on the surface but buried beneath the emulsion. In one of my favorite movies, *No Country for Old Men*, the sociopathic villain Anton Chigurh, terrorizes a store clerk by asking what’s the most he’s ever lost in a coin toss. After a tense moment he flips and calls heads, the store clerk is awarded the coin and his life, Chigurh then tells him: “Don’t put it in your pocket, it’s your lucky coin … Anywhere but your pocket. Where it’ll get mixed in with the others and become just a coin. Which it is.” The old man stares confused and terrified as Chigurh leaves. Sometimes the photograph is just a photograph, mixed in with the rest, and other times it means the world to someone, it’s his or her entire world cropped into a 4x6 frame. I like to believe that emotional power, that aura if I’d go that far, can linger long enough to speak to someone new, becomes something more than just a photograph. Which it is.

### 3.2 Violence and Tenderness

As my practice moved away from my own family’s pictures into the pictures and objects of unknown people, I began to question why such a shift. Was it because thinking of my grandfather in his final days was too much for me to linger on? Or perhaps there is an inherent violence to photography that I could not enact on my own family. John Stezaker, a collage artist

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who uses found photographic materials like headshots and postcards, once said, “There is something very odd, even unnerving about cutting through a photograph … It sometimes feels like I am cutting through flesh.” In his practice he will use simple cuts to dissect portraits and piece them together in a Dada style composite, creating strange surreal images. (Fig. 3.6)

Figure 3.7 John Stezaker, Betrayal XVIII, 2012

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These images come across as funny, aggressive, funhouse, and nightmare. While his physical intervention with the photographic object shows a literal violence, the simple act of taking pictures in of itself is violent, as Sontag stated:

Like a car, a camera is sold as a predatory weapon – one that’s as automated as possible, ready to spring. Popular taste expects an easy, an invisible technology. Manufacturers reassure their customers that taking pictures demands no skill or expert knowledge, that the machine is all-knowing, and responds to the slightest pressure of the will. It’s as simple as turning the ignition key or pulling the trigger. Like guns and cars, cameras are fantasy-machines whose use is addictive.28

Even the use of words like aim, focus, shoot, take, capture, etc. give a sense of violence and aggression, like using shooting a gun. Evidence of this addiction can be seen all around us, you see it on walls, billboards, magazines, social media, and all over the Internet. We take picture after picture, surrounding and insolating ourselves in images like birds building nests. It gives us comfort and entertainment, educates us and cures our boredom. I see myself as rescuing the photographs from oblivion, saving them from their demise. However, it is possible that my pack rat mentality, my savior complex, is just a way to try and escape death. By saving the images from demise, I in turn hope for something to prolong my own existence. On the other hand, I do not fully return the images back to life, since their context and original stories are still lost in time. Instead I

resurrect them into strange new creations that no longer resemble their former selves once they are recontextualized and put into a new narrative. One particular artist that appropriates and recontextualizes photographs is the equally hated, equally loved Richard Prince.

Before he threw his hat into the ring of galleries and art critics, Prince was working with magazine companies, collating articles and removing advertisements. In doing this, he began seeing Marlboro ads over and over, specifically, the Cowboy ads. As an artist he was interested in not just stealing someone else’s image, which I would argue he did not do, but re-presenting the images that we as a culture consumed already and place it in the gallery setting for us to reconsider intellectually. Prince stated, “It wasn’t important who took the photograph. I took the photograph. I literally took it.” Much to the anger and disgust from the original photographers, Prince’s work changed the paradigm of how we as a culture understand art and how photography functions in society.

For me, his work becomes more than just a copy, the enlargement and the re-presentation of the image changes it completely. When the advertisement was selling a product that in turn was selling an experience, the rugged American West cowboy experience, Prince took that pre-existing urge, that dormant desire for freedom and put it right in our face. As homage of sort, Salvation by Fire from my exhibition contains a scene of two cowboys from a Hollywood set. (Fig. 3.8) In its original form, it was the front facing photograph on a postcard.

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Figure 3.8 Ben Lee, Salvation by Fire, 2017
It depicts the back of one cowboy shooting another off the roof of a nearby saloon. In relation to *As I Lay Dying*, Addie said that her son Jewel would be her savior: “He is my cross and he will be my salvation. He will save me from the water and from the fire. Even though I have laid down my life, he will save me.”  

30 The cowboy is Jewel, and the fire is from the pistol that shot down the other cowboy. Salvation to Addie is just words, like most things, so any salvation the dying cowboy finds is salvation from life’s pains. Like the works of Prince, I have made my materials known; I do not try to hide anything from the viewer. Prince’s works attempted to mask some of the moiré effect of the CMYK processing, but he was very clear where the pictures came from. As part of my process I fully embrace the flaws and conditions of the object as they were found. In the case of *Salvation by Fire*, there are scratches, color fades, marks, stains, dog-eared corners and overall damage to the emulsion. During the scanning and enlarging process, these become highlighted and hyper-visible, pointing to its origin.

Another appropriation artist influential to the final evolution of my work is that of Marlo Pascual. In her practice, she finds objects and images to combine into thought-provoking ways, as a method to explore the image-object relationship. It has a dada feel mixed with some of Prince’s attitude. When asked about a large photograph of a cat seen in her collection of works, Pascual stated: “I liked the cat’s gaze, and I just bought it off eBay, scanned it, and had it enlarged and mounted to plexi.”  

31 Her cool, hands off approach could be credited to those who came before her, like Richard Prince, Andy Warhol, and Sherrie Levine, but in the age of the internet, “stealing” has become less of a

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dirty word, often rephrased as borrowed, found, pirated, or even just “Copy-and-Paste”. When it comes to her object-image pieces though there is something more going on. She is making the photograph into an object, mimicking Minimalism’s approach of having to physically interact with the object and the space it takes up. In her piece, Untitled, as many are named, she has the photograph of a man with two lit candles physically jutting off the image. (Fig. 3.9)

![Figure 3.9 Marlo Pascual, Untitled, 2011](image)
When seen at the right angle, one can see the flames line up with his eyes, creating an “Ah Ha!” moment for the viewer. This playful game of Discovery-Reward inspired me to make Up for Air, a piece about Addie’s coffin being drilled into by Vardaman to provide air holes. (Fig. 3.10) In my piece I left a wooden panel blank with the exception of a single drilled hole. When the viewer approaches the hole, the eye of a woman peeks back out at towards the gallery. This is essentially a photograph fixed behind the panel, but the claustrophobic figure plays peek-a-boo with the audience, a little dark humor to mix in with the death and misery seen in the rest of the show. The transformation of this piece from just image is when the wooden panel, which was used to mount the rest of the 2D works, is used for its materiality, thus becoming an object, a meta reference to its own construction and a literary reference to the violation of Addie’s coffin.

The beauty of the appropriation approaches of Prince and Pascual is that it opens the image or object up to new meanings and purposes. While the photographs that I find or objects that I use may have at one point meant one thing, through my recontextualization and setting in the gallery, they take on a whole new set of meanings. And like some mad scientist tinkering and experimenting for sake of discovery, the stories and narratives that unfurl during the process is serendipitous and beautiful.
Figure 3.10 Ben Lee, Detail of Up For Air, 2017
3.3 Fragmented Narrative

According to William Faulkner, he wrote *As I Lay Dying* by dividing the work into nightly sessions, working tirelessly from 12:00 AM to 4:00 AM for over a month, not changing a single word. His use of stream of consciousness and character driven chapters broke the story up into tiny pieces, each offering a taste of possible truth. I found his writing style to be dreamlike, cerebral, and enchanting. I thought that this open-ended form of writing could be applied to art making as well. It would allow me to move freely from snapshots, to illustrations, to text, or even to 3D objects. The connecting thread to all of these elements would be that I could use what was necessary to make the piece; I was longer limited by medium or style.

A particularly interesting artist and outlier of sorts, Melissa Cantanese, created a series called *Dive Dark Dream Slow* as a collaborative effort with Peter Cohen and his extensive collection of found photographs, ranging from photography’s inception to now. In this series, Cantanese wanted to create a new narrative through the sequencing and editing of the varied images. However, because the work consists of disassociated images that are fused together through the working process, the viewer does not get a clean, easily read narrative. Instead what is presented is what I like to call a *broken narrative*, a story or story-like sequence of images that contain many independent narrative functions acting for the larger, arching narrative. Her images could include a woman’s dress, lighting bolt streaking across the sky, and then someone doing a handstand underwater at night. Individually, each vernacular image is somewhat banal, but together or seen in a series becomes fascinating. One gets an overall sense of subject or mood but

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is left in a perpetual Presque Vu, or tip of the tongue, feeling. This method seems to mirror Faulkner’s stream of consciousness, in that one chapter could be about faith and religion while the next is about the fear of pregnancy. Each operates fine on their own, but becomes infinitely more intriguing as the layers add up. Dive Dark Dream Slow hints at a particular theme or story, but offers no direct characters or setting. It seems to be built off feeling instead of tangible content. In my own series, I have tried to use a particular novel as a vertebrate, as some type of traction for the images and themes to grip. I found my method of cohesion when driving down to Birmingham for a studio visit.

In my last year of graduate school, one of my seminar classes took a trip to the University of Alabama Birmingham to visit Jared Ragland and to see his recent body of work *Everything is Going to be All Right*. And right off the bat I felt as if I walked into an alternate universe where someone had a concept and title eerily similar to *The Feeling of Being OK*, but as he explained how narrative acted as his visual glue my brain began to fire on all cylinders. For his project Ragland used a combination of self made images as well as found photographs from online. In it everything revolves around Percy Walker’s *The Moviegoer*, in which a man tries to get over a mid-life crisis through watching movies. For Ragland, there is a universal theme of “the search” being the existential desire to know what our purpose in life is. He makes all the images black-and-white to create a sense of unity amongst the varied subjects. While each image comes from independent sources, they pertain to the novel. Footnote What comes out of it is mysterious, dark, and tantalizing. One image in particular, *Untitled (Phantom of the Opera)*, is an on stage photograph of the Phantom reaching out to a young woman. Using stories within stories to build on larger themes, this image is both theatrically beautiful and classical chilling. (Fig. 3.11)
Figure 3.11 Jared Ragland, Untitled (Phantom of the Opera), 2016
Ragland’s sense of narrative is better structured, or more apparent than with Cantanese, but with Ragland too there is a strange sense of disorientation as we jump from time to time and place to place. Both of their works feels like a waking dream, caught between worlds, and the pieces come together after you’ve been jolted awake. I think that Ragland’s movie themed images fits perfect with the novel he focuses on, but also for investigating broken narratives. In movies there is no fidelity to time or place as the camera shots jump from scene to scene, only a loose understanding of continuity. In my own work I use cinematic styled images to convey the sense of theatrical storytelling. In one vignettes, *Vulture I, Vulture II*, and *The Feeling of Being OK*, I pair together an 8x10 black-and-white photograph of woman looking out in terror at an unknown force with a larger 16x20 illustrated page of a vulture peering down from a tree. (Fig. 3.12) Next to these is a small torn page, with text containing the show’s title. The three pieces together represent the foreshadowed terror and death that will eventually doom the Bundrens with a friendly warning of sorts to the viewer to never let one’s own faults get in the way of life. In a similar method as Ragland, I began searching for images to fit the role of the vulture character of the novel. While there is no specific vulture, the idea of death from above lingers throughout the pages. In a strange twist of fate I found a book on Southern birds and a 1960’s B-rated science fiction movie called *The Vulture*. Thematically tied with the bird of death, the two images worked well enough formally that I kept both. I found this playful staring contest to be reminiscent of Cantanese’s images as well as techniques used by Ragland in his series. Each piece offers unique, stand-alone narratives that sparked when combined. That’s the beauty of broken narratives, its half planned and half instinctual, but you know it works when you see it.
Figure 3.12 Ben Lee, Vulture I & II, 2017
4 CONCLUSION

“Now your turn.” My grandfather would say as he slid the newly marked sheet of paper towards me. I started this series of work thinking about him, thinking about how his death affected my family, my mother, even my own views on life. And even though death has always been on my mind in one way or another, the making of this series put things into perspective.

And as I said before, I do not believe in superstitions like fate, but rather the endlessly wonderful coincidences of the universe. While making The Feeling of Being OK I felt as if the universe made a thousand small yet incredibly wonderful things fall into my lap over and over. The journey I took in finding all of these photographs, torn pages, hand written notes, knick-knacks, and oddities changed me. Changed me in ways I’m not sure that I yet fully understand. I feel as if I’ve shared memories and moments with people I’ve never met, as if by some spectral means I walked in and out of their lives. The smell of dust and the slightly scratched surfaces of all my relics made the work feel more and more real the longer I stayed with them. When I put the final piece on the gallery wall, I felt as if I bumped into someone on the street I hadn’t seen in years. All the features and details seemed familiar, but instead of being in my imagination or scribbled on a sketchpad, it was right there in front of me.

I learned a lot about the work and myself as an artist during this final year. I realized the characters in As I Lay Dying are tragic not only because of their actions or choices or place in the world, they are tragic because they are human. And all of the intricate parts to my installation had their share of imperfections, making them seem almost human. I found that pieces came and went, orientations and arrangement shifted to fit into the space, but I knew that once I was in the gallery with everything it would somehow work out. I learned that patience and dedication pays off in the end. I was even able to print, mount, and hang all of my work with my own two hands,
something that makes me feel incredibly proud and accomplished, but if it wasn’t for my fellow
grads and professors helping me along the way, I don’t think I could’ve gotten as far as I did. As
I was putting up the vinyl lettering for the show’s title, I couldn’t help but think of my
grandfather. We always started playing Stump the Artist with a blank white sheet of paper, blank
as the walls in the gallery, blank as an endless void. I’m not sure what the next blank sheet will
be or exactly what direction my art will take me from here, but I know that I’ll be able to make
something out of seemingly nothing, that there will be a solution somewhere out in the void.

Figure 4.1 Ben Lee, Installation Shot #1, 2017
Figure 4.2 Ben Lee, Installation Shot #2, 2017
Figure 4.3 Installation Shot #3, 2017
Figure 4.4 Ben Lee, Installation Shot #4, 2017
Figure 4.5 Ben Lee, Installation Shot #5, 2017
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