



Artifacts of a Storm

Thesis Paper

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When the civilizations of tomorrow unearth the layers of artifacts from the year 2013, the strata will be riddled with an overwhelming number of little orange prescription pill bottles. The aptly chosen name *opioid-epidemic*, has become the label of the era. A shocking 4.24 billion prescriptions were filled in 2013. Of those, 3.7 million were opioid-based prescriptions filled in Colorado.¹ Hidden away within that number lie dormant narratives of 433 lives lost due to overdose.² This paper discusses the problematic nature of presentations of addiction in data-focused discourses that cause a societal separation from human compassion for the addict. This is strengthened by the absence of personal and collective narratives. *Artifacts of a Storm*³ exemplifies the ways in which socially-informed artworks create empathetic connections to data through the use of metaphor.

In 2013, I found myself in the throes of an addiction to opioid-based painkillers. I was caught up in the battle of trying to lessen my residual pain from three spinal surgeries. I neglected self-care and spent most of the year in my darkened bedroom, listening to the sounds of my family enjoying meals and growing up. When I did emerge from my bed, my violent outbursts left my family dreading my presence. My addiction was a hailstorm that was out of control and destroying everything in sight. The life that I had dreamed for myself had turned into a nightmare and I wanted it to end. On November 30th, I attempted to take my own life through an intentional overdose.

While drifting in and out of consciousness like a kite on the wind, I remember being in the hospital and hearing the staff yelling at me to breathe. I finally woke to the news that I was

¹ "Opioid Pain Reliever Prescriptions," *National Institute on Drug Abuse: Advancing Addiction Science*. <https://www.drugabuse.gov/drugs-abuse/opioids/opioid-summaries-by-state/Colorado-opioid-summary>. Accessed 27 August 2018.

² Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. <https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/opioid-overdose-deaths-by-age-group>. Accessed 27 August 2018.

³ Image 1.

being transported to a mental health facility. I rode in the ambulance alone, staring through tear-filled eyes out the rear window, watching my life and the world behind me drift further and further away. The soaring kite that was my life was caught in the hailstorm and had hit the ground hard. I was at rock-bottom. But I was not alone.

I discovered that my story is all too common. In the almost six years since my first day in recovery, I have learned that stories such as mine go unheard by the greater community. The speeches are typically delivered to a group of people whose storylines are similar and whom I only know by first name. I learned that outside conversations surrounding addiction have undertones of addict-shaming or big-pharma blaming and are reduced to data-focused discussions. I began to share my story with whomever would listen. When I lost one of my closest friends to substance abuse in 2016, I decided to pursue a degree in art, to make art about addiction. I wanted for the greater community to know that there are real people behind the cold statistics; to bridge the gaps between numbers and shame by elevating personal and collective narratives to create empathetic connections.

The use of the hailstorm and kite metaphors give tangible context to the sensations and consequences of addiction, although, these representations can never encompass the entire truth of the experience. To begin to decode it would lead us only in search of a deeper understanding of the causes of addiction, or the sources and patterns of a storm system. “Every decoding is another encoding.”⁴ When interpreting literary texts or artworks, this becomes the dynamic of Jacques Derrida’s deconstructionist abyss of *infinite regression*. The harder we try to decipher the author or artists’ intentions, the more we understand that the meaning does not

⁴ Vernon Minor, “Deconstruction” in *Art History’s History*, 2nd ed (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2001), 186.

lie within the artwork itself; it lies within the connections to perpetual truth, within the dialog about the work. We interject our own perspectives, we begin to uncover new associations, new oppositions, and new questions with every attempt at defining meaning. If we care enough to understand how others are affected, we keep digging. Vernon Minor, a professor of fine arts and humanities, explains the findings of Jacques Derrida as: "...every word in a sentence leaves its traces on the word behind, and is open to the word ahead. Every word marks or is marked by other words."⁵ If we were to dissect a text, we would be stuck in a continuous spiral of defining words, which only leads to more words; this leads to further definitions, etc. With visual language, we see an object or an image, and we make associations, attempt to explain them, and make further associations, etc.⁶

I decided from the start of this project that I did not want to depict the human form to prevent the addiction conversation from having a posterchild to accompany the statistics. Addiction doesn't have a specific demographic; it is anyone, and it affects everyone. The way that the world looks at addicts and provides statistics that lack the presence of an individual (who recounts their own experience) allows others to write it for them. To label them "other", the opposite of themselves. This othering relates to the study of *heterology* (hetero: meaning "other", ology: "the study of:) as described by Georges Bataille's use-value paradox of the *accursed-share*; the irredeemable other. It is that which is undesirable or has little value in a world that is obsessed and controlled by production, where that productiveness is connected to personhood.⁷ Bataille was a twentieth century French intellectual that wrote about art history, philosophy, and sociology, et al. He believed that artworks of the avant-garde, especially

⁵ Minor 187.

⁶ Minor 187.

⁷ Jae Emmerling, "Georges Bataille" in *Theory for Art History* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 81.

that which subverted the expectations of Western art tradition (such as readymades), “best represent the current situation of human life.”⁸ This is the intent of the use of ready-made objects in *Artifacts*.

I turned to metaphor as my medium using found objects to embody the neglect, self-abuse and destruction to the world surrounding the addict. The landscape needed to be visually tragic in order to see these real-world objects in disrepair, broken, their use-value diminished. These items become the accursed-share. To be successful, intuitive curation of the objects using Ferdinand Saussure’s system of signs informed the process of investigating each item. Specializing in linguistics and semiotics, Saussure’s language systems explain the ways in which images carry connotations of meaning. Further, my objects embody the oppositional binaries of Jacques Derrida’s Deconstruction wherein images are codes that make up visual language. The images in the visual language had to be the antithesis of the symbols of the ideal life experience. The use of real objects as metaphors keeps this spiraling into the abyss of infinite regression constant. Vernon Minor equates the delayed gratification of finding true meaning in an artwork to the anticipatory nature of striptease. Though the end-result is to see the subject naked, it is the slow, intentional uncovering of each inch of skin that delays satisfaction and keeps the viewer interested. Equally, the deciphering of meaning in everyday, banal objects becomes an undressing of understanding, though the end-result of a complete explanation is infinitely delayed.⁹ In *Artifacts*, these objects act as visual signification and emotional triggers to keep the viewer asking questions and making new associations to achieve empathetic connection. They

⁸ Emmerling, 82.

⁹ Emmerling, 81.

must continually desire to take in new information about the object and distinguish it from what it is not, by discovering its binary opposition.¹⁰

Take for example the child's bike in its pristine state: it symbolizes childhood, freedom, growth, and opportunity. Here, in *Artifacts of a Storm*, it has a rusted chain and is missing wheels.¹¹ It still signifies childhood, but one that is traumatic, neglected, abused, hindered, and broken. The swing and the see-saw are similar in context. There are three of these childhood objects to represent my three children and their experiences with a mom that is an addict. The procurement of these objects is also symbolic of the donor's own three adult children who are addicts. Each object within the installation holds equal significance and layered meaning.

Similarly, the toolbox lies central in the installation, its rusted tool tray compartment is tipped askew and filled with pills.¹² The box holds prescription bottles instead of useful tools. It is a metaphor for the central causes of addiction. As developed humans, we are expected to be equipped with a set of "tools" in our psyche that enable us to cope with life's events. However, problems arise when there is a breaking down of that toolbox, or an insufficient understanding of how to access those tools. For the ill-equipped individual facing difficult situations, there is a search for replacement methods that manifest in the form of substance abuse.

The creative and destructive processes used to create *Artifacts* are literal examples of binary oppositions. By the end of November 2013, I ingested approximately 2,880 doses of Vicodin. Each one of those doses has been realized in slip-cast porcelain as a creative counterbalance to devastation. Their pill-form denotes hail and its destructive nature.¹³ This

¹⁰ Minor, 187-8.

¹¹ Image 2.

¹² Image 3.

¹³ Image 4.

work reaches beyond my own experiences through field-research to create a socially-informed artwork that includes the collective narratives of addicts like me. I worked with the Continued Care group at *Impact Recovery, LLC*, lead by Danielle Hackett in Lakewood, CO. I challenged the group with creating paintings that are representational manifestations of the destruction of addiction in the form of a stormy sky. I prompted them with questions such as: “*If you were to compare your story to a storm, what would your sky look like? What would your landscape look like? What artifacts would be scattered amongst your landscape?*” Their paintings which flank the installation, are displayed high above my own contributions in a collaborative elevation of personal and collective narratives above disengaged statistics.¹⁴

Our collective narrative includes homelessness, which is represented in the suitcase¹⁵, upturned and pitched like a tent. It is a temporary structure. The National Coalition for the Homeless reports: “substance abuse was the single largest cause of homelessness for single adults (reported by 68% of cities).”¹⁶ Experiences with addiction also include time spent behind bars, embodied here within the broken clock.¹⁷ The hands are frozen, unmoving to indicate time lost while trapped in the criminalization of their addiction. This is strongly due to the addicts’ fear of full disclosure when discussing relapse with parole officers. “Our patients are far less likely to talk honestly about their relapses and their struggles with recovery if they think it’s going to land them in jail,” says Sarah Coughlin, a social worker and addiction specialist in Charlestown, Mass.¹⁸ Finally, our collective narratives also include death. Connecting the

¹⁴ Image 5.

¹⁵ Image 6.

¹⁶ “Substance Abuse and Homelessness” National Coalition for the Homeless (Washington DC: National Coalition for the Homeless, July 2009). <https://www.nationalhomeless.org/factsheets/addiction.pdf>. Accessed 14 November 2019.

¹⁷ Image 7.

¹⁸ Editorial Board, “If Addiction is a Disease, Why is Relapsing a Crime?” in *The New York Times* (29 May 2018). <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/29/opinion/addiction-relapse-prosecutions.html>. Accessed 14 November 2019.

metaphor of the kite as my life through visual representation of five hail-battered kites unifies the idea that I could have been one of these statistics.¹⁹ They represent the 433 lives lost in Colorado that same year; each one an age group, and each inch around the perimeter, a life. Each kite was constructed as if it were a stretched canvas to be painted, exemplifying the preciousness of the art object, the preciousness of life. This creative process was counterbalanced with acts of destruction to destroy the kites; leaving their languid forms draped over the landscape of objects in place of the human body. Their tails are strips of torn bedsheets that made up the bed where I spent the bulk of 2013; a creative use of the material that lay witness to my own destruction.

The creation of this project has become the bookend to my own story. This exhibition closes on November 30th, 2019, the sixth anniversary of my suicide attempt. Every process has been an exploration in stamina, will and perseverance. I have learned that art saves my life every day and can be used to save others as well. I have learned that if I keep creating art, keep checking in on my mental health and that of my community by recognizing the signs, that together we can learn to predict the weather; to pull the kite from the storm before it gets destroyed.

¹⁹ Image 8.

Image List

Image 1.



Kristin Smith
Artifacts of a Storm
installation
November 2019
Photo credit: Kristin Smith

Image 2.



Kristin Smith
Artifacts of a Storm (child's bike detail)
installation
November 2019
Photo credit: Monique Archuleta

Image 3.



Kristin Smith

Artifacts of a Storm (toolbox detail)
installation

November 2019

Photo credit: Kristin Smith

Image 4.



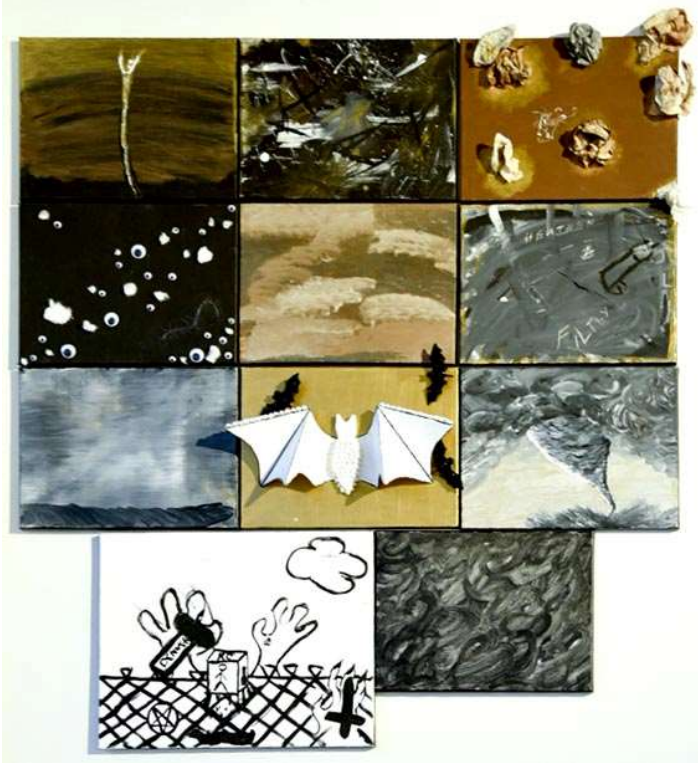
Kristin Smith

Artifacts of a Storm (pills/hail detail)
installation

November 2019

Photo credit: Monique Archuleta

Image 5.



Kristin Smith

Artifacts of a Storm (sky paintings detail)
installation

November 2019

Photo credit: Monique Archuleta

Image 6.



Kristin Smith

Artifacts of a Storm (suitcase detail)
installation

November 2019

Photo credit: Monique Archuleta

Image 7.



Kristin Smith

Artifacts of a Storm (clock detail)
installation

November 2019

Photo credit: Monique Archuleta

Image 8.



Kristin Smith

Artifacts of a Storm (kite detail)
installation

November 2019

Photo credit: Monique Archuleta

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