

STICKY FEELINGS, LIKE VELCRO

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Abstract

This paper is written to accompany my MFA thesis exhibition, *An object thick with presence (the presence of an absence)*, which took place April 14 - 17, 2025 at Special Projects Gallery (York University). The work included in this exhibition is informed by my sticky experiences with family photographs—experiences that situate me as what writer and scholar Sara Ahmed calls an “affect-alien,” a feminist killjoy, and unhappy queer. The exhibition consists of reworked images gleaned from my family albums, ceramic objects, and various photo-installation strategies in an effort to work on, with, and against the structure of the family album in order to imbue it with new meaning. The aim of this paper, “Sticky feelings, like velcro,” is to make sense of and contextualize my inclinations in making through an explanation of and grounding in queer and intersectional feminist theory and practices, alongside personal auto theoretical anecdotes. How do images from my personal archives—ones that I hold so much affection for, but do not *feel* myself reflected in—register? How can I work in tandem *with* these images to claim space and agency? My thesis exhibition and this accompanying support paper use these questions as a springboard to look up and back, as well as forward and onward.

Acknowledgements, or *The bricks that form this dwelling*

In *Living a Feminist Life* (2017), writer and scholar Sara Ahmed states that, “citations can be feminist bricks: they are the materials through which, from which, we create our dwellings.”¹ I would like to extend this thinking to acknowledgements and dedications: to the people and places that have sustained me over the course of the past two years, through which and from which, I have been able to think, feel, write, and make.

The thinking and research that formulate this paper are rooted in queer and intersectional feminist frameworks.² In *Dear Science and Other Short Stories*, Katherine McKittrick writes that in observing how we arrange, rearrange, and gather ideas outside of ourselves, it is necessary for us to consider how those “ideas are bound up in stories, research, [and] inquiries that we do not (or should not claim) we own.”³ As a white settler living and working on Turtle Island, it is crucial for me to acknowledge that I am indebted to the rigorous and thoughtful work of feminist, queer, and antiracist artists, activists, and scholars, specifically women of colour and trans folks—bell hooks, Jack Halberstam, Judith Butler, Leslie Hewitt, Tina M. Campt, and so many more. It is only through their critical and engaging work that I am able to situate myself within a larger community, work through my own inquiries, build upon, and add to these frameworks. Notions of citation, annotation, and translation as intergenerational feminist practices are crucial to both my writing and making. I seek to activate and add to these strategies as a way of engaging with “feminist practices and feminist knowledges from the past and in the present moment.”⁴

¹ Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 16.

² For more on Intersectional Feminism, see Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics [1989],” in *Feminist Legal Theory: Readings in Law and Gender*, ed. Rosanne Kennedy and Katherine Bartlett, 2018, 57–80.

³ Katherine McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Short Stories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 15.

⁴ Gabrielle Moser and Helena Reckitt, “Feminist Tactics of Citation, Annotation, and Translation: Reflections on the Now You Can Go Programme,” *On.Curating: Curating in Feminist Thought*, no. 29 (2016), 42–48.

As a person of settler-colonial, European descent, it is critical for me to acknowledge that the lands on which I exist are the unceded, traditional, and ancestral territories of many nations, including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishinaabek, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, and the Huron-Wendat, and subject to the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant. While not directly about land, my thesis work and graduate experience have largely been shaped by the spaces I have been fortunate enough to work in and from. For the majority of my life, I have lived and worked in the area known as Tkaronto/Toronto and my current studio is located on York University's Keele campus. Tkaronto is a Mohawk word meaning, "the place in the water where the trees are standing."⁵ As I write this, just outside of my studio, the magnolia trees are blooming, the sun is shining, and I am contending with the fact that, in my final semester, the institution granting me my graduate degree has also suspended eighteen degree programs, including Indigenous Studies—a crucial program that prioritizes Indigenous knowledge, critical dialogue, and informed and responsible citizenship.⁶ I am incredibly grateful for the time I have had in the past two years to make work, immerse myself in research, and grow as an artist and I acknowledge that so much of this stems from a place of deep privilege. I recognize my responsibility to not be complicit or stay silent in relation to the on-going injustices facing Indigenous people—across Turtle Island and elsewhere—and I am deeply committed to interrogating my position in relation to colonialism and furthering my engagement with anti-capitalist, decolonial discourse and action.

In her virtual address to the 2020 graduating students of Harvard University's Graduate School of Design, artist, writer, and educator Jenny Odell said that, even if you have "what looks like a highly solitary [practice], appreciate how much of your thinking happens in conversations with others, in encounters with unexpected ideas and situations."⁷ So much of the thinking and making that I have done in the last two years would not have been possible without the *many*

⁵ *Land Acknowledgements: Uncovering an Oral History of Tkaronto*, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=voXySM-knRc&ab_channel=LocalLoveMagazine.

⁶ Indigenous Studies Faculty at York University, "Indigenous Studies Faculty Response to York's Suspension of Their Program," February 20, 2025, <https://wgsj.ca/2025/02/21/indigenous-studies-faculty-response-to-yorks-suspension-of-their-program/>.

⁷ Jenny Odell, *Inhabiting the Negative Space* (Cambridge and Berlin: Harvard University Graduate School of Design and Sternberg Press, 2021), 71.

conversations I have had with friends, family, peers, and mentors. I want to acknowledge as many of these moments—whether fleeting or prolonged, planned or spontaneous—as I can.

I have had the immense privilege of making this artwork and writing this paper with guidance from the most uplifting, generous, generative, and incredibly smart and talented thesis committee. Thank you to Jessica Campbell, Dr. Marissa Largo, and Dr. Gabrielle Moser for your critical insight, rigorous feedback, and unwavering support. Thank you to all of the faculty members, artists, writers, and peers that have taken the time to sit in the studio with me, engage in meaningful conversation, and provide me with the space to ask questions. Thank you to Sara Knelman and Erika DeFreitas for their generous support at the beginning of this process, as well as throughout. Thank you to Robyn Cumming for so much more than I can sufficiently put into words; for providing me with immeasurable guidance, advice, and resources over the past ten years; for opportunities and feedback that have allowed me to grow as an artist and arts instructor; for being a staunch example of what a thoughtful, attentive, and caring artist and educator looks like.

To my Zoom art group—Ailene deVries, Erika DeFreitas, Fehn Foss, Julia Nemfield—for co-creating a nurturing and supportive virtual space where ideas, thoughts, and feelings could be shared. To Fehn for many things over the last few years: from working alongside one another in that shared Corso Italia basement, to campus tours and studio visits. Your insight and thoughtfulness as an artist, writer, and friend are deeply appreciated. To my family for recording everything, being the stewards of our albums, and for allowing me to spend time with and make work in response to these wonderful objects. To my siblings, Sabrina and Daniel, for their consistent and constant support. To my dad, Roberto, for nurturing my love of photography—whose 35mm Nikon FG I now use to create my own albums. And, finally, to my mom, Mary: for teaching me through example how to move through life with care, consideration, and integrity. I would not have reached this point without you.

The last two years have been challenging for many reasons and I would not have been able to work through them alone. It has been a privilege to complete this degree alongside a cohort of

smart and talented artists, and I am especially grateful for the long-lasting friendships we have cultivated. I would like to give a final thank you to my friend and peer, Jules D. Mills. A lovely summer spent in the ceramics studio is what kept me going, and nearly two years of being studio mates—thinking out loud, sharing books, sharing heavy moments, supporting one another, and making weird and wonderful things—has made this experience that much more worthwhile.

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Introduction, or *Where do I go from here?*¹

Let us rewind and zoom out to twenty years ago. A ten-year old version of myself is sitting on a well-worn green leather couch at some family function (of which, there are many), surrounded by close and extended family members (of which, there are also many). Family photo albums are being passed around and flipped through, people are laughing and pointing to images with fondness, joy, and faux horror. The crinkle of someone's finger catching on a plastic sleeve sounds off like an exclamation point in the middle of a run-on sentence. When the album comes to me, I hold it heavy in my hands like an encyclopaedia, or perhaps a sort of index—a visual index—trying to tell me something. Both its warmth and weight are palpable, as are the feelings of simultaneous excitement, anxiety, apprehension, and dread that swell in my chest as I am about to take my turn at flipping through the album's pages (Fig. 1).

This porous recounting of a memory is not a single memory, but a compilation of many, very similar memories that have produced many, very similar feelings—intense, unformed, unstructured, non-conscious, affect-laden experiences.² I am incredibly fortunate that I come from a family that obsessively photographs, prints, and circulates images that capture and preserve the most monumental of moments to the utterly boring and mundane—from formally posed and tensely staged portraits chronicling milestones, to snapshots of indiscernible yet salient moments: split-seconds that inform years to come. These images, along with the memories and haptic experiences they produce, leave me feeling conflicted; “they are photographs that affect me and images in which I see [and don’t see] a multitude of things.”³

¹ During a recent Artist Talk presented by Lan Yee in a Graduate Seminar class, Yee articulated that at the beginning of a project, they frequently pose a question to themselves, one that often cannot be answered. In 2024, when applying for funding that would assist in producing this body of work, I had a hard time articulating a cogent and quantifiable research-creation question. How could I justify funding my feelings? In writing this paper, I think about Yee, their practice, and the importance of questioning, as well as making work that does not seek to provide answers. Over the past two years, the question I have most often posed to myself is: *Where do I go from here?*

² Tina M. Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 16.

³ Tina M. Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 40.

When I look at these images, I should feel an intrinsic sense of belonging. I should be able to see myself in the pages of the album and feel firmly rooted in what looks back at me. Instead, what I am confronted by are sticky feelings—hard to point to, impossible to digest—and an inability to locate myself as a queer person anywhere other than in the periphery. These objects and the images contained therein present themselves to me as sites of “anxious disidentification” and implicate me as what Elspeth H. Brown and Sara Davimann have termed *an archival queer*—a body that does not fit into the archival space that it is meant to belong to.⁴ What I am left to contend with are images that have a deep, affective impact on me and elusive, slippery feelings that I am unable to resolve. *Where do I go from here?*

⁴ Elspeth H. Brown and Sara Davidmann, “Queering the Trans* Family Album: Elspeth H. Brown and Sara Davidmann, in Conversation,” *Radical History Review* 2015, no. 122 (May 2015): 190.



Figure 1: Alessandra Abballe, 2024. Family photographs on the floor of my grandparents' house.

Prompted by these ambivalent experiences of affect and the feelings they engender—grief (*adjusting to a loss for a thing I never had*), disconnect (*an inability to point to something and say definitively: I belong here*), longing (*a strong desire for something that feels unattainable*)—my thesis work, *An object thick with presence (the presence of an absence)*, and this accompanying support paper, “Sticky feelings, like velcro,” considers family albums as significant, affective, conflicting, and inherently exclusionary sites of disidentification.⁵ As I have come to understand them, vernacular images are affective and pernicious objects capable of moving some to feelings of familiarity and belonging, while cultivating a sense of absence in others. They are ordinary and reiterative artifactual objects that play an integral role in relation to identity formation and memory. In his influential work, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999), Cuban-American academic José Esteban Muñoz writes that a disidentifying subject is someone “who tactically and simultaneously works on, with, and against a cultural form...[in order to] hold on to [the] object and invest it with new life.”⁶ Through slow, prolonged, and intentional engagement with photographs gleaned from my family albums, alongside material research and embodied creation methodologies, my artwork and writing explores the role of affect in the process of research and making, and looks to work on, with, and against the structure of the family album in an effort to imbue it with new meaning. How do images derived from my personal archives—ones that I hold so much affection for, but do not *feel* myself reflected in—register? How can I work in tandem *with* these images to claim space and agency? In their 2013 conversation, artist Tammy Rae Carland and scholar Ann Cvetkovich write that, “unless we do radical kinds of recovery work around archives, and also grapple with profoundly absent archives by acknowledging missing lives and *missing feelings*, we can't move forward.”⁷ My thesis work situates itself within these uneasy tensions and the uncertainties of what is missing.

⁵ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 12.

⁶ Muñoz, 12.

⁷ Emphasis added. Tammy Rae Carland and Ann Cvetkovich, “Sharing an Archive of Feelings: A Conversation,” *Art Journal* 72, no. 2 (2013), 76.

The impelling forces behind this work are my feelings of being rejected by something that I am meant to feel I belong to, or perhaps more importantly, that I *want* to feel I belong to. In the early days of this inquiry—at the start of my MFA degree at York University—I struggled to locate and position myself in relation to my family albums. I was told to omit the elusive feelings previously mentioned and instead be more specific about what it is in the family albums that generate my feelings of non-belonging.⁸ If we read between the lines, what was really being asked of me was to distill and define the terms of my queerness in an easily digestible and legible way, to point out what it is in the album that I do or do not see in relation to my identity. *Tell me, because I don't see it.*⁹ In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam writes that “legibility [is] the favored technique of high modernism for sorting, organizing, and profiting...”¹⁰ He goes on to argue that what the refusal of legibility and the pursuit of queer studies might be able to offer us is the space to create and contemplate “alternatives to hegemonic systems...”¹¹ My thesis work and this accompanying support paper reject notions of queer legibility and easy digestibility. I am far more interested in exploring the complex, fertile, and muddy grounds that refusal, illegibility, and ambiguity as aesthetic praxis can offer. I am not interested in using research-creation as a methodology that seeks to, “describe, explain, or solve problems, [but rather] as an event that creates concepts that problematize.”¹² Through the obfuscating visual tactics I employ in my art making, images derived from my family albums can begin to be read within the scope of alternative understandings.

This paper discusses how I came to make the work that comprises my thesis exhibition, my approach to making, and provides a formal description of the work itself. The past two years have by and large been a practice of acting on intuition—attuning myself to a hunch, an inkling,

⁸ In previous writing, when trying to identify my feelings, I was told to omit the use of *grief*, *disconnect*, and *longing* as being too elusive and, subsequently, invalid. I include them here for exactly this reason. These leaky and sticky feelings *elude* me and it is through the creation of this work that I try to make sense of them.

⁹ After that Zoom meeting, I had again experienced a rejection by something that I wanted to feel I belonged to.

¹⁰ Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 9.

¹¹ Halberstam, 88-89.

¹² Stephanie Springgay, *Feltness: Research-Creation, Socially Engaged Art, and Affective Pedagogies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), 17.

a suspicion in response to feelings, thoughts, questions, or material. Process and material are integral accomplices in my practice and while I am always initially drawn to photography and images, the question of why I engage with a particular material or source image is central to my work. The aim of this paper is to make sense of and contextualize those inclinations through an exploration of and grounding in queer and intersectional feminist theory and practices, alongside personal autotheoretical anecdotes. Citations, footnotes, and what exists on the margins then become key components of my work and writing. Citations become crucial in acknowledging who my work references, “as well as part of a broader understanding of where [I] put [my] energy.”¹³ In her double-stranded fiction novel, *Threadripper* (2020), Danish writer and artist Amalie Smith suggests that “a footnote opens up a space in which I can write.”¹⁴ In the context of this paper, footnotes also serve as a safe space for me to confer information and feelings in the form of “fragments and moments of knowing,” a space that feels less conspicuous and therefore, less expected to hold valuable knowledge in the eyes of the institution.¹⁵ In these spaces, as well as throughout the body of this text, I enact Lauren Fournier’s notions of autotheory as a longstanding feminist practice and a scrupulous methodological approach that values scholarly research as much as it does autobiographical writing, acting on a gut-instinct, and moments of happenstance.¹⁶ I use these spaces to disclose personal experiences, dismissed or difficult-to-articulate feelings, and ineffable impulses, alongside academic research, in an effort to highlight the significance that attuning myself to these things has had on my ability to make meaning through my artwork and writing.

In the first section, “An affective promise,” I consider affect as a catalyst for research and making. I position feminist scholar and philosopher Sara Ahmed’s notions of the stickiness of affect theory (Fig. 2) as being integral to my work and situate my family photo albums as what

¹³ Moser and Reckitt, “Feminist Tactics of Citation, Annotation, and Translation: Reflections on the Now You Can Go Programme,” 3.

¹⁴ Amalie Smith, *Thread Ripper*, trans. Jennifer Russell (London: Lolli Editions, 2020), 60.

¹⁵ McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Short Stories*, 15. Thank you to Jules for helping me work through and articulate this point, as well as for introducing me to the work of Amalie Smith.

¹⁶ Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (MIT Press, 2022), 4.

she calls a “happy object.”¹⁷ In the following section, “Enter that space,” I consider the approach I have taken to working with my family albums, exploring the performative nature of family photographs, and turn my attention to the periphery of vernacular images as generative, inherently queers sites in which meaning-making can occur. “To look, to hold,” offers a glimpse into a longstanding practice and a place that I love. In “Gathering through encounter,” I consider “slow looking” as an essential process in relation to my thesis work, positioning it as a crucial precursor to making, and exploring how my own work calls for a prolonged engagement from the viewer. In an attempt to connect the dots, the section titled “April 11, 2006,” reveals a page from my sixth-grade diary, followed shortly thereafter by “Dis/Embodied,” a section that locates my pull toward clay as an embodied material and making methodology. “An object thick with presence (the presence of an absence),” points to the title of my thesis exhibition and addresses the importance of familiar, everyday objects. Finally, in “My hand determines the gaze,” I discuss specific image-making and installation strategies implemented in my work, paying close attention to illegibility, refusal, and ambiguity as important aesthetic choices. I acknowledge my thinking, work and writing as leaky, elusive, and, perhaps, inconclusive, restating the question that I posed at the beginning of this paper, a question that has no clear, discernible answer; a question that I am only just beginning to work through:

Where do I go from here?

¹⁷ Sara Ahmed, “Happy Objects,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 29–51.



Figure 2: Alessandra Abballe, 2024. Ceramic letters on my studio desk, Goldfarb Centre for Fine Arts, York University.

An affective promise

Understanding the stickiness of affect theory in relation to the question of why I, and perhaps a broader “we,” are drawn to family photographs and vernacular images has been integral in shaping my consideration of and approach to working with these objects. In her formative essay “Happy Objects,” Sara Ahmed describes affect and anxiety as being that which *sticks*, writing that, “rather like Velcro, [affect and anxiety] tend to pick up whatever comes near.”¹⁸ The word “sticky” has many connotations depending on the context you are using it in:

tenacious, viscous, treachy, tricky, tacky, gluey, gummy, clingy, perplexing, icky, muggy, stifling, awkward, difficult, delicate, sensitive, uncomfortable, knotty, thorny, hairy.

When I think about the word “sticky,” I think about haptic experiences of stickiness—the residue of a quickly-melting ice cream running down the arm, sand clinging to wet skin after a swim in the salty ocean, clammy hands that tack onto the plastic pages of an old photo album. Like Velcro, affect is what sticks, what lingers, and, ultimately, what is difficult to peel off. How do you contend with an image that sticks to you, that is hard to peel away from?

I opened this paper with an autotheoretical account that details a memory, or perhaps a feeling of a memory, derived from personal experiences of encountering my family albums—moments that can be thought of as the “archival encounter,”¹⁹ moments that provoke critical reflection and interrogation, and that, as Stephanie Springgay writes, co-compose the research inquiry.²⁰ These experiences have often been ones of alienation, but a difficult alienation to name and accept because these are objects and images that I cherish, ones that I spend so much time looking at and preserving. My fondness for them then makes it challenging for me to dismiss these albums and their images as exclusionary sites that engender what cultural theorist, critic, and scholar

¹⁸ Ahmed, “Happy Objects,” 32.

¹⁹ Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe*, 20.

²⁰ Springgay, *Feltness: Research-Creation, Socially Engaged Art, and Affective Pedagogies*, 11.

Sianne Ngai calls “ugly feelings.”²¹ In relation to experiences of affective alienation, Ahmed has articulated:

Think too of experiences of alienation. I have suggested that happiness is attributed to certain objects that circulate as social goods. When we feel pleasure from such objects, we are aligned; we are facing the right way. We become alienated—out of line with affective community—when we do not experience pleasure from proximity to objects that are already attributed as being good.²²

In these memories and continued experiences, the family album presents itself to me as a “happy object,” one that has already been positioned as being *good* and that is imbued with an inherent guarantee of happiness. When I flip through the pages of the album or shuffle through loose photographs in a shoebox and I fail to feel the promise of happiness come through, I become out of line with these images and, conversely, my familial narrative. I become alienated from a thing that I am not only meant to feel a connection to, but that I want to feel a kinship with.

In the memories I have of gathering with friends and family around the kitchen table or on the floor of the living room, armed with stacks of family albums, there would often be times when someone would point to images of me with arms defiantly crossed across my chest, a furrowed brow, a skeptical look, and a huge frown and declare, “look how miserable you were!” In these moments, I became what Ahmed identifies as an affect-alien, a feminist kill-joy, and an unhappy queer; a person that fails to share the happiness toward a certain thing as being good because they do not find the “promise of happiness to be quite so promising.”²³ I hated when my indifference was pointed out and I had no way of reconciling it—no way of working through, around, or past it (Fig. 3).

²¹ Ngai articulates “ugly feelings” as unproductive, non-cathartic negative feelings, such as anxiety, envy, or paranoia. Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

²² Ahmed, “Happy Objects,” 37.

²³ Ahmed, “Happy Objects,” 30, 39.



Figure 3: Alessandra Abballe, 2025. A Barbie polaroid of me on my fifth birthday, May 27, 2000.

Making this work and writing this paper—sorting through and trying to make sense of these longstanding and persistent thoughts and feelings—has been a sort of catharsis. I have long wanted to shed the moniker of being the family sourpuss, the one always frowning in pictures as a kid. In working to locate these experiences and feelings as being an inability to identify myself within the affective promise of the family album, I have been able to catalyze affect and “ugly feelings” as an important precursor to making. Ahmed writes that “the experiences of being

alienated from the affective promise of happy objects gets us somewhere. Affect-aliens can do things...by refusing to put bad feelings to one side in the hope that we can ‘just get along.’”²⁴ I am not interested in sidelining these feelings or, as my therapist would say, punching my way through them in order to get to the other side. I want to do the difficult work of noticing and sitting with them, feeling them in their entirety, letting them bubble and ferment, shifting into new forms, turning into something fruitful. These emotional afflictions do not go away, but through an attunement to bad or negative feelings and an embrace and conscious embodiment of my position as an affect-alien, an unhappy queer, and a feminist kill-joy, I am able to look up and back, as well as forward and onward.

²⁴ Ahmed, “Happy Objects,” 50.

Enter that space²⁵

In the Spring of 2024, I found myself at an impasse, not sure of where to go or how to move forward. I was finding it tough to figure out an approach to working with photographs that not only implicated my feelings—feelings largely associated with a negative affective resonance—but might also implicate a larger group of people who might not feel the same way about the album and its images as I do. These images indicate their memories, feelings, and familial history as much as they do mine, and so the challenge for me became finding a way to interrogate the photographs and the heteronormative structures from which they emanate in a considerate, collaborative, care-oriented, yet rigorous manner. In “Happy Objects,” Ahmed writes that, “to experience an object as being affective or sensational is to be directed not only toward [that] object, but to [what] is around [it],” including what is behind, in front, and what is not immediately apparent.²⁶ As a response to the frustrating standstill in making that I was experiencing, I used Ahmed’s words as a springboard to push me up and around; as a way to redirect my gaze from the people posed in the center of the photographs and toward the often overlooked details around them. Instead of working with images in a representational way—meaning a way in which the figures in the images would be clearly identifiable—I was looking to “access parts of the image that might otherwise go unnoticed if we engaged with them only on the basis of what seems most apparent.”²⁷ I began looking to the periphery.

In *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (2012), theorist Tina Campt describes vernacular photography “as a genre of everyday image-making most often created by amateur photographers and intended as documents of personal history,” comprising both professional studio portraits, alongside family snapshots.²⁸ With this shift in approach, I focused my attention on vernacular studio portraits gleaned from varying albums spanning different branches and generations of my family. I became interested in and pulled toward these images because of their highly staged, performative, and affective qualities, as well as their

²⁵ “This ‘we’ is that us in the margins, that ‘we’ who inhabit marginal space that is not a site of domination but a place of resistance. Enter that space.” bell hooks, “Marginality as a Site of Resistance,” in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture*, ed. Russell Ferguson et al. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992): 343.

²⁶ Sara Ahmed, “Happy Objects,” 33.

²⁷ Campt, *Image Matters*, 19.

²⁸ Campt, *Image Matters*, 8.

everyday-ness and repetition. In this sense, I think of vernacular portraits as being performative in the terms set forth by feminist philosopher and scholar Judith Butler, who states that the performance is “not singular or deliberate, but...the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names.”²⁹ There are not just one or two of these images, there are *many* of these images. What happens when we see something over and over again? What does repetition do in relation to identity formation? When we think about these images as objects that have affective resonance and enunciative abilities, we can start to understand them “as part of a more complex process of cultural articulation.”³⁰

As an intuitive response, I started scanning a selection of these portraits at a high resolution and began meticulously and diligently working to remove all figures from the photographs using Photoshop. What remains in the image is the backdrop and, on occasion, traces of a presence that was once visible, as evidenced in the shadows. These newly constructed images take on an alluring and unsettling strangeness as quiet, hard-to-locate peculiarities become palpable—a blob of smudginess in an area that was difficult to digitally replicate, or an entirely out-of-focus image due to the lack of a perceptible subject (Fig. 4). When finished digitally rendering the constructed image, I employed a variety of large-scale printing and installation strategies that seek to reference different qualities or aspects of the original backdrop as a material—such as printing on fabric or installing an image to reference a draping quality that the original object might have had (Fig. 5). Backdrops as objects are significant in that they mark the setting in which something might occur. They are used in a variety of different contexts and, therefore, have a variety of different meanings. In theater, a backdrop is something that is hung at the back of the stage in order to create a visual environment for a performance to unfold. In a photographic context, we can consider the term “backdrop” as being the general background of the image, something that exists behind the main subject and used to create depth. Figuratively, the term “against a backdrop” calls for a consideration of the broader context or circumstances surrounding an event—a *setting of the scene*. In shifting my attention to the backdrops of these

²⁹ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (Routledge, 1993), xii.

³⁰ Campt, *Image Matters*, 17.



Figure 4: *A tense grammar*, Alessandra Abballe, dimensions vary, 2024.

vernacular images and conversely, making my own defunct backdrops, I am calling on the viewer to redirect their gaze and focus on what exists behind the main action of the image and to consider the heavily constructed and performative nature of this type of imagery. In omitting a figure altogether, the images approach and consider the space itself as a queer site and compel the viewer to focus on that which is not at the centre, ultimately queering the act of looking.³¹ In engaging with digital forms of intervention alongside reprinting and installation strategies, I am able to cite images from my personal family albums, “interrogate the original image and at times the first author,” as a form of queer refusal and as a way to open up a space for further contemplation.³²

I would like to circle back to the questions I posed in the introduction of this paper: How do images derived from my personal archives—ones which I hold so much affection for, but do not *feel* myself reflected in—register? How can I work in tandem *with* these images to claim space and agency? The approach that I have taken here, to focus on the peripheral aspects of these images, is a response to not being able to locate a sense of myself in the central action. By shifting my attention to what is behind, in front, and around the centre, I am able to interrogate the complex nature of these photographs as performative, hegemonic sites without implicating the figures within them and furthermore, without assimilating to the parts of those images I am in conflict with. I am not interested in aligning myself with the dominant discourse, nor am I interested in rejecting it entirely. Rather, I am concerned with devising and implementing ways of working within these structures as a way of creating space in a conventional cultural form—space to consider *what is missing*.³³ In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009), Muñoz writes that “queerness is a longing that propels us onward...that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing.”³⁴ Instead of disavowing the family album as an inherently oppressive site, my artwork approaches this structure *through* queerness as a way to intervene and make space, striving to establish queerness

³¹ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 111.

³² Erika DeFreitas, “Artist’s Archive: To Affect/to Appear (Planche XXIII.Bis),” *C Magazine*, April 2023, <https://cmagazine.com/articles/artists-archive-to-affectto-appear-defreitas>.

³³ This process is coined as a process of disidentification by scholar José Esteban Muñoz.

³⁴ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York, 2009), 1.

“as a mode of critique rather than as a new investment in normativity or life or respectability or wholeness or legitimacy.”³⁵

In “marginality as a site of resistance,” author and theorist bell hooks conceives of the margins as a fundamental location for the creation of counter-hegemonic discourses. She writes about marginality not as something that one wishes “to lose, to give up, or surrender as part of moving into the centre, but rather as a site one stays in, clings to even, because it...offers the possibility of radical perspectives from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives.”³⁶ My thesis work seeks to activate and embody the periphery of vernacular images as an inherently queer site of radical possibility and resistance. Through large-scale printing and various photo-installation strategies, I am hoping that my work creates the opportunity for us to enter and consider that space together. “Let us meet there.”³⁷

³⁵ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 110-111.

³⁶ hooks, “Marginality as a Site of Resistance,” 341.

³⁷ hooks, “Marginality as a Site of Resistance,” 343.



Figure 5: *A shift in focus*, Alessandra Abballe, 130 laser prints on copy paper, 2025.

To look, to hold

On a bright, sunny, and fantastically cold Toronto day, I find myself on the fifth floor of the Toronto Reference Library, buried deep in the file cabinets of the picture collection. Two weeks prior saw me poking around in the “Drag Queens to Embroidery” cabinet (the images are filed alphabetically and by subject), while today finds me on the hunt for pictures of hands, of which there are many. I land on three folders: “Hands: Women,” “Hands: Men,” and the third simply labelled “Hands.” I find a spot at a vacant table and lay out my folders. The light beige files are well worn and browning at the edges, indicating the many hands that have passed around, sorted through, and refiled them. My vaseline-coated hands even leave their own greasy marks on the folders. I like to think of this as some sort of participatory gesture—perhaps even a sticky gesture— but also, it’s very cold out, the library is extremely dry, and I have horrible eczema.

Inside the folders are newspaper and magazine clippings, images printed on plain, unspectacular bond paper; pieces of thick and rigid cardstock, and occasionally, the odd pamphlet or promotional flyer. I sit with these images for over an hour, slowly flipping through them, taking the time to observe each image in quality and content (sometimes kitschy and humorous and at other times, deeply sad and troubling). Occasionally, I come into the library looking for something specific, but most times I am not looking for anything at all. I pay close attention to the images; which ones I am drawn to and which ones I feel the need to quickly flip past, what thoughts come up when I’m looking at them, what technical qualities of the image I am captivated by, what sense I can make of them in relation to one another, and other images that come to mind outside of the envelope at hand.

I take note of the images that move me to an affective state—the images that I linger on—and I check them out of the library. I take them to my studio, I flip through the selection I have made, I contemplate them further, I lay them out on the floor, I reorder them, I pair them, I layer them, I shuffle them, I interact with them, I rephotograph them, I scan and I digitise them, I reprint them, I hang them on my studio wall, I take them down, I sandwich them in books (Fig. 6-14). I find it difficult to part with these images and I wait the full three weeks that I am allotted to return them.

I let the images sit with me over the coming months (sometimes years) as I work through thinking and making. They end up tacked up above my desk in lieu of sticky notes and to-do lists. When I feel like I am at an impasse, when I feel frustrated, irritated, or unmotivated to continue, I can glance up and rest assured that the feeling will change. What are these images doing to me?



Figures 6 - 14: Alessandra Abballe, 2024. Images from the Toronto Reference Library Picture Collection laid out on my studio floor, Goldfarb Centre for Fine Arts, York University.

Gathering through encounter³⁸

Spending time looking at and engaging with images has been a longstanding and integral part of my practice. In the previous section, “To look, to hold,” I detail a way in which “slow looking,” a term coined by scholar Shari Tishman, has unfurled throughout my time as an MFA candidate at York University. In *Slow Looking: The Art and Practice of Learning Through Observation* (2017), Tishman describes “slow looking” as a mode of learning that prioritizes measured, involved, and intentional engagement with an image or object.³⁹ She notes that this practice can occur “anywhere [in which] people take a generous amount of time to observe the world closely—in classrooms, in art galleries, in laboratories, online, in backyard gardens, and on neighbourhood walks.”⁴⁰ Over the past two years, my practice of slow looking has mainly manifested on the fifth floor of the Toronto Reference Library, an important site in relation to my thesis work where slowness and observation are a requisite. During a conversation with curator Courtney J. Martin, American artist Leslie Hewitt spoke about her relationship with the library as an important space in which the studio experience is replicated, citing the value of being surrounded by books, objects, and images that contain alternative historical narratives.⁴¹ The Toronto Reference Library functions similarly for me. Spending time working on the fifth floor in close proximity to the Picture Collection has provided me with the space and opportunity to engage in an act of slow looking outside of my family albums. I am able to think deeply and critically about the images and objects that I am interacting with, and I can ask myself: How are these images informing the work that I make? What connections can I draw between images from public collections to ones that live in my private family albums?

³⁸ “What is relevant here is...the *gathering through encounter*.” Kris Dittel and Clementine Edwards, eds., *The Material Kinship Reader: Material beyond Extraction and Kinship beyond the Nuclear Family* (Eindhoven: Onomatopoe 208, 2022), 4. I often feel self-conscious about the amount of time it takes for me to make artwork. I spend a lot of time thinking that my practice is at a standstill, that I am doing nothing if I am not actively making—feelings instilled and perpetuated by capitalist expectations of production. In conceiving this paper, it was important for me to dedicate space to discuss moments of looking that fuel my making; to acknowledge the days, months, weeks, and years of gathering images, objects, and material through encounters.

³⁹ Shari Tishman, *Slow Looking: The Art and Practice of Learning Through Observation* (London: Routledge, 2018).

⁴⁰ Tishman, *Slow Looking*, 2.

⁴¹ *Artist Talk with Leslie Hewitt and Courtney J. Martin*, YouTube video, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nmZHKpEH14Y&t=660s&ab_channel=TheMenilCollection.

In her 2017 series, *very strongly may be sincerely fainting*, interdisciplinary Scarborough-based artist Erika DeFreitas works with found images to create collages that contemplate ideas of representation, labour, and the indexing of women in art history.⁴² On working with these objects, DeFreitas writes: “When an image *works* on me, it is visceral. I sit with the feeling and see if it passes, push it aside and lose it among other images that trouble, or respond to the image in kind.”⁴³ Slow looking as a research methodology allows me to contemplate how images in my family albums are *working on* me. I can sit with these uneasy and uncomfortable feelings that DeFreitas is alluding to, consider where in the images (or not in the images) these sentiments are emanating from, and spend time ruminating on what larger social relations are at play—what Campt would call “the *social life of the photo*.”⁴⁴ Sourcing, scanning, reprinting, displaying, layering, and pairing images then become essential parts of my practice. When I find images that move me in some sort of way, I scan, print, and tack them up on my studio wall. Thus, my studio becomes a space full of fragments, observations, overlaps, and tangents; a space that recognizes the importance of exploring and mapping alongside detouring and getting lost;⁴⁵ a space that acknowledges that when we are moved by things, we make things.⁴⁶

At odds with the way we encounter images on social media, where the infinite scroll dominates our attention, my practice of slow looking requires me to sit with an image for prolonged periods of time, forcing me to focus on my bodily reactions, decipher what the image is telling me, and in turn, how I *feel* about what the image is telling me. In *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (2019), Jenny Odell writes about her love of bird watching and deep listening, a practice that demands slowness and stillness from a person in order to take in all of

⁴² Erika DeFreitas, *Very Strongly May Be Sincerely Fainting*, 2017, Collage on paper, 4" x 6", 2017, <https://www.erikadefreitas.com/very-strongly-may-be-sincerely-fainting>.

⁴³ Erika DeFreitas, “Artist’s Archive: To Affect/to Appear (Planche XXIII.Bis),” *C Magazine*, April 2023, <https://cmagazine.com/articles/artists-archive-to-affectto-appear-defreitas>.

⁴⁴ For more on the social life of photos, see Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe*, 6.

⁴⁵ For more on detouring and getting lost, see Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 24.

⁴⁶ Ahmed, “Happy Objects.” 33.

the sounds around them.⁴⁷ Synonymous to Odell's use of deep listening, my engagement with slow looking forces me to disentangle myself from the way that image-based apps like Instagram hold and direct my attention, providing me with the opportunity to disengage from one way of looking and re-engage with an alternative that is more deliberate, conscious, and present. By implementing slow looking as a fundamental research methodology in my practice, I actively reject capitalist notions of productivity, utility, and creation. What I am advocating for instead is a way of looking and, subsequently making, that entails an extended engagement with images and requires a looking that goes beyond first impressions and "toward more immersive, prolonged experiences that unfold slowly over time."⁴⁸ I am calling on myself and the viewer to consider how a prolonged engagement with enunciative images—such as family photographs—might effect a person's sense of belonging.

⁴⁷ For more on deep listening, see Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (New York City: Penguin Random House, 2019).

⁴⁸ Tishman, *Slow Looking*, 5.

April 11, 2006

Some time in the last year and a half, my brother and I were tasked with the job of going through boxes of ephemera, objects, and photos that my dad had kept and stored over the past twenty-nine years—everything from soccer tournament trophies and local newspaper clippings, to dusty dvd cases holding scratched discs. At the bottom of a wood treasure chest, I came across two fuzzy diaries from when I was in elementary school, one a cobalt blue and the other a tangerine orange, both indisputably purchased from Claire's in the early aughts. Admittedly, I was never a consistent or good journaler—even though I enjoyed writing and very much still do—as evidenced by the many blank pages in the diaries.⁴⁹ I opened the unlocked orange diary to find a printout of three black labradors glued to the inside cover on the left (I grew up on a farm with a labrador named Jesse) and a filled out entry from April 11, 2006 on the right (Fig. 15). Evidently, there seems to be a handful of pages ripped out, as the inside spine looks cracked, rough, and gnarled. The diary entry reads:

Dear Diary,

Today I went dirt bike riding, played basketball and a game of soccer. Then for no reason I stuck my hands in the mud. I also played with the puppies, Jessica, Lou and Sunny. And also went on MSN.

Alessandra.

I imagine myself outside in the yard of my dad's farm (where my siblings and I would spend every other weekend), being bored out of my mind and frustrated, and perhaps frustrated with being bored yet another weekend. As a response, I shove my palms face-down into the wet, squishy, sticky, beige-brown, cake-like mud, the frustration slowly diminishing with every mushy squidge.

⁴⁹ In retrospect, I think I found writing about myself boring or difficult or, perhaps, both. In some ways, I still feel the same. Repeatedly trying to write about myself and my practice over the last two years, about why or how I come to make the choices that I do, has been gruelling, exasperating, exhausting, and equally fulfilling.

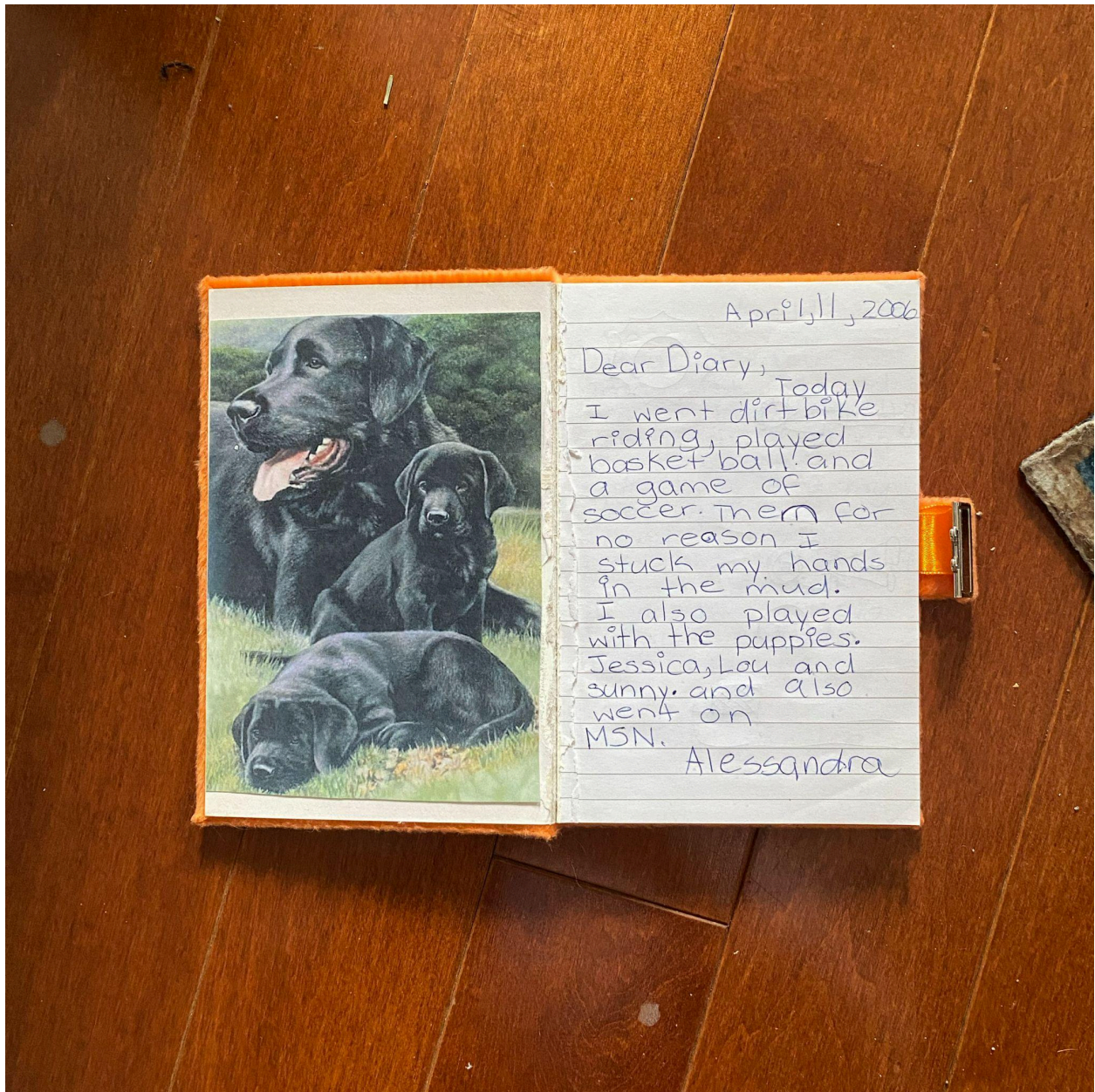


Figure 15: Alessandra Abballe, 2024. An image from a 2006 diary entry pictured on my mom's living room floor.

Dis/Embodied

After the first two semesters of my MFA, I was experiencing a type of burnout and frustration that I had never encountered before. My first year of graduate school was difficult to navigate, riddled with personal conflicts and institutional roadblocks that were hard to come face-to-face with. It became tough for me to be present, immerse myself in the research I was interested in pursuing, and ground myself in my studio practice. For the first time, being in the studio became a stifling, disembodied experience and I started questioning myself and my choices in a wholly unproductive way. I made virtually nothing in those first two semesters and it felt awful.

Cut to.

The summer following the spring semester was the most fruitful, fulfilling, generative, and engaging, as I found myself working in the ceramics studio with clay alongside my peers. Having had a primarily photo-based practice prior to that summer, this was new and exciting territory for me. I am not entirely sure what drew me to ceramics and I have a difficult time pinpointing my first encounter with clay or even recalling the first objects I made, despite it not being more than a year ago; however, I imagine that it was a similar response to the feelings of frustration and anxiety that I experienced as a child —ones that led me to shoving my hands into the mud (a substance akin to clay or slip) for no conceivable reason. After a difficult year in a studio-based program where I was rarely in the studio, it seems that I had turned to clay as a grounding material and process that involved working with my hands—a somatic, embodied response to disembodied feelings.⁵⁰ In their essay “Embodied Research: A Methodology,” scholar-practitioner Ben Spatz writes about embodied research as a methodology that allows us to foreground what bodies can do, what knowledge they hold, and what information they can share.⁵¹ What knowledge do my hands hold? What potential is there for feelings, emotions, or affects to pass through them and how can I work with clay in order to activate and transmit that information?

⁵⁰ “Material was close, craft-based work; grounding work involving the fingertips.” Kris Dittel and Clementine Edwards, *The Material Kinship Reader: Material beyond Extraction and Kinship beyond the Nuclear Family*, 3.

⁵¹ Ben Spatz, “Embodied Research: A Methodology,” *Liminalities* 13, no. 2 (2017): 5.

I started in ceramics by making simple forms and objects—round plates, trinket dishes, small mugs, and wonky candle holders. Aside from asking my peers how they work with clay, I have stayed away from looking up instructional videos, allowing my hands to do the majority of the learning through a process of trial and error.⁵² *What can my hands do?* Springgay writes about embodied research methodologies as a form of research that prioritizes a thinking in and through movement, a “thinking that is saturated with rhythm and affect.”⁵³ Admittedly, I have not been the most prepared when working in the ceramics studio. I often go in on any given day with a vague idea of the object I want to make and an unclear sense of how I need to approach making it. As a result, I frequently rely on the use of informal tools that I can find at the moment and unconventional modes of making.⁵⁴ Conversely, I often have a better understanding of how I want the object to feel or, maybe, how I want the object—or the making of the object—to make *me* feel.

In *Threadripper* (2020), Smith writes: “my schooling promised me that subject matter and material are two sides of the same coin. That any decision can be put off until the moment I’ve got the material in my hands.”⁵⁵ The way I have approached ceramics and working with clay very much echo this sentiment. It is important for me to have an idea of what I might want to make and to try to devise a plan to carry out that making; however, what is more important is for me to allow room for feelings and ideas to shift and transform when I have the clay in my hands—to allow for a “thinking with and through the material,” as well as acknowledge my proximity to, enmeshment in, and kinship with the clay as an integral part of the process.⁵⁶ As I wedge the clay, dropping it hard on my canvas worktop, rolling it over, squeezing it, squishing it, cutting it, flattening it, turning it over, I think of images I have been holding in my

⁵² I have gleaned so much information about working with clay from my smart and talented peers—thinkers and makers that have generously allowed me to pick their brains and lean on them for knowledge and skill-sharing: D’Andrea Bowie, Heather Lippold, Heather Rattray, Holly Chang, Jules Mills, Jenny (Hyemin) Kim, to name a few.

⁵³ Springgay, *Feltness: Research-Creation, Socially Engaged Art, and Affective Pedagogies*, 17.

⁵⁴ In my unpreparedness, I have dug through dusty drawers in the ceramic studio and used the following objects as tools in my making: bowling pins, cracked plastic tupperware, discarded cardboard tubes, glass jars, comically tiny pylons, rolling pins, and small trash bins.

⁵⁵ Smith, *Thread Ripper*, 5.

⁵⁶ Kris Dittel and Clementine Edwards, *The Material Kinship Reader: Material beyond Extraction and Kinship beyond the Nuclear Family*, 2-5.

mind—images that have *stuck* to me—and I let my hands and the movements they carry out respond to them with the help of the clay.

An object thick with presence (the presence of an absence)⁵⁷

In “Happy Objects,” Ahmed discusses how sticky experiences of affect move us to making, writing that “we turn toward objects at the very point of ‘making.’”⁵⁸ In learning how to work with clay, I turned toward objects gleaned from my family archive—objects that exist in both family photographs, as well as objects that *hold* family photographs. There is a staged portrait that sits in my mother’s home that I think about often. It is a portrait that lives in a beautifully ornate steel frame, that has moved from my grandparent’s home to my childhood home, and that I have grown up looking at in different stages of life.⁵⁹ As an intuitive, embodied response to the affective resonance of that image and the frame that holds it, I decided to create my own object that emulates the frame. I rolled out, flattened, and ribbed a slab of clay, traced a rectangle into it, removed the centre, and carved into each side. After the greenware object thoroughly dried, I loaded it in the kiln and bisqued it; waited two days, unloaded the kiln and endured a period of despising the newly bisqued object; waited two weeks, applied a grey metallic glaze called *pewter*, and, finally, glaze fired it. The final object resembles something akin to the original frame that lives in my childhood home, but in an imperfect, uncanny way—a corner of the ceramic object has been nicked and cracked off, the heat of the kiln has slightly warped the edges of the frame, and the improperly applied glaze has resulted in strange, orangey-beige patches of the clay underneath to poke through (Fig. 16).

⁵⁷ “...the making present of something that is now absent (the presence of an absence).” Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 158.

⁵⁸ Ahmed, “Happy Objects,” 29.

⁵⁹ In retrospect, this can be viewed as an act of slow, prolonged making—one that has unfurled over the course of more than twenty years and that has led me to making this work.



Figure 16: *A thick object*, Alessandra Abballe, glazed stoneware, 2024.

When I hold it in my hands, the ceramic object feels both fragile and incredibly sturdy. It holds a weight—both literally and figuratively—coupled with impressions of my touch that are saturated with the affective resonance of the original image/object that it is derived from. As described by cultural theorist Eric Shouse, the French term, *l'affection*, refers “to a process whereby affect is transmitted between bodies.”⁶⁰ Working with clay as an inherently embodied material and process allows for affective registers to pass through my body and to that of the clay body I am working with, permeating the final object and forging a material kinship. In *The Material Kinship Reader: Material beyond Extraction and Kinship beyond the Nuclear Family* (2022), curator Kris Dittel and artist Clementine Edwards write that “from high up and far away, the proposition of material kinship takes two words—*material* and *kinship*—and mashes them together to see what meanings can arise from their proximity.”⁶¹ What meanings can arise from my proximity to clay as an embodied material and grounding agent? How can I consider the ceramic objects I am making—familiar, rather mundane, often disregarded objects gleaned from family photographs—as queer kin?

I have approached the clay objects I make in a similar way to how I came to make images of backdrops. In turning my gaze to the periphery of family photographs and vernacular studio portraits, I began to pay more attention to the objects that exist around and outside of the main action of the images: vases, vessels, stools, stands, tiles, tables, chairs, plinths. The objects in these photographs are unextraordinary, everyday items that contribute to the performative nature of the images themselves—domestic objects or furniture that Ahmed would characterize as “overlooked.”⁶² In this sense, these objects can be considered as a sort of prop—an object whose significance is reliant on its placement and use in an image.⁶³ In many cases, the object/props that I was seeing in family photographs, specifically in vernacular studio portraits, were different versions of the same thing—reproduced Ionic columns used for the sitter to lean against, simple vases often holding kitschy, plastic flowers, and stools waiting for someone to perch themselves

⁶⁰ Eric Shouse, “Feeling, Emotion, Affect,” *M/C Journal* 8, no. 6 (2005), <https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.2443>.

⁶¹ Kris Dittel and Clementine Edwards, *The Material Kinship Reader: Material beyond Extraction and Kinship beyond the Nuclear Family*, 2.

⁶² Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 163.

⁶³ Gabrielle Moser, “Mute Object, Loud Object” (Oakville Galleries, 2017), 2, <https://gabriellemoser.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Propped-curatorial-essay.pdf>.

upon. Commonplace objects that one might find in a photography studio of a certain time. Similar to my affective pull toward family photographs, I am drawn to these objects not in spite of, but rather, because of their inherently mundane and reiterative qualities. The fact that they are familiar and repeatedly overlooked things used to support the sitter of the image is what I am intrigued by.

The ceramic pieces that I have made during the course of my MFA—both the ones that I have included in the final exhibition and not—are objects that have been gleaned from and made in response to images taken from my family albums, specifically staged portraits (Fig. 17). These works sit in the gallery alongside large-scale images of backdrops and in conversation with framed photographs that serve as the object's referent. In *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006), Ahmed discusses what it means to queer an object or approach something from a queer angle, writing that moving something from “‘behind’ to the ‘front’ can have a queer effect.”⁶⁴ By attending to and foregrounding these often disregarded objects that exist as a footnote to the main action of the images that they have been gleaned from, I am approaching my family photographs from a queer angle and am calling for the viewer to pay attention to what lies in the background. I am interested in how these objects—both as sculptures and images—might help us think about how “objects resonate differently as they move in and out of our field of vision...and reveal the unexpected power [that] everyday things wield.”⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 166.

⁶⁵ Gabrielle Moser, “Mute Object, Loud Object” (Oakville Galleries, 2017), 15, <https://gabriellemoser.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Propped-curatorial-essay.pdf>.



Figure 17: Alessandra Abballe, 2024. A clay stool drying in the studio, York University.

My hand determines the gaze⁶⁶

There are photographs included in my thesis exhibition that are comprised of three components—an image gleaned from my family albums, a clay hand, and my studio floor (Fig. 18). The images pictured in the photographs are plucked from my family albums, scanned, reprinted, and then laid flat on the floor of my studio—a cold, grey concrete surface that is splattered with the material residue of every thinker-maker-artist that has inhabited the space before me. On top of the family photograph—a staged vernacular portrait—sits a flattened, almost two-dimensional unfired clay hand. Borrowing from the visual aesthetics of artist Leslie Hewitt’s series, *Riffs on Real Time*—a three-part photographic series that brings together ephemera, images, and objects that reference historical narratives and rephotographs them as assemblages on sections of wood floors, carpets, and concrete—these photographs pluck images out of my family album and place them in front of the viewer in an effort to investigate, extend, and complicate their meaning.⁶⁷

Hands have repeatedly captivated and held my attention over the last two years and when looking at family photographs and vernacular portraits, they are often one of the first things I notice. Like clay, hands hold meaning and have an embedded, embodied knowledge that is both “relational and affective,” as well as “difficult to articulate.”⁶⁸ I often think about the haptic experience of looking at and interacting with family albums and what kind of contribution this has in relation to the affective resonance of the images themselves. The act of sifting through boxes of fraying photographs, lifting a photo close to your face and turning it over to find writing on the back, picking up a heavy, fabric-wrapped album and flipping through its pages, is an intimate, relational experience. How do photographs register through touch? In *Listening to Images*, Campt writes about what it means to “listen” to images and attune ourselves beyond what we are looking at and toward other senses, such as hearing and touch. She writes that this mode of engagement with photographs “is a haptic encounter that foregrounds the frequencies of

⁶⁶ Adapted from writing by C. Ree and Eve Tuck. C. Ree and Eve Tuck, “A Glossary of Haunting,” in *Handbook of Autoethnography*, ed. Stacey Holman Jones, Tony E. Adams, and Carolyn Ellis (Left Coast Press, 2013).

⁶⁷ Samantha Topol, ed., *Leslie Hewitt: Sudden Glare of the Sun* (St. Louis: Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, 2013), 28.

⁶⁸ Simone Fullagar et al., “Embodied Movement as Method: Attuning to Affect as Feminist Experimentation,” *Somatechnics* 11, no. 2 (2021): 184.

images and how they move, touch, and connect us to the *event* of the photo. Such a connection may begin as a practice of ‘careful looking’, but it does not end there.”⁶⁹ Careful looking and a haptic engagement with photos, both from my family albums and with images found in the files of the Toronto Reference Library Picture Collection, are what led me to making clay hands.



Figure 18: *To point to*, Alessandra Abballe, Concrete floor, family photo, greenware, 2025.

⁶⁹ Campt, *Listening to Images*, 9.

I was having a particularly frustrating day in the ceramics studio when, in a last-ditch effort to avoid going home and feeling wholly unproductive, I decided to flatten a slab of clay and trace the silhouette of a hand onto it. This image was one that had been in my studio tacked onto the wall for a little over a year and I would look at it nearly every day, both passively and actively, letting it ferment. The translation from photograph to a flat, nearly 2D object removes the context and characteristics of the hand and what I am left with is a simple, yet uncanny indication of the gesture itself—gestures of holding, pointing, pinching, touching, caressing, feeling. The resulting object calls for the viewer to think about haptic moments, both in looking and in making, and to consider the hapticity of the ceramic hand itself; to think about my hands, sifting through images in the picture collection, to working and rolling out a slab of clay until it is ready to carve into. (Fig. 19).



Figure 19: Alessandra Abballe, 2025. Clay hands drying on a wood board, L. L. Odette Centre for Sculpture, York University.

Here, I would like to pause and refer back to the standstill in making that I experienced and detailed in the section, “Enter that space.” In making images of backdrops and ceramic objects gleaned from family photographs, I felt that there was a third component missing in my thesis work—something that could point towards the images from my family albums and provide a visual context for the viewer, while still maintaining a level of ambiguity for the figures pictured in the images. I sat with this sense that there was a missing piece to the puzzle for the better part of a year before I followed a gut-instinct to make ceramic hands with no clear idea of what purpose they would serve.⁷⁰ In the final semester of my MFA, a peer and fellow MFA candidate, Jules Mills, pointed me in the direction of a text that would ultimately make everything click into place.⁷¹ In their guiding essay, “A Glossary of Haunting,” scholar Eve Tuck and artist C. Ree discuss the implications of illegibility as praxis, writing:

In telling you all of this in this way, I am resigning myself and you to the idea that parts of my telling are confounding. I care about you understanding, but I care more about concealing parts of myself from you...*I am using my arm to determine the length of the gaze.*⁷²

At the beginning of my MFA and making this work, I had strong opinions of not wanting to directly include images from my family albums in the work itself, bristling like a cat just at the suggestion of it. What Tuck and Ree’s text made apparent to me was that I was not entirely opposed to sharing photographs from my family albums with the viewer. On the contrary, I *wanted* to share these images with the viewer, to anchor them in these photographs that I hold so much affection for and that I make artwork in response to; however, I also care about creating some distance—distance between you and I—and about being intentional about where or to what

⁷⁰ For more on gut-based knowledge, see Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*.

⁷¹ Although this might be strange or unconventional for an academic paper, it is crucial for me to locate and name these happenstantial moments where something suddenly becomes so clear because of an unexpected conversation with a friend or the generosity of a peer. I want to formally acknowledge these moments of how I come to know in an effort to align myself with the citational practices of feminist scholars and artists, such as Ahmed, McKittrick, Moser, Odell, and Reckitt.

⁷² Emphasis added. C. Ree and Eve Tuck, “A Glossary of Haunting,” 640.

I am directing the viewer's gaze to. I care about you understanding these images, but I care more about concealing parts of them, and in turn, parts of myself, from you. By layering ceramic hands on top of family photographs in very intentional and deliberate ways, I am able to decide what parts of the image the viewer is able to access and, therefore, what information about myself I am willing to confide. I can direct the viewer's gaze to the peripheral and often overlooked parts of the images, ones that embody a queer perspective and that have incited an affective response in me, while maintaining a certain level of ambiguity for both the figures pictured in the images as well as for myself.

Making photographic work that stems from a personal place and that seeks to question notions of identity, memory, and belonging has been challenging. In an institutional setting, there is often a call for full transparency and vulnerability in what McKittrick calls "identity-disciplines"—areas of study that are often kept alive by queer-black-indigenous-people-of-colour and that aim to intervene in and undo hegemonic systems.⁷³ This type of full-on legibility—specifically in relation to photography—is certainly important and by no means am I dismissing work that seeks to employ these modes of representation. It is crucial for people—specifically queer, black, indigenous, and people of colour—to be able to see themselves represented in different forms of visual media, such as photography, made by artists from their communities; however, my work and research calls on methods of thinking and making that emphasize the use of illegibility, refusal, and obfuscation as equally important and inherently "queer modes of intervention."⁷⁴ I am less interested in making work that tries to fill in the gaps and absences and more interested in lingering in the generative liminal space of what's missing.

I am using hands to determine your gaze.

⁷³ McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Short Stories*, 40.

⁷⁴ Elspeth H. Brown and Sara Davidmann, "Queering the Trans* Family Album: Elspeth H. Brown and Sara Davidmann, in Conversation," *Radical History Review* 2015, no. 122 (May 2015): 190.

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Appendix A: Exhibition Documentation Images

