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# Keeper of Lost Things

Sheila Valentin

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KEEPER OF LOST THINGS

A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

Sheila Valentin

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

May 2019

Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
School of Graduate Studies and Research  
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*Keeper of Lost Things* is an exhibition examining how memory, time, and space can affect self-conceptualization and shape one's lived experiences. This art exhibition consists of sculptures that are interconnected through the use of language, materials, and space. My artwork draws from personal narratives of women who have struggled with loss and emotional pain, yet who have gained strength and comfort through their pursuit of self-identity. The constructed and assembled forms are made from building materials and found objects which reflect home and private spaces. Materials such as plaster, beeswax, and string are incorporated into the pieces to reflect the idea of kept memories and time passed. Overall, *Keeper of Lost Things* is a visual testimony of selected moments of women's lives, a metaphorical journal.

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To God be all the Glory.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
I	INTRODUCTION .....	1
II	VESSELS: HOME AND BODY .....	3
III	THE IMPACT OF MEMORY .....	11
IV	SELF CONCEPTUALIZATION AND OBJECTS .....	17
V	EXHIBITION ANALYSIS.....	22
VI	CONCLUSION.....	36
	WORKS CITED .....	38

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure		Page
1	She served well .....	24
2	Susan came for tea .....	25
3	She only wanted to see the sky meet the land from her bed .....	26
4	So emotional .....	28
5	The <del>American</del> Dream.....	30
6	Momma mends the brokenness.....	31
7	With Good Intentions.....	32
8	Dearly Departed .....	35
9	Dearly Departed, detail .....	35
10	Gallery view of <i>Keeper of Lost Things</i> .....	37

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

*In a home, there is a room, a private space. In that room, there is a dresser of drawers. On that dusty dresser, amidst the clutter of books, earrings and beaded bracelets, folded clothes, hair ties and coins there is a small pile of tightly closed dried yellow rose blossoms. The dead roses lay carefully in a small handmade copper dish. They have lost their fragrance, they are fragile, and are seemingly without purpose. Yet the roses are being carefully kept and protected, and even somewhat displayed, for they hold more significance than meets the eye. They carry a time, a place, and a feeling. They possess an ability to soothe, to reassure, and to confirm. They play an important part in the perception and realization of the keeper's story and identity. They are far from powerless.*

*For she is the Queen Bee, the  
keeper of lost things.*

I create sculptures and art installations that are both representational and metaphorical of private spaces and the stories found therein. My work is a reflection of the home as a place where we live and develop, a place of change, and where we are united into an intimate experience with ourselves and others.

*Keeper of Lost Things*, a mixed-medium art installation, is a response to my research concerning private spaces, memory, and identity; as well as an analysis of personal life events and a desire to evoke empathy and provoke reflective thinking. My thesis exhibition reflects the junctures in one's life and the burdens and blessings that accompany them. The installation consists of abstract, constructed and assembled sculptures that are representations of an event, a person, or season of life. The materials and processes I use communicate attachment to the past and the value placed on it, while creating a visual representation of the things one holds onto, emotionally, mentally, and physically.

Using an anthropological approach, I collect accounts of people's lives through working to understand their learned behaviors, beliefs, and ways of life. Non-linear timelines are an essential part of my collective process, as the concept of time is essential to the creating and keeping of memories, as well as the forming of identities and perceptions in one's life. My art

takes these components and brings them together into a visual and perceived language of private spaces that are communicative of events. The work denotes memory and emotion, using objects and materials to narrate glimpses of personal histories. The sculptures are a kind of marking, a visual timeline, a recording and keeping of moments. Lastly and more specifically, my art draws from stories of absence and mourning, regrets and responses, as the essence of memory is manifested in our physical beings through emotional states and personal narratives.

## CHAPTER II

### VESSELS: HOME AND BODY

Vessels hold, contain, protect, carry. Sometimes they are open, other times they are closed. Vessels are not only seen as full, but as empty. The contents of a vessel can vary drastically. The contents can be physical, emotional, or spiritual, with all different associations and meanings. The vessel can be recognized as purely functional, symbolic, decorative, personal, or private. Vessels can be used for ceremonial, wartime, utilitarian, or religious purposes. Lastly, many of these examples of a vessel can be found in a home which in itself, is a vessel.

My artwork specifically examines the role of the home, for it is the quintessential private space. It is in this private space that identities are formed, secrets are kept, personal narratives are written, loss is kept, and memories live. In our homes the essence of memory is manifested through the objects we choose to surround ourselves with, and ultimately hold onto. Oftentimes, these kept memories and objects are found in intimate containers or carefully chosen spaces within the home. In this current body of work, I am particularly interested in the body and the home serving as vessels. More specifically I am interested in how these forms hold stored emotions that are associated with loss and mourning, and how they are used to help in the development of one's self concept.

The home as a vessel can look and function differently for people. Home can be a place of comfort, a place of escape, and sometimes the only place for one's privacy. Home can provide contentment and security. It can be a space where self is actualized and grown. Although when home is without these various essential significations one's identity can be greatly impacted, negatively effecting the value we place on it. In the making of a home, objects play a large part, for we attach meaning to them and give them value. For some, that value is based on

consumerism and culture, making the importance of home more objectified. For me, as a woman and mother, the significance of the home is based on the nurture and protection found there, the lives that abide within and their personal development as individuals. The idea of home is expressed more subjectively in my art making. Regardless of the type of value placed on the home, it is indeed a place of human life and emotions, making the role of the home a vital part of the formation of one's identity (Douglas).

In view of the aforementioned signification of home and objects, I have sought to answer the following questions: How do we view and interpret our personal spaces, and does our space influence our self-concept? What role do personal objects play in the private spaces in our lives and what significance do the objects have in the forming of our memories?

On the condition that the home is a living space for an individual(s) or families, providing a place for rest, nourishment, and care, I will build upon the idea of the home as a vessel and its importance and purpose in self-concept (or in its role of building a personal narrative), and refer to it as the home-vessel. The home-vessel is made up of smaller compartments that I will refer to as private spaces. The home-vessel holds human lives and things, both tangible and non-tangible, such as objects and memories. The souls within the home are vessels as well, storing emotions and life. I cite this vessel as a soul-vessel. It not only holds and encapsulates memory and emotion, but it also produces thoughts, leaves a record of events, and forms identities and perceptions, ultimately creating narratives. These narratives are spoken in a unique and personal language based the character and experience of each individual soul-vessel. Like a journal holds language and documentation of events, feelings, and ideas, so does the soul-vessel. An imprint is left on the soul-vessel after a significant event, tragedy, or emotionally charged experience. A

recording of feelings is left within the construct of a human being after having experienced joy, sadness, pleasure, or pain (Seppala).

In creating mixed-medium sculptures and installations that are expressive of the home as a vessel I am influenced by the artwork of Louise Bourgeois and Rachel Whiteread. Both of these women artists create representations and abstractions of interior spaces and nooks in the home to create dialogue between the viewer and their work. Louise Bourgeois addresses the body as a vessel of stored emotions and memories, while Rachel Whiteread focuses on the body in relation to the home and its contents. These artists integrate the theme of home into the notion of memory. Bourgeois's work has a strong autobiographical nature, as she creates art by pulling from her own memories rooted in childhood, traumas, and unresolved struggles. Whiteread's work exhibits memory of physical space, and the relationship between people and those spaces relating to memory. Bourgeois and Whiteread both use materials primarily monochromatic in color and create forms that are minimalistic in style (Cajori & Wallach; Gallagher).

Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010), a French-American artist, is best known for her large-scale sculptures and installation art. Her work has ascribed to surrealism and feminism but has also been noted as being unable to place in a specific art movement. In a thought-provoking manner, Louise Bourgeois tied deep-rooted narratives and somewhat unresolved struggles into her art installations. Examining the sculptural work of Louise Bourgeois, we find an unveiling of the chapters of her life. Bourgeois made sixty significant installations in twenty years, which she called *Cells* (Bourgeois; Müller-Westermann). These pieces had a strong architectural presence in the form of a fully enclosed cage structure resembling a room or in a large steel spider form. In 1997, she created *Spider (Cell)*, in which she incorporated both the cage and the large spider form. *Spider (Cell)* was made of steel, tapestry, wood, glass, fabric, rubber, silver, gold, and

bone. The spider form and choice of materials is directly linked to her mother who was a tapestry restorer. The chosen objects are connected to the idea of memory and were very significant to her (Cajori & Wallach). She once stated in an interview with the MoMA that “Clothing is...an exercise of memory... It makes me explore the past... how did I feel when I wore that...” (Hutchinson). Bourgeois’s *Cells* are a beautiful culmination of her influences, practices and themes, yet also a place where she analyzed her pain, memory, anxiety, and the fear of abandonment. Aside from the metal framework of the physical cells/rooms and spider forms, her sculptures and installations were made of found objects, personal artifacts and symbols from her own subconscious. She would often hand-stitch and hand-write text onto elements within the pieces, and seldomly, yet contextually used color (Furtado). It is this particular style of art making that I find to be most illustrative of how an artist can so beautifully and powerfully communicate personal narratives, loss, and memory through sculptural forms and materials. It is Louise Bourgeois’ intensity and passion, her forthrightness and independence that has been influential to me as artist and a woman for many years.

Rachel Whiteread (b. 1963) is a British sculptor, living and working in London, England. Whiteread is noted for her very large, cast sculptures of the interiors of homes, other architectural spaces, and domestic objects. Although Whiteread’s work has such a strong presence due to the monumental qualities, there is also a quiet presence due to the minimal and pure aesthetic. It is this quiet presence that Rachel Whiteread strives for as she desires for her sculptural work to give the viewer, as she states, “a moment of pause and quiet...a moment of reverie—just standing, dreaming, and thinking” (Burns par. 20). Themes of absence, memory, and loss are evident in her forms as she carefully considers the materials being used and spaces being cast. She primarily works in plaster, resin, concrete, and rubber as she casts negative

spaces inside, underneath, and around three dimensional domestic and architectural objects such as sinks, stairs, and doors (Evening Standard). Whiteread also chooses objects for their contextual value, and at times for their psychological resonance, as in *Shallow Breath* (1988). *Shallow Breath*, which is a cast of the underside of a mattress chosen because it was representational of her father's death that took place in bed. Art critic, Matthew Collings, writes that Whiteread made this piece "as a personal act of remembrance and of preserving intimate moments of sleeping and dreaming" (Collings par. 9).

Whiteread's ability to reinforce the power of memory through objects is something that directly influences my art. Whiteread has a way of veiling objects and honoring moments in time through her use of a single material, chosen cast objects, and through her poetic juxtaposition of forms in a given space. It is the reasoning behind these actions that I emulate in my art, yet through a different means. For example, Whiteread may use a pure stark white plaster to create a sculpture of the underneath space of a desk, communicating the ghost of a space and the stillness of a time. While I, on the other hand, drape a form in a white cloth striving to communicate the same message of reflection and memory. Another example of Rachel Whiteread's influence in my art practice is in the aesthetic of her finished forms. Whiteread conveys a simplicity and honesty in the way she handles the materials. For example, cracks in the plaster forms, debris on the surface of cast objects, and seams between cast forms. In my work, I strive to illustrate the same genuine and handmade feel. Some examples are hand stitched language on cloth, loose threads, and clear evidence of my processes (brush strokes of beeswax, hand marks in plaster, torn edges of pages). Lastly, Whiteread's repetition of elements and analogous aesthetic creates a sense of existence, a type of sculptural mark-making of an event. Also, in her positioning of forms in and around an exhibition space, Whiteread creates a

narrative for the viewer that is both contemplative and ethereal. Rachel Whiteread's vast and intuitive body of work spanning the last fifteen years has been very inspirational to me as a sculptor. Her ability to capture the unseen in a solid form, exuding wonderment and encouraging reflection, is very helpful to me as I too make art that is often driven by things unseen.

Similarly, on the topic of home and objects, I relate philosophically to the late French philosopher Gaston Bachelard (1888-1962) and his writings on personal experiences within lived-in spaces. Gaston Bachelard is best known for his contributions in the field of poetics and philosophy of science. And it is Bachelard's book, *The Poetics of Space*, that has been influential to me in my current body of artwork. In *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard examines the home as an expression of the soul, with a focus on our intimate and emotional responses to domestic places. He also looks into more specific spatial types within the home, such as chests and drawers, attics and cellars, nooks and corners. And like Bachelard, I explore these private spaces in my artmaking as places where we are molded and shaped, where we think and grow (Bachelard).

In addition, I am influenced by Bachelard's philosophical idea that the home consists of both unity and complexity, and memories and experiences. The different parts of the home awaken different emotions and yet they bring up a personal and private experience of living. In *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard creates poetic imagery in his work as a result of what he sees in the private spaces in which we live. Similar to Rachel Whiteread, Bachelard also sees the home as a place of intimacy and memory (Bachelard). As a sculptor, Whiteread manifests this idea in the form of cast objects made of various materials such as plaster, resin, and rubber; while Bachelard writes philosophy. Also, the notion of thoughts and objects acting as a way of connecting the past to the present is a shared belief between the sculptor and poet.

The idea of home is the foundation for the cogitation and research behind my art work. It is the place that holds the stories of loss and sadness that are relevant to my work. The home is also the place that holds the secrets and inter-workings behind the stories. Bachelard states that the moments in these domestic spaces are where things “begin anew.” (Bachelard xviii) In this realm of thinking Bachelard encourages us to become readers and writers of our own lives. To accomplish this, we need to experience intimacy in the private spaces in our homes. As Bachelard addresses the home in imaginary dimensions, he leads us through different portals, leaving the reader to embark on various interpretations of this intimate space. He breaks down the walls of the home and opens it up to mysteries, childhood memories, the collective unconscious, dreams, and the intricacy of the insiderness and outsiderness of private niches within. These are the places that I work from to make the art that I do. It is in these places that I see the secluded and quiet histories of our lives being created, kept, and cherished. Like Bachelard, I see the function and purpose behind the rooms and things in our homes, such as the cellar or a drawer. On the other hand, I also see how they are not just spaces or objects, rather entranceways into our own consciousness and platforms for identifying self and experiences. Just as physical space requires being brought under control and materialized to create a house, so do physical beings need to be constructed and regarded to create self. For example, through the moments we share with the objects and spaces in our homes, we enter into a relationship with ourselves where we establish the foundations and the scaffolding of our souls. In the stillness of those places, we can enter into what Bachelard calls “fertile laziness” (Danielewski & Kearney par. 21). This act of allowing ourselves to dream, imagine, feel, and think allows an inpouring of spiritual, mental, and emotional nourishment into our beings, bringing about solid growth. Therefore, this physical structure, the home, is vital in cultivating self-concept and in providing a

transparency through which we see and understand the world around us. Bachelard speaks of homes as havens. Homes are our safe place, or at least they should be. The home provides care and comfort for our bodies and minds. And with this kind of private space we can escape the circumstances of life and the harshness of our world. In response the idea of home being a place of being anchored, found, or revived, I quote Gaston Bachelard:

We comfort ourselves by reliving memories of protection. Something closed must retain our memories, while leaving them their original value as images. Memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home and, by recalling these memories, we add to our store of dreams; we are never real historians, but always near poets, and our emotion is perhaps nothing but an expression of a poetry that was lost. (6)

In essence, the home-vessel memorializes birth and rebirth of one's self, of relationships, and of events, through the reoccurring appearance of objects and the solidarity of spaces within the home. And like Louise Bourgeois, Rachel Whiteread, and Gaston Bachelard I use a metaphoric and poetic language through the use of materials and processes to create art to illustrate these ideas. With the home being an actual construction of a place, as well as virtual dwelling for human development and interaction, I create art forms that invite viewers in for a closer look into their own their own private spaces of home and body.

## CHAPTER III

### THE IMPACT OF MEMORY

*Looking into the old wooden box that sits majestically on the shelf of the bookcase, she gazes at the tattered black silk ribbon, hanging loosely from a round and underestimated pin. She remembers being unfortunate enough to be anchored to reality on a cold, grey February afternoon. Standing amongst sounds of sorrow and pain, still in the drizzling rain, there was that black silk ribbon secured tightly to her lapel. Like a shield of armor, she pretended it was there to protect her broken heart. But the silk shield was not strong enough to withstand the memory of him, for Shiva awaited her.*

It was after experiencing much mourning and tragedy in my own life, that I came to a better understanding of the body being a home for stored memory and suffering. In response to this revelation, I create forms that are representational of the body and/or the spaces that intersect with the body. These forms are found or created containers that are either left empty or that hold items that are, or once were, precious and important. Yet sometimes the container-like forms hold objects that are connected to pain and sadness. Concealing or keeping objects connects us to past events or personal histories. The objects themselves and the act of keeping them is a way of storing fragments of times past. And the memories associated with them compose narratives.

The pieces in my exhibition are small segments of life stories belonging to others and myself. They are comparable to sentences within a chapter of a book. They are remnants of biographies threaded together to represent the similitude of humanity. In our homes we exhibit fragments of times in our lives through the objects that we choose to surround ourselves with. Many of the objects in our lived-in spaces hold claim to an abundance of memories, connecting us back to other lifetimes. I find inspiration and context for my artwork in the notion of memories being linked to both time and place. I embrace a non-linear approach to artmaking to mimic the concept of time memory. Time memory pertains to the sought-out answers of a precise life event. There are two factors that help to determine this, location (where this event

happened) and distance (how far in the distant past did this experience take place), both of which are commonly found in the studies of autobiographical memory. There are eight different theories of time memory, only two of which are influential and of interest to me and my art making. The two theories I ascribe to are close in common to the abovementioned conceptions: distance-based theory and location-based theory. W.J. Freidman, professor of psychology at Oberlin College, Ohio best explains, “The distance theory assumes that time judgments are based on processes that operate between the time that a stimulus is encoded and the time of retrieval” (Freidman 166). Another aspect to this theory is that of memory-traces and how they appear when an event takes place but “decay progressively with the passage of time” (Freidman 166). Additionally, is the idea that memory is organized chronologically, based on the natural order of life events and the feelings associated with them. Through estimating the amount of time between the event and the present moment, memories are established and stored. Another theory is that factors such as distance between when something is actually experienced and then recalled, or the number of events in an amount of time can affect the accuracy of the memory, changing our perceptions of people and places. Location theories do not rely on the age of a memory. Instead location theory is grounded on the idea of where an event happens and when the memory is later retrieved (Freidman 166). I adhere to these theories on the establishing of memories as I approach the making of my work and the overall assemblage and exhibition of the work within a given space.

Memories give objects life, making them of more interest, and more relatable, filled with much meaning. When individuals interact with objects, they bring substance to the forms, they bring their own memories. This in turn affects the outcome of how these objects are placed in a space, as well as the story imputed to the object. Ultimately, the weaving of memories grants a

new identity to the object, giving it a soul. Gaston Bachelard states that giving objects a kind of friendship is what they deserve, helping to give them meaning and value (Bachelard). The keeping of objects and how we relate to them is an important aspect in how we process past events and in how we perceive things to be true or not. Objects keep memories alive and memories help form our personal histories. Siegfried Kracauer explains in his essay, *Memory Images* (1927) that our memory does not pay attention to exact details, dates, or times. Our memory is not like a photograph where everything is captured in sight. Our minds filter out details that are irrelevant and without significance, creating memory images. These images are stored in our consciousness and subconsciousness and in no particular order, they are fragments. Memories are linked to their truth content which is not always accurate, making the “images opaque, like frosted glass which scarcely a ray of light can penetrate” (Kracauer 51). The more our consciousness is freed up, the clearer the memory, the more truth it contains. (Kracauer)

In my experiences learning about the personal narratives of women, I have seen how memories are collected and stored in the body and in the home, helping to create a person’s actual history. It is in this collecting of memories and the forming of one’s private history that I create art. More specifically, it is the sometimes-clouded memories, the redefined moments, and the fragmentation of events that has led me to the aesthetic of my work and the processes in which I work. For example, to illustrate a memory that is filled with uncertainty I use materials that are weak and loosely held together with thread. To show a time in one’s life where there was a lack of foundation, I introduce forms that exhibit fragility and a sense of physical instability.

Congruent with my approach to making is Columbian artist Doris Salcedo, who is very influential to my art practice. Salcedo is best known for making powerful political sculptures,

installation, and performance art that is strongly influenced by her experiences in Colombia; primarily by the sufferings and travesties that Colombians have had to endure. Salcedo's sculptures and installation art speaks to the ideas of mourning, loss, narratives, and namely, memory. She creates from a historical point of view, conveying the burdens and battles that friends and family have experienced as their loved ones have gone missing in the Colombian War. Salcedo works with materials such as wooden furniture, clothing, concrete, grass, and rose petals. These materials paired with processes such as filling, sewing, and reconstructing address forgetting and memory, while creating conversation about collective mourning and offerings (Princenthal).

Salcedo states, "If we do not know our past, we cannot face our present or our future" (Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago). And it is this belief that I cling to in my own life and in my art making. The acknowledgement of the past and the memories associated with it, lead me to the choices I make in my own work, in regard to my chosen materials, objects, and sought-after experiences for my viewers. An example of this would be my own personal acknowledgement of a failed marriage, as well as the processing of those memories and pains associated with that. The demise of that relationship was directly connected to home and my identity as a wife and mother. This action led me to the choice of building materials in my art, such as drywall and lumber, found objects, and cloth, which are used in constructing a house and creating a home. Additionally, revisiting past experiences birthed a method of working in my art practice where I correlate actions and emotions to a specific way of handling materials. An example of this would be the *act of being forgotten* portrayed by encasing an object in a beeswax and placing it in a box-like form. Using this process, I build and finish my artwork in a rudimentary style, such as leaving loose threads, stripped out screw heads, or imperfect wood

cuts thus creating a hand-made aesthetic. It is this step in my process that helps to make the expressed memories more impactful and poetic, while emphasizing the voice of the narrator and the passage of time.

In addressing time and its place in our lives, Doris Salcedo's *Unland* series, most commonly known as "Memory Sculpture", is a powerful illustration of the flow of time, as it presents the past of her own country of Colombia to the international art audience. Salcedo does this through using objects from the past, drenched in history. In an interview with Carlos Basualdo, Doris Salcedo describes this memory as, "memory at the edge of an abyss...memory in the literal sense...and memory as process" (Salcedo, Basualdo, Princenthal, & Huyssen 101). *Unland* is made up of three different, yet related works: *Unland: the orphan's tunic*, *Unland: irreversible witness*, and *Unland: audible in the mouth*. The works are made from two tables joined together to create one long table. Each table has thousands of tiny holes drilled into the surface, housing human hair and silk that is sewn throughout. These dismembered tables speak to broken family and home, and how they are being held together quite precariously. *Unland* is a word invented by Salcedo, meaning *displacement*. The process behind this piece is very inspirational to my work, in how the artist takes materials and methods of constructing to communicate an action being experienced or felt (Barson).

Another piece that uses materials minimally and ever so delicately, as well as processes that are expressive and deliberate is *Flor de Piel* (2013), a large installation consisting of hundreds of thousands of hand-sewn red rose petals that create an eleven-foot by sixteen-foot tapestry. *Flor de Piel* shows forth Salcedo's commitment to her work and to her passions through her exuberant amount of sewing, as a gesture of repair and healing, as well as wounding. The presence of the color red in this work is somewhat sobering, as it lay across the floor like a

shroud, suggesting the vulnerability of life and death. The sewn form is quite fragile, which also lends itself to the context of the piece, as does the positioning of the form in the gallery space, laying on the floor (Barson). The solemn historical and human presence of this piece speaks directly to the art I am making about sadness and loss. The connection between the materials and the context, as well as the repetitive process of hand stitching and exhibiting the work have been specifically influential to me.

## CHAPTER IV

### SELF-CONCEPTUALIZATION AND OBJECTS

The understanding and awareness of one's self, how one thinks, evaluates, and perceives themselves is self-conceptualization. Self-concept theory is found in different areas of study, namely psychology and sociology. Dimensions of self-concept have been agreed upon amongst researchers and have been proven to effect various areas of one's life. Some of these areas include self-esteem, self-worth, self-image, identities and/or roles, and personalities. Self-concept is vital for growth and development in humans. And although the theory of self-concept reaches into areas of adolescence, culture, academics, careers, and communication, my artwork draws from theories of self-concept in regard to relationships and identity (Ackerman).

The quest for self is, unfortunately, not a common exploration for women. Women are often responsible for and to many people, maintaining various roles (Ackerman). For example, roles such as caretakers, nurturers, employees, and leaders; more specifically as wives, mothers, and daughters. It is common for women to look at the duties they perform and the people around them to define who they are. This happens subtly as women are pulled in different directions. These influences or perspectives are silent and external, keeping women from hearing their own thoughts, opinions, or passions. Typically, women prioritize their thinking outwardly, placing emphasis on others and the world around us. This can become unhealthy for the mind, body, and soul. Research has proven that looking inwardly, allowing the mind to be free from distractions and pressures, especially during times of conflict and stress, can help alleviate such issues and heal our bodies (Seppala). When we shift outward oriented reasoning to a more self-reflective understanding and acknowledging we enter into subjectivism or subjective knowing.

Subjective knowing means that the truth now resides within the person and can negate answers that the outside world provides. One of the many positive results of subjective thinking is a developed and strengthened intuition. Unfortunately, for some women this does not come easily or naturally. For to grow one's intuition, one must be confident with an awareness of their own value. As women grow to understand their value, that they are not alone, and that they can lean on themselves, they begin to grasp the notion and nature of internal authority, versus external. The concept of authority increases intuition and ultimately creates a healthy mindset and belief system. Authors Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule write in *A Woman's Way of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (1997) that the understanding of authority comes from an emergence of self, sense of agency, and control. Authority and subjectivism help to build self-confidence and a clearer sense of self-conscious and self-concept.

Much of the content behind my artwork is fueled by women who struggle with identity or have overcome the loss of self. I have found in my collecting of accounts of women's personal experiences that as they look inwardly for answers and solutions, they begin to discover their likes, dislikes, opinions, and feelings. Sometimes as a result of this reflective process, life as they know it begins to change, and that change sometimes involves pain, sadness, brokenness, and loss.

Subjectivism is a way of approaching issues or events based on what is felt or experienced, versus a constructed approach. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule's research also showed that women who embraced the process of looking inward to gain knowledge "found a new and fascinating object for study: the self" through listening to the "still small voice" inside themselves (84). And with the personal listening, research showed that it

was also through observing themselves and observing others that the women in their studies became better listeners, more connected to others, with a need to understand the people around them and who are woven into their lives. Subjectivist knowing has proven to be quite significant for women, freeing them from old thoughts that kept them in chains to hurt and sadness, and thoughts that kept them silent. (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule)

As an artist, I take these self-reflective experiences in women's lives and I allow them to be an integral part of my work. I am interested in how self-care and internal authority all work together to help women discover their inner power, as they gain new and healthier views of themselves and their circumstances. Through the use of materials that are contextually charged and processes that show forth evidence of mindfulness, emotion, or sensitivity I create sculptures that give glimpses into the narratives of women's private lives. As I plan and construct my artwork, I am also mindful of my own journey of self-discovery. I take feelings or experiences I have had, and I match them to a word or two that best describes what I was feeling or experiencing during a noteworthy event in my life. For example, in reflecting on the last two years of my past marriage I am reminded of words such as *facade* and *fabricated*. In response to those particular words I have made sculptures that have layers of materials upon one another, such as drywall, graphite, wallpaper, and then joint compound. The layers speak to the word *facade* and are representative of my thoughts and feelings after looking inwardly after such a personal life event. The building construction aesthetic in my work is another response to experiences in my life dealing with rebuilding and initiative. Therefore, choosing the word *fabricated*, I use raw materials that are left exposed, like lumber and drywall; and the visible signs of my handwork, like stripped nail heads or tool marks along the surface of the joint

compound. Inner reflection and discovery are important aspects to the narratives I tell within my work. It creates the autobiographical and biographical voice that I use in my art making.

Self-discovery is also found through objects, due to their connection to memory. My interest in how people interact and relate to objects is a part of what drives my work. Objects from events and/or significant people in our lives become like personal artifacts symbolizing emotions and moments in time. In keeping these objects close to us in our private spaces we are preserving lived experiences. Also, as we associate with these objects, we ascribe value on the memories and the emotions that we have joined to them. This is often evidenced in how the object is kept in our private spaces. Because memories are often obscured and intangible, the objects in relation to the event often help memories to become alive, making them more lucid and relevant. As we interact with the objects that we have in our private spaces we are adding our own interpretation and meaning to the events that surround the object or the person(s) joined to it. Ultimately, we give the object a new identity, making it less of a thing and more of something with greater significance (Farr).

With a sensory and emotional connection to objects, we uncover wonderment in the physical things that we possess. This opens us up to experiencing a power hidden in the objects that is able to comfort us and align our consciousness. In this relation to objects, we bring life to the ordinary and relive personal histories. It is this life that I seek to articulate in my sculptures through the use of created forms that include everyday objects with emotional and experiential relations to home. Through visual language and expressive processes, I work to whisper the narrative behind the incorporated objects to its viewers, exposing a glimpse of time.

On the notion of objects and their influence in our lives Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule quote British-Australian scholar Sarah Ahmed, “To re-encounter objects as strange things

is hence not to lose sight of their history but to refuse to make them history by losing sight.”

Author Rosemary Lloyd writes about literature and narratives in relation to personal objects, in her book *Shimmering in a Transformed Light: Writing the Still Life*. Lloyd compares early nineteenth century to the present-day French and English-language texts to historical paintings. Taking a literary approach, she likens objects in our personal spaces to a still life, writing that the *still-life* is an avenue to encoding and defining moments in our lives. This way of looking at objects is one of interest to me and a part of my art making. For like Lloyd, I see the purposeful compositions of objects in our homes as an invitation for reflection and a deepening of self-understanding. I see objects in the home-vessel as a representation of meanings, or of events in our lives. Lloyd calls this “suggestive” still life (130), in which the displayed objects are more about the effect they produce in the beholder, and less about the nature of the realism being seen (Lloyd). In my sculptures, I use objects because of their power of suggestion, as the object has the ability to engage in the viewer’s memory or evoke emotions. I also work to achieve this through incorporating other contextual materials and occasional language in my art forms.

## CHAPTER V

### EXHIBITION ANALYSIS

As a sculptor I work intuitively with my materials and processes, and in a non-linear fashion. My choice of materials and processes are very purposeful and meaningful. In my exhibition, *Keeper of Lost Things*, I primarily use materials commonly found in the building of a house, combined with objects that are found in a home and literal and symbolic language that is personal. The aesthetic of my work is raw and seemingly unfinished, with a clear sign of the maker's hand. I commonly disguise objects and materials in a way that opens dialogue between the viewer and the art by encouraging interpretation and reflection. *Keeper of Lost Things* is an installation consisting of several pieces that make up a whole. Through language, materials, and placement of the work, I have created an invisible thread throughout the gallery space stitching the pieces together. Although each piece is independent of one another, they are interconnected through common narratives. The titles of the pieces are representative of events on a timeline. The timeline is not linear, nor is it one woman's personal timeline, but rather of several. The placement of the work in the gallery is inspired by the layout of rooms in a home, speaking to private spaces.

My art is a direct result of listening to and empathizing with others. Hearing personal stories of loss, absence, sadness, and pain has been the catalyst behind my art making and research. Personal narratives lead me to materials, and materials lead me to processes. And somewhere in there I am led to language that is directly or subtly used in my work or in the titles of my art. I also use language abstractly, through activating a material in the way it is used within the sculpture. For example, draping a transparent, fine, white cloth over a form activates the cloth element and in turn speaks of the actions *to veil* or *to mourn*. Another way I incorporate

language is through small fragments of written, stitched, or published language within the individual pieces.

The apparent crudeness in the making and assembling of my work is a direct response to being a single mother for over nine years. My chosen aesthetic and mode of working is reflective of my experiences of raising my children alone, mending broken things, making a home for my family and I, choosing my battles, and figuring out solutions to things that I sometimes know nothing about. Making the decision to create art with an unpolished and unpretentious presence is connected to my personal narrative, specifically with a strong focus on survival, intuitiveness, and resourcefulness. My work is a portrayal of all the hard work that women freely give to keep their families strong and together, using the skills and knowledge that they possess.

*"She served well"* is the first piece made for *Keeper of Lost Things* and has set the tone for this body of work. Created from lumber, metal, found wood, drapery lining, rivets, flour, kitchen gadgets, beeswax, string, and castors the piece stands approximately six foot tall. The design of the overall form is representative of a mobile clothing rack while made of wood. It has five handmade metal hangers that each have two hooks on the ends, and that are hung through the top of the wooden form. The hangers each hold a four-foot long sewn sack, roughly five inches wide, that is both machine-stitched and handsewn. The stitches are irregular and expressive, lacking continuity. The edges of the cloth forms are unhemmed and coated with beeswax. The bottoms of the sacks are filled with baking flour which cover the kitchen gadgets concealing the objects identity. The objects are then tightly stitched around with string. The hand stitching is decisive, yet erratic. The four castors below the wooden rack are clear.



Fig. 1. *She served well.*

The aesthetic of this piece is raw and natural, the design and construction are thoughtful yet elementary. With a few stripped screwheads and pencil markings on the wooden component, and long loose threads on the sacks with unfinished edges, I am again speaking to the idea of the personal and to the notion of vulnerability. The seeming functionality of “*She served well.*” is to imply a purpose to the form and evoke a storyline. The materials and title suggest women’s narratives and gender roles. There is also a slight touch of resentment as I imagined the words “*She served well,*” being spoken through gritted teeth.

In a continuation of women’s narratives, “*Susan came for tea*” represents a season in the lives of two women. This abstract and minimal sculpture is made of two forms stacked one upon the other. The larger form is approximately 5 feet tall and made of drywall, lumber, wallpaper, joint compound and mesh drywall tape. It is rectangular in shape with a slight taper at the top. It sits upon a plexi-glass box which houses a green glass saucer that is veiled in an opaque purple scarf that encloses the object by string stitching. The stitches are expressive due to the line quality and design. The drywall form has a decorative wallpaper on one side that is covered in a layer of joint compound and sanded away in spots. Additionally, the form has a three-inch hole cut into another side. The top of the form is open, yet not easily accessible to the viewer.



Fig. 2. *Susan came for tea.*

The layering of materials on the tall form speaks to the notion of covering things up, creating a facade. The exposed and unkept drywall tape, visible screwheads, and loose strings on the scarf are a type of mark-making, exhibitiv of the maker's presence. These aesthetic choices are to create transparency between me and the viewer, and to help bridge a connection between the viewer and the main character in the story of the artwork. I choose to work in this manner to convey a poetic nature and expressiveness.

The shape of the overall form is influenced by totems and monuments that mark a time in history. The placement of the plexi-glass box containing a delicate personal object, on the floor and under the weighty drywall component is about the burial of a time. The encasing of the saucer speaks to the preciousness of the object, making the object almost sacred, like an artifact. There is also a small purposeful contradiction between the assembling of the elements and the monumental form. For although the object is being treated as precious, it is also being disregarded through the placement of the object on the floor, not bringing it any honor. *Susan*

*came for tea.* is inspired by one women’s experience with deception in her marriage and her weekly confiding in a dear friend. It is about intimate conversations, sadness, and loyalty.

In looking at the home as a place of privacy and reflection, “*She only wanted to see the sky meet the land from her bed*” is a large-scale sculpture that addresses one woman’s dream of a room with a view and her desire for simplicity. This piece consists of three separate welded steel forms, each attached to wooden frames. The steel and wooden frames are larger on the bottom and smaller on the top and are each covered in white drapery lining and air duct material. There are various types of hand stitched markings on the stretched cloth panels, made of white and pale blue embroidery thread. The stitches create symbolic and almost archaic designs, inspired by picture writing and map making. Some of the stitched markings are loose and organic, while some are tight and abrupt creating almost a story board that is enigmatic. In addition to the sewn panel designs, the threads are randomly woven back and forth from the top to the bottom frames, activating the negative space and drawing the viewer’s eye from one frame to the next. One of the window-like frames has thread that extends from its top panel to the ceiling of the gallery space. The three components each sit upon six cinder blocks, elevating the piece 8 inches.



Fig. 3. *She only wanted to see the sky meet the land from her bed.*

“*She only wanted to see the sky meet the land from her bed*” is an expressive piece that is both strong and delicate in its appearance, as well as in its materials and processes. Materials, such as cloth and thread, and the hand stitching are representative of the women’s hand in the home. The placement of the windows on a concrete block wall speak to foundations and fragility. Foundations are both needed literally and metaphorically in the building of a house and home, as well as in the lives of the people in the home. The theme behind this artwork is self-conceptualization, specifically dealing with yearnings, hope, and home.

On a more intimate scale, I have shifted my attention from the larger focus of the home-vessel to private spaces within the home. “*So emotional*” is examining the personal space of containers that we keep objects and memories in. This piece consists of three desk drawers, each containing different objects representing a time in my life. One drawer holds handwritten letters surrounded by raw cotton fiber that symbolize the passing of time and thoughts. The second drawer holds a porch post that has been cut into over a hundred pieces and covered in beeswax representing a past dream. The third drawer is seemingly empty, yet it is lined with drywall covered in a layer of wallpaper, which is mostly covered by joint compound. This drawer also has a doorknob plate secured on one side. This drawer eludes to the idea of home, yet with a sense of emptiness to it. Each drawer sits on a self-made dolly that is covered in a vibrant red and white vintage drapery material. The drawers on dollies are covered in a vinyl cover that fits over the entire form. Each drawer is connected side by side to one another by a leather strap. The three connected drawers are then connected by one eight-foot strap, laying on the floor, suggesting a handle-like apparatus.

The materials and individual forms have been inspired by the idea of holding onto ideas, plans, and hopes. The drawers on moveable forms, covered in vinyl, being connected by a

handle, speak to hauling and protection. The strapping system has a sense of absurdity to it due to its design, for one can imagine how cumbersome it would be to pull these wheeled forms together. The decision to not secure the vinyl covers suggests that these objects in the drawers can be accessed. The materials are characterized by home, personal space and language. The context behind the work is about one person's need to lug around their dreams and hopes. The piece also speaks to the protection of those desires and transparency in one's life. For example, the porch post coated in beeswax, the letters engulfed in soft cotton, and the vinyl covers support this idea.



Fig. 4. *So emotional.*

In continuation of the themes of hopes and home, I created the sculpture "*The American Dream*" Overall, this small-scale piece is under three feet tall and sits on a carpet on the gallery floor. It resembles a two-story house, 1:15 scale, and made only of found wood and beeswax, no fasteners. The first floor of the house has material that looks like wallpaper on the edges of the walls, and the second floor has one Jack of Clubs playing card. Both of these minimal elements are covered in beeswax making their likeness obscured. The construction of the tiny house is

reminiscent of a dollhouse, in that the back side of the structure is open and accessible. The house is upon a solid plaster base, which is 3 inches high. The overall form sits on a circle of green outdoor carpet.

“*The ~~American~~ Dream*” is rooted in specific ideas of how women sometimes establish self-concept based on their home and the inner workings of it, such as family, roles, and responsibilities, as well as dreams. Along with the building of one’s self-concept, there can sometimes be identity conflict and disillusionment, especially in the building of a homelife and with another person. The context of this work speaks to the falsehoods that sometimes accompany promises and dreams, hence the slight “tongue in cheek” approach in making the work.

The scale of the house has been influenced by the lack of significance felt or experienced in one’s dream of a home and a family, as well as one’s perception of their actuality. Based on my own experiences and my research, I have found that having your hopes and dreams minimalized and/or abandoned is discouraging, leaving one feeling empty and alone. The materials and processes speak to these experiences. The house structure being composed of discarded and found wood with no fasteners, and beeswax addresses the constructing of a life plan that has no real hope or solidarity to it. The beeswax specifically speaks to the preservation of that plan, despite the uncertainty that might be connected to it. Although the beeswax acts as protection, it is also communicating as something not to be trusted in the holding together of the structure of the home and house. The beeswax is being used both objectively and metaphorically. The green outdoor carpet that the piece sits upon is a response to the façade, the outward appearance, that is commonly associated with the “American Dream.” The boldness in the aesthetic and the sheer artificiality of the material is my response to idea people of have of what

a home should be and look like, but that is often not reality. Lastly, the Jack of Clubs playing card speaks to games people play. This specific face card also has the meaning of a minimum standard, as well as a man who is questionable.



Fig. 5. The ~~American~~ Dream.

Sustaining the aforementioned themes, “*Momma mends the brokenness*” has been prompted by the ideas of sadness and memories. This piece addresses the role of a mother and how she mends things for others in the home. Contrarily, it is about the mother who is a human being with her own hurts and sadness. The piece was inspired by the moments in a mother’s life that are in private, the moments where the mother is mending her own brokenness.

“*Momma mends the brokenness*” is made of tissues, beeswax, and thread. The piece is suspended from the gallery ceiling, hanging in a thin vertical line. The minimal materials in this piece come together in an absurd way as the crumpled tissues are layered in beeswax and expressively hand-stitched over the surface in red thread. The tissues are then linked together by

the same thread that embellishes each individual one and is anchored to the ceiling, leaving the strand to just barely touch the floor.

This processes and material choices in this piece are packed with intent, illustrating preservation and personal narrative. Through the heavy coating of beeswax on the tissues, a visual representation of safeguarding is present, a preserving of sadness and of a time in one's personal history. Secondly, the stitches on the tissues represent the threading together of a story, a mark making of emotion. The tissues are used as a vessel just like a drawer or a cloth sack is used in my work. Lastly, the choice of red in the thread is because of its association with intensity, strength, and passion.

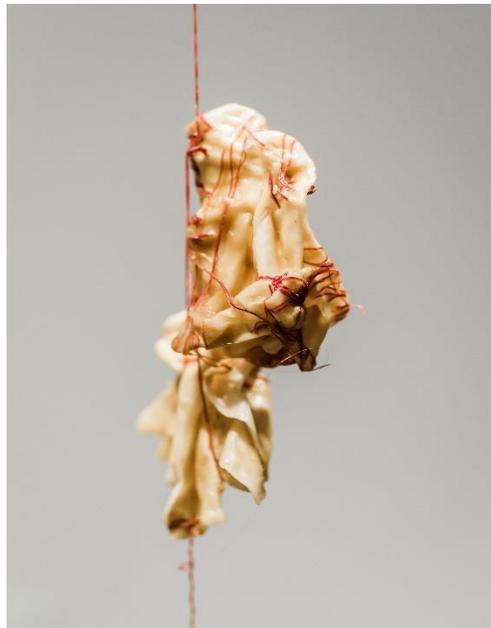


Fig. 6. *Momma mends the brokenness.*

Another piece in the exhibition, *Keeper of Lost Things* is “*With good intentions*”. This piece is a response to one woman’s experience with secret bitterness. It is made up of five loaves of bread, beeswax, cloth dinner napkins, wormwood oil, lumber, and carpet. The materials, processes, and overall form are all intrinsic of a woman who has lost herself in her role as a wife and mother and who deals with resentment.



Fig. 7. *With Good Intentions*.

This piece involves an assemblage and construction of parts. The loaves of bread are coated in beeswax and wrapped in cloth. The cloth has been soaked in wormwood oil. The lumber has been constructed into a form that is characteristic of the subflooring of a home. The use of beeswax in “*With good intentions*” is most representative of the beeswax in an actual hive, for the wax is produced by bees to protect the food and larval/pupal storage. The bread was purposefully made and baked in my home, as ideas such as homemaking, hospitality, and spirituality are deep-seated themes in this work. The choice of building a form that is

representative of a subflooring structure is to establish the idea of home. The wrapped loaves of bread that carry a strong pungent odor of wormwood sit within the subfloor form which stands upright. This placement of the bread is to imply something concealed, under the floor boards. Lastly, the wormwood oil is known for its bitterness and its use in treating digestive disorders and lack of sexual desire, and to stimulate imagination. These medicinal uses connect the narrative behind the piece to the artwork, as well as subtly bring a dark humor to the piece. The foundation of this sculpture is based on the story of a woman who is dealing with resentment towards her husband, for all the years of hospitality, providing meals, and caring for others without ever being appreciated or noticed. “*With good intentions*” serves as a voice of a woman who has shoved her frustrations down, swept them under the rug, and who may, or may have not, had good intentions.

Lastly, “*Dearly Departed*”, is the final piece made in this series of work. It encompasses all the themes present in the exhibition, particularly my personal narrative and history, also home, hope, and private spaces. Standing approximately eight feet tall, this sculpture is made of lumber, cloth, beeswax, joint compound and tape, natural cotton fibers, string, aluminum sheeting, glass block, steel, a small copper dish, four small yellow rose buds, a book titled *Grace and Addiction*, an old window pane, and two pieces of miniature doll furniture. The overall structure is made of lumber and is representative of housing construction yet is abstracted in some of its dimensions. For example, spaces are narrowed or fragmented. The found objects that are placed within the large wooden framed sections are personal and metaphorical as they speak of times past. Additionally, the chosen objects have been formative in my own self-conceptualization. Each object symbolizes relationships and experiences in relation to homelife and private spaces.

The processes involved in this piece represent preservation, time, memory, and secrets. I used beeswax to coat and cover the doll house furniture, copper dish and roses, and parts of the wall construction as I was thinking about time and memory. Layering objects and materials with beeswax is a process I use to illustrate the preservation of the elements and the memories associated with them, a kind of storing. On one side of the sculpture, I created a small narrow space that is characteristic of the interior of a wall. Inside the wall space is some foam insulation and natural cotton fibers that surround and hold the book which is tied up with string. The act of filling the interior of a wall space and padding an object with the soft fibers is about secrets, protection, and memory. Wrapping elements with string is also a way that I illustrate the passing of time, as well as connecting moments to one another. Another process that is used in this artwork is the making of a veil-like form that covers the assembled sculpture. The veil element is made of a white, transparent, drapery liner material. The action of covering the form is inspired from veiling rituals done in times of mourning, and to conceal, protect, and separate. The veiling of *“Dearly Departed”* refers to the mourning of a time, also the concealing of a space. The covering serves as a protection of the private space being referenced, not a literal protection, but symbolic. There is a section of the large wooden form that is exposed, leaving the viewer a space to look into, to view the interior of the piece without the façade of cloth. A third process used in this work is the elementary and crude construction of the house-like forms. It is a style I have used in my art for the past two years, one that speaks to simplicity and poetics of the materials and processes. I desire for the aesthetic of the forms in this exhibition to show forth a unique construction; a style that helps the viewer to connect the created forms to events and narratives. I am interested in leaving the mark of the maker in the construction of the wooden elements. I

want the viewers to feel as if the sculptures were made by the person that is sharing the story, like an artifact from their life and from their home vessel.



Fig. 8. *Dearly Departed*.



Fig. 9. *Dearly Departed*, detail.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

*Keeper of Lost Things* is my personal contribution of ideas in the form of three-dimensional artwork that address self-conceptualization, home, loss, sadness, and personal histories. I have created the work in this exhibition to be a collection of moments from women's private histories and everyday lives. Through a very thoughtful choice of materials and content-driven construction and assembling I have sought to tell the stories of women who have worked hard, loved, suffered, and hoped. *The stories are of things lost, found, and kept.*

The research behind *Keeper of Lost Things* has increased my knowledge and understanding of people's pain, the privacy of home, and the pursuit of identity. It has also strengthened me as a person and an artist as I have explored and studied the lives of women who had once lost themselves, only to rediscover their stronger, wiser self. Theories of memory, time, self-concept, space, and object relations has greatly informed the works present in this exhibition, as well as provided a path for future artwork. I can clearly see how my personal history, artistic influences, and empathy for others has brought me to the mode of making and expressing that I am characterized by.

Artists such as Louis Bourgeois, Doris Salcedo, and Rachel Whiteread have greatly affected my work, but have also impacted the world around us with their intuitive and thought-provoking approach to making art. These contemporary artists incorporate narratives, autobiographical and biographical information, with emotionally charged materials and processes into their artwork. The way they translate life experiences into sculptural forms using elements that are rich in context has influenced my art practice greatly. More specifically, the

concepts that address memory, narratives, spaces, and loss are most similarly found in my artwork.

This exhibition is a poetic and metaphorical representation of fragments of time and events. My hope is that *Keeper of Lost Things* will be a reflective experience for the viewer. The selected personal moments of women that are revealed in the exhibition are to bring an awareness to sadness and struggle, a bringing forth of the hidden things that have screamed to be heard. I seek to evoke empathy and wonderment as one experiences this installation of voices being manifested through sculpture.



Fig. 10. *Gallery view of Keeper of Lost Things.*

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