

# *Heavy as a Cloud*

an exhibition of artworks

by

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## Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners. I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

## Abstract

*Heavy as a Cloud* is a collection of phenomena that alludes to the fragility and transience of life; clouds drifting away, waves rolling in, flowers fading in the sun, a lingering fragrance, and crumbling sandcastles. Using photographic and sculptural mediums, this exhibition considers human experiences such as grief and memory, mediated through everyday objects and elements of nature, to represent states of impermanence. Exploring how grief can be contained within objects and photographs, but also felt in the world around us, this work investigates some of the ways in which we contain loss. Using ephemeral themes and materials, the work asks the questions: How do you hold something that doesn't exist? And how will we be remembered after we die? This work resides in a place of desire or longing to hold things that cannot be held, to fix a moment that is gone, to make physical things out of the intangible.



Fig. 1. Amber Lee Williams, *Heavy as a Cloud* at the University of Waterloo Art Gallery, Polaroid.

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to my 2 daughters, Olive and Octavia, for sharing me with school. I've been in school for their whole lives, and it takes up a lot of my time. Over the years there have been a lot of times that I couldn't participate in family stuff because I had a paper to write or a project to finish, and they have been pretty understanding of that, for the most part. Also, thank you Olive and Octo for being a part of my studio practice. Lots of my ideas come from things my girls say or do, and I feel very fulfilled not only to be their mother but also to make work about these experiences. Thank you to my partner Arih. Arih met me at a very important time in my life. I was a single mother to 1 year old Olive, and also in my first year of my undergraduate degree. It was a stressful but exciting time for me, and I'm very happy and grateful that Arih is a part of my life.

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class as my final elective in my 4<sup>th</sup> semester and I made some of the work that is in my thesis exhibition: the digital emulsion lifts that became the waves series, and also the cyanotypes of my girls. Doug was always so excited about what I was making, and had so many questions for me, and his positive attitude was really encouraging and motivating.

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## Land Acknowledgment

There are three locations in which I spent my time completing my MFA.

The first place is my home, which resides in St. Catharines, Ontario, and is the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe peoples, many of whom continue to live and work here today. This territory is covered by the Upper Canada Treaties and is within the land protected by the Dish with One Spoon Wampum Agreement. Today this gathering place is home to many First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples and acknowledging reminds us that our great standard of living is directly related to the resources and friendship of Indigenous people.

The second place is my school, in Waterloo, Ontario, which is located on the traditional territory of the Attawandaron (Neutral), Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee peoples. The University of Waterloo was built on the Haldimand Tract, the land given in treaty in 1784 to the Six Nations that includes 10 kilometres on each side of the Grand River from its source in Dundalk Township to its mouth at Lake Erie. The land was given in treaty to support the Six Nations in perpetuity, but this did not happen. The university's work at reconciliation with Indigenous peoples includes decolonizing our historical narratives, our minds, and our hearts. This is an ongoing process, and we have a long way to go. We do this in humility and gratitude to our Indigenous neighbours, past and present.

The third place is my family cabin, in Owen Sound, Ontario, which is located on the Territory of the Anishinabek Nation: The People of the Three Fires known as Ojibway, Odawa, and Pottawatomie Nations. Also, the Chippewas of Saugeen, and the Chippewas of Nawash, now known as the Saugeen Ojibway Nation, are known as the traditional keepers of this land.

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## Fragments

This paper is written in a fragmented system, all the pieces coming together to explain my process, theoretical influences and artistic inspirations, along with the personal stories and life experiences that the work's subjects draw from. It is a constellation of ideas, a grab bag of collected, interrelated crumbs. The artworks employ alternative photographic processes. Based in non-linear narratives, they are a reflection of my life as a mother. I have two girls, Olive and Octavia, so my days are filled with constant interruptions. Motherhood is a fragmented experience at the best of times, and this fragmentation felt heightened during my graduate degree which also coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic. My memories of my mother and my grandmother, both deceased, are also made up of tiny pieces: like ashes floating in the air, leaving smudges on my hands when I try to grasp them. Within my fragmented days, grief bubbles up unexpectedly, memory is not sequential, and the photographs taken are paltry stand-ins for the lives they document.

*I'm trying so hard to think, but as I write this all I hear is "mama... mama... mama..."*

## Introduction: Loss

Did you know that clouds can be heavy? How can something that floats in the air be so heavy? I know that the air in my chest feels heavy when I remember that my mother died.

When I first learned about the weight of a cloud, I thought about how strange it is that something so ephemeral, that repeatedly disappears and reappears, can also be so substantial. And this reminded me of how it feels to grieve when you carry death with you. The kind of death that doesn't exist in a physical form. A death that still hovers in the air once all the dust is settled: the arrangements made, the body gone, the things packed up, the flowers wilted, the calls and messages subsided. A sort of invisible death, because the memory of it is hidden inside you. When you don't walk around announcing that you are grieving the loss of a loved one. When the heaviness of mourning is carried in secret, when it comes and goes, just like a cloud.

Inside me are two empty spaces, one for my mother, one for my grandmother. These two great voids (sometimes I feel their loss together, and other times separately) feel like a hollowness that is somehow both formless and heavy. A contradiction; a *dialetheia*; an absence that is held. At times the emptiness feels small and almost unnoticeable, and other times I can barely find enough solid ground to stand on. That's the thing with grief; it's as if it is alive and hungry, waiting to swallow me whole. I wasn't planning to explore grief in my MFA, but my grandmother passed away right before the start of my first semester, greatly impacting my life and the art that I made. This newer loss (my grandmother) made an older loss (my mother) rise to the surface. Motherhood is also present in my work, in the photographs I take of my children. I document their lives as I watch them grow, as I feel these deep, maternal losses (and time slips away).

## Photography: Time's Relentless Melt

My interest in photography is rooted within the medium's connection to everyday life and the home, "cameras go with family life" (Sontag 8). When a baby is born, photos are often taken shortly after, a souvenir for a special occasion. And this pattern continues throughout life—images that mark the many firsts, the pets, the messes, the tears, etc. For me, the act of picture taking is a way to push against the inevitable passage of time. "Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt" (15). Photographs allow me to hold onto experiences after they've happened. When a person dies, one of the first things people do is look at photos of them. Whether it's swiping through a digital album or turning the pages of a physical one, our lives can be summed up and remembered as a series of photographs. "Through photographs, each family constructs a portrait chronicle of itself—a portable kit of images that bears witness to its connectedness. It hardly matters what activities are photographed so long as photographs get taken that are cherished" (8). Photographs of my family are some of my most cherished possessions, and I feel a deep connection to the medium of photography.

Photography is also linked to death and this goes beyond the rituals of looking at photos after a person has died, or memorializing a life with a photo (such as an obituary photograph). Every photograph is a reminder of death because whatever has been photographed is immediately relegated to the past. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes states that "photography has something to do with resurrection" (Barthes 87). By having and holding photographs of relatives (alive or dead), as well as photographs of my younger self, I am able to maintain and reproduce a connection to the past. "Every photograph is a certificate of presence" (87). Sontag also makes connections between photography and death, stating that "[the] link between photography and death haunts all photographs of people" (Sontag 70).

The bulk of this exhibition brings together several types of photography: Anthotypes, cyanotypes, 35mm black and white film developed at home in a caffenol mixture, digital emulsion lifts, and Polaroids. What all of these processes have in common is that they are mediums I can use safely in my home with my children around. The choice of the photographic

medium is also guided by the conceptual underpinnings of my subjects. For example, botanical emulsions are used to make reproductions of my mother's obituary photo, because of the connection between flowers and death. Flowers are present at funerals, and historically, within the canon of Western Art History, they symbolize the fragility of life, as seen in Vanitas paintings from the Netherlands (circa 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries). In another example, a picture of a wave is photographed floating in water. Here, water is both the subject and the process. And in a third example, the Polaroids of clouds, the images are reduced to thin diaphanous veils using an emulsion lift technique. Held in water and ready to drift and shift at any moment, the process mimics the behaviour of real clouds.

### **Melancholy Objects: Sontag, Barthes, Gibson.**

Melancholy is defined as a feeling of pensive sadness (Lexico). In the chapter “Melancholy Objects”, Susan Sontag argues that all photographs have a surreal quality because they turn today’s reality into an object that can be carried through time. “What renders a photograph surreal is its irrefutable pathos as a message from time past” (Sontag 54). Photos are ‘real’ in the material sense, but when you look at the subject of a photo (of your child, for example), it doesn’t seem ‘real’ anymore, especially as more time passes. According to Sontag, the photograph becomes a melancholy object because of the distance and emotion that are inherently found within it. “Photographs turn the past into an object of tender regard” (71). This sense of being out of time is what evokes the melancholy quality with photography; when you look at a photograph you are reminded of what is lost. The many details of the day that could never be remembered—mundane, everyday things—are what photography allows us to hang onto. “Life is not about significant details, illuminated flash, fixed forever. Photographs are” (Barthes 81). Roland Barthes also refers to the photograph as melancholy, because of its connection with time. “The Photograph...is without future (this is its pathos, its melancholy)” (90). Barthes calls the photograph a “flat death” and it is this flatness and the inability to discover more beyond the surface, that adds to the sadness of the medium (107).

Margaret Gibson expands on the idea of the melancholy object in her essay, stating that “the melancholy object is a double signifier. It is the object (or objects) materializing and signifying the mourning of mourning (Gibson 289).” For Gibson, the melancholy object is “a part of mourning and memory” and “functions as metaphorical and metonymic traces of corporeal absence” (285). Gibson’s idea of the melancholy object includes the photograph, as well as possessions that belonged to the deceased. “Most people take for granted the objects around them, never thinking that many will survive their own being and come to stand in for them, in their absence” (285). She writes about the role that objects play in the process of mourning. “In grieving, as in childhood, transitional objects are both a means of holding on and letting go (288).” She explains that melancholy objects go through a transformation, and that it is “not the same object it started off as being (288).”

In my work, there are several examples that serve as Gibson's melancholy objects. The first are two unfinished watercolour paintings that my mother made, the second is my grandmother's travel case, and the third is the book that was used to make the *Clouds and Storms* series, which also belonged to my mother.

## Psychology of Death and Dying: Identity Markers

During my second semester, I enrolled in *The Psychology of Death and Dying* with Professor Chris Burris, fulfilling one of three elective requirements. The course engaged with death as a broad topic—a complex system of knowledge with many ways to approach and understand ideas around death. It was structured by several levels: animate, special (human), historical/cultural, medical, legal, religious, arts/media, political, relational, individual level 1 (developmental), and individual level 2 (personality). A comment that I personally found to be true was Professor Burris' quote: "Death changes everything. It is interwoven into many systems."

The subject of identity markers, which exists within several of Professor Burris' levels, helps to contextualize the motives behind my work. Identity markers are psychological extensions of the self, such as names, possessions, images, and even the body (Burris). There is a vulnerability in placing one's self within these external things, because things can be lost or broken (Burris). There is also the possibility that these "treasured possessions" could cause tension within a family after a person has died and the bereaved possessions are divided up (i.e. the who gets what decisions as the person's home is cleaned out and/or the estate settled). "Following a death, people become more attached to identity markers" (Burris). And the value that is placed on objects left behind after someone has died may differ depending on who is the one doing the evaluating (e.g., sentimental value vs. monetary value). The person who is left with the things, and has the power over them, may not care about what the other family members find important.

"People may do different things with identity markers to seek comfort" (Burris). Not having access to certain photographs or possessions that belonged to the deceased (i.e., something you gave them and want back for comfort) can cause the bereaved more pain. Death changes relationships within a family system. "The death of an individual in a family system not only affects how every survivor must conceptualize and reconstitute their sense of connection with the deceased, it also means survivors have to rethink their relationships with each other" (Burris). Think of a child's mobile, where the objects rely on one another to create



a balanced system. “Death rips off a piece”, throwing the system into disarray, and it “takes time to find a new balance” (Burriss). I haven’t spoken to my father since my grandmother died, and it has been nearly two years. Consequently, I don’t have access to many of her things, and I think that’s part of why I feel so connected to the few possessions that I have. “Identity markers become very important [because they] keep the dead alive through memories” (Burriss).

## Grief and Love: bell hooks

“To be loving is to be open to grief, to be touched by sorrow, even sorrow that is unending. The way we grieve is informed by whether we know love” (hooks 200).

My explorations of grief focus on the emotional sufferings that I have experienced—the heaviness that comes with losses that are deeply felt. bell hooks helped me to expand my thoughts on death, to understand that this longing comes from a place of love. We grieve so deeply because of the love that we feel for the person who has died. She writes about how grief is not something to be hidden or suppressed, and that by doing so we cause ourselves more pain. I am beginning to accept that I’ll carry this grief with me for the rest of my life. It’s not something that will pass. It will change over time, but it is part of who I am. “In its deepest sense, grief is a burning of the heart, an intense heat that gives us solace and release. When we deny the full expression of our grief, it lays like a weight on our hearts, causing emotional pain and physical ailments” (201). One of the ways that I grieve is through the artworks I make. “Love is the only force that allows us to hold one another close beyond the grave” (202). Having possessions and photographs of deceased loved ones isn’t enough for me. I need to make artworks from them, to impart the images with a material existence. This allows me to revisit and understand my grief in new ways. Through this act of transformation, the collected materials become anew, and I’m able to bring the past into the present, express my love, and keep the memories of these two women alive.

## Sophie Calle: A List of Lasts



Fig. 2. Sophie Calle, *Couldn't Capture Death*, video still, 2007.

Sophie Calle is a French conceptual artist. When her mother was on her deathbed, Calle set up a video camera because she didn't want to miss the moment when her mother took her last breath. The film "Couldn't Capture Death" is 11 minutes long. The title referencing how hard it was for Calle to tell the exact moment her mother died. Days before her death, her mother told Calle that she could have all of her diaries, knowing that her daughter would use them in her art practice, and she has. She made an artist book called "Rachel, Monique..." or "She was called successively Rachel, Monique, Szyndler, Calle, Pagliero, Gonthier, Sindler. My mother did not appear in my work, and that annoyed her" (Calle). The 8 x 10 inch book has a silky white cloth cover with the title embroidered in gold thread. It is filled with selected excerpts, as well as some of Calle's own photos and words. In the book, Calle explains some of the reasons why she so publicly shared her mother's private thoughts and feelings:

A few days before she lost consciousness, my mother asked me to take a box full of her photo albums and personal diaries home with me. Sixteen notebooks, dated 1981, 1984, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1999, and 2000. She had chosen not to destroy them. She wasn't naïve about what

might happen to them if she left them in my hands. Otherwise I wouldn't have allowed myself (Calle).



Fig. 3. Sophie Calle, *Rachel Monique...* (double page spread), artist book, 2016

In the artist book is a photo of the ocean, “Monique wanted to see the sea one last time. On Tuesday, January 31st we went to Cabourg. The last journey.” (Calle). There are impressions in the sand where someone walked out to the water. On the next page, Sophie Calle lists her mother’s last experiences:

The next day, “so my feet look nice when I go”: the last pedicure. She read *Ravel* by Jean Echenoz. The last book. A man she had long admired but never met came to her bedside. Making a friend for the last time. She organized the funeral ceremony: her last party. Final preparations: she chose her funeral dress (navy blue with a white pattern); a photograph showing her making a face for the tombstone, and her epitaph: *I’m getting*

*bored already!* She wrote a last poem, for her burial. She chose Montparnasse cemetery as her final address. The days before her death she kept repeating: "It's odd, It's so stupid." She listened to the *Clarinet Concerto in A major. K. 622*. For the last time. Her last wish: to leave with the music of Mozart in her ears. Her last request: for us not to worry. "*Ne vous faites pas de souci.*" *Souci* was her last word. She didn't want to die. She said this was the first time in her life she didn't mind waiting. She shed her last tears. On March 15, 2006, at 3 p.m., the last smile. The last breath, somewhere between 3:02 and 3:13. Impossible to capture. (Calle)



## The Last Time: I Saw My Mother

“if the dead are not in time, or not in our time, is there any clear difference, only speak of them, between was and is and will be?” (Lewis 20)



Fig. 4. Amber Lee Williams, *The Last Time*, Polaroid emulsion lift, 2020.

This photograph is a square portrait, distorted and distressed, surrounded by a black space with bits of the image floating away. It is the first thing I made during my MFA.

The last time I saw my mother was completely by chance. I was driving to do some laundry and I saw her walking down the street. I pulled over and she leaned into the passenger side of my car. We chatted for a few minutes, and I told her to please call me. She didn't have a phone, and I didn't know where she was living, so it was hard for me to reach her. I took a photo because I didn't know when I would see her next, but this was the last time. The

photograph stayed in digital form for many years, until I happened to come across it as I swiped through a digital album on my cell phone. I printed her image as a Polaroid, turning it into an emulsion lift. Instead of a white background, I used black. The resulting image, recognizable facial features gone, resembles a pillow floating in outer space <sup>1</sup>, a source of comfort that is out of my reach.

I never got to say goodbye to my mother. Her death was sudden, a suicide. I don't have a list of lasts like Sophie Calle. Her lasts exist in a void of nothingness, they are unknown.

---

<sup>1</sup> Logan MacDonald, observation made in a studio visit during first semester, 2020.

## Holding her Hand: Saying Goodbye.

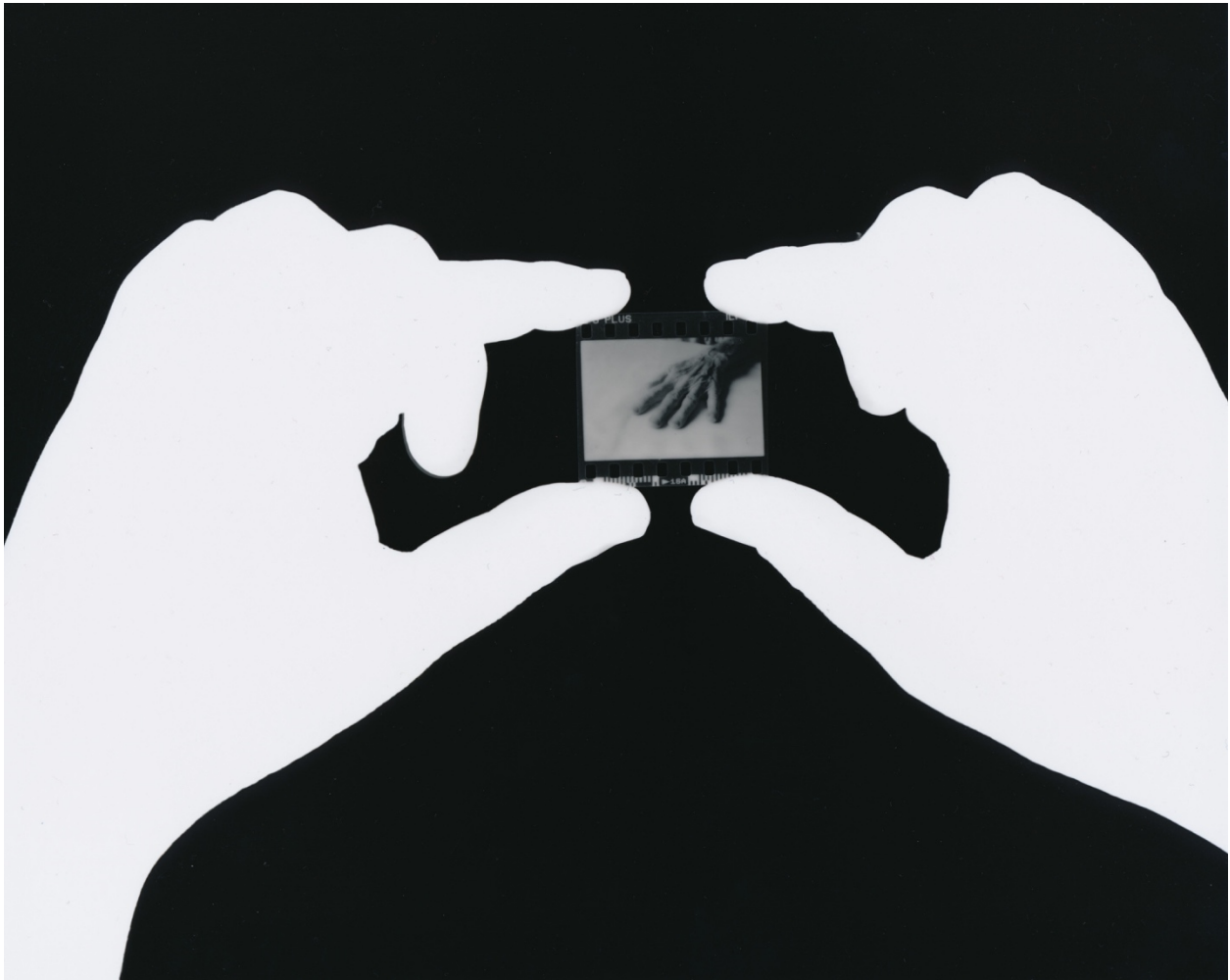


Fig. 5. Amber Lee Williams, *Holding her Hand*, 8" x 10", photogram, 2020.

The last time I saw my grandmother was in the hospital. I held her hand for five hours and said goodbye. I don't have a photo of the last time I saw her, but I had a roll of film I shot of her hands a few months before, and I made the image *Holding her Hand* as a way to work through my grief and discomfort around the experience. It wasn't a nice goodbye, and I think of this image as a way to memorialize the last time I was with my grandmother.



## The Funeral: Sylvia Plath

I recently remembered that at my mother's funeral, I asked my cousin to read the poem "I Am Vertical" by Sylvia Plath:

But I would rather be horizontal.  
I am not a tree with my root in the soil  
Sucking up minerals and motherly love  
So that each March I may gleam into leaf,  
Nor am I the beauty of a garden bed  
Attracting my share of Ahs and spectacularly painted,  
Unknowing I must soon unpetal.  
Compared with me, a tree is immortal  
And a flower-head not tall, but more startling,  
And I want the one's longevity and the other's daring.  
Tonight, in the infinitesimal light of the stars,  
The trees and the flowers have been strewing their cool odors.  
I walk among them, but none of them are noticing.  
Sometimes I think that when I am sleeping  
I must most perfectly resemble them --  
Thoughts gone dim.  
It is more natural to me, lying down.  
Then the sky and I are in open conversation,  
And I shall be useful when I lie down finally:  
Then the trees may touch me for once, and the flowers have time for me. (Plath)

March is the month my mother died, and it is also her birthday. It's March now as I write this; March 26<sup>th</sup>, my mother's birthday. At my mother's funeral, instead of flowers, my brother and I picked out an orchid that was growing out of a dead tree stump. My father said it was a

morbid choice. Often, beautiful cut flowers are bought and displayed at a funeral to try and brighten up the mood, lighten the darkness, but that didn't seem like the right choice for us. Besides, I think my mother would have appreciated our gesture. She was always a bit obsessed with death. My mother's suicide wasn't a first attempt. She tried a few times throughout my life and I think I always knew, and feared, that one day it wouldn't be a close call. It would be final.

I can't stop dreaming that my mother is alive again. That her death was some kind of mistake or misunderstanding. She finds her way back somehow. I get to see her face again and have her near me, like looking at a photograph, here but not really.

We still haven't had a funeral for my grandmother, and I'm not sure we ever will.

## Flowers, Alcohol, and Sunlight: Kept in the Dark



Fig. 6. Amber Lee Williams, *Ruth*, hibiscus anotype, 2020.

In September 2020, which also marked the beginning of my MFA, I made my first anotype. I used a red hibiscus flower to make an emulsion, that once exposed to light, produced an image of my grandmother. The hibiscus was the most memorable flower in my grandmother's garden, and with her passing in July 2020, the process of making this anotype was a way to work through my grief.

Anthotypes, impermanent photographs made from plant matter, are produced by crushing organic materials (like flower petals) into a pulp that is mixed with alcohol. This emulsion is then painted onto an absorbent substrate. To make the exposure, a positive film is set on top of this light sensitive paper, and then placed in the sun. Exposures can take hours, days, or even weeks. Anthotypes cannot be made permanent, and continued sun exposure lightens them further. Even stored in complete darkness, the image will disappear, due to the fugitive nature of the pigments. Anthotypes are inherently ephemeral, tying them to themes of memory and the transience of life.

I chose to explore flowers vis-a-vis anthotypes, as their materiality relates to not only beauty, but also decay. In 16<sup>th</sup> century Dutch Still Life paintings, flowers are symbolic of the transience of life. They speak to both fragility and brevity, as a flower's beauty is enjoyed, but not for very long. The flowers used in this work were collected at different times and from

different locations. Some are from my garden (tulip, petunia, lily, rose), or the garden of a friend, while others were from the side of the road, a ditch, a field, or in some cases covertly cut as they peeked over a neighbour's fence. They exist together as one artwork, a collaged-based process which is akin to Maria van Oosterwijck's flower paintings and her imagined compositions that were constructed over prolonged periods (circa 1600). Her paintings, made prior to the invention of photography, used 'live' flowers as source material for the composition. However, Maria van Oosterwijck would not have had access to these flowers at the same time, thus flowers were successively painted and added, as they became seasonally available. The outcome is an impossible composition that simultaneously speaks to life and death. (Dufour)



Fig. 7. Maria van Oosterwyck, "Flower Still Life", Cincinnati Art Museum, 1669.

*Kept in the Dark* consists of 44 unique anothotype reproductions of my mother. I chose this number because it was her age when she died. The selected image, reproduced photographically again and again, is her high school graduation portrait. It hangs in my stairwell and I walk by it daily. The image was also used in her obituary, and at her funeral, as a centerpiece. For me, it has been irreversibly changed, inescapably tied to her death.



Fig. 8. Amber Lee Williams, *Kept in the Dark*, 44 unique anothotypes, 2021-2022.

## The Weather: The Invention of Clouds / Roni Horn

“As clouds race towards their own released form, they are replenished by the mutable processes that created them. They drift, not into continuity, but into other, temporary states of being, all of which eventually decompose, to melt into the surrounding air” (Hamblyn 16).



Fig. 9. Roni Horn, *“You are the Weather”* at the *Fondation Beyeler, Riehen/Basel*, photograph by Mark Niedermann, 2020.

This series of 100 portraits of the same women’s face is by Roni Horn. They were taken over a six-week period throughout Iceland. Roni Horn says “Using the naturally heated waters that are commonplace there, we went from pool to pool. We worked daily, mostly outside, regardless of the changeable, often unpredictable climate that frequents the island” (qtd. In ITSLIQUID).

What draws me to this work is the repetition of the face. How the composition is the same. (i.e., Horn shot it very tight with cropping at the top, and sometimes the side of the face and bottom of the chin. The woman also looks directly at the camera and does not smile). And



yet her facial expressions vary and I wonder what emotions the woman felt, as well as the feeling and influences of the weather.

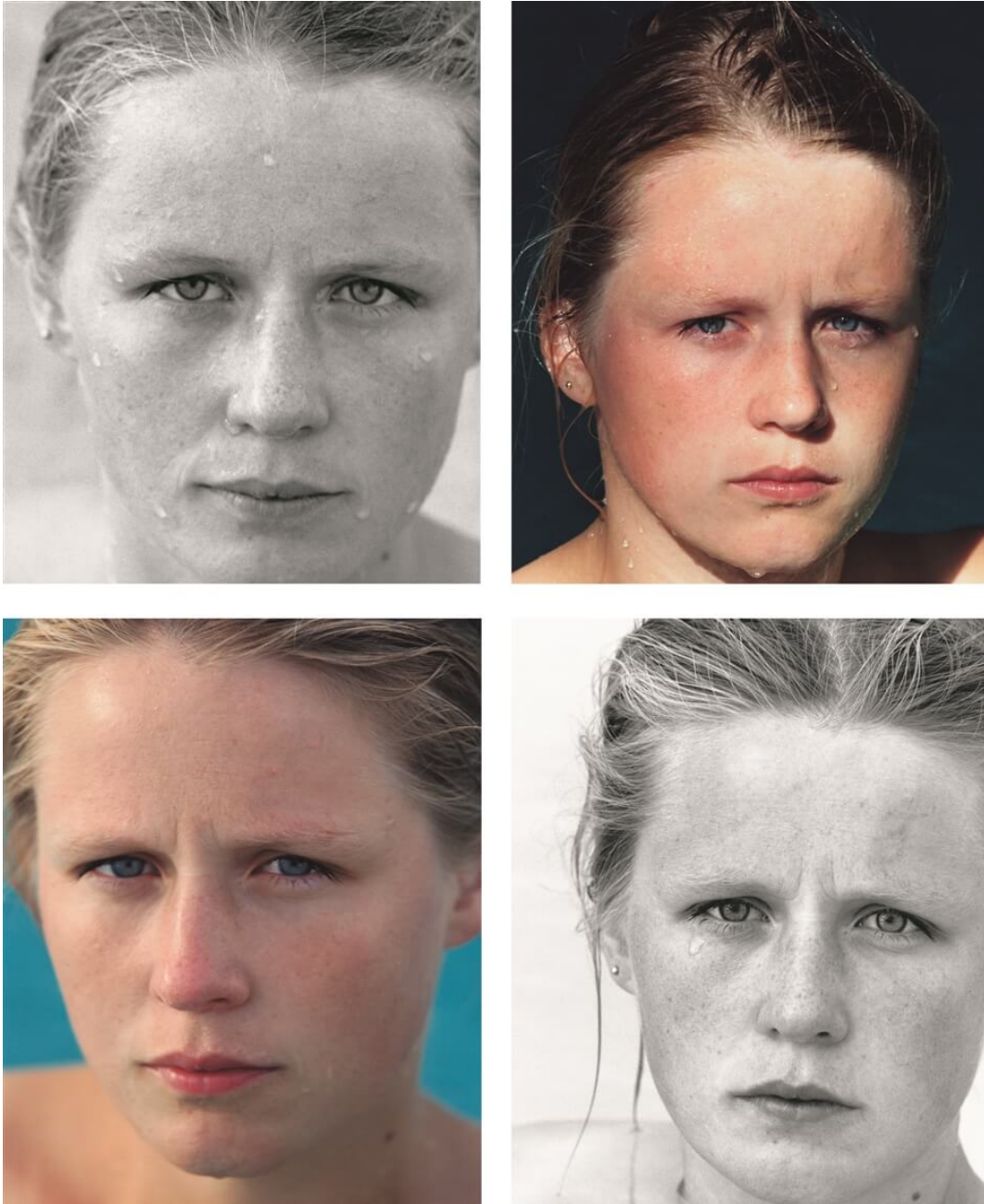


Fig. 10. Roni Horn, *You are the Weather*, photographs, 1997.

## Weathering the Storm: Clouds and Storms

“Why seek dated clouds? Why save a letter, take a snapshot write a memoir, carve a tombstone?” (Dillard 47)



Fig. 11. Amber Lee Williams, *Crepuscular Rays*, Polaroid emulsion lift, 2022.

Clouds have been described as “airy nothings” but really, they are more like watery somethings, bodies of water in the sky. There’s also water in our bodies down here on earth. Sometimes it leaks from our eyes when we are sad. What’s that saying, something about how we all look up at the same sky? Another saying, dust to dust, but maybe it’s really water to water. This work is about my relationship with my mother, and how that connection is mediated through objects, specifically objects she left behind after she died. One of those objects is a book. I don’t care about this book, at least not the facts in it, nor the science behind it. I care that my mother held it in her hands. I care that she carried it with her. I am attached to this object because it is one of the few possessions I have of my mother’s. So this work is about clouds, and my mother, and



grief, and time, and memory, which is really to say it's about temporary states of being, about being here one moment, and then gone the next.



Fig. 12. Amber Lee Williams, *The First Cloud*, Polaroid, 2021.

I turned to this book as a source because of a Polaroid I took of some clouds, at the end of the day in the summer of 2020. The image reminded me of my mother's pocket guide book called *Clouds and Storms*, and as I flipped through its pages I thought about how "weathering a storm" is a phrase used to describe getting through hard times. My mother was an artist, and she died by suicide 11 years ago. Many of her watercolour paintings were landscapes, and she used this book as a reference for the skies in her paintings. I have a few of these paintings, and some of them are left unfinished. These clouds are not my mother, but they are images she looked at, and I feel a closeness to her when I hold the book.

The Polaroid emulsion lifts that make up this series shares the same name as my mother's book, both suspend and disrupt time: the cloud's time, my mother's time, and my time all becoming one. They converge into a single moment. There is process of distortion and

concealment within my manipulations of the medium. They allude to what is lost in time. I do not know who took the original photos, or any details about the days the clouds were photographed. Did the weather turn dark, or was the sky clear moments later? The images, however, remind me that weather is part of our daily lives—something that we all experience even though we can't control it. And this element of unpredictability in the weather is echoed within the emulsion lift process, an alchemy that is akin to grief—how sorrow quickly moves to joy, and then back to grief (all within a few heart beats).



Fig. 13. Amber Lee Williams, *Clouds and Storms Pocketbook*, scan, 2021.



Fig. 14. Amber Lee Williams, *Clouds and Storms (Lightning, Mammatus, Rainbow)*, installation of exhibition *Heavy as a Cloud* at the University of Waterloo Art Gallery, 2022, Photo by Robert McNair.

## Things Left Unsaid: The Unfinished Painting(s)



Fig. 15. Amber Lee Williams, *The Unfinished Painting*, readymade sculpture, original date unknown, found in 2020.

This image depicts an unfinished watercolour painting taped to a table top. I found it in what remains of my mother’s belongings, when I was clearing out my old bedroom. At the time, I was also beginning to clear out my grandmother’s bedroom, where I found the travel case. My mother’s scene—a grey sky, tall forest green pines, a small patch of green grass, a sandy beach, and the pale blue lake—depicts a place I travelled to in the summers with my grandmother. Several elements are left unfinished: faint pencil lines suggest a small shed, a swing set, a house that no longer exists, and two cabins (almost identical in size, but my family called them the “big cabin” and the “small cabin”). My grandmother and I always stayed in the small cabin. I wonder now, why was my mother painting this? Was it meant to be a gift for my grandmother? She must have been painting from a photo. Who took the photo, from way out in the water? These are questions that can never be answered about a painting that will never be finished.



And I have no intention of removing this painting from the surface it is taped to; the paper and tabletop are now permanently fused with the watercolour tape. Within the exhibition, it serves as a readymade sculpture that accompanies my other works. The unfinished painting is the piece that holds everything together—an anchor. The fact that it is left unfinished is significant. It symbolizes a life that ended abruptly, one without goodbyes. My mother was only 44 when she died. She left no note.



Fig. 16. Amber Lee Williams, Installation of Exhibition Heavy as a Cloud at the University of Waterloo Art Gallery (readymade sculpture with “Unfinished Paintings”, note, folded photograph, photographic negative, Clouds and Storms pocketbook), 2022, Photo by Robert McNair.

## Carrying Grief: The Travel Case

“As we looked at her straw bag, filled with balls of wool and an unfinished piece of knitting, and at her blotting-pad, her scissors, her thimble, emotion rose up and drowned us. Everyone knows the power of things: life is solidified in them, more immediately present than in any one of its instants.” (Beauvoir 98)



Fig. 17. Amber Lee Williams, *The Travel Case (closed)*, 35mm black and white film developed in caffenol, 2021-2022.

The travel case is a small, light brown, hard shell case that my grandmother brought to the cabin that she and I visited in the summers when I was a child. I don't recall exactly how many times we went, but it was more than two and less than ten. I do remember the long drive, and the cooler filled with snacks. My grandmother died during the COVID-19 pandemic. There was no funeral, no big family gathering in remembrance, no grieving ritual. One of her belongings that I was allowed to take from her room was this travel case. It was filled with personal care items and other objects such as a toothbrush and toothpaste, a curling iron, bobby pins, a razor, ointment, hairbrush, shampoo, conditioner, rubber bands, a eucalyptus breath mint, and soap. She hadn't used it for years, but when I opened it, the scent of soap immediately filled the room. I had a visceral reaction to the escaping fragrance; it was so strange and felt as if it

went inside me. Her clothes always smelled like soap; she kept bars of soap in her dresser drawers.



Fig. 18. Amber Lee Williams, *The Travel Case (open)*, 35mm black and white film developed in caffenol, 2021-2022.

For me the travel case became an object that symbolized my grandmother's departure from this world, and the objects within it were things once held close to her body. Intimate and personal, they became precious. But what do you do with your grandmother's razor? It's not something one usually keeps for remembrance. I began photographing each of the objects, one at a time, with 35mm film. I developed the film in a homemade instant coffee mixture, known as caffenol. My grandmother drank instant coffee every morning. She used to give me the empty jars. She carried the travel case with her, and now I carry the grief with me.



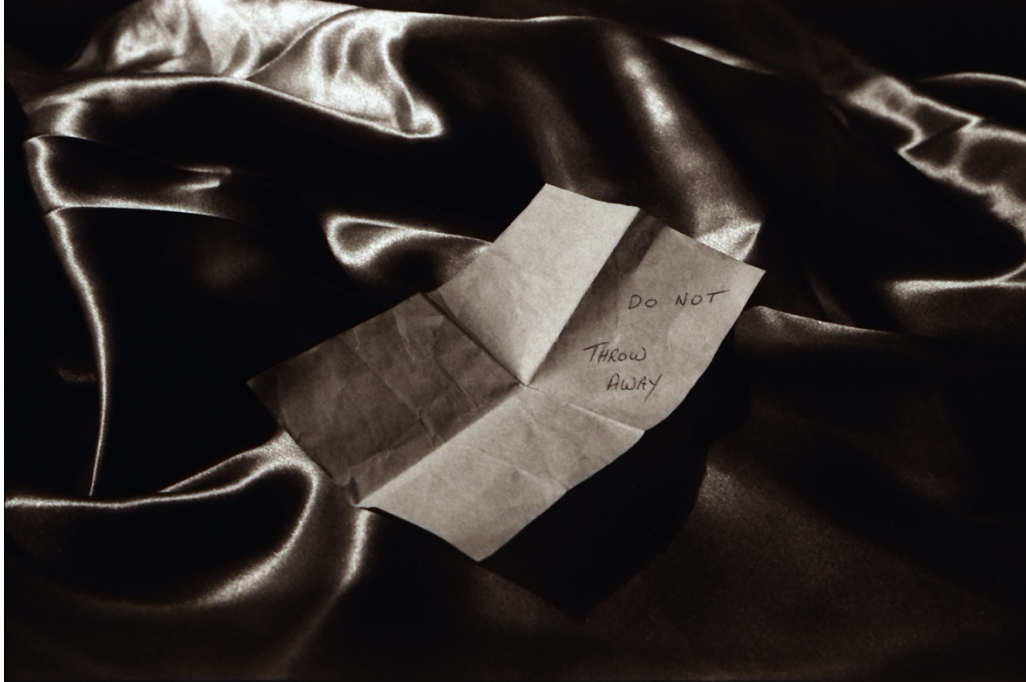


Fig. 19. Amber Lee Williams, *Do Not Throw Away (unfolded)*, 35mm black and white film developed in caffenol, 2021-2022



Fig. 20. Amber Lee Williams, *Soap*, 35mm black and white film developed in caffenol, 2021-2022.



## A Lingering Fragrance (Soap)

Because the travel case released such a strong soap smell, and the history of my grandmother with her soap filled drawers, soap felt like an important medium and subject for my thesis work. I tried many things with the soap. Here are a few examples: I made a cast of my face in blue soap, I encased a hibiscus flower in clear soap, I made a mold of the travel case and tried casting it in soap, I purchased 84 bars of Dove and filled the travel case with them, and even photographed myself washing with one of these bars in the shower. Although few of my soap experiments made it into the show, I don't think of them as failures. Like the lining of the travel case, the soap is embedded in these other works. Soap was always present while I was making photographs.



Fig. 21. Amber Lee Williams, *Holding Soap*, 35mm black and white film developed in caffenol, 2021-2022.

## Out with the Tide (Waves)

*The Waves* series began as 35mm black and white film photographs. I went to the cabin with my family (my two girls and my partner), and I brought the travel case, including its contents. My intention was to photograph these objects in the place where they used to be when my grandmother was alive. But when I got there, and went into the cabin, it didn't feel right. I was so overwhelmed with emotion that I was not able to make the work as imagined. Instead, I went outside and photographed the waves rolling onto the shore. The waves, vast and less tangible, felt closer to how I was feeling.



Left: Fig. 22. Amber Lee Williams, *Polaroid of the Small Cabin (exterior)*, 2021.

Right: Fig. 23. Amber Lee Williams, *Polaroid of the Small Cabin (interior)*, 2021.

I developed the 35mm black and white film in the darkroom. I scanned the negatives and then printed them on waterslide paper. I sprayed the paper with a varnish, and after about 20 minutes of drying, I submerged the photos in water. The emulsion part of the image (i.e., the ink secured by the sprayed varnish) floats off the paper's surface. It swims and crumples,

folding in on itself where small pockets of air get trapped under the emulsion, creating bubbles. The work is then photographed digitally in a reflective metal tray. The images begin in black and white, but colour is introduced through my body's reflection. I see myself in the metal tray, below the waves, and digitally photograph this process. These digital files are then printed on metallic paper. The metal tray led me to the metallic paper. The metallic prints are then meticulously cut-out and the edges sanded to soften them. Finally, these cut-outs are scanned and digitally printed to produce the exhibited version. Like the waves, the process goes back and forth between digital and analogue. The reflection mimicking the intangible qualities of memories, a kind of elusive apparition that's simultaneously there but not there.



Fig. 24. Amber Lee Williams, *Wave #3*, digital image of the emulsion lift, 2021-2022.

## **There Is Only Now (Water Buckets and Sand Castles)**

There are 24 cyanotypes in this series. They began as digital images of my two daughters playing on the beach behind the cabin (the same place where my grandmother used to bring me). After attempting to photograph my grandmother's belongings in the small cabin, I instead chose to document the waves rolling in. On that same beach, I also spent time observing and documenting my children doing what children do best—being in the moment. I watched them carry water from the lake and pour it into holes they had dug, only to see it vanish into the sand moments later. They built sandcastles, knowing they would not last. I felt as if I was watching a performance of ephemerality. But really they were just playing. They were being kids, and I was being their mother, which is so say I was deeply aware of the time passing, knowing that tomorrow they would be a little different, and that tomorrow would turn into next week, next month, next year.

All of the cyanotypes in this series were made at my home. I coated many sheets of watercolour paper with the mixed emulsion used for cyanotype (ferric ammonium citrate and potassium ferricyanide) at night in my basement. I often work at night. There are fewer interruptions because my children are sleeping. The added benefit to coating cyanotype paper at night is that there is no UV light, to which this type of photographic paper is sensitive. After making the exposures (which involve placing a negative over top of the coated paper and exposing it to UV light for several minutes), I chose to bleach and tone the images so they would not have the traditional blue hue that cyanotypes are so well known for. I used washing soda to lighten the images, and instant coffee to darken them (both materials that are found in the home).





Fig. 25. Amber Lee Williams, *Untitled (Olive)*, coffee toned cyanotype, 8' x 10", 2021-2022.



Fig. 26. Amber Lee Williams, installation shot, coffee toned cyanotypes, 2021-2022, Photo by Robert McNair.

## Conclusion

The final installation of this exhibition brings together several bodies of work made over a two-year span. As you enter the gallery, on your right, there are three Polaroids: one inside the cabin, one outside, and one of nothing. A lifespan represented in three simple moments, in the womb, in the world, and beyond. Next to these three Polaroids is the Polaroid emulsion lift I made of my mother, using a photo I took the last time I saw her. This photo is framed and stands alone, because nothing compares to the last time you see someone before they die. It is a solitary experience. Around the corner of the gallery and tucked away on a small wall is the first anothotype I ever made: a hand sized image of my grandmother, made from an even smaller photobooth photo I found in an album. On the farthest wall from the entrance, a vertical grid of cyanotypes that brings to mind the order of a contact sheet. All of which are a collection of single moments that make up a greater whole. Interspersed between the photographs of my girls carrying water buckets and building sand castles, are photos of waves. One moment to the next, waves crash to the shore as the viewer moves through the space. On the back wall, there are three waves, printed on aluminum, emphasizing their reflective surface which is similar to water. On the wall to the left of the entrance are the forty-four anothotypes, installed in a horizontal grid. As a set they suggest the colour of a pixilated sunset (a time ending), as well as the impossible bouquet that is beginning to wilt and fade. Next to the anothotype grid, there is a single image of my hand holding a bar of soap. Below is the travel case, positioned at both the entrance and the exit. In the center of the room sits the table; divided into two (the center piece, if there ever was one, is lost). Atop the tables are the two unfinished paintings by my mother, as well as a small note, a photographic negative depicting the small cabin, a folded photograph that mimicks the Dove packaging and holds one bar of soap, and the small pocketbook *Clouds and Storms*. Above the table, floats four photographs from the *Clouds and Storms* series. Printed on fabric and hanging like banners, they depict *Lightning*, *Mammatus*, *Rainbow*, and *Crepuscular Rays*. They sway slightly, and light shines through them. Together, all of these works make up how it feels to carry grief, contain loss, and continue on without those you love. The works ask the question: what do we do when

someone leaves this world? They are not here, but their presence is strongly felt, in the objects and photographs that remain, and in the familiarity of day-to-day activities such as time spent with family. Where do their things go? We cannot keep everything, but what should we keep, what will help us remember?



Fig. 27. Amber Lee Williams, *installation of exhibition Heavy as a Cloud at the University of Waterloo Art Gallery, 2022.*  
Photo by Robert McNair

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