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"By reason of birth"

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“by reason of birth”

cheyenne k. crawford

A monograph submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

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Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

School of Art and Art History

April 2011

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis monograph, and the body of work it accompanies to my mother and grandmothers. My mother, who gave up her early adult life to raise five children, has left me more memories as a child than anyone could imagine. My grandmother's influence on me was greater than they can imagine, and without that influence alongside my mother's, this body of work would not be possible.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my family, friends and James Madison University's School of Art & Art History. I would like to specifically thank my advisor Rebecca Silberman, my thesis committee members Greg Stewart and Susan Zubrigg and other faculty and staff that have mentored me through my studies at the university.

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Abstract

This written monograph is intended to parallel my MFA thesis show, “*by reason of birth*”. These written accounts from my childhood are specific occurrences in my life that influenced the creation of this work. Through the combination of written and made work, I recall an ambiguous past that allows the viewer to infer his or her own personal histories alongside mine.

Its 6:30am on Saturday nearly 6 years ago: the aroma of muffins, toast, bacon, eggs and grits has made its way to the second floor and into the room where I am sleeping. I hear the banging and clattering of pans and dishes, running water and oldies on the radio. Although I could sleep for many more hours, I slowly make my way from beneath the warm quilts, out of the small twin bed and into the chilly morning attic air. I stand up to stretch and my head nearly touches the ceiling. I look to my right and I can see the dark hallway lit up only from the light below...illuminating the stairs leading to the kitchen. There are two small rooms upstairs with three beds. Six children grew up here and all shared this tiny space. With every step I can hear the creaking of the floor beneath me, a wood floor that is now covered with carpet. My grandfather who gleaned from various places in order to build a home for my grandmother and himself placed these boards here. As I walk down the narrow path to go to the kitchen I pass various old photographs neatly placed on the small walls, each in their own frame. They fill the walls. China from which my grandmother ate when she was a young girl is piled neatly in a small handmade cabinet. Looking closely, I can see the cracking glaze and fading paint on each of the hand painted roses. As I walk down the narrow, steep stairs I see various trinkets all holding their own story and history. Continuing my decent down the stairs as I look up, the kitchen table is nearly visible. I look to the sink and there stands my granny.

“Perhaps the most ubiquitous of all photographs, snapshots are also the most hermetic. To the insider, to the member of the family, snapshots are keys that open reservoirs of memory and feeling. To the outsider, who does not recognize the faces or know the stories, they are forever opaque. At the same time, because we all have snapshots of our own, and thus know the habit of understanding them, we all are equipped to imagine ourselves into the snapshots of others, into the dreams and the passions they conceal.”¹
-Peter Galassi, director of the Museum of Modern Art's department of photography

¹ Hirsch, Marianne. The Familiar Gaze. (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999) 117-118.

It's mid July, the propelling of the window fan, the crickets chirping all night and the heat; the heat kept me awake during these deep summer months. I lay awake in my bed; the sound from the box fan is so loud it sounds like a train coming, and this is the second time I've been woken up by this loud vibrating noise. The sheets are sticking to my skin from my sweat; I try and roll over towards the wall and rest my body on it, hoping the coolness from the bricks can help me go back to sleep. This works for about thirty seconds. I flip my pillow over, trying to rest my head on the colder side long enough to go back to sleep. This also fails, so I get up. I stand up and look across the room at my sister fast asleep in her twin bed. How can she sleep through this? Frustrated, I go to the kitchen to get a cold wet washrag, return to bed and place it on my forehead. Please, I thought, let me fall asleep before the rag becomes too hot.

Around eight thirty the next morning the rag is dry as if it never held any water. I get up and begin to get dressed. Picking vegetables out of our garden is what I was going to have to do today and after the previous night, I did not want to even think about the day ahead of me. I hated weeding the garden or anything else that had to do with it, but it had to be done and my mom made sure all five of us were helping. Although I was probably only ten years old, I remember this specific day specifically as if it was yesterday... it was so hot that we all just dressed in our bathing suits as if it were a day at the pool.

I went out the back door. Is it really possible to be cooler outside under the shade than inside the house? I was unsure, but I hoped that there was just enough of a breeze so I could remain cool as I was in the garden. Somehow my mom thought this was fun, that

the garden was like an amusement park or something. She loved the garden and loved working in the garden. I never understood how this was a pleasurable leisure activity.

Out the back door and down the broken old wooden steps I went. The steps were made of untreated wood and had bowed and splintered. The railing was falling down and I could see all the cracks in each board, each crack forming its own path within the board like little streams. I liked the stairs for the most part, except when I would forget how old and weathered they were and I would slide my hand down the railing and catch a splinter. This day, though, I remembered and did not put my hand anywhere near the rail. I slowly went around to the back of the house where the huge garden was situated. It felt like it went on for miles and miles; full of everything you could think of: lettuce, radishes, cabbage, cucumber, tomatoes, cauliflower, green beans, lima beans, peas, watermelons... you name it, my mom had planted it in that amusement park of a garden.

As I arrived at the edge and stepped into the first row, the dirt puffed up like a cloud of smoke, this was one of the driest days I could remember. As I looked up I saw the row that I needed to get to- the green beans. I moved closer to the row and with each step I took the dust on my feet got thicker. I got to the row and started the dreaded task of picking the green beans. This was almost the worst to pick, only coming second to tomatoes, which always seemed to attract swarms of fruit flies and smelled of rot. It was hard to see the green beans, as they were the same color as the vine on which they grew and were so low to the ground that I had to bend over or squat the whole time making my legs so tired. After what seemed like forever, I was finally nearing the end of the row, and although it may have only been an hour, to me it seemed like an eternity.

Finally I was done and as I looked up I caught a glimpse of my mom coming toward the garden. The sun was so bright and I lost her in the light. Fading in and out, all I can see is her silhouette and before I could make her out again I am hit with droplets of... water? Was it raining? There was not a cloud in the sky and it was still so hot and dry. I wished for a second that it was rain, but I knew that this was impossible. The water droplets continued to hit me and they were getting closer and faster. I could hear my brothers and sisters laughing. Finally I looked up again and could make out my mom with the hose in hand and the sprinkler attached. Yes! It was time to play.

How much fun it was to play under this sprinkler all five of us (six if you include my mom!) It was so hot and the cool water felt so good trickling down my skin and washing the dry dust off my feet. We played under the sprinkler for the rest of the day, running under, jumping across and drinking from it. How funny it was to try and drink from it. The water would spray you in the face more than it would go in your mouth but that was the best part. We played and laughed the rest of the day. The next thing I knew, the sun was setting and it was time to go inside.

Once inside, I looked to the kitchen counter and saw the bucket of green beans sitting next to buckets of other vegetables that had been picked. It was time to start the canning process. I did not mind this part so much, so I began helping my mom by getting the canning jars out of the basement. She carried the jars and I got the rings. The strands of rings were almost as big as I was and were hung on the dirt wall by a single nail. They were strung together by a piece of yarn through the middle of each, creating a necklace-like shape full of lids. I imagined myself playing dress up with the strand.

Back upstairs, my mom started washing the produce and I assisted the best that I could. The long process of cooking and steaming the vegetables began. I was little help during this time. I would hand her this spoon or that tool when she asked, but I was too young to have any real part in this process. We neared the end, which was my favorite part: the wax seal. I enjoyed this, because not only could I help, but also because I could play again. The end of the canning ritual would start by melting the wax in an old pot on the stovetop. All the jars were lined up and the wax was melted and ready to pour. My mom would begin to slowly pour the melted wax on top of the jars; the wax sealing off the jars and ending the process. I would sneak and put my finger in the hot wax when she was not looking and try to make a mold of my finger.

After I snuck a dip of wax with my finger, I waited till it cooled; usually just putting it behind my back thinking she could not see what I was doing. Then I peeled it off and I could see every line in my finger on the wax mold. My attention was then directed back to the jars and I watched as the wax turned from a transparent liquid to an opaque block of white, sealing off each jar. I looked to my mother and she was looking down at me as I patiently watched this cooling process. We were finished.

As one's eyes travel over the surfaces of the encaustic panels there is a faint haze of foggy wax. There are dips and cracks, folds and stains, each panel holding a separate but personal story. Like fading memory, the wax is clear in some places and opaque in others. The immersed image vanishes and resurfaces, allowing the viewer's eye to penetrate through parts of the wax to the image below. On close examination, the tiny cracks, seams and stitching become apparent.

The seams intersect much like a quilt and merge together to complete the panels. The stitching suggests a domestic quality, much like the sewing of a quilt. When viewing the panels, one must allow time to pass. When this is done, more shapes and forms can be seen; study of a single piece will slowly reveal items like a chair, dress or figure. A mere glance will be just that: a glance into the past. Elements moving into focus then quickly fading portray forgotten, fragmented memory. The humbleness of each object that can be seen exemplifies a simple beauty, much like the home that my grandfather built.

The image immersed below the wax is a combination of the front and backside of a family snapshot. On some of the panels the “front” image is visible only enough to pull the viewer’s eyes in, causing the viewer to scan the surface quality and the image more carefully and look deeper. The fading forms, intersecting ridges, cracks and skin-like color illustrate the history of the photograph as an object, rather than simply an image.

On the back of each of these photographs the history of the object can be seen. The marks left by the persons in contact with the photograph depict the history of time on the surface of each object. The tired worn edges, decaying cracks and neatly placed folds, or lack thereof, give an insight into the history of the photograph as an object. Through handwritten dates, names or other markings, the backs of these objects become as important as the front image in the retrieval of a past.

Skin-like in color and material, the humanness in these panels is reminiscent of the aging hands of a working class individual. The hairline splits in the wax closely resemble the cracks in my grandmother’s skin, or the cracks in my mother’s hands from tending the garden and her years of domestic chores. This skin-like quality cannot be

missed, and is a key signifier in this body of work. This human fingerprint left on each of the panels is a direct and purposeful attempt to represent time and human contact.

“Untitled 8”(figure 1) shows a woman standing at the edge of a sidewalk or concrete slab. Her feet and dress are the clearest forms and appear at the bottom of the panel. The top portion of this panel becomes more a tribute to the photograph as an artifact; what is considered the back of the image has eclipsed the front of the photograph. The top portion fades into a kind of emptiness, a result of blending the back with its corresponding, but arbitrary markings with the front content. Cracks in the actual photographic image lend a sense of time and aging and are present in both the process of making the panels and the original image. The stamp “A833” which is mirrored and printed over the bottom of the woman’s dress comes from the company that developed and printed the original image. This stamp was placed on the back as an inventory system. Looking over the rest of the image, a small bush in the bottom left corner protrudes upward past the hem of the dress and into what appears to be a dirt road behind the woman.

When looking at Untitled 6 (figure. 2), the waxy surface has taken over any traces of a recognizable form; it has become solely about the back: the textured layers of time, the colors and dates and hand-written words. The scrape marks that are below the surface of the wax look as if someone dug into the image with their fingernails. These form what appear to be deep ridges within the panel. The transparent center of the wax is abruptly interrupted by thicker more opaque wax on the edges just before the wrap of material around the canvas. The edges of the transfer hang over the boundary of the canvas and wrap it like a package waiting to be opened.

When we were old enough to help, a few days before Christmas we would all wrap someone else's gifts. From my birthday in October through the end of December, we were never allowed to buy anything new for ourselves... no games, no toys, no clothes or anything. This was my mom's Christmas shopping time and she wanted to make sure we did not buy ourselves what she was getting us. We would all make a list of what we wanted, hand it over, and the months of her accumulating gifts for us began.

I remember one Christmas the big craze was the "furby." It was this furry animal in the shape of a ball with a beak like a bird and huge ears and eyes. It talked and even told you when to feed it because it was hungry. Their fur was fluffy and all but their big circular eyes and beak-like mouth were covered with the fur. They came in all different colors, ranging from more natural colors like white, gray and tan to pink and even rainbow-colored ones. It was impossible to get one, and one had to stand in line overnight just to get a chance at a purchase. My sister had asked for one and my mom was determined to get it. The furbies came in all colors and there were exclusive ones, ones that were worth more because of their limitedness. Boy, did people want to get their hands on the limited furbies!

The Sears at our local mall had announced that they had furbies in stock and would be selling them, beginning at some terrible time, like 5AM. We stood in line; there were a bunch of older ladies in line trying to get these furbies. We got there early the morning of the sale, and the line was already clear around half of the mall. I remember so clearly when the doors opened; it was as if there were stacks of money inside and whoever got to it first kept it. Adults, some elderly, were knocking each other over to get the furby and, if I remember correctly, one lady snatched one out of my mom's hand. This

was insane! I could not believe my eyes; these adults were acting like us kids for this toy! Somehow we made it out of there with a furby or two, although I was so confused by how crazy these people acted for this toy. I knew my mom must have really wanted to surprise my sister with one of these because she had to fight these old women at 5AM to get one.

When we arrived home with the furby and bags of other toys that were even hidden from me, my mom moved them to her hiding place down in the basement. The gifts would accumulate down there for months and we would all try to sneak a peek, but the basement was dark and scary so they were usually safely hidden from prying eyes down there. It was hard to know where they were and not look. What was not so exciting was thinking of all the wrapping that had to be done...wrapping half a year's gifts for five kids.

Most of the time what I would wrap was clothes, already in the boxes and taped shut, in order for us not to see what the other person was getting. This would start out fun for me. Choosing the paper and bow and wrapping maybe thirty gifts for the same person... after the first five it became clear why this job had been outsourced to each of us. All the different papers and the tape and ribbons to choose from made wrapping like Christmas itself. The crumbling sound and slicing noise of scissors as they-ran across the paper made me want to wrap more and more. Taping the paper together trying to make the perfect folds and seams, placing the creases just right so that it would look like the perfect gift, this was my goal. Taping the package was also something that I loved, sealing the package off and completing the wrapping process. But wait! There was more...I would sift through piles and piles of ribbon to chose just the right one and then tie it just so around the package to make the bow. I was so proud of the package... and I

thought it was the best wrapped one each time I would complete a new one. When I would put mine next to the ones that my mom had wrapped, they paled in comparison, but I would still strive to wrap the perfect gift, one that was identical to hers. The thirty gifts that we would wrap were nothing compared to the hundreds she had to wrap between all of us. How could one wrap so much? I know my mom must have had thousands of paper cuts after wrapping for all those years throughout our childhood. All that work wrapping, and within thirty minutes on Christmas morning, the neatly wrapped packages were destroyed.

A tree jutting out into the foreground supports a woman hanging from the limbs. A large brown fur-like randomly shaped patch interrupts the surface of the image in Untitled 12 (figure 3). Looking more carefully one sees a woman figure, much clearer than in other panels. She is staring directly into the camera. The top of her head fades out slightly, and the cracks and tears begin to emerge. The top right portion of the photograph is missing, leaving a ripped hole. The seams connecting the image are filled with brown stain and run horizontally and vertically to join the sections together. As one's eyes travel around the blurry background, the image comes slightly into focus and in one place a fence at the edge of a field becomes apparent. The wax then distorts the forms so that they are no longer recognizable, and the back of the photograph becomes the dominant image. The worn paper and ripped sections are in the forefront.

The ritual of physically making is an essential element to this body of work. There is such beauty to see here; through marks of wear and tear, or the absence of, due to years of handling. Here on the backside of the photographic image, a record of time exists; from the moment the photograph is development to now, the split second in time

when I am holding it. While making, I think back to times from my past where physical labor was used to complete tasks, and I am reminded of my mother and grandmothers who used their abilities to can foods, tend the garden, weed the rose bushes, mow the lawn and wrap gifts. Through these images I travel back to moments in time that no longer exist and this intrigues me. It brings back to life a brief second in time that exists now only in the form of a photograph, otherwise forgotten and set aside.

I find there to be honesty in a snapshot unlike portraits which become mere images that are far separated from the true identity, representing much less the realness of the subject within their everyday environment. This realness within their environment is what I want to bring back to life when I relive moments through making. Some viewers have suggested that trying to put back this essence brings to life a forgotten and under documented class, the common person, and the working middle class. These people who seem to be of a forgotten place in history, are thought of as overlooked in the historic record due to the absence of written, oral or pictorial documentation.

The experience of viewing each piece is different for each individual, as it is not necessary to remove ones subjective and personal response to the work. Rather, each interaction with the image will be unique because everyone will be able to relate in some way to the faint snapshot image. Untitled 20 (figure 4) has an ominous dark shape overtop of what appears to be a male figure, the wax is heavy in spots and it is hard to make out recognizable figures. This panel is faded and becomes hard to decipher. In the bottom left corner there appears to be a white chair that the male figure is standing next to. This brings back memories of cookouts with my family where white plastic chairs

were used. The cracking in this panel is heavy and there is a play between the wax and the image, creating even more opacity and a sense of fading through time.

Frequently I consider what makes up my past, traveling back to random moments in time, moments full of mystery that can never be fully revisited. Snapshots capture these moments in their rawest form. “What the photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once.”² Attempting to revisit these unrepeatable moments motivates my art making. I visually re-imagine a fragmented past through the use of found objects, photographs and personal memory. Through the combination of memory, history and images, I imagine traveling to this fragmented or incomplete moment. I recall this ambiguous past through the whole process of making of the final piece. This causes the viewers to infer their own personal histories alongside mine, representing both a personal narrative and times past. The final image is a glance, depicting memory, time and the sense of home.

² Barthes, Roland. Camera Lucida. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981) 4-5.

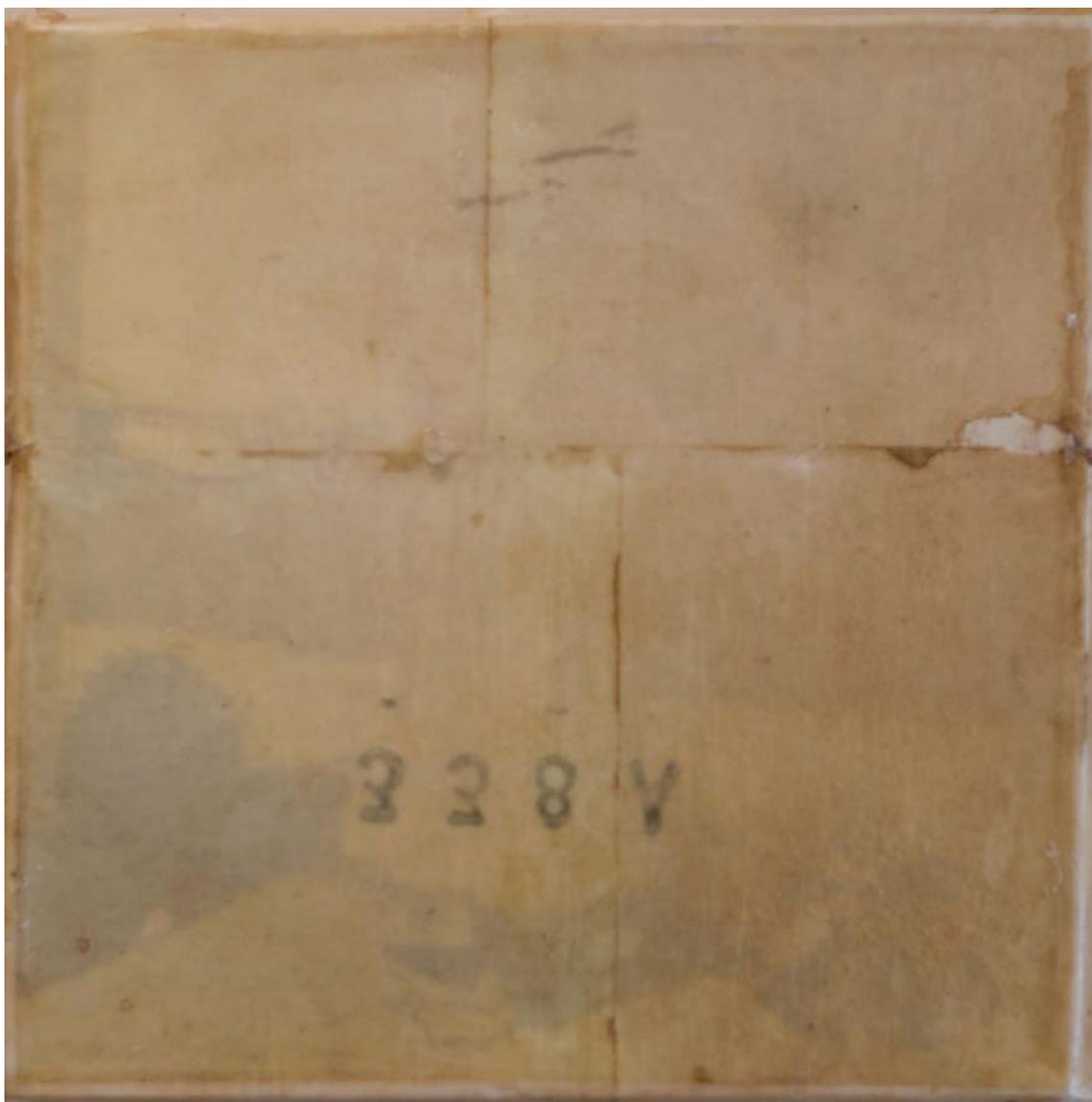


Figure 1

Untitled 8

12" x 12" 2010-2011

laser jet print, matte medium, paraffin wax, beeswax, resin, canvas, tea stain, coffee stain

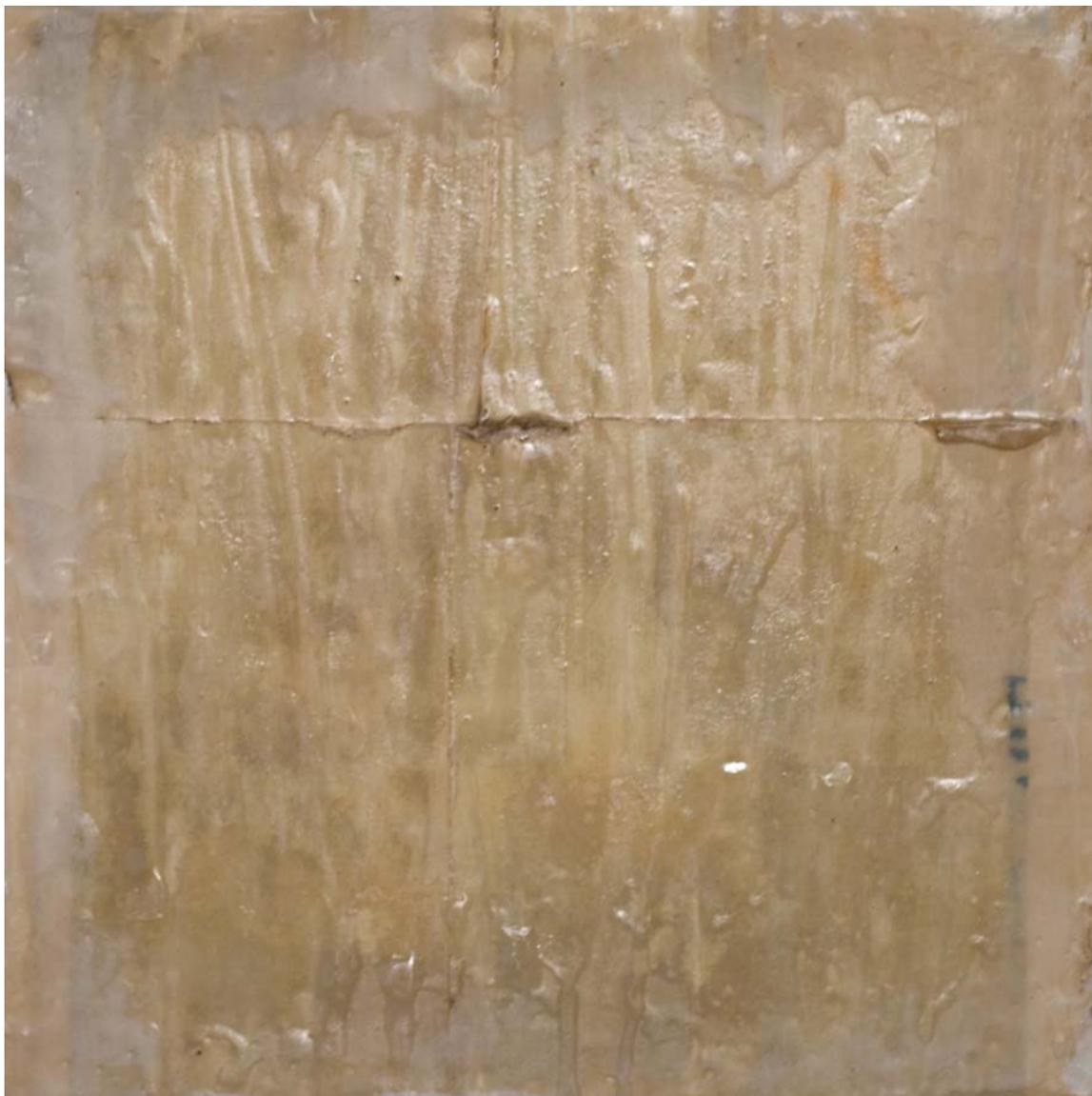


Figure 2

Untitled 6

12" x 12" 2010-2011

laser jet print, matte medium, paraffin wax, beeswax, resin, canvas, tea stain, coffee stain



Figure 3

Untitled 12

12" x 12" 2010-2011

laser jet print, matte medium, paraffin wax, beeswax, resin, canvas, tea stain, coffee stain

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