4sh: Coping via Crayons, Canvas, and Mixed-Media Artmaking

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ABSTRACT
This arts-based thesis is a personal account of making sense of loss, embracing emotion, and the cathartic qualities of mixed-media art relying greatly on family photographs. The findings from this will inform my teaching approach and assist budding artists (my pupils) in creating connections by breaking down walls to promote growth of their artistic voice.

INDEX WORDS: Mixed-media, Memory, Collage, Photographs, Loss, Culture
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2017
4SH: COPING VIA CRAYONS, CANVAS, AND MIXED-MEDIA ARTMAKING
by

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DEDICATION

To my friends, family, and therapists; thank you for always lending a kind word and being a lamp to point me in the right direction. Mom, Dad, the SDak Claphams, and Aunt AJ; no words can adequately depict the amount of gratitude I owe you. Lastly, Dr. D, I certainly could not have done this without thee.
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Mary Beatrice “Bea Bea” (née Keith) Forsh; without you this thesis would be non-existent. This is not a final goodbye, but another farewell for now. To my beautiful niece and nephew, you are the driving force behind my push toward the finish line. I hope your aunt has made you proud. Your innocent love and priceless hugs are what get me through the darkest and most difficult hours. Lastly, an extra special shout out to Blayne and Herscheda—the real MVPs that assisted me with issues formatting.
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Delicate shadows outline their unmistakable contours

Solemn and serene – I am entranced by their blissful beauty

A strong presence emanates from rigid forms

The simple elegance manifest a personal peace

Faint outlines and figures emerge from the depth of the black abysses

Stark and seemingly desolate, the silence and reverie inundate

Comforted by the familiarity;

Acceptance looms in the presence – of their silent goodbyes

Whilst the omnipresence of death in life

inspires me.

--4sh
1 INTRODUCTION

On a coffee table in a metro-Atlanta home in the late 1980s laid a book with a pristine photograph on the cover. The image so powerful, that the young girl longingly gazing at its cover, traverses a room (she knows is) forbidden to her tiny toes. That young girl was me and that image is one of my most notable art memories. The lighting was so delicate and descriptive. At the time I could not read, but the images spoke volumes regardless. I longed for the ability to speak without words and help others hone their skills to do the same.

Since I was young I have gravitated towards art. I hope in my teaching of art I can facilitate someone else’s quest to find their niche and a voice they were not aware they possessed. Mixed-media art is a great vehicle to give growing minds a unique point of view and an outlet. In an art classroom they are given the tools to learn how to think, versus being told what to think. The ability to further myself and consequently give others the ability to succeed is a genuinely empowering feeling. I want to encourage experimentation and help others learn from their “mistakes” through the creation of mixed-media artworks. People oft times forget that art is not limited to paintings and sculptures in museums. Many academic subjects hinder or do not allow the unique type of growth and preparation for thinking that I want to foster. I often found myself stifled and forced to create work for a deadline based on a strict rubric that did not allow for candid personal expression.

One of my most significant educators was never at the helm of a traditional classroom setting. That invaluable teacher is my paternal grandmother who was undoubtedly one of biggest influences in my journey on this Earth. Beatrice, more
commonly known as “Bea Bea,” was a personification of all things I aspire to be. Unfortunately, she was taken away from me at the age of eighty-four as a result of Alzheimer’s disease. As defined by the Alzheimer’s Association (alz.org), Alzheimer’s is the most common form of dementia that progressively causes memory loss, inability to perform intellectual activities, and ultimately death. While pursuing my dream (away at college) she was losing her memory slowly, and by the close of my matriculation at SCAD it was rapidly. In an extremely painful way, I ‘Whitnessed’ from a distance as a pillar in my life structure faded away. This was an arduous and drawn out farewell. I now reflect and wonder if due to her illness I chose photography unconsciously. She was, in my mind, akin to a vintage camera, built to last with a fresh roll of film inside. This is how I thought of her when I began matriculating at Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD), yet as time progressed the film aged, exposures outnumbered frames, and when the final ones tried to advance, the delicate holes broke on the tiny spokes. Irreparable damage was done within her brain and the experience changed my world, my mind frame, and my art.

I became distinctly fascinated by aging and mortality, the regression to a state of infancy, the idea of time, and the notion that life-long memories can devastatingly become ephemeral. While Bea Bea once sent loving letters of support, those slowly dwindled and consequently, my aforementioned fascination became a full-blown obsession that trickled into and eventually inundated my artwork. No longer was the imagery I produced a manifestation of the sarcastic, witty, talkative, and chroma-loving student that most seemed to know. Instead, my photographs became melancholy, harsh, macabre, and borderline morbid for some onlookers. There were days I would find myself wandering in a graveyard admiring the beauty (Figure 1.) amongst what much of
society would classify as eerie; yet for me there was a clear sense of peace. When introduced to large format photography the beginning of the qualities that are encompassed in my current aesthetic blossomed. Tilts, shifts, and particularly the ability to create double exposures with ease spoke to my soul. The juxtaposition of two images of a single scene within in one frame was a gentle homage to Alzheimer's effect on the brain and signals getting crossed accordingly.

![Image](image.png)

*Figure 1. "Mano de Dios" 16" x20" Digital inkjet print, 2007*

Eventually double exposures no longer fed my artistic appetite, and returning to my roots in painting and charcoals; I entered into the realm of mixed-media. With the option of registering for Drawing I or Printmaking, I chose to embark on a path foreign to me by taking on Printmaking. The class was held in Alexander Hall, which also housed Painting majors as well. Each day I would encounter free spirits with exceptional depth, passion, and a significant ease to their spirits as well; a stark contrast to
designers and most photographers I typically associated with. Under the direction of my professor, I dabbled in creating monoprints, lithography, and incorporating text more easily into my artwork. Remaining true to my new aesthetic, I chose to focus on the late Martin Luther King, Jr. as a subject (having used an image of him in his coffin) for an assignment requiring multiple processes to pull a print. Furthermore, I quoted his infamous *Mountaintop* speech (delivered the day before his untimely death). At this point, by using photographs as inspiration and as a substrate for applying traditional mediums, my cathartic purge got its start. Depressing the button to release a shutter felt detached from more personal work and insufficient for allowing me to express my voice. Additionally, a blank canvas can be paralyzing, but by giving a surface ‘memory’ by layering a photographic image down first, the flood doors of my imagination began to burst open. It was as if my granny’s aura was omnipresent, thoughts rushed into my psyche, which seeped from my fingertips that grasped a brush and free flowed onto a canvas. Slowly, through exploration of techniques, building layers, adding text, gently caressing the mild undulations on a canvas and physically interacting with the materials permitted a sense of relief that I had not yet experienced. Suddenly, there was a considerable connection betwixt my pieces and myself that was almost frightening and refreshing simultaneously. Far removed from simply satisfying the appetites of professors and instructors, I finally made work for myself. By becoming vulnerable, liberated, and exposed I became invigorated by what I knew was inside.

An unanticipated resemblance can be drawn between my work and that of Radcliffe Bailey’s with clear connections to the African diaspora, family artifacts, photographs, and multiple mediums. By gathering tokens that have been used for me to contextualize who I am, what stock I come from, and relate to my ancestry; like a puzzle
I place items together to materialize a sense of completion. Concrete visualizations of memories in regards to family members (due to a short acquaintance prior to their sunset) are fading will be immortalized as a result of the work. Sorting through the piles of photographs provides an opportunity to evaluate and confront feelings as they arise. “Photographs are an invitation to sentimentality. They turn the past into a tangible object of tender regard. Rehabilitating old photographs finds new contexts for them” (Sontag, 1973, p. 71).

A sense of self-awareness and understanding comes to the surface when I produce mixed-media work. In those moments, I scratch far beneath the surface and the method of production permits an expansion that I feel encourages me to push past limitation, confront private musings, and acknowledge emotion with less intimidation (Soneff, 2008, p.14). The art making process allows me to quiet the day-to-day noise, dig deeper and listen to all that is buried beneath the surface. Nourishing our creative avenues reveals the joy which can be located if we are willing to unshackle ourselves from the constraints of the stressful demands of daily life; we begin to see that there can be free movement and pleasure gained from imagination and exploration (Miles 2015).

Sitting in a studio or alone in my classroom, rearranging and configuring items until they are ‘perfect’ all while reliving moments from yesteryear is a meditative experience for many (myself included).

Artmaking, in its primal roots can help people examine their inner lives and connect with other human beings. “Art as therapy” embodies the idea that art making is, in and of itself, therapeutic and that the creative process is a growth-producing experience (Malchiodi, 2013. para 2). No such peace have I ever found in an actual psychologist directed session that is comparable to my contentment gained through
execution of assemblage, collage and mixed-media art (as therapy). “Through creating art and reflecting on the art products and processes, people can increase awareness of self and others, cope with symptoms, stress, traumatic experiences, enhance cognitive abilities and enjoy the life-affirming pleasures of making art” (American Art Therapy Association, 2010). While commonly confused, it should be made clear that art therapy and art as therapy are not synonyms. The prior requires an individual that is clinically trained in psychology, yet also educated in the arts also. One of therapy’s multiple definitions essentially refers to any activity that has the ability to provide solace or reduce tension. The arts have the ability to help individuals work through pain and suffering when words seem inadequate. Emily Newman, an artist and therapist declares:

> Art has been a pathway to healing emotional wounds. Art making has the ability to move people along their journey... the creative process can help recalibrate a person’s life. People find comfort and emotional release in the process of creative expression, as well as from the final artistic product. To witness work that is generated from a desire to heal deep wounds can have the power of transforming the viewer’s experience as well; loss and grief are universal emotions and healing can happen when one feels less alone in their own experience. (Mullen 2016)

For centuries art has been used as a tool to communicate, promote growth, and in some societies promote spiritual and physical healing. It is not my intent to act as a therapist, but I have found genuine comfort over the years engaging the canvas, crayons, and via collage techniques. Evidence exists that supports the claim that engagement with artistic activities, either as an observer of the creative efforts of others or as participant, can enhance one’s moods, and emotions (Stuckey & Nobel, 2010). Process is a large
component in the connection in meaningful art making. It is apparent there are obvious
links betwixt therapeutic and creative processes. Exercises for both include exploration,
development, and the encouragement to flesh out something until we open new parts of
ourselves, lay ourselves bare and discover ideas we did not realize were there (Miles
2015).

In this studio-based thesis body of work, I tried deliberately to ignore many
formal conventions associated with my art studies. I chose a bit more of a process-over-
product approach to my workflow. Deviating from my comfort zone encouraged
unabashed exploration and produced great serenity.

In the past, the concept of the “melting pot” was used to describe and structure
the population of students within the nation’s educational system. I will elaborate
further in chapter 5 with ways to address this in my own teaching. We are culturally
diverse and by abolishing assimilation can embrace the beauty of humanity by
addressing those individual identities. This has the ability to inspire and empower the
budding artists in my classes which are primarily comprised of minorities. By allowing
them to experience various media and learn about new facets of art, it gives them brand
new progressive and innovative ideas in a constructivist type setting. It is my belief that
with so much tension in the world daily, they have a multitude of feelings waiting to be
expressed and purged from within. There is something about the ability to see an artist
that looks like you or items in your home and how it inspires a student’s artistic voice.
Oft times, unless a student explores artists on their own they are rarely exposed to
artists with a similar perspective. Presenting diverse artists has the capacity to assist
students in understanding the link betwixt themselves, expression, and the world in
which we reside. Art fills voids left in traditional academic classroom and uses visual
literacy to make the abstract seem concrete. Another key point is that art has the fortitude to surpass capacities nature bestowed us, compensate for emotional shortcomings; and is a therapeutic medium that can guide, lift and excite observers, warranting better versions of ourselves (Botton & Armstrong 2013).

My decision to align with a more process-oriented production is mainly to help inform ways to implement the same methodology into my teaching practice. Higher order thinking skills or “H.O.T.S.” has become county-wide initiative, whilst high stakes standardized testing is also omnipresent in most schools. Lowenfeld (1975) declared, “we know factual learning, will not benefit the individual or society; and educating has unfortunately overlooked qualities necessary for development of an individual’s sensibilities (p. 7).” By reducing the rigidness of art projects, I can give my students more of an avenue to creatively problem solve, explore various theories, think independently, gain confidence, and fortify a sense of self awareness. In a like manner, as an artist open to exercising new practices, I managed to innovate myself. Equally important, my toolbox as an educator expanded proportionally to my acquired understanding as an artist of self and materials. While the mantra of “you can be anything you want to be!” is widely expressed, the educational system is currently geared to assimilate students to a large extent. Through the sparking of divergent thinking and a certain amount of freedom within the art making process, a walkway can be created to bridge gaps between scholastics and souls.

As an artist and educator, I will use this studio based thesis project to enhance my abilities in both roles thus providing pupils with skills and insight that as a young artist I may have lacked. In the coming chapter, I will discuss some of the artists who inspire me, and describe how their work connects to my own.
2 LITERATURE REVIEW

As I work on compiling, editing, and creating my culminating body of work; it is my goal to find artists with similar techniques and aesthetics. Among the artists, I find inspiration based on their use of collage, photography, family relics, impasto, and assemblage. As I work on my multi-layered, multi-media images, I find that each artist’s works whispers to me in its own unique way. This will guide me, promote growth, and add richness in my work as I dissect the constructions of their leveled pieces.

2.1 Cultural Representation

I was introduced to the work of Carrie Mae Weems in a documentary photography course with professor Zig Jackson. Weems’ usage of photography, text, race, gender, and familial relationships spoke to me as a maturing Black woman and artist willing to openly acknowledge who I was. Having been force-fed images I felt disconnected from and could not genuinely relate, Weems helped me realize the disparities. Until this time, most of the work presented (in Art History) came from a small elite group of Caucasian men with which I often failed to relate. Each required course seemed to have a nearly identical myopic audience that excluded me. Very few people of color, LGBTQ, or women were represented. Carrie’s work boldly challenged all that I knew. She too began her formal post-secondary visual art education by studying photography as I did at SCAD. Yet her work is in-your-face, proud, radiating a distinct cultural heritage, and managed to not simply speak, but shout directly at me. Representation matters for minorities and I was finally faced with someone to whom I could more easily relate. Weems focused largely on her culture, community, and gave the world a glimpse into how the ‘other side’ lives. Her words were pointed,
confrontational, and sometimes yelled at the viewer by relying on the usage of all caps to convey her message. Nonetheless, there was a clear poetry in the juxtaposition of word and image that balanced beautifully. Furthermore, exposure to her work gave me the vision and drive I apply to my current work. Following in Weems’ footsteps, I borrowed her aesthetic (Figure 2) and experimented with creating new imagery while also adding text. The process did not fully satiate my artistic appetite.

Figure 2 From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried, Carrie Mae Weems,(1995-1996). Source: http://carriemaeweems.net

However, there were still strong elements that I noted during the research process. Her unapologetic forwardness addressing power and privilege was refreshing and equally empowering in a time when I felt somewhat discarded as “other.” I reintroduced myself to her work that investigates culture with hints of the African diaspora, family, and a variety of media like photos, fabric and typography to express herself. While she was born in the 1960’s, many of the same conversations and social
issues about diversity are being played out present day. I therefore feel a sense of necessity to take the baton or join hands to bridge the generations through similar art.

My discovery of Radcliffe Bailey’s art occurred later, on a field trip to The High Museum of Art with my fifth grade art classes; I beheld this exhibit for the first time with awe. It may seem impossible to fathom when one examines my artwork from studio classes with Tim Flowers (where my mixed-media explorations commenced); but until 2015 I had not been familiar with his style of work. There was a distinct sense of

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

Figure 3 Students viewing *Tar Top*, (1995), 96 " x 120 x 11", High Museum of Art, Atlanta

validation with pieces sharing a strong resemblance to my work and what I aspired to create being displayed at such an influential venue. I snapped countless pictures (*Figure 3*) in an effort to capture the essence of each facet (to study and dissect later). By similarly constructing a historical dialogue, Bailey’s aesthetic was almost a blueprint for my work. I admire the experimental, improvisational and intuitive qualities (Bailey, Thompson, & Barilleaux, 2011, p. 19). Like myself, Radcliffe was raised in Georgia, which can stir up a myriad of emotions being an African-American in the south in
relation to identity. He generates a pointed narrative using treasured family artifacts and imagery. Contrary to the slides I was subjected to in undergraduate school, this artist regains the power and is a strong steady voice for the African-American community through his exhibits with a personal perspective. Clear African aesthetic influence is present, yet from analyzing it is also obvious that the artist draws inspirations from various details of his life experiences. The selective use of achromatic photographs is an obvious nod to imply the past. Which works well for me as my main focus for the intended work is based on memories. My goals even aligned with the idea of separate entities coming together to be visually unified through “poetic resonance” in the signature assembling of memory and history. A common thread of family, struggle, and perseverance act as a steady beat that flows throughout his many creations. The art he creates has a depth that I admire and provides new ideas of ways to manipulate the two- and three-dimensional forms that inform the purpose of my works. Additionally, the scale of Radcliffe Bailey’s installation exceed the dimensions of any pieces I have ever attempted, but the intimacy created makes my work more concentrated and fits the meaning behind it all. Choosing to construct pieces with modest dimensions coincides with his subject matter grounded in family, which informs a large majority of his art. The work is often creatively produced simultaneously as if arranging a personal photo gallery in the home that creates a cherished and dear narrative.

While Radcliffe does not explicitly refer to his work as therapeutic, the book of his works is titled *Memory as Medicine* as homage to a piece where he conceived a sculpture using “medicine cabinets” for his socially cathartic art. Not only does the work give attention to familial relationships, but it Bailey (2011) states, “making art is like writing a journal. Each work is a different page, but all are of the same book (p 20).”
Congruent to my goals for the body of work included in this thesis, he is attacking the interest in our cultural history and providing a new face to the African diaspora through his exhibits.

### 2.2 Assemblage Artists

Distinct connections can be drawn between the aforementioned artist’s multilayered compositions and the shadow boxes of Joseph Cornell and “combines” created by Robert Rauschenberg (Bailey, Thompson, & Barilleaux, 2011, p. 16). Prior to Bailey, many of my aesthetic choices stemmed from the shadow boxes of Joseph Cornell and the monochromatic collages of Louise Nevelson -- both artists using geometric confines for unification and stability, yet breaking the plane and invading the viewer’s space whilst piquing intrigue, which is often lost in standard two-dimensional works. Nevelson is an American artist, that happens to also be female, an innovator, and managed to see beauty in the discarded by utilizing what others overlooked as trash. Her use of found objects was typically a result of circumstance due to war that made it increasingly difficult to obtain art materials. By carefully reconstructing a variety of objects, she proposed a new narrative that was previously ignored based on gender. My work aims to recontextualize my personal artifacts to express an idea of memory and loss. Her ability to ignore societal norms permitted other women’s success and development in the fine arts. Relationship between forms produced their own notes and interacted like a prima ballerina traipsing expertly across a stage. The use of specific pieces to illicit emotional appeal and simply by exploring with materials confronts the status quo. Even with a variety of materials and angles, I take note that Nevelson managed to unify the work and create a new artifact of sorts by using paint to reclaim the individual components.
Using found objects brought a notion of nostalgia to the forefront and encouraged my use of things from yesteryear. Cornell, known for his shadow boxes (also known as memory boxes), made pseudo time capsules that could be constantly displayed and admired (Figure 4). Anything placed inside was given a second life with an entirely new meaning. Every box takes the viewer on a visual journey of memories via mementos and bric-a-brac. Cornell, unlike Bailey, uses relatively small-scale shadow boxes like myself, also referred to as “poetic theaters.” Each time I hold something in my fingertips I reflect on it’s significance in my life thus far and then painstakingly arrange it like a composer penning their next opus. Based on the minimal amount of objects in the poetic theaters, one can infer the editing process and deliberate use of particular items to engage the observer, knowing that once attached and permanently assembled my interaction would be redesigned for future times. Individually components had a

Figure 4 Naples (1942), 11 ¼ x 6 ¾ x 4 ¾ “, Joseph Cornell, source: http://www.bbc.com
story and collectively they became chapters within a proverbial book. Nevelson and Cornell inspired my outlook on more formal qualities, leaving a noticeable void regarding my personal identity and individuality.

Enter Betye Saar; a prominent American artist who like myself has African roots with a penchant for incorporating that into her artworks. Born in the early 20th century, Saar has played a pivotal role in the redefining of Black identity in the art world. She recognized the damage of the marginalization of sayings like “woman” or “Black” artist. Nevertheless, she took the challenge on and persisted; becoming a notable figure in contemporary art with deep-rooted societal issues at the forefront of her works. Instantly I could relate to her carefully crafted and evocative assemblages (Figure 5). She realized, through retelling of family events and rifling through photo albums that “every picture tells a story.” Betye’s reliance on nostalgic photos informed my use of imagery to reinterpret events and extending what she called, “the frozen moment.” The photograph is an instrument of memory that investigates the value of family and self as it depicts daily life (Saar & Steward, 2005, p. 22). My granny was known for snapping
pictures, now it is my aunt, and eventually the baton will be passed to me as family historian. As memories fade, the image left on paper provides a vehicle for reinterpretation. According to Betye (2005) it triggers something and she is, “inspired to create an alternative reality by integrating the photo with other materials, media, and objects. . . a process that somehow extends the frozen moment (p. 9).” My choices of old images are often without pigment or mildly sepia in tone; and contribute to my use of a neutral palette. The goal being the same as was executed by Saar that evokes a sense of time passed and a tribute to those that came before us. In her glove series, Saar assembles a work with a sepia-toned palette like myself to reference the distant past and pay homage to personal histories by using handwritten letters and her great aunt’s treasured souvenirs (Saar & Steward, 2005, p. 136). Regardless of differences, portraits typically have a common thread that despite divides provides an intimacy that I use to convey my poetic narrative to viewers through. Family photos precipitate an inclusivity and affiliative introspection that embraces images of greatly contrasting cultural origins (Saar & Steward, 2005,p. 23).

In the same fashion that these artists used a variety of material to construct personal meaning, I feel compelled to do the same. Taking note from each person’s style and technique I shall build my own body of work. The formal qualities by use of layers and the tangible element of texture will make this a truly immersive process. A hands-on approach will activate several senses providing a cathartic take away. Next I will delineate my intentions for this studio-based thesis.
3 METHODOLOGY

In this studio-based thesis, I intend to address the following questions:

1. How might mixed media art-making serve as an expressive tool for me to process and manage various emotional states as well as experiences of loss or trauma?

2. How can I enhance current methods in my teaching through personal exploration of art-making as a self-expressive tool?

To answer the first question, I plan to create a series of approximately nine artworks utilizing a technique of layering photographs, paint, paper, and objects to explore my feelings about loss of life, memory loss/Alzheimer’s, aging and personal identity. The majority of these works are to be on canvas employing the impasto technique with acrylic, ranging in size from as small as 8 x 10” to a maximum of 22 x 28.” Canvas will not be used exclusively as my goal is to utilize found objects and reappropriate previous artworks as a way of reclaiming my (artistic) voice. While it is difficult to carry a sketchbook around consistently, I will rely on my phone to capture tidbits of inspiration, gather quotes, and record any new ideas. My workflow is destined to be a tad unconventional with searching for ideas on Pinterest, to minimalistic sketches with only words to describe the goal of the pieces in a style similar to stream of conscious writing. A portion of the growth stems from experimentation and moving items ever so slightly and intuitively.

Consequently, photographs are a key component as a foundation for the mixed-media manifestations. A few memory boxes influenced by the work of Cornell and Bailey are similarly planned to create a composition similar to a Mexican ofrenda. An altar, or ofrenda is a ritual of placing items like pictures of lost loved ones and
decorating an area based on memories to celebrate the life of a lost loved one. The planned color scheme of the work will be relatively muted with darker hues to convey a feeling of nostalgia and melancholy. As a result, some previous works that no longer align to my vision will be placed on the floor to allow me to edit which works to include or alter further. Earlier works from studio courses may be the driving force for preparing a specific color scheme for cohesion.

One proposed work is heavily motivated by the analogy of old film and memory loss. In this particular piece, I would like to join antique cameras and employ techniques similar to Louise Nevelson for unity. A matte color will further reiterate the idea of dust and time. I envision this being a central piece on a pedestal with the other artworks displayed on a wall akin to an in-home photo gallery.

My most precious piece will compare the likeness of myself and my granny Bea. Using reproductions of her homegoing program to fill the space and add texture to a somewhat abstracted depiction of her face. On the opposite half, I would weave images of the two us to illustrate an eternal connection I feel. Lastly, I will incorporate texture cascading down the canvas to reference tears and the song lyrics that were sung at her funeral to layer on the background.

To address the latter inquiry, I will jot notes, make tutorials, and research applicable standard parallels as I work to keep track of ideas that emerge for my classroom instruction from my process of art-making. Further elaboration of these findings will be shared in the following chapter. I anticipate completing this thesis project in summer semester, 2017. Due to the personal nature of my artwork, I do not anticipate attaining assignments with strict parameters for my students to generate copycat images with congruent themes, but rather, to discover strategies that might be
appropriate to introduce the concept of using visual art to process their own emotions and experiences. Ideally, through their learning and activities provided as a result of my artistic explorations, they will enhance their comprehension of the meaning-making process. This can be achieved via lessons with active learning using kinesthetic, visual modalities, creating opportunities for dialogue and fostering creativity (White, 2009, p. 76). This work is not intended to be generic; instead, I am keeping my school’s specific student population in mind. My school’s demographic consists of a large minority population which is namely Black or African-American. While we are a public charter, we have a fair amount of students that receive free and reduced lunch. Additionally, many students are being reared in broken homes. Most students have not had Visual Arts in years and will be given the opportunity as an elective in Fall 2017.

From the inception of this particular collection of work, I was pulled to 2 things: my “abuelita paterna” (Bea Bea), reflecting on memories from the past, and family artifacts in the form of handwritten notes and pictures. I used tracing paper, physical arranging of materials, digital sketching and rough thumbnails in a sketchbook to work out my ideas. These helped me determine material choice and color images provide inspiration for color choice (if outside the neutral palette).

3.1 DEFINITIONS

Mixed-media -- a term used to describe artworks composed from a combination of different media or materials

Collage --- the technique and the resulting work of art in which photographs, paper, fabric and other ephemera are arranged and adhered to a surface
(African) **diaspora**-- In relation to art, the term is used to discuss artists who have migrated from one part of the world to another, (or whose families have), and who express their diverse experiences of culture and identity in the work they make; often expressing alternative narratives, and challenging the ideas and structures of the established art world.

**Assemblage** --- art that is made by assembling disparate elements – often everyday objects – scavenged by the artist or bought specially

**Impasto** -- refers to an area of thick paint or texture, in a painting

In the following chapters, I will continue to elaborate on my personal process by sharing and describing the work I planned. It will exhibit my growth throughout, successes and failures, how I relate it to the artists who inspire me, a glimpse into my mind via reflections, and implications for my classroom.
The process of compiling this body of work essentially commenced prior to applying for college in 2003. My interest in art had been fostered for over a decade. Tactile qualities associated with charcoals, pastels, pencils, and paints bestowed a sense of solace since childhood. As adults our skill levels elevate – but to familiar materials we often will still gravitate toward. In the past, I was always drawn to items reliant on a direct human touch (possibly due to my affinity to fictional archaeologist Dr. Indiana Jones). I imagined handwritten letters and photographs as priceless artifacts with history and complex stories cryptically locked inside; waiting for discovery.

Consequently, I have kept mail I received dating back over a decade’s time (Figure 6). Use of these materials for creating my artwork turned into a dance whilst pinpointing a pleasing configuration that resulted in satisfying visual poetry (to me). I relied on 21st century technology, as well as traditional methods to help create sketches for visual representation of my inner musings. Each time a great idea arose I would quickly type it within my phone’s notes, which often resulted in confusion when I attempted to revisit and decipher my shorthand attempts. Such moments almost made me wonder if this was a slight congruence to how a person with dementia or Alzheimer’s may feel when trying to read or write as their mind deteriorates.
Lacking easy access to large format cameras and wanting to juxtapose older images with modern images (digital files) − I employed Photoshop™ to merge digital double exposures and composites (Figure 7). Additionally, song lyrics, scripture, and beautiful prose acted as catalysts for many of my ideas. In particular, Bill Wither’s Grandma’s Hands resonated, as it was the composition I listened to repeatedly once my paternal grandmother’s death was confirmed. I contemplated every detail about her as I sat alone that 2008 morning digesting the awful realization that I would never breathe the same air as her again. Thoughts spurned a list of each tangible item I felt reflected my memories of her. Later, these became the signature motifs that were duplicated digitally or in drawings throughout my artworks. While I have now experienced several meaningful losses in my family, my paternal granny is easily the most significant (and the first). Hence she has influenced an overarching theme for the pieces that comprise the body for this thesis. Handwritten cards or notes were incorporated via various transfer methods learned during the research process, using copies (keeping the original mementos intact for sentimental purposes).
One of the first mixed-media pieces on canvas was a repeated image of my Granny with the biggest smile on her face. It is appropriated from one of the few images I have ever seen of my grandmother and grandfather. He died 20 years to the day before her (from complications associated with Crohn’s). I think not knowing him, made me cherish my grandmother that much more. I wanted to treat her image with the utmost respect and drew several sketches on tracing paper before even touching the canvas (Figure 8).

*Figure 7 Digital composite (L-R) Mary Beatrice & WhtnyMchll (2012)*

*Figure 8 Shine On BeaBea sketches, 9x12” (2011)*
Once satisfied, I began a light wash with red paint (Figure 9). I think I was unconsciously inspired by the color used in Weems’ work that I had recently viewed and the hint of red in her sweater from the original photograph I was working from. Considering it was one of the first pieces I made under the instruction of Timothy Flowers during Saturday classes; I am a bit surprised how much I like it and have nothing further I desire to change. I will admit that in 2017, about 6 years after I started it, I went back and added a bit of texture and blackness to the central image to make it more of a focal point.

Notes and sketches assisted in dedicating where to place particular scrawlings. Provided that I relied on an image transfer or traced from a manipulated digital image –

*Figure 9 Shine Down Bea Bea (2011)*
the intimidation of a blank substrate dissipated. Aforementioned notes were also crucial to constructing works that consisted of ink, charcoal, and spray paint being applied to digital inkjet prints. One 21st century tool that was helpful is Pinterest. The website that acts as a digital vision board was a solid reference that I frequented while working. As mentioned previously, a blank canvas can instigate a blank stare. There is a wealth of information regarding visual journals, mixed-media technique, and thousands of beautiful finished examples that invigorate my eagerness to assemble new work. This resource helped alleviate some anxiety of where to start and was a lovely springboard for learning new methods. Once the permanence of India ink was applied, there was no reversal and preplanning with optics was essential. My palette remained strongly muted with earthy neutral tones emitting a sense of somberness. Inside (Joseph) Cornell-like shadow boxes, organic materials used succumbed to the elements and deteriorated illustrating a sense of time and mortality (Figure 10). The ephemera enclosed bringing the biblical passage to mind:

“and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it” (Ecclesiastes 12:7).

While the organic components faded, the symbolic rock housed to the bottom right remains intact. My grandmother was my foundation, and congruent to rocks used in Judaism to acknowledge the memory and lasting presence of the deceased; I use this body of work to preserve my memories of her. Each box was somewhat representative of an ofrenda. Contrary to día de los muertos (day of the dead) traditions, my ofrendas are dark displaying loss of life. Fragmented papers, samples of letters with jagged edges are akin to brush strokes; and
duplicate pictures portray cyclical inner turmoil as if to display a visual interpretations of my private thoughts. All are equally indicative of attempts to heal emotional scars.

Portions of the first shadow box reveal cursive script in what I surmise is the last letter I received from her when I was in undergraduate school. The visible words state, “Dear Whitney, you have to adjust..” I find letters and photographs beautiful family artifacts that manage to freeze time. A significant feeling overwhelms me when I set my eyes on the familiar loops and lines indicative of a certain loved one’s penmanship. Minute idiosyncrasies a reminder of each unique personality trait.

My goal for this piece Mary Bea: From Grandma’s Hands (Figure 11) was to incite introspection and remind others to cherish each moment, word, and memory for as long as possible. There is a certain intimacy with the hand drawn items and the process was cathartic as the pastels caressed the paper.
I felt I was making a connection that extended beyond this realm and in those moments I could feel my granny’s gaze upon me, and the warmth of her aura surrounding me. Those instances made the production rewarding and draining (emotionally) at the same time. A sense of timidity overwhelmed me in my attempts to manifest my ideas onto the canvas; harboring a deep desire to make this culminating collaboration ‘perfect’ because she deserves it. Viewers may initially interpret each piece as a memento mori. In actuality, for me, it is a way to recall precious priceless moments and the strong stock I come from. *Because You Were* began based on an earlier digital composite (see Figure 8). It shows the uncanny resemblance between myself and “Bea Bea.” and myself. This was by far the hardest canvas to orchestrate (Figure 12). Throughout my journey, although the work could be seen conversely, I was in a state of euphoria creating it.
There was a somber sense of finality as I arranged the papers, traced the lines, and wrote faintly with dimensional paint on the surface. As I forged on, it was as if a leaky faucet’s washer became dislodged; my eyes welled up and were washed with tears. My soul and my heart began to ache. A bittersweet saline solution signifying joy, pride, and a tinge of pain trickled across the curvature of my naturally plump lips. The salty taste on the tip of my tongue bringing me back to the day when she was freed from her suffering and left behind progeny to continue her story. Days go by and thoughts continually travel to that sincere Southern spitfire that molded much of who I am in life. I now choose to assemble ingredients in the fashion that my beloved granny would in her ‘studio’ – the kitchen or in the sitting room at her cast iron wooden stove. Employing methods learned from my studies of Louise Nevelson, I assembled fragments on the canvas. Redefining, reusing, and redesigning the meanings of items identified as junk to the average person. A few pieces strategically obscure the slightly abstracted...
faces drawn. Puzzle pieces of various and sundry sizes were considered to add a recognizable shape and texture to the relatively flat surface plane. Outside of their normal formation, I recontextualized them to convey memory that ceased to fit together or make rational sense. I pondered the use of antiquated floppy disks at the bottom to provide visual weight and represent a brain that’s disks are “full” and no more information can be stored. Furthermore, like a brain effected by Alzheimer’s the disks are obsolete and can no longer be used as they were originally intended. To pull all of the contrasting elements together; a matte white was planned to unify the contrasting shapes, sizes, and surface textures. Reminiscent of the fog created as the disease progresses and the brain functions decline and deciphering simple nuances becomes a challenge. Unfortunately, regardless of new sketches and various arrangements,

*Figure 13 Revisited sketch of Because You Were, 22x28”, (2017)*
I could not find a configuration that seemed to fit. With this in mind, I abandoned this work (Figure 13) with hopes to have a future epiphany that can incite a fresh perspective to drive completion of it.

In spite of that setback, the aforementioned puzzle pieces seemed too great of an idea to relinquish. For this reason I came up with another plan using the composite. This time, I did not project, but printed the image in black and white. I chose to remove color for two reasons; the image of Granny was not in color and I did not want the chroma to become an undue distraction. Next, I traced the absent puzzle pieces on the back of the image and cut it apart. I selectively placed a fraction of the image on the puzzle board. Where the image is incomplete are still the organic contours that show an obvious void as a metaphor to memory loss. This was further reinforced with Alzheimer's particularly in mind and pieces that were the incorrect adhered to the surface. Fragments and paint shroud the viewer from seeing the primary surface, yet enough is visible to draw one into looking more closely looking for more (Figure 14). The piercing eyes are keenly unobscured and seem to be gazing directly into you. Although this was born from a ‘failed’ idea, it has become one of my favorite pieces from the collection. The lovely delicate textures, the formal qualities from implied line to shape, and the strong resemblance noticeable using very little of the original image is a solid representation of what I often lack in words. On the upper corner is a date that was taken from her nameplate using primitive printmaking techniques. Crayons and oil pastels were brought to the memorial park, but I surprisingly found that oil pastels were far more suitable for the task. I literally obtained a blister transferring the information (when using crayons) and tears were shed digesting that her Earthly vessel was mere feet below me.
However, the sadness was mitigated considering the moment as another memory with her as a pseudo participant in the final work and that through me – she lives. During the production, the feeling of the paint and oil pastel on my skin and sticking to my fingers was pleasing. Direct contact with media contributes to an unmistakable sensation of satisfaction and a catharsis from the pressures of intellectualizing (Britain & Lowenfeld, 1975, p. 34).
In light of this, I was pulled back to shadow boxing. On this occasion, I wanted to arrange something on a grander scale than I had previously done. After some reconnaissance at the local arts and crafts store, I decided upon a moderately deep 16x10” shadow box. My original plans included the use of recycled computer packaging as shelves inside, peppermint like she carried in her purse at church, and seeds of vegetables she used to garden. I was disappointed to discover that my non-mathematical approach resulted in an inaccurate estimation of the depth. For this reason, I had to revamp my plan. Instead of scribbling a new design, I used the previous ideas and literally moved items about to test various compositions. There was some difficulty in that I did not have shelves to affix the artifacts inside. I was limited to small pins and felt glue would not be sufficient. Carefully, I placed items on the back and periodically reconstructed the box to verify each item fit inside. The small skillet gave me a bit of trouble and was too heavy to be glued or pin. It is a very important part of the overall poetic theater because cooking was an important aspect of Bea Bea’s life. In fact, it was a way she showed her love for the family as matriarch. Using a projector and transparency, I transferred her distinct handwriting on the backing. I am grateful for having kept those notes and cards. Once the cards ceased coming, realization of the terrible disease that is Alzheimer’s was unavoidable. Archiving them within a shadow box gives me an opportunity to look back at the lucid times daily and preserve those moments in my history (Figure 15).
LYVM was a critical moment in my process and I regained my confidence. The idea of Bea Bea being with me was increasingly felt when I included dirt from her final resting place in the box, an artificial flower from the vase there, and a handkerchief (like she often had in her possession) with rubbings from the low relief sculpture that is her grave’s nameplate. Feathers found around the site are also a metaphor for the hymn written in 1929 “I’ll Fly Away.” It reminds me of the doves released that day in 2008 and the anguish across all faces as the coffin was lowered and my cousin Kenya wept.

In contrast, I came across a small mantle clock that had stopped, and decided on a far more intimate scale ‘shadow box’ next. The idea of stoppage time in life resonated with me. In the film Fried Green Tomatoes, a mother and woman of faith passed away.
Similar to Granny, she was aware of her diagnosis and fought for as long as possible for those around her. Eventually, the character goes on to glory and the nanny stops all the clocks and covers them. That idea of how they recorded a passing in the past was the impetus for this piece (Figure 16). Instead of stopping the clock at the minute and hour she died, I placed the time at 2:15 since she died on February 15th. A small cross is hung on the second hand as a representation that she is now with Him. Film with broken film perforations to reference the double exposure mentioned regarding how Alzheimer’s effects the memory. Lastly, the words “her” and “me” are reversed as I feel that I am a reflection of her. Again, if one looks closely, the composite exhibiting the strong genetics

*Figure 16 tcelfeR (2017)*
through our similar facial structure is inside. By using certain items repeatedly, I felt it would make each piece seem more cohesive to the entire collection.

In 215 (Figure 17) and Grateful BCross She Was (Figure 18), I used a similar palette yet drastically different scales. They are not meant to be considered a diptych, but I based Grateful on 215 because I was quite pleased with the results and hoped the replicate a similar aesthetic. I found out that the greatest challenge was the gross difference in scale. Large format canvases require me to physically step away to fully capture the whole. I mimicked the sewing and took it to a different level and added some transparency (literally) to the canvas. The image on the transparency is the first family reunion and my grandmother is hidden amongst the kids at a mere 10 years of age. Similar to the motivation of works by Saar, Bailey, and Weems, I too wanted to

*Figure 17. 215, 8x10" (2009)*
incorporate my heritage. Repeating the use of Granny’s cursive, I projected her expression of love to me at the top. Both *Grateful* and *215* use minimal words (in ratio to their scale). Using Pinterest inspiration. I relied on the black out poetry technique to key in on specific words within the book of Ecclesiastes. Coincidentally, when I stepped back and photographed the work I noticed an unintentional cross hidden inside. It was reassuring
and comforting to think that God is surrounding me with high hopes that Granny Bea Bea is gazing down.

Lastly, I stumbled upon an image on Pinterest that piqued my interest tenfold. There was a picture of portraits beautifully woven together to create a brand new image. Upon further investigation, I found the artist is Greg Sand and the manipulations are a response to his thoughts on family, memory and loss. It was a serendipitous moment to happen upon such amazing work. Having had previously created a composite that is present throughout my collection, I was motivated to construct my final piece. Thus, I printed my grandmother’s image from her twenties, and my self-portrait from my twenties. After carefully examining Sand’s woven portraits, I felt that for an 8x10” portrait, I should measure ½ “strips. My Granny’s portrait I cut vertically and my self-portrait horizontally. Then I painstakingly intertwined the two. The new composite (Figure 19) was not sufficient and I decided to create a triptych using canvas. While the

![Image of Woven Remnants (2017)](image)

*Figure 19 Woven Remnants (2017)*
portrait fit on the 2 canvases, I had my eyes left over and using the rule-of-thirds, I placed them slightly off center with pulled scripture from the 23rd Psalm and Ecclesiastes 3:11. The prior addresses death in a poetic way and the latter that “everything is perfect in His time.” Inexplicable peace washed over my entire being and I am eager to display the work in my home.

The journey has been challenging, but not without great reward in emotional release, but also in productivity. Great comfort was found and I have found more peace from these exercises than any session with my therapists. It gives me new hope that I can create chaos in my living room as a maker space, and finish knowing I will end with a sentiment comparable to the endorphins released when I won a soccer game. This collection is a mere beginning to continued examination in self, family, and peace. In the final chapter, I will reflect on my inquiries, the outcomes, and insight for the future.
5 REFLECTIONS

The studio quickly became a stifling scene where I could not gain a sense of comfort to expose my true feelings on canvas. Which brings me back to revisit my first inquiry; “How might mixed media art-making serve as an expressive tool for me to process and manage various emotional states as well as experiences of loss or trauma?”

While it has been an exceptionally trying experience that has pushed me greatly beyond my comfort zone, I feel that my growth as an educator and as artist is immense. The dried paint on my body, the pastel dust on my pants and fingertips evoked a sensory perception that was therapeutic. Carefully arranging, and rearranging items on a variety of sources activated endorphins that resulted in a genuine feeling of satisfaction. Painting has long been seen as the most expressive form of art (Britain & Lowenfeld, 1975, p. 352). Not only did I educate myself, I have gained a new skillset to share with my students by joining my love of photography and more interactive methods of creating art. I believe if I continue to produce art frequently it will help satiate the uneasiness inside me and improve my quality of life by providing a valuable outlet for stress.

Solace was unearthed by working independently; allowing me to confront many a psychological demon that no licensed therapist has been able to expel. I reinvigorated my passion for viewing, appreciating, and living in the moment whilst exploring this artistic process. Ironically my evolution as an artist hinged on a return to my foundational skills that I had ascertained as a youth.

Permitting myself to create distance from my normal was liberating. The self-directed philosophy was fruitful and I intend to bestow that confidence within my students through my newfound art education outlook. A new openness to a much wider
variety of materials and application methods has enhanced my ability to teach and reach pupils. Ignoring stressful societal conventions, I became informed about ethnic artists with an uncannily similar aesthetic and epistemology. The vulnerability I showed has released my voice and banished previous fears of failure.

5.1 Material Exploration

I have devised through my findings from exploring mixed-media, a path I would like to use for my school’s inaugural year of Visual Arts. Traditional approaches will be employed to show students how to safely and properly use materials. The first days will be used an introductory survey of visual arts. There are 18 weeks in a semester, and of those students will spend at least 3 to learn, explore, and investigate use a wide variety of media. Cross-curricular connections will be encouraged by asking pupils to record their own findings along the way. Ideally, this will be the beginning stages of building a personal aesthetic and work flow. Their evaluations will be observational and informal. The goal of such exercises are to foster confidence in using supplies and honing technique for more in depth work as they move forward.

5.2 Visual Journals and Composition

After their hands-on experimentation, they will choose a passion or topic to explore via a visual journal. Journals will act as a place for them to experiment artistically and express themselves. All will strongly be encouraged to incorporate a variety of media on each page. Periodically, they will meet with their instructor (me) to discuss their findings. If they are comfortable, they will present their research to the class in a supportive and safe environment I plan to foster. Similarly, I will work alongside them and allow them to witness me as not just teacher, but fellow artist. Along
with material exploration, students will be challenged to find artists with similar aesthetics and motivations. All of which will include kinesthetic activities. The senses should be a deliberate part of the educative process, heightening awareness and promoting a greater chance for learning (Britain & Lowenfeld, 1975 p. 6). By utilizing journals, hands-on explorations and multi-sensory processes, I think my art program will be structured for nurturing creative problem-solving and meaningful experiences.

Specific assignments will be provided to assist in composition. Initially, there will be deliberate limitations so that students do not become unduly overwhelmed. Art History will be incorporated so that adequate discussion and understanding of traditional compositions can be evaluated. Basic design principles will be introduced via Molly Bang’s text, Picture This: How Pictures Work which expertly exhibits the elements of principles of design with references to common books from children’s literature. Additionally, I will incorporate the 5 tips delineated in the art blog Cloth Paper Scissors to extend the idea into their journals. Author CateP (2012), provides the following suggestions for stronger compositions:

1. Limit the palette
2. When faced with a flat surface, add layers
3. Use odd numbers to add heightened visual interest
4. Include typography for a layer of information and mystery
5. Step back

I find these tips helpful and a way of facilitating without fear of my young artists attempting to create a carbon copy of my personal work. Nonetheless, I will selectively share my work and provide ample demonstrations. Since integrating technology is also being pushed within schools, I may record tutorials for home access.
Visual verbal journals will house their research of artists that pique their interest, act as a parking lot for potential artworks, a place to jot notes, and a substrate to showcase new ideas or media combinations.

5.3 Meaning Making & Metaphors

Inevitably, the idea of identity will come about in secondary art education and I plan to meet the students where they are. Building meaningful lessons about pop culture and multiculturalism will be an integral vehicle for doing so. Kickasso, Banksy, fashion and album covers are a fantastic place to start these conversations. This teaching style is intended to evoke ideas that students may have not investigated and have trouble verbalizing, yet they carry around like a weight every day.

By allowing students to spill their sentiments across the pages of their journal, it will inherently become personal as they progress as a person and artist. One way of nurturing this will again be facilitated by assignments. I am cognizant that without direction it is common for students to stray or become reluctant to start. The first few pages will be experimentation. Through art history references, students will be educated on how artists use sketches and writing prior to producing final work. In order to further engage the students, they will view preliminary sketches by notable figures authors/illustrators, inventors, shoe and apparel designers. Making note that the famous figures typically drew what they were passionate about, students will be given the task of creating their own personal connections. At first, students will brain storm and write a page of words that they feel describe or ‘define’ who they are. From this they will produce a page using a selected word from the previous page. Later they will move to depicting that word through symbols.
As I reflected on my work, I discovered that in almost every piece was a metaphor. Literary devices are introduced in literature courses, but I want to assist in showing students that those devices can be illustrated. First I would use music lyrics as an activator and lead a discussion on figurative language. I anticipate the real-world connection may show students the importance of understanding the concept. Then, using a game from The Art of Ed’s website I would introduce symbolism to bridge the gap between visual art and metaphor. Finally, as a culminating project, students would complete the ‘Meaningful Metaphors’ from theartofed.com to bring everything full circle.

5.4 Assessment

Most of the student assessment up to this point is informal and strictly observational. At the close of the semester, students will be charged with the task of creating a book as a form of authentic summative assessment. This lesson is also a great find from The Art of Ed and includes a rough rubric that students can use at they create their final book. There would be weeks and in-progress critiques along the way to circumvent any issues that may arise during the process. Although each student will have the same assignment, each will be unique because they choose specific units that were taught to revisit. Every page is dedicated to previous learning and allows students to showcase their strengths. Debi West, the lesson designer, does not use a significant written aspect to her instruction. I would certainly like to challenge by students further and require a pseudo miniature thesis to articulate their process and conclusions.
5.5 Conclusion

Art educators must be multifaceted and fearless as teachers, mentors, facilitators, and pseudo therapists. I have managed to locate a few artists that truly light a fire inside (of me). However, with newfound tools and talents, I envision I will be teaching some of my favorite artists very soon. I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the importance of those that came before me. I stand tall because of who they were. Sometimes who we become is dependent on embracing who we used to be. I sincerely look up to many of my former teachers and realize what a profound influence they have had. Redesigned, rearranged, and unashamed; the journey continues as those same tiny toes (now wearing a size ten shoe) traverse multiple surfaces to liberate the voices of her learners. No longer am I a prisoner of strict assignments, but I am an architect of my own artistic development. If I can be that same sense of strength and beacon of hope to others, I feel I will have truly succeeded. Now I possess the power. In closing, I am reminded that some have declared, “the pen is mightier than the sword.” That makes me wonder—have those individuals ever been handed a paintbrush?
REFERENCES


