HAIR | HEIR

by

Stephanie T. Booth
A Thesis
Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty
of
George Mason University
in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree
of
Master of Fine Art
Studio Art

Committee:

_____ Thesis Director

_____

_____ Director of the School of Art

_____ Dean, College of Visual and Performing Arts

Date: 4/30/2013 _____ Spring Semester 2013
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Fairfax, VA

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Stephanie T. Booth
Bachelor of Arts
Mary Washington College, 2004

Director: Peggy Feerick, Associate Professor
School of Art

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DEDICATION

I dedicate my thesis to my family. From relatives who lived centuries ago to those I grew up with, they are the inspiration for my work.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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A special thanks to my aunts, mother, and grandmother who participated in my work and of course thank you to all my family for their love and support over the last three years.

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ABSTRACT

HAIR | HEIR

Stephanie T. Booth, M.F.A.

George Mason University, 2013

Thesis Director: Professor Peggy Feerick

Why do many of us feel the need to connect to the past? Events that we did not experience will always partially be a mystery and our own memories are both fallible and malleable. Despite the fact that they are often inaccurate, our family history and personal memories serve an important role in grounding us in the present through the context of the past.

The artwork in Hair | Heir exhibition is the culmination of a three year exploration of the tenuous relationship we have with the past. I explore both the difficulty in connecting with events we did not experience and the continued urge to continue trying to do so. Appropriated family photographs, genealogy, and recorded narratives serve as the content of my photographs, hair embroideries, and videos.

INTRODUCTION

It began three years ago with an old photo album. Covered by embossed leather, the gilded pages inside held the contents of two dozen aging cartes de visite. “They were your grandfather’s people,” my grandmother explained to me. “He could have told you who they were, but I don’t remember anymore.” No names were written on the back, just a few dates and stamped addresses of photography studios in towns and states where I never knew my family lived.

Photographs serve as connectors. They can link images with stories of the past. Their photograph could have helped preserve their legacy for the future, but the photograph did not live up to its potential. Their images were preserved, but without any connections to history the memories of them were lost.

I began to stare obsessively at these photographs, searching for some physical similarities, perhaps I have her eyes, maybe she was tall like me, or maybe my lips are similar to hers. However, the more I searched their faces, the less of a connection I felt and my interest quickly turned to their hair.

I've always had a contentious relationship with my hair, as have as most of the women in my family on both my maternal and paternal sides. When I look at these images of my ancestors with tightly curled bangs, ringlet tendrils, and unnatural waves, I can’t help but imagine they experienced the same difficulties as well. Hair became a natural connection between these unknown women and me. Hair contains DNA and through DNA and genetic sequencing you can discover what countries and areas your ancestors came from and which physical traits you

inherited from them. It is an obvious link to our ancestral past and I can establish a connection to these women both genetically and metaphorically through the hair that is on my head.

This family photo album was my impetus to study my family history and genealogy and became the basis for my work. As my art evolved, it became less about the individuals in the photographs and more about what these photographs represent to me. The instability of memory and the difficulty of photography and other media such as video and audio recordings to aid our memories serve as the basis for my work.

The faces that stare back at me from the album serve as a constant reminder that a photograph alone cannot keep our memories alive. For many, there is an undeniable urge to connect with the past and to discover one's roots. However, the past not experienced will always be a mystery. We have a tenuous relationship with our history. The past is part fact and part fiction, and it is difficult to differentiate between the two. My work explores the struggle of discovering the undiscoverable.

GENEAOLOGY AS METHODOLOGY

The album my grandmother gave me continued to bother me. I questioned my grandfather's actions. Why was it important to save their photographs, but not pass down their basic information? I needed to discover who these people were and their relation to me. My questions brought me to the Family Research Library in Salt Lake City, Utah. I naively believed if I found people on my family tree who were about the same age as the people in the photographs, then perhaps I could uncover their identities. However, the more I studied and learned about genealogy, the more I realized how impossible my task would be.

Genealogy is a puzzle that leaves many questions unanswered and many mysteries unsolved. There is no way to be certain your research and information are completely accurate, and there is always another generation to discover. I recognize the arbitrary connection we have to our own family history. The biggest challenge of genealogy is also what keeps me engaged with it; this never-ending mystery is what keeps me searching for new relatives and new stories.

Lyford explores the process and emotional experience of uncovering undesirable people or characters in one's genealogical line. John Lyford, my 10th great grandfather, was the first ordained minister in Plymouth Colony. He fled to England from Ireland after being threatened by the families of women he allegedly raped in premarital counseling. Continuing to run from his past, he sailed to the newly founded Plymouth Colony. He was eventually discovered as a spy for the Church of England and was banished to the Virginia Colony until his death. In the video, I sit by a window and embroider. The imagery of embroidery in the video connects to the feminine experience and purposefully disconnects from the spoken narrative about a male ancestor whose

actions against women were deplorable. The use of a religious-themed cross-stich, which is not fully revealed until the end of the piece, relates to the falseness of Lyford's calling to the ministry. The window frame serves as a barrier and represents the difficulty in both connecting to one's past and accepting the unsavory aspects of that history.

Figure 1: *Lyford*

Though my research has led to new discoveries, about my lineage from centuries ago, both positive and negative, it has also provides me the opportunity to record a more recent past. My paternal grandmother, Carol Booth, is my oldest living relative. Through her, I have my strongest link to the past. I have spent hours at my kitchen table coaxing my grandmother to tell her personal history into a microphone. As I listen and record her stories, I discover it's not her major life changing moments, but the simple everyday stories that form a well-rounded picture of her

when she was younger and how she evolved into who she is today. One particularly telling example occurred when she was a twenty-year-old married woman. She was so petrified to be discovered by her father smoking she threw a lit cigarette into her purse. This story creates a portrait of a person as independent and strong-willed, but who still was concerned about having her father's approval.

Although most of the women in the album gifted me by my grandmother are still unknown, Louisa Fuller is one of the few I've been able to identify. She sits, an elderly woman in full mourning dress, and stares out at the viewer with a sour look on her face. A rare inscription on the back reads "Mother on her 95th Birthday." Louisa Fuller lived most of her life in upstate New York, moving in the 1880s to Nebraska with her second eldest son's family. Her whereabouts are unknown for approximately a decade; however I found a record of her living in a mental institution in 1900. This record raises questions. Was she actually mentally ill? Her portrait from the album was taken after she was institutionalized in a local photographer's studio. Had she became senile or was she simply a burden who could be locked away and visited on special occasions? What happened to her during that decade is hidden in the vital statistics. Questions answered only create more questions and the research continues. These unanswerable questions both inform and inspire my work.

Figure 2: Louisa Fuller approximately 1890

HAIR AS MEDIUM

My work with hair echoes the sentimentality of hair jewelry. Mourning jewelry, a popular fashion for centuries, preserved the hair of a deceased loved one in a locket, ring, or broach. In the past, hair was a medium through which memory was stored and connections to the past were made. My belabored stitching, the repetitive action of making thread from my hair and then sewing with it, serves as a metaphor of the preservation of hair as memory.

Hair represents a constant cycle of loss and rebirth. Despite the gradual loss of each strand, it remains. Other than our bones, it is our hair that takes the longest to break down. It can long surpass and survive our soft tissue and organs. Because of its longevity and its malleability, hair has long been a way to memorialize a person after they had passed. Hairwork filled a need to stay connected.

Though popular for centuries in Europe, hairwork peaked in the United States in the mid-19th century.[1] The Civil War started a tradition of couples exchanging locks of hair before a soldier left for war. Though the loved one was not dead, exchanging hair before the enlisted went away ensured they both would be able to carry a part the other wherever they went and no matter what was their fate during the war.[2]

I re-contextualize hair as medium to connect myself to an unknown past instead of an unknown future. *Common Threads* uses hair as a connection between my nuclear family, myself, and

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[1] Sarah Nehama, *In Death Lamented,*(Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 2012),104
[2] Ibid., 104

photographs of unknown ancestors from over a century ago. Combining embroidery with photography is one way to connect myself physically and metaphorically to my female ancestors and relatives. I use my hair and the hair of my brother and mother as a genetic link to our unknown past. The image of only one woman in the series faces out. She is Ella Rexford, the only photograph from *Common Threads* I have been able to identify through genealogical research. The other four women's identities are still unknown. Their images are purposefully turned around in their frame, revealing what is usually hidden in needlework; the messy backside of the embroidery.

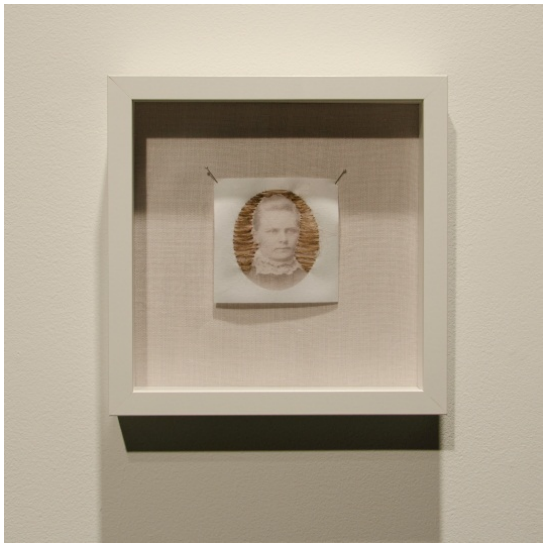

Figure 3: *Common Threads*

Figure 4: *Common Threads*

Hair, its styling and treatment is a visual marker of different eras in a woman's life. Our hair becomes a part of our personal narrative. We can link ourselves to a personal timeline by how we style our hair, its color, or its length. Interviewing my female relatives is an important process in creating my artwork. Their narratives about their hair allow me to better understand their

experience. Capturing these narratives has become an important theme in my work. I have explored in two different series; *She Always Wanted to Be a Blonde* and *Hair Stories*.

Figure 5: *She Always Wanted to Be a Blonde*

She Always Wanted to Be a Blonde, a series of photographs and hair embroideries, connects me to recent family history. I explore my maternal and paternal grandmothers' experiences through their wigs. Both of my grandmothers wore wigs after they lost their hair to illness. My paternal grandmother enjoyed her wigs and continued to wear them for decades. My maternal grandmother only put hers on twice before it was left to sit on its stand on her dresser, an eerie reminder of the disease she was fighting. In the series, I symbolically use myself as a wig stand and photograph myself wearing a part of their histories. Under each image is embroidery stitched with my hair in place of thread. The embroidery reveals a short snippet- a part of their life stories.

The story of my paternal grandmother is taken from interviews I have recorded of her and written in her own voice. The quote for my maternal grandmother, who is deceased, is taken from a story from one of my experiences with her from when she was receiving radiation treatment. Though part of the message of the image is revealed, the full story remains a mystery to the viewer.

Figure 6: *She Always Wanted to Be a Blonde*

Figure 7: Still from *Hair Stories*

Hair Stories, a series of videos was originally conceived as a companion piece to *Common Threads*. It eventually evolved into a separate series unrelated to my original mixed media work. In this multichannel video, I place myself in the stories told by female relatives. I interviewed three of my aunts, my grandmother, and my mother and asked them to discuss a memorable event in which hair was a common theme. Some of these stories were ones I grew up with, others I heard for the first time when I recorded them. Some were funny and lighthearted while others were sad, but all were deeply personal. After I collected their stories, I acted out a part of their story on my own hair as a way to connect to their narratives and their experience. The camera focused on just the interaction between my hair and hands to capture the action of the narrative. The videos are all placed on their own pedestals so that each narrative functions both as a separate piece and as part of the whole.

Figure 8: *Hair Stories* Installation

The importance women place on their hair results in a huge commercial industry of hair products for women. The irony is we spend so much time, attention, and money on an object that we consider unsightly or unclean once it falls out. My work plays with this contradiction. Intricate

needlework done with hair creates an alluring texture that both appeals and repels the viewer at once. Detail-oriented photographic prints enhance the texture of the contour lines of strands of hair and create an image that is compelling for the viewer. The images and embroideries play with the idea of the" beautifully ugly" and the line between what is alluring and what is repulsive.

The projection *Unwinding* is an abstract exploration of hair and genealogy. The strands of the hair as they unravel from one another create a galaxy of lines that swirl and expand in the projection. The combination of the visual with the audio, softly spoken whispers of the discovered surnames in my family tree, create an immersive, hypnotic experience for the viewer. Though the "icky" factor of the content, the detritus mixed in with the clumped hair, could potentially be repulsive, however, the beauty of the formal elements of the video draws the viewer in. *Unwinding* became the capstone piece in this series of work. The video's abstract qualities allow it to function as a connector between the more sentimental mixed media pieces and the videos that focused more on loss and destruction. It permits all the pieces to have a broader conversation with each other and brings the work together as a complete series.

Figure 9: *Unwinding* Projection

Through the medium of hair, I have been able to explore a variety of issues in my artwork including questions about my relationship with the past, explorations in family history, and discussion of the female experience. Hair serves as a common experience from which the personal becomes universal.

METHODS OF CRAFT

My use of hair to embroider imagery acknowledges my own sentimental connection with the past and serves as a more emotional link to my family's narrative than traditional fiber materials. Every woman in my family has a story about her hair. By sewing with my hair, I am able to connect with the women who have come before me by sharing both their domestic experiences and referencing their relationships to hair.

Historically, embroidery and samplers were a way of showing a woman's worth. Popular in the 18th and 19th centuries, they displayed a woman's ability to read, write, and stitch, but also her capacity to sit still and complete a time-intensive task. Embroidery served as a way to educate women, not just on a skill, but also as a way to serve as an ideal within the domestic context.[3] The stance a woman takes when she embroiders can be read as a subservient one. Her head is bowed, her eyes are focused on her task, and she is quiet. These traits were propagated as ideals for a wife and mother in the pre-industrialized world.[4]

My work develops stitchery beyond its historic roots; it also does so without acknowledging its oppressive aspects. Instead I look to my family for how needlecraft has been a part of our personal domestic experience. For my great-grandmother, an accomplished seamstress, sewing was a way to provide a stylish life for her three daughters, even during the Great Depression. My mother carried on this tradition, sewing her own wedding dress and my prom dress when available funds were limited. My grandmother sat and stitched at my grandfather's death bed, the

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[3] Roskia Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*. (London: IB Tautis, 2012), 82
[4] Ibid., 10-11

constant movement of her fingers providing both a mental relief as well as a needed distraction. In turn, I worked on my own needlepoint in the waiting room while she received radiation treatments for an inoperable brain tumor. For the women in my family, needlework was not a social requirement or a push to become a feminine ideal, but instead a way to exercise control over our lives. Whether creating an actual garment for a child or as an outlet for anxiety, stitching is re-contextualized from an oppressive activity to one of control.

Figure 10: Embroidery Detail from *She Always Wanted to Be a Blonde*

In my work, craft becomes a type of performance. Imperfections in the textile, the style of embroidery, and the materials used create a signature for the textile artist. When a viewer looks at a piece of textile art, he or she immediately starts thinking about its process of creation. A weaving conjures images of a loom; a sewn image references a needle and thread. For me, the

performance of creation is a private one. My work with fibers is a performance only I witness and experience. The resulting embroidery is the documentation I share with the viewer.

THE OBJECTIFICATION OF THE PHOTOGRAPH

When is a photograph original? For a medium that is reliant on its ability to create multiples, the concept of a true original is complicated for photography. For film, the negative could be considered a tangible original in the same sense that a mold is the original for a bronze sculpture. It is the source from which facsimiles are made, but it needs the copy, the print, to be realized. With most forms of photography, there is the potential for other prints and thus other copies. However, when a photograph becomes a precious object, a singular image can become an original based on its sentimental value.

Figure 11: My Great-Grandparents Wedding Portrait, 1911

My great-grandparents' wedding portrait has been in my family for over 100 years and now belongs to my brother. To share access to the image, I scanned and uploaded it to my public family tree so others can have a copy of the photograph.

Despite this proliferation of instant digital access, I'm still jealous that my brother has the "original." There is something completely irrational about these feelings. I have access to the image, to the information of what my great-grandparents looked like. I can attach this visual knowledge to both the vital statistics that I've discovered through my genealogical research and the recorded stories we have from my grandmother. I can even print it and display it in a frame in my own house. But the actual photograph serves as a sacred object. My great-grandparents looked upon and held this image. This authenticity is connected to the object of the photograph and not the scan on my hard drive or the zeros and ones that create the image on the screen. Even if more analog copies of this photograph exist somewhere, I know my great-grandparents looked upon this exact photograph in their home as did their children and grandchildren. Four generations later, my niece sees it now in her home. An original is created by the objectification of the photograph and does not transfer inherently with the image itself.

Digital photography undermines the possibility of a photograph to achieve this level of objectification. The abundance of images creates a glut that does not allow one image to rise to this sacred level. In stark contrast to my great-grand parents with a single image to celebrate their wedding, my cousin had over a thousand images taken at hers. The ability to shoot on continuous shooting mode has eradicated the idea of a singular "special moment" since the photographer now capturers so many moments.

It used to be when we would get a roll of film developed we would also get a print of each image taken. The good images, the bad, the blurry and poorly composed or exposed, we would get a copy of each of them. These images remain as a part of our visual photographic experience.

When I look through an old photo album of my grandmother's, many of the images pasted are blurry and cropped. While I look at it I question, why did you take this shot and why did you take the time to paste it in a photo album? These questions and my curiosity about her early life allow me to keep a connection open with her even though she has passed. That experience will be impossible for the current generation. My niece has had thousands of images taken of her. Formal portraits, snapshots, and videos; our family documents her entire existence. Not one of these photographs was taken on film and only a small percentage of them exist off the screen. The images that are deemed to be the best of the best are printed and shared. The photographs deemed bad get deleted, and their insight into the way we see and how we live is eliminated with it.

I am able to get lost in a box of family photos. I can sit and flip through hundreds of images I took with my bright blue plastic Fisher Price 110mm camera. Harshly lit with flashbulbs and oddly composed, I documented family dinners, vacations, and holidays through my six-year-old perspective. These images were never put into albums, but instead remain in boxes to be sifted through and valued in their own right. Though the memories that are conjured up while sitting among plies of photographs and images of the past may not be accurate, the act itself becomes ritual. How will the next generation be able to remember if there are no outcast photographs to look through? My three-year-old niece recently took my phone to look at pictures stored on it. While she had it, she snapped a picture of her mother. The image is candid, slightly blurry. My sister-in-law is un-posed and unaware she is having her photograph taken. My first instinct was to delete it. It is not the most attractive photo, and I would never have any need of it. As a digital file, it occupies limited memory space on my phone. Instead, I saved it. Someday my niece will be able to see her mother again as she did as a toddler. She will be able to return to a time in her life she may not remember. This allows the photograph to serve in its role as a "memory maker."

In *Safety Film,* video serves as a way to document the destruction of my grandfather's film. Sifting through my grandfather's photographs and negatives became a way to attempt to discover a man I barely knew and hardly remember. Though the photographic stills accompany the piece, video is necessary to fully convey the sense of loss that happened during the process. The photographs alone don't speak completely to the destruction of memory until they are installed with the video. The video is more successful in speaking to the emotional aspects of the process, where the photographs document the possibility of beauty in the destruction.

Figure 12: *Safety Film* Video and Stills

How will our connections to the past occur in the digital era? In our post-film world, can a photograph become a sacred object and if it can't, do we retain our connection to the past? Can flicking through images on a screen create the same sense of ritual as sorting through a box of

prints? My work grapples with the difficulty of the loss photographic traditions, memory, and connecting to the past.

THE DEGRADATION OF THE PHOTOGRAPHIC MEDIUM

We embrace media to aid our ability to remember. Old videos and photos represent times past and people lost. But what if the media fails? Cassette tapes degrade and stretch, photographs fade and tear, memory cards and hard drives fail. The way that we make images is in continual flux and like our ability to remember, media is both fragile and fallible.

At first thought, the digital revolution solved many of our analog problems. Digital images, stored as binary code, are not susceptible to physical damage like our optical prints are. A digital photograph's colors remain vibrant on the screen, unaffected by UV rays which can slowly degrade a traditional photographic print. We can email and digitally send our photographs to one another instantaneously; no more waiting for film developing or double prints.

In reality, digital preservation of memory is just as problematic as our analog methods. Computer hard drives are as vulnerable to a magnet as a cassette tape. We no longer get photographic prints made and our albums are stored on our phones and tablets that can be easily misplaced or stolen. The binary code, which isn't susceptible to physical degradation, can be corrupted and no matter how many backups of our digital photographs we may create, there is still no guarantee that the image file will survive and be compatible and viewable for our future decedents.

Jpegs are the universal image file of the 21st century. They can be viewed on the web and opened on any computer platform. Despite this open access platform for imagery, this most common file type for digital capture degrades every time it is opened and saved. It seems almost impossible to believe a file format that we are so reliant on has only existed for a little over two

decades. With such little time in existence, it seems impossible to know how well these files will be preserved.

Re Corded Re Membered, like *Safety Film,* explores the problems we encounter when relying on media to aid in our memory. Where the visual experience is essential in the latter, sound takes precedence in *Re Corded Re Membered.* In a search for a particular recording of my grandfather's voice, I discovered the audio had been lost, taped over by preparations for school reports, multiplication tables, and music. Since the media destroyed in the processes were cassette tapes, a more explanatory narrative was essential in the video to convey the message of the piece.

Figure 13: *Re Corded Re Membered*

The difficulty in our quest to create a complete photographic record of our lives makes me question if we are meant to accurately remember. Is the difficulty in archiving photographs and video a reflection the difficulty of remembering and memorializing ourselves for future generations? Photographs, as well as video and audio recordings link us to our past, but they also impede our ability to recall the past based on memory itself. The more we look at photographs and watch video, the more we remember the images of the event instead of the event itself. When we're gone, we leave behind a photographic archive that doesn't necessarily contain context. There is a poetic quality that these visual aids to our memory should be as unstable and nontransferable as our memories themselves.

HAIR | HEIR EXHIBITION

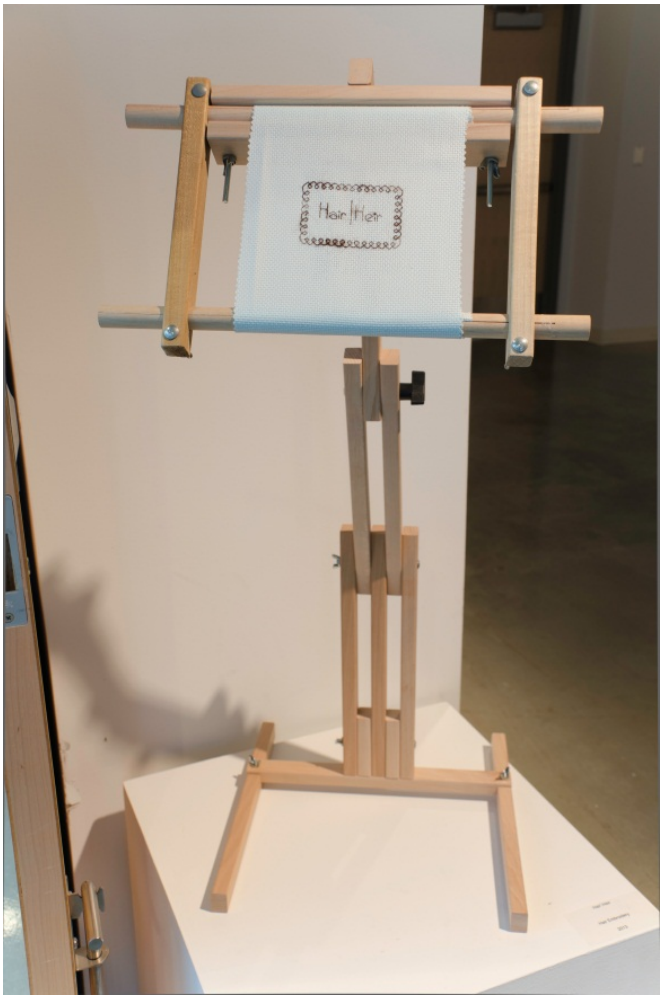

Figure 14: *Hair | Heir*

Our recollections and family histories are human constructs created by human memory, which though often inaccurate, serve an important purpose in keeping us connected to the past and grounding us in the present. It does not matter if how we remember an event as how it actually

occurred. What matters for each of us is what we hold in our minds and what we accept as reality. My use of appropriated family photos, stories, and genealogy in my work makes reference to these constructs.

Figure 15: Panoramic View of Hair | Heir Installation

When I am working on a piece, I first determine the best media with which to express my idea. I create and display my images in a way that informs the viewer of the meaning behind the piece. I recognize the inherent meaning materials like appropriated photographs and hair can carry with them and utilize and exploit that in my artwork. I do not pigeonhole myself to a specific style or way of making artwork. Photography is a tool for me to be able to create art, but it is not the only way I practice as an artist. For me, it is not important to be recognized as a photographer, but instead as an artist.

This flexibility in my work practice allows me to experiment with both mixed media and video during the creation of this body of work. Though mixed media has been part of my art practice for some time, video is a new addition. Video became increasingly more important as my work progressed. The use of the moving image and audio allows me more freedom when investigating complexities in my themes of memory, loss, and history that were proving difficult to fully explore through photography alone.

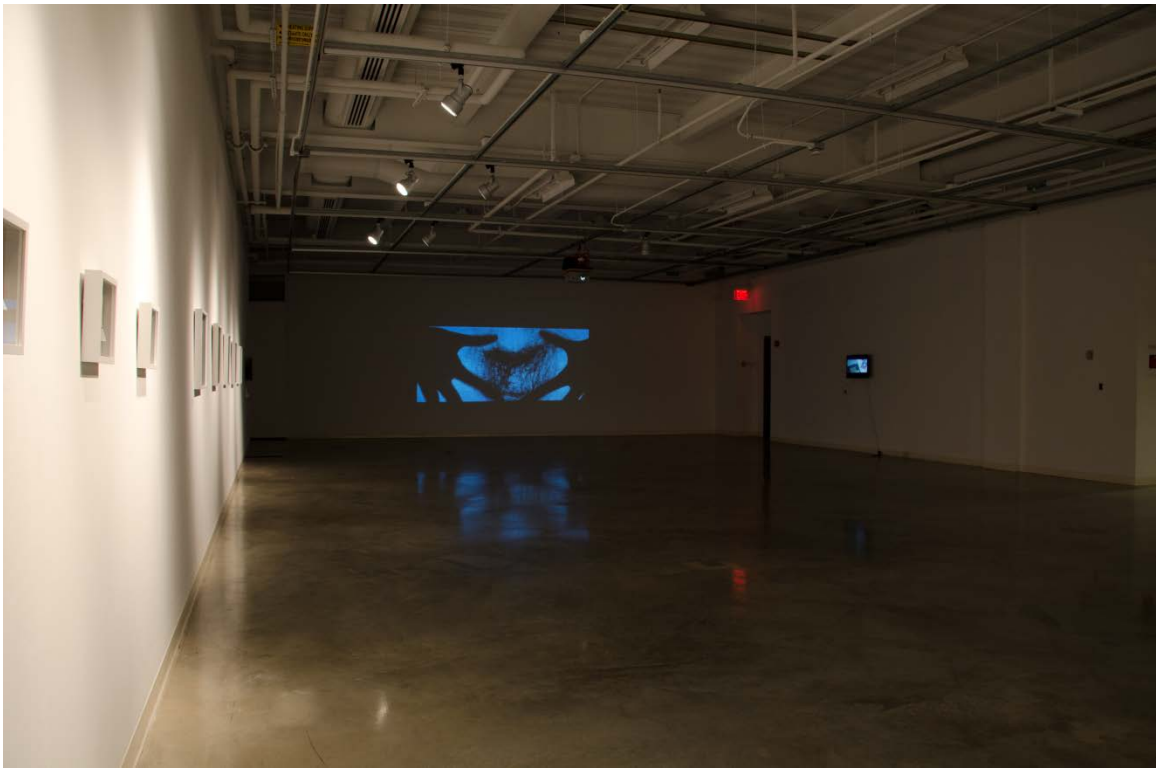

Figure 16: Installation Image from Hair | Heir

The work in the exhibition can function as smaller vignettes or series. For example, prior to the Hair | Heir exhibition, the series *She Always Wanted to Be a Blonde* was displayed on two separate occasions. This is also true for *Common Threads* and several of the videos. Though they were created as individual series, when they were displayed for the first time together in Hair | Heir, I was able to see how much they informed each other when they occupied the same space. When they speak to each other, they create a much greater impact on the viewer and the exhibition space.

Figure 17: Installation view of Hair | Heir

A body of work based on family stories and genealogy may be perceived as being too personal and too sentimental to hold the interest of a general audience. What I discovered in creating these pieces is although they are inspired by my personal history, they also touch on universal experiences. The sense of loss after realizing a cassette tape of a loved one has been taped over, the frustration and sadness from destroyed negatives and photographs, and the need to discover one's heritage are experiences shared by many, even if the inspiration of the story comes from another's family. This work transcends the potential pitfall of simply retelling family stories and dry genealogical facts. Instead, it employs a personal narrative to connect to the larger themes of loss and memory. By focusing on my hair and objects like cassette tapes and negatives, instead of my facial features, I've created a story that remains ambiguous enough for

many to connect to their own memories and family connections rather than as spectators of my experience.

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BIOGRAPHY

Stephanie T. Booth (b. 1981 in Alexandria, Virginia) is a working artist in the Washington D.C. area. She attended Mary Washington College and graduated, with honors, in 2004 with a BA in Studio Art and Art History. She worked as an art educator for Fairfax County Public Schools for six years and concurrently earned an MIS in studio art with concentrations in Mixed Media and Computers in the Arts from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2007.

Stephanie has shown extensively both in and out of the Washington metropolitan area. Her art has been featured in galleries in New York, Chicago, and Washington D.C. and Internationally in Nantong, China. Her series *Spinster* was published in The Washington Post in 2010 as a finalist in the Real Art DC contest. Stephanie's work finds the intersections between photography, mixed media, and fiber arts.