PILLAR OF SALT

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements ii
List of Figures iv
Introduction 1
Non-knowledge and Metaphor 4
Drawing: An Engagement with Memory 9
Quilting: Contemporary and Historical Considerations 12
Time: A Non-linear Encounter 15
Conclusion 19
Bibliography 21
VITA
ABSTRACT

LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 1 Installation view of *Pillar of Salt* 3

Fig. 2 Installation view of *Historic Formula* 5

Fig. 3 Installation view of *Ruin Cycle* 9

Fig. 4 Installation view of diptychs as seen from main area of gallery 11

Fig. 5 *Hope Chest, Age 8,* viewed from front 14

Fig. 6 *Hope Chest, Age 8,* viewed from side 14

Fig. 7 Installation view of *A Child's Agency* 15

Fig. 8 Installation view of *Source Text* 17

Fig. 9 Open pages of *Source Text* 18

Introduction

In my Master of Fine Arts thesis exhibition, *Pillar of Salt*, I return to my most familiar actions and memories to explore a generations-long personal history. The result of this exploration is not representational or narrative specificity, but an open-ended query in which metaphor is the primary method of navigating the unknown.

The title, *Pillar of Salt,* refers to the Biblical allegory of an uprooted family, in which – much like my exhibition – metaphor is the main tool of interpretation and loss is a primary theme. The text centers the patriarchal head of the family, Lot, and his unnamed wife and daughters as they flee their homeland of Sodom. Angels visit the family, determined that the rest of the town is truly wicked. They command the family to leave without looking back as the cities are destroyed. But "Lot's wife looked back, and she became a pillar of salt." [1] I imagine her scrambling along a hillside path, her daughters ahead of her as she pauses. She turns, looks, changes. The common interpretation for this transformation is that she doubted God's providence, evidenced by her clinging to the past, and was immediately punished for this sin. [2]

In contrast to the common interpretation, I've come to empathize with this woman. I see her looking back as the most basic human response to trauma; how could she not? Furthermore, I see her practicing agency with the simple turn of her face. It is possible that she wanted to acknowledge what had happened even as her family moved steadily forward. Maybe her gaze was a search for understanding. In any case, she transformed into a symbol for her own grief and

1. Genesis 19:26 (New International Version)

2. This interpretation is so ubiquitous as to appear in Encyclopedia Britannica, a non-religious source. "Lot's wife, biblical figure," Britannica, Encyclopedia Britannica, March 1, 2017, www.britannica.com/topic/Lots-wife.

a guide for my own. She is a brief, nameless character in a horrific story, making the pillar of salt a secret as much as it is a tenuous memorial.

This allegory mirrors my own relationship to history as the daughter of Christian missionaries. I am looking back, acknowledging, and seeking understanding. My mother, my grandmother, and my great-grandmother were all missionaries. Their choices to relocate their families overseas brought a sense of purpose as well as specific crises and traumas, the effects of which slipped silently from one generation to the next.

For most of my developmental years my family lived in Solomon Islands, a tropical archipelago in the South Pacific that neighbors Papua New Guinea, Australia, and Vanuatu. The islands are overwhelmingly lush. My childhood there was marked by wonder and play along with the deep self-consciousness of being a white child in a Melanesian country. In 1975 Solomon Islands gained independence from Great Britain and were faced with all-too-common post-colonial struggles. Between 1998-2003, building tensions between two of the islands came to a violent head in the form of a militant coup. The coup led to a spectrum of issues including the displacement of many villages, the corruption of the government and the police armory, years of structural instability and poverty,[3] and the consequent sudden evacuation of my family, along with hundreds of other expats. My family primarily frames this crisis and the following two years of movement, uncertainty, and apprehension in terms of divine grace and total weariness. Despite the good intentions of my parents and the positive experiences we had in Solomon Islands, we all left gripped by the insistent fingers of trauma.

3. Tarcisius Tara Kabutaulaka, "Australian Foreign Policy and the RAMSI Intervention in Solomon Islands," *Contemporary Pacific* 17, no. 2 (2005): 284-286.

The works in my thesis exhibition allude to events and cycles of my family's missionary history, stretching from my daughter's childhood to my own, to my mother's, and to my mother's mother. The exhibition reveals a personal iconography. It distills my maternal generational narrative into a few potent images and actions, such as ruins and vessels, flora and fauna, packing and unpacking, and cutting and stitching. These images and actions hold a myriad of meanings. While they stem from personal impetus, I intend for them to generate new associations for each person who sees the exhibition. I am motivated by the potential to unravel experience in a way that reflects its complex nature. In this paper, I discuss the foundational issues of making work about memory and the unknown that motivated my use of metaphor throughout the exhibition.

Fig. 1. Installation view of *Pillar of Salt*

Non-knowledge and Metaphor

My thesis research began in the fall of 2021 when I felt compelled to revisit the Solomon Islands landscape, the site of my earliest knowledge of home, of foreignness, and of fear. I took up an old habit of headlong internet searches. I combed through videos of flights between islands, reviews of local establishments, travel bloggers' enviable summaries of remote resorts, social media profiles, and Australian news archives. These sessions grew longer, more frequent, and more unnerving until I looked through my digital folders teeming with screenshots and realized that this search meant more than homesickness. I was accumulating the pieces of an emblem that would transform and hold my losses, those of my family, those of my people (the missionaries), and my people (the islanders). I needed to make a pillar of salt. Yet the problem with making work about loss is that it is an ineffable absence. Much of the history I revisit in my thesis exhibition is out of reach by virtue of its position on the globe and the timeline. How can one approach and give form to an absence?

I use events that I am intimately acquainted with as scaffolding to build an empathetic relationship towards past events that still affect my life. Much of the imagery keeps key information hidden. For example, one gecko eating another presents a repulsively violent moment; it suggests that the geckoes might stand in for actual human parties whose identities are not disclosed. The reason for this implicitness is not to tease the viewer about a secret they do not get to know, but to maintain the privacy of those who experienced the events. Not every story that affects me is mine to know or tell. This is another way in which the subject is an absence.

Fig. 2. Installation view of *Historic Formula*

The paradox of speaking about the unspeakable natures of loss and privacy both challenged and formed the exhibition. *Pillar of Salt* was an arena to think and rethink my identity in terms of non-home and non-belonging. This struggle is echoed in an interview between curators and writers Lucy Cotter and Sarat Maharaj on the topic of non-knowledge in artistic research. Cotter summarizes the concept:

> "Non-knowledge lies in 'forms of knowledge that are often below the radar of our conscious thought and which can bypass our rational minds to incorporate contradiction and intuition.' It is constituted not only by what is not yet known, but also includes what is unknowable or cannot be assimilated as (formal) knowledge. This is where artistic

> research becomes antagonistic to academic knowledge…(Artists) embrace this unknowability, being comfortable with holding open spaces of not knowing that confound traditional research. Artistic research thus revolves around articulating new questions without seeking answers." [4]

This excerpt touches on the bias towards obtaining quantified or qualitative information when starting a research project. However, my research is not about acquiring and portraying definitive facts of history but navigating the complexities of experience and creating the mental space to approach the lost and grieved parts of it. As much as it is about my personal narrative, this work is also about the larger utility of metaphor in approaching the unknowable.

According to a Stanford encyclopedia article, "we [sometimes] resort to metaphor because there's no established term for the thing we want to talk about and no need to contrive a new term that will refer to it once and for all." [5] This illustrates the contrast between the functions of metaphor whose meaning is somewhat fluid and that of symbol whose meaning remains consistent. This article deals with verbal rather than visual metaphor, but it elucidates much of my thinking about the function of images and mediums in my work. I want to create slippery relationships between image and meaning. When my relationship to the meaning of the work stays flexible, I maintain an expectation that it can keep developing and that more understanding can be gained as the work changes. Thus, the inclusion of an image in one work may not have a parallel meaning when it appears in another. This fluidity constitutes a "willful and challenging [...] innovation on the part of a speaker, followed by a resourceful struggle to

4. Lucy Cotter referencing her interview with Sarat Maharaj in the introduction to her book. Lucy Cotter, "Reclaiming Artistic Research," *Reclaiming Artistic Research*, ed. Lucy Cotter (Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2019), 18.

5. David Hills, "Metaphor," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* ed. Edward N. Zalta, Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2017. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/metaphor/

keep up on the part of a listener, [...] that requires and thereby elicits a special cognitive rapport between speaker and listener (1992, 24)." [6] Metaphor is the primary communication between my work, my audience, and myself. Furthermore, it facilitates an adaptable lexicon within which I can think.

The landscape of Solomon Islands has diverse and familiar metaphorical potential. Coral, frangipani, geckoes, and cowries are as ubiquitous as WWII wreckage, rusted out trucks, oil drums, and other industrial trash. The first drawing that I made for the exhibition was *Grandmother,* an image of a rusted-out cargo ship in the shallows of a forested shoreline. In this drawing the representational image means something other than itself; the ruin is in part a metaphor for the past being lost while persisting in the present. It is not a drawing of my grandmother, nor did I see the ship and immediately think of her. Rather, by pairing the image of the ruined boat with the title *Grandmother*—which denotes age, wisdom, and a link to the past—I pushed the drawing into a space that was not about boats or grandmothers but loss and the passage of time. Many of the images I used and the actions I took in the studio became methods to position the known aspects of my history to navigate the shape of its unknowns. Metaphor became the way to sort through information to which I had only partial access.

I wanted to create an open-ended visual space to explore unfamiliar conceptual territory. I carefully chose images to convey just enough to an unfamiliar viewer to touch on the important issues and keep them engaged from work to work while also being accurate enough to the source to keep myself engaged and questioning. In a 1978 article by Melissa Meyer and Miriam Schapiro the artists discuss *femmage,* a term they coined to include creative practices by artists

6. Hills, 2017

"using traditional women's techniques to achieve their art." [7] Out of the criteria they developed to qualify artwork as *femmage*, the most formative and descriptive for this exhibition is that the work be created for an audience of intimates. Meyer and Schapiro explain that historically women's domestic art was received by people they knew; therefore, a shared context and understanding could be assumed. [8] In my case, I push the audience to become intimate through the work. I hope that the inclusion of familiar access points will create that "special cognitive rapport between speaker and listener" [9] and in turn develop trust between my viewers and my work. The technical processes of drawing and sewing carry specific histories of their own, as do the familiar actions the viewer may do or observe. These actions include sitting at a table, turning book pages, sorting through objects, or imagining the sounds and feelings of water. The imagery is recognizable yet layered with context from a general sense that the images are metaphorical, to the specific knowledge of Biblical themes, to the familiarity of certain objects being depicted. Despite this shared context, I do not lead my audience to a prescribed end point. Rather, I hope to engage them in "articulating new questions without seeking answers." [10]

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7. Melissa Meyer and Miriam Schapiro, "Waste Not Want Not: An Inquiry into What Women Saved and Assembled," *Heresies Magazine* 1, no. 4 (1977-78): 67. http://heresiesfilmproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/heresies4.pdf

8. Meyer and Schapiro note that at least half of the criteria should be present in order for a work to qualify as *femmage*. The full criteria are as follows:
"1. It is a work by a woman 2. The activities of saving and collecting are important ingredients. 3. Scraps are essential to the process and are recycled in the work. 4. The theme has a woman-life context. 5. The work has elements of covert imagery. 6. The theme of the work addresses itself to an audience of intimates. 7. It celebrates a private or public event. 8. A diarist's point of view is reflected in the work. 9. There is drawing and/or handwriting sewn in the work. 10. It contains silhouetted images which are fixed on other material. 11. Recognizable images appear in narrative sequence. 12. Abstract forms create a pattern. 13. The work contains photographs or other printed matter. 14. The work has a functional as well as an aesthetic life"(68-69).

9. Hills, 2017

10. Cotter, 2019

Drawing: An Engagement with Memory

Fig. 3. Installation view of *Ruin Cycle*

The first pieces encountered in the exhibition are collectively called *Ruin Cycle*, a series of three large graphite drawings on paper that together span fourteen feet. They are all portrayed from an aerial position of omniscience. However, these drawings do not tell a whole or verifiable story. They revisit features of my childhood setting, revealing how the physical environment shapes interior language. In the drawing on the left, *Sister*, a lone suitcase floats on a swelling ocean wave created by an accumulation of smudged and erased marks. In the middle drawing, *Mother and Daughter*, a partially constructed or deconstructed house is seen from above. Since its roof is missing, we can see directly into the bare single room inside and out through its

windows into the surrounding field. Faintly visible perspective lines keep the imagination and construction of the drawing as close to its surface as the question of the house's status of disuse. The final drawing on the right, *Grandmother*, features a broken-down cargo boat near a beach covered in vegetation. Calm water ripples around the boat. Its details range from fully rendered value to preliminary sketch marks erased from a hazy graphite ocean. In all three, I use the ruin as a metaphor for my own losses as well as those of my family members. I distill narrative elements into a set of evocative images while keeping the referent private. The titles of these drawings evoke cyclical loss and generational time as each woman inhabits the ruins of her predecessors and adopts new structures to hold her identity.

The *Ruin Cycle* drawings were mostly made from memory. I began by creating a graphite powder ground and erased into it to excavate the illusion from the graphite. This requires simultaneous concentration on the drawing surface and on the mental image. Each mark is a line connecting the physical to the memory. In this focused state, I would sometimes become so engaged with the details of a particular place that I would retrieve memories that I had not thought of in years. Sensations and sights responded to an invitation I had not known I could issue. Jarring as this was, it affirmed drawing as a productive and intuitive mode of knowing. This process also affirmed my relationship to the place I had steadily distanced myself from since leaving permanently at the age of ten.

Fig. 4. Installation view of diptychs as seen from main area of gallery

In the three diptychs, *Personal Timeline, The Claim,* and *Historic Formula,* I engaged my memory in a different way. I renewed my Internet search for images, focusing on certain events. I was incredulous when records of these events turned up in the public domain, since I had for so long regarded them as lost or private. In contrast with the bigger drawings the diptychs feature single precisely drawn objects in the center of each white page. I legitimized my memory to myself with the research and production of the drawings, making their interaction with viewers a point of curiosity. What connections can these images generate beyond my experience? The drawings become as much an inquiry into the capacity of metaphor as they are into my own history.

Furthermore, I chose to develop the drawings as diptychs with the hope that presenting two images would implicate the moment between them. The viewer may generate their own version of the unspoken part, occupying a territory of between-ness as I have done since infancy. For example, the viewer can only face one of the two drawings of *The Claim* at a time, viewing either the hands treasuring a shell or the broken shell fragments. The unspecified narrative and the physical gap between the two drawings create a position in which one chooses to look forward or backward, mimicking Lot's wife. In *Personal Timeline,* a historic ship and a modern airplane sit side-by-side heading in opposite directions. The century between the two vessels is not explicitly represented but implied by their differences. The flatness of the schooner on the left contrasts with the detailed rendering of the plane on the right. This suggests different levels of familiarity with the vessels and beckons the viewer into a liminal relationship between forgotten and remembered. The layout of the diptychs in the gallery space leads to *Historic Formula.* In the drawing on the left, a single large gecko looks up off the page. In the drawing on the right, two smaller geckos engage in struggle; one appears to eat the other. This diptych is a gross secret hidden in plain sight, the realization of which cannot happen until one steps close to it. This requisite engagement between the viewer and the work mirrors my own engagement with my memories throughout the process of making the drawings.

Quilting: Contemporary and Historical Considerations

In the mosquito net quilt, *Hope Chest, Age 8,* I further simplify the sights and themes of my childhood by unifying positive and negative experiences as makeshift icons stitched into one surface. There are tropical flora and fauna that populated my happiest memories of living in Solomon Islands. There are also man-made items from my most troubling memories – tools of

the coup that destabilized the country and the boxes and fences that defined my family's life for several years after. If I could give anything to that confused and uprooted child self – from the first moments in that place to the day of evacuation – it would be the assurance that someday she would feel safe enough to revisit those times without fear. The title references my age at the time of crisis. It invites the notion that my thesis work reaches back through time to offer myself a new way to understand that period. It also references the linens and other keepsakes made by unmarried girls in preparation for their domestic futures. The quilt, an object of childhood comfort, provides a place to acknowledge the impact of trauma and to let it exist simultaneously with joy.

Figs. 5. *Hope Chest, Age 8,* viewed from front.
Fig 6. *Hope Chest, Age 8,* viewed from side.

Hope Chest, Age 8 is constructed entirely of mosquito net, that ubiquitous tropical boundary between human and pest, life and death, privileged and poor. Beyond my own childhood association with the nets, the green army surplus connotes the history of military intervention and exploitation led by US and Japanese forces during World War II. My hand stitching contrasts with the original machine stitched seams of the nets, fusing multiple histories into one surface. This layer in the quilt appears to be a readable grid of information while its shadow is a version that lives below the surface. The soft linear shadow echoes the drawings across the gallery.

Additionally, *Hope Chest, Age 8* (along with the artist book, *Source Text,* which I will discuss in the following section) provides a material opportunity to engage and subvert a codified and gendered textile tradition. For the past several hundred years of Western society, fabric work and many other crafts in the domestic sphere have fallen to women.[11] Quilts continue to speak a visual language largely formulated by women. This language traditionally marked significant events from births and weddings to departures and movements of empire. [12] [13] The previously limited designation of *craft* [14] is changing through the work of established and emerging artists who make those processes and materials central to their conceptual work. In the contemporary context, artists such as Louise Bourgeois, Tracy Emin, Ann Hamilton, Do Ho Suh, Diedrich Brackens, and Sanford Biggers have used textile in broad societal contexts to effectively

11. Meyer and Schapiro, 67-68.

12. Amelia Peck, "American Quilts and Coverlets," Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, Metropolitan Museum of Art, October 2004. https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/amqc/hd_amqc.htm

13. "Making Memories: Quilts as Souvenirs," Art Institute of Chicago, October 20, 2017 – April 1, 2018. https://www.artic.edu/exhibitions/2954/making-memories-quilts-as-souvenirs

14. Elissa Anne Auther, Materials that Make a Difference: "Non-Art" Media and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art of the 1960s and 70s," Doctor of Philosophy dissertation, University of Maryland, 2001, 259-261.

deconstruct the hierarchies that previously pigeonholed it as women's work. I am joining these artists in reinventing the tools of my mother and grandmothers to name what they passed down to me. Thanks to the work of these other artists and to the craft knowledge of my own family, textile is one of the visual strategies available to me.

Time: A Non-Linear Encounter

Fig. 7. Installation view of *A Child's Agency*

A Child's Agency is a two-channel video projected downwards onto floating shelves that are a few paces apart. The staggered layout mirrors that of *The Claim*, which is installed on the other side of the wall. The two video projections push the viewer into a spatial position that

limits their ability to perceive the whole. The camera looks down onto an orange Nike shoebox resting on a wooden table. In one video the box is closed with two small quilts folded on top. In the other it is open, surrounded by an ordered array of small trinkets and boxes. After a few moments my hands come into view from the bottom of the frame. In one video they set aside the quilts, open the box, and remove toys, shells, rocks, tins, etc., carefully placing them on the table. In the other video my hands pick up the items, fit them into their small boxes, and arrange the boxes into the shoebox until it is fully packed. The videos then cycle through the opposite channel's action so that packing and unpacking happen simultaneously regardless of when the videos are encountered.

A Child's Agency defers to and thereby legitimizes the child's needs and voice, once again referencing the possibility that this work could mend time in a non-linear way. The video inserts the physical existence of the situations alluded to throughout *Pillar of Salt* exactly as I chose and preserved them as a child. I emphasize the endless action of packing and unpacking rather than emotional reactions to the items by hiding views of my face and body. *A Child's Agency* simply shows my hands sorting with no cuts to the sequence. Time—particularly as it relates to memory and trauma—becomes an embodied concept of the exhibition. Experiencing time on repeat, or the past inserted into the present, or noticing a jump in sequence – these all relate to the way that trauma perforates our experience of "now" with splices of "then" and "what if." I set up a scenario in which the viewer can only see half of what is taking place, coaxing them to look back at the other video for comparison and taking up the position of Lot's wife in doing so. Waiting is a significant factor in the experience of this piece: waiting to see what one has missed in the other video, waiting to see what comes out of the box next, waiting for action to start again. Like the drawings, the video takes on a metaphorical dimension. In this

case, sorting is a form of understanding, and the box is akin to the body saturated with compartmentalized memories.

Before the viewer walks into the video room or immediately after exiting it, they encounter another time-based object that contains pieces of the narrative – a handmade artist book, *Source Text.* The viewer experiences the book in real time by taking in sequential information within its pages. Unlike the video, the pacing of the book is up to the viewer. *Source Text* is made from heavy muslin and mosquito net. It sits on a wooden table directly across from *Hope Chest, Age 8* and between the two sets of drawings, *Ruin Cycle* and *Personal Timeline*.

Fig. 8. Installation view of *Source Text*

In *Source Text* I explicitly reference embroidery samplers. This provides an aesthetic and conceptual framework to gather the research and memories that I have undertaken in the past three years. Like the girls of previous centuries, I doggedly sew verses, a family tree, and naturalistic motifs. [15] Embroidered pages feature info-graphic color-coded designs; some of these correspond to true information and some do not. Embroidery is interspersed with graphite drawings on muslin, blocks of poetic text that the familiar reader may recognize as Biblical, and mosquito net pages containing other found materials – shells, magazine cutouts, and hair. Semi-transparent mosquito net flattens the view of several pages into singular images that deconstruct as the pages are turned. In fact, most pages at the beginning of the book are only legible once they have been turned; understanding comes through hindsight. This is another example of the work evoking the position of Lot's wife.

Source Text is an invitation to engage in the puzzle of people and places with whom I identify. At the same time, my intentionally inconsistent pictorial codes subvert the reading process to maintain privacy. The front and reverse of sewn pages present unique versions of information collectively organized to portray both confusion and closure. The term *source text* is borrowed from the Bible translation work of my parents. All translations start from an original document called the source text. In my artist book I consider my identity in terms of translation. I pose a question to myself on the first page: What are you? What is your source? The disjointed answer slowly unfolds as pages turn: I am a series of women, each a copy and a mistranslation of the last. I am a series of goodbyes, each an echo and a redemption of the previous.

15. Amelia Peck, "American Needlework in the 18th Century," Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, Metropolitan Museum of Art, October 2013. https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/need/hd_need.htm

Fig. 9. Open pages of *Source Text*

Conclusion

In this exhibition I created a framework for self-examination, drawing on Lot's wife – the pillar of salt – in her subversive yet relatable action and in her allegorical significance. This process transformed my personal history from a lonely and inaccessible experience into a shared one in which generational experiences permeate each other and time is malleable. This unburdened my relationship to the past and enabled me to navigate it with curiosity and empathy. The work found in the exhibition allowed me to make a belated goodbye that I was not capable of giving at the moment of sudden departure. It also enlivened my engagement in multiple

research areas, including missionary history, specifically its intersections with patriarchy and colonization; the concurrent development of women's textiles; and my own perception of memory. My interest in these areas is ongoing and will continue to provide questions for future work.

I am motivated to understand my place in the world as it is contextualized by the systems of colonization and patriarchy. Having seen their effects firsthand, I will continue to navigate these power structures subjectively through my work. My practice constitutes a slow and intuitive gesture of resistance in a society that – in service to these structures—insists upon the validity of logic over emotion and the value of efficiency over process. In *Pillar of Salt*, I accessed and externalized memories through the repetitive and caring labor of making. Mentally revisiting loss while physically undertaking creative processes that I have long associated with safety has enabled me to rewrite my relationship to that history. I achieved this outside of efficiency and logic—rather, through metaphorical image and intuitive action. Making has become a method of understanding that "incorporate[s] contradiction and intuition... holding open spaces of not knowing." [16]

16. Cotter, 2019

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VITA

Corrie Thompson was born in Fountain Valley, California in 1992. She was raised in Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Southern California, and North Texas. In 2013, she graduated magna cum laude with a Bachelor of Arts in Fine Art from North Park University in Chicago, Illinois. In 2022, Thompson earned a Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art from Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas. Thompson received a graduate fellowship from TCU, where she also served as a gallery technician, a teaching assistant, and an instructor of record in Drawing I.

ABSTRACT

PILLAR OF SALT

by

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In my Master of Fine Arts thesis exhibition, *Pillar of Salt*, I return to my most familiar actions to explore the events and cycles of a generations-long personal history touching on mission work, trauma, and gender. The exhibition reveals a personal iconography, distilling my maternal generational narrative into a few potent images and actions, such as ruins and vessels, flora and fauna, packing and unpacking, and cutting and stitching. This exploration results in an open-ended query in which metaphor is the primary method of navigating the unknown.