



Theses and Dissertations

---

2011-12-09

## Traces of Existence

Jayna Brown Quinn  
*Brigham Young University - Provo*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd>



Part of the [Art Practice Commons](#)

---

### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Quinn, Jayna Brown, "Traces of Existence" (2011). *Theses and Dissertations*. 2892.  
<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/2892>

This Selected Project is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

# **Traces of Existence**

Jayna Brown Quinn

A selected project report submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Fidalis Buehler, Committee Chair  
Brian Christensen  
Sunny B. Taylor

Department of Visual Arts

Brigham Young University

December 2011

Copyright © 2011 Jayna Brown Quinn

All Rights Reserved

## ABSTRACT

# Traces of Existence

Jayna Brown Quinn

Department of Visual Arts

Master of Fine Arts

This project report accounts for my final MFA project, *Traces of Existence*. This body of work began as an exploration, partially borne of the love of genealogical research translated into visual art by exploring the things my ancestors touched, be it ephemera, the soil they lived on, or artifacts they left behind, and partly as a pathway through which I could learn to understand more about my own identity, all the while finding beauty in the mundane. Although the works are personal, it is my hope that the viewer will respond to them in his/her own way, and that considering them will create an interest in the viewer to discover more about his/her own lineage. I believe we are all a part of a global family, and because of this familial connection, it is my hope that many viewers will have a dual response; one of appreciation for the aesthetic qualities of the work, and a sense of belonging.

Keywords: family, genealogy, artifacts, preservation, reliquary, self-identity

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my appreciation to my parents, Jack A. and Sherie Freer Brown for continuously fostering the belief that hard work will yield positive results; that nobody deserves a free ride, and that personal integrity is one of the greatest character traits one can attain. They, along with my mother-in-law, Beverly Reid Quinn, have been my constant cheering section. In addition I owe a great debt of gratitude to my aunt, Loa Freer Webb, who let me live with her for my first year at BYU. She ate with me, waited up nights for me while I worked late in my studio, laughed with me, cried with me, and let me rummage through her family treasures to my heart's content.

I would also like to acknowledge my gratitude to my friends and siblings, who stood by me with encouraging words, who painted with me, shared ideas, took trips with me and Steve, never grumbling at how long I was taking to get just the right photograph or to find the one elusive headstone in yet another cemetery. Sharing the world of art with family and friends who are just as artistic (or are forced into learning to appreciate art) is a joy that is difficult to express in words. Although I could fill a book in an attempt to list every individual I would put in this category, I must acknowledge my brothers, James, Warren, Kent and Steven Brown, my sisters, Jackie Brown, Jeanmarie Brown Goodman, and Joni Brown Barnson, and my dear friends Lisa and Andrew Gemperline, Brenda Stewart Brooks, Dianna Larkin Lindquist and Michelle Calvin Jorgensen. I cannot say enough how much you have blessed my life through your kindness and encouragement. I love you dearly.

I would like to recognize my committee members who have been instrumental in helping me organize and curate my MFA project. Thank you, Sunny Taylor and Brian Christensen, for asking pertinent questions, teaching in a way that encourages personal exploration, and bringing

out the best in me. A special thank you goes to Fidalis Buehler, my ever-consistent committee chair, who has always been ready to push, pull, or buoy me up when I didn't know if I could do it. Their expertise, advice, and salient critiques have given me a gift I cannot repay.

Most importantly, I must acknowledge my husband and children, almost all of whom had a part in helping me finish my last project by rolling scrolls, including my then 2, 3, and 6-year-old granddaughters, Molly Quinn, Alyrie Quinn, and Aria Conlin, respectively. My son, Ryan Quinn, and daughters/daughters-in-law, Jessie Quinn, Valerie Baker Quinn, Tawni Thompson Quinn, and Melodie Quinn Conlin sat with me hour after hour until the back-breaking task was done. My son, Ryan, did an amazing job building a second box for my *Nine Thousand Souls* piece, in record time, and was instrumental in helping to set up my final exhibition. Steven Joseph Quinn, my husband of nearly 33 years, has been my right hand, my nurse and caregiver, my chef, chauffer, errand-runner, and my heart. He has gone along with so many seemingly harebrained ideas, never asking when the madness would end. He has spent his money on my art, spent his time in helping me make it, has driven me all over the world in the name of research and fresh inspiration, and has never counted the cost. I could not hope to find a more loyal, supportive, or generous man than he. He worked harder and longer than I did, and "Thank you" doesn't come close to telling him how much he means to me.

What a blessing you have all been in my life.

# Table of Contents

Traces of Existence – The Journey .....	1
Influences .....	1
Concept.....	3
Early Works.....	5
Process.....	7
Traces of Existence – The Exhibition .....	8
<i>Powder and Lace</i> .....	8
<i>Lew’s Homestead Box</i> .....	8
<i>Tuxedo</i> .....	9
<i>Grandpa’s Character</i> .....	10
<i>Ruby’s Brick</i> .....	11
<i>13 Notes</i> .....	13
<i>Skate Key</i> .....	14
<i>Nine Thousand Souls</i> .....	16
<i>Gathered Earth</i> .....	17
Traces of Existence – Images of Works .....	20
<i>Powder and Lace</i> .....	20
<i>Lew’s Homestead</i> .....	21
<i>Tuxedo</i> .....	22
<i>Grandpa’s Character</i> .....	23
<i>Ruby’s Brick</i> .....	24

*13 Notes* ..... 25

*Skate Key* ..... 26

*Freer's Sunshine Guernsey Dairy Cream Jars* ..... 27

*9000 Souls* ..... 28

*Gathered Earth* ..... 29

Works Cited ..... 30

## TRACES OF EXISTENCE – THE JOURNEY

### *Influences*

My first exposure to artists who incorporated found objects into their works occurred early in my undergraduate studies at Weber State University. My professor challenged his students to create a 3-dimensional work after the manner of Joseph Cornell. I began studying Cornell and became more and more intrigued by what I found. His work was so unusual in the sense that he was manipulating aesthetically interesting and beautiful components in a way so different from his contemporaries.

I did not know that Max Ernst existed when I was a little girl, but the fact that he tried a new art form which he called *collage* influenced other artists to follow suit in their own ways, which in turn influenced successive artists and designers, changing the art experiences of life for all, including my third-grade teacher, who became enthralled with it. I vividly recall several early attempts at collage in Mrs. Donnelly's 3<sup>rd</sup> grade class, and although she was not an artist herself, she valued art enough to bring the experience of this and other "newer" art forms to a class of 8-year-olds in 1967.

Naomi Muirhead is one of my more recent direct collage influences. She was showing her work in Florence, Italy while I was going to school there in the summer of 2005. Muirhead's show was entitled, *Ritrovati*, or in English, *Found Again*. I attended this exhibition almost daily at the art gallery at Studio Art



**Figure 3**  
**Naomi Muirhead**  
Old Italy, c. 2005



Centers International (SACI), Florence. In her artist statement that hung just inside the gallery doors, Muirhead describes her motivation for using collage as her preferred medium for the exhibited works. She states, “I began making collages during my sojourn in Italy because I wanted an art form that was portable, immediate, and inexpensive. At first, they were mementos of being in a foreign environment and were directly related to site and place, usually in a historic context. They have evolved into work that is less about place and more about suggesting narratives with a contemporary reference. Using scraps of found paper memorabilia and magazines, which are normally discarded after being read, I recompose these remnants putting them in a new, fragmented context, changing the relationship of how they were previously perceived.” (1)

I found Muirhead’s work fascinating, and while I was in Florence, I passed by the gallery at every opportunity so that I could study her pieces over and over. By the time I left for home 7 weeks later, I knew I wanted to give this medium more consideration.

Nick Bantock is another collage artist whose work inspires me. Although he was trained as a traditional “fine artist”, in order to support himself, he began his art career as an illustrator. My



first exposure to his work was through a book given to me as a gift by a fellow student in my undergraduate years. Bantock’s whimsical and colorful collages make me smile every time I see one of them.

**Figure 4**  
**Nick Bantock**  
Zebra Walk, c. 2000

### *Concept*

My elder brother, Kent, and I lost our natural father through divorce when I was 3 years old. One of the consequences of this event was that our mother had to search for work that would support her little family. She found a job as a bank teller, and through her manager, met a man whose wife had recently passed away after a battle with breast cancer, leaving him with four children to care for. Both single parents, they found a common bond, and as my mother put it, “that spark” of attraction. They decided to marry.

Upon becoming a part of this large blended family, my life changed dramatically. I felt I had lost a part of my identity that I would never retrieve. Of course, at 4 years of age I couldn't put this feeling into words, but I believe it affected me deeply. I didn't look like any of my siblings – not even my natural brother. In 1966, my step-dad adopted me and my brother, and we took the same last name as the other members of the family, but away from the family group I was never individually associated with them. I yearned to belong, but couldn't quite find my place. I believe this caused me to mourn for what might have been, or to idealize and fantasize about it. Later, I understood that this family upheaval was actually a great blessing in my life, but as a little girl who suddenly felt displaced and helpless in her surroundings, making the adjustment from only daughter in a family with two children to being the youngest of six was no easy transition. There were many positive aspects to belonging to this new family, but there was always a longing, yearning, and curiosity about my heritage that was a constant in my life.

At the young age of eleven I grew interested in journal-keeping. I believe it stemmed from a need to find my place in the world – to find some kinship to people who made sense to me and who could validate who I was in some way.

When I was twelve years old, my youth leader took a group of girls my age to the Genealogy Library, as it was called in 1971, in Salt Lake City, Utah. As the library volunteer

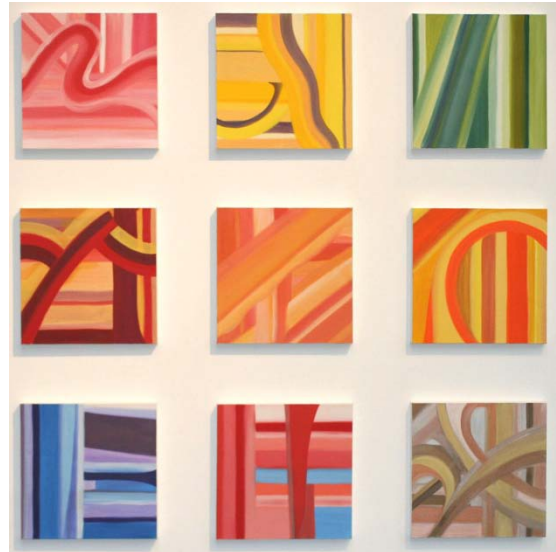
directed us to the heavy legal-sized bound books of yellow family group sheets and pedigree charts that lined row after row of shelving, I was fascinated with the prospect of finding my own family's record in one of the many tomes before me. Thus began my search for lost relatives – a dedication to re-linking myself to those from whom I had been unlinked through the choices of others.

### *Early Works*

In my undergraduate years, my family-based art was centered around paintings, including self portraits, abstract portraits of my siblings, and collages based on family photos and events. I enjoyed working in series, usually consisting of 4 – 9 complementary pieces.



**Figure 5**  
**Jayna Brown Quinn**  
Ours By Choice, 2007



**Figure 5**  
**Jayna Brown Quinn**  
Sisters, 2006

As I began to make artwork of a personal nature, it became apparent that my more personal work that included images of loved ones, possessions they had left behind, and ephemera relating to their lives, were more interesting to me. They had a depth to them that was missing in my less personal works.

As I entered graduate school I struggled to find a way to express myself in my new environment. My paintings were not well-received by my professors, which discouraged further exploration into 2D art forms. During my second semester I decided to delve into box-making in an attempt to move my work in a new direction, hoping it would enrich my paintings at a later date.

After much thought, and many discussions with family members, it became clear to me that I needed to work in a way that would allow me to continue to explore my relationships to my ancestors. I decided to create a place in which to preserve the little sentimental and commonplace trinkets left behind by loved ones long passed. My family members have an abundance of sentimental mementos that they have tucked away in boxes or drawers, and using some of these, I began exploring the design possibilities open to me.

## *Process*

Using cigar boxes, book board, cloth, leather, fabric, paper, glue, and myriad other found materials, including rusted items found on the farm my mother grew up on, I constructed my first two boxes.

When cigar boxes (or any of their parts) are used, all of the original paper must be stripped from the masonite structure before any new surface can be applied, as the decorative paper used by the cigar manufacturers is often not attached well, and is usually too slick of a surface to effectively allow another paper or leather to be applied without peeling at some later date. Because of this, many hours are spent in stripping the boxes. I found it to be important to allow time for these repurposed boxes to air out before resurfacing them, as the newer boxes carry a strong scent from the cigars that were shipped in them.

In many instances, I have created boxes from book board in order to emphasize the particular shape or form of the item it will eventually house. In these cases, there are many hours spent measuring, cutting, and carefully figuring out the angles at which to cut and join the components.

Each of the boxes contains one or more notes written by me to the ancestor whose items are housed inside. Some of the notes are in the form of rolled paper that is tied with twine, while others are written on portions of the box (usually inside the construction) that are unseen. This was a cathartic exercise that allowed me to move through the emotions associated with the loss of a loved-one. Private tears were shed as my love was expressed, questions were asked, and gratitude was offered.

## TRACES OF EXISTENCE – THE EXHIBITION

*Powder and Lace* was the first box I created during my graduate studies (see Figure 7). It was made from a cigar box which I stripped down and resurfaced with a map of the Parisian environs. It contains belongings from my Grandma Freer who is affectionately known to her grandchildren as “Grammy”. The inside of the box has been divided into sections, each housing an item that was amongst Grammy’s effects when she passed away, including a lacy fan, a powder compact, a linen handkerchief with hand-tatted lacy edge, and an aluminum French coin (see Figure 8).

The box rests atop an 1883 copy of Gaskell’s *Compendium of Forms*, an educational, social, legal and commercial self-teaching course in penmanship and bookkeeping, composition, etiquette, law, agriculture, mechanics, parliamentary practice, and mining; in short, the complete encyclopedia of reference for the cultured home. This book was chosen as a base for the box in part for aesthetic reasons, but also as a representation of the structured and disciplined home that Grammy maintained.

*Lew’s Homestead Box* represents the beginning of my Grandpa Freer’s life as a dairy farmer (see Figures 9 and 10). Early in his marriage, he and my grandmother bought a farm in Burley, Idaho, where they created a prosperous dairying enterprise. Seven of their eight children were born at this farm, and six of those seven were born in the family home.

Along with the corrals, pens, lean-tos and sheds, my grandfather built a new milking barn and a store from which to sell his products on these premises. The craftsmen-style barn, store and house were painted a tidy white, with a matching undulating picket fence between the home and the farm road. The retail store served visiting customers, while deliver trucks were parked side by side awaiting the next morning’s run.

My husband and I have been back to see the dairy lands three times in the last three years. Each time it is further deteriorated. The store and the family home are now gone, but the barn still shows remnants of its layers of white paint. The bare grey wooden-planked outbuildings are still standing and functional, albeit dilapidated, surrounded by the debris of exfoliated roof shingles, balls of rusted fencing wire, and thrown horseshoes left behind by working farm animals of my grandparent's day.

Lew's Homestead Box contains soil from the dairy's grazing land, walnuts from the orchard planted by my grandparents, and one of the horseshoes found tied to a fencepost. The handle used to open and close the lid was pried from a fencepost, where it once held a section of wire fencing in place, and the drawer pull is a nail that I removed from the horseshoe inside the drawer (see Figures 11 and 12). This piece isn't just about my grandfather's life. It also represents the first years of my mother's life and the fond memories she carries of growing up in this rural setting.

*Tuxedo* and *Grandpa's Character* are also boxes dedicated to my Grandpa, Lewis C. Freer. Housing four items that signify Grandpa Freer's life stages, *Tuxedo* was made using a collaged photograph taken when he was about 24 years of age (see Figure 13). I chose the paper for the box because it had a formal look to it that matched the formality of the suit Grandpa was wearing in the photo.

Because he died when I was only 4, my memories of Grandpa Lew are fleeting and few. *Tuxedo* is an attempt to connect myself with this man who helped mold and shape my mother and her siblings into the men and women they became. I wanted to insert a connection to my own life into the piece by making the base of the piece a book that I have consulted numerous times in my years of learning about painting.



There is abundant symbolism in the aesthetic choices made in constructing this box. The choice of rather formal striped paper in a warm tone carries several qualities of symbolism; the vertical stripes symbolize Grandpa's path in life being carefully laid out and followed closely (a straight and narrow path), while the horizontal stripes are the furrowed rows of planted fields overseen by the conscientious farmer that he was. The warm color of the paper is symbolic of the earth he made his living on.

Housed within the box are other symbols of his life (see Figure 15). These include the repetition of circular shapes that symbolize eternal families and the Heavens, gingham checked paper reminiscent of the picnic tablecloths used at family gatherings, a stone marble represents Grandpa's childhood, and a WWII ration token symbolizes his early married life and the struggles encountered by the generation who experienced that era (see Figure 14). Further, a blossom taken from his still-functioning and family-owned farm in Mountain Home, Idaho represents his mastery of the land and the crops he grew, while soil gathered from the farm he died working stands in for his last days of life here on earth. The final symbolic item is the clasp that closes the flaps on the front of the box, securing all snugly within, made to be reminiscent of the string and button closures found on the tithing envelopes of Grandpa's youth and adulthood.

***Grandpa's Character.*** Five raw gemstone varieties were used in ***Grandpa's Character*** to represent particular character traits of my Grandpa Lewis Freer (see Figures 16 and 17). There are many layers to this box, and each item integrated into it has a particular meaning. The outer shell is made from an old cigar box my grandmother (his wife) had in her possession when she died. Three of the four sides of the box are immovable, while the right side is attached to a gate hinge taken from Grandpa Lewis' farm in Burley, Idaho. The rusted and abandoned gate hinge is attached with new screws and washers, fastening the generations from Grandpa Lew to his

descendants. This hinged side can be securely fastened into a closed position with a small brass looped hinge. The box has a glass front flap, hinged with paper and binding tape, and is held open with a vintage pencil tucked into a rusted metal star stud. The bare wood and book board construction was covered in high quality book-end papers, pages from old books, and scanned advertisements.

Inside the box is a small 5-drawer cabinet made from book board and mat board. Each drawer holds a different type of gemstone, and is marked with the character trait that has been attributed to that stone. Since my grandfather died when I was only 4 years old, my memories of him are few and hazy, so for me, these stones become a tangible representation of some of the qualities that made my grandfather who he was. A jeweler's loupe sits atop the cabinet, enabling the viewer to peer closely at each individual stone, in order to gain insight into the complexities and variations therein, drawing a parallel between the complexity of a gemstone and the complexity of men.

Different views of my grandfather's silhouette are cut from various papers, with a photo of his shoulder as the top layer. A tiny brass honey bee is attached to the collar of the shirt, representing his industriousness and work ethic.

***Ruby's Brick*** is a five-sided box with a flip-top lid containing a circular pane of glass in it (see Figure 18). Two of the five sides are also glass, allowing the item inside to be seen without removing it from the box. None of the sides are of the same length. The box itself was constructed using book board and hand-marbled paper, and it was formed to emulate the shape of the block of soap it holds (see Figure 20). It has three metal feet that came from a 1940s musical body-powder container, while the back foot is an extension of the side wall it supports (see Figure 19).

The soap brick inside the box was one of many that my grandmother, Ruby, saved for about 50 years. When I was 17 years old I went to spend a weekend with my grandmother, and during the course of my stay, she sent me downstairs to her storage room to fetch something. The room was well lit, and lined around three sides with deep, sturdy, painted wood shelves. As I scanned the room for the item she had sent me after, I noticed a large restaurant-sized glass mayonnaise jar with a metal lid sitting high up on the top shelf, toward the front edge where it could easily be seen. Inside the jar were chunks of what looked like hardened fat from a distance. I thought it looked horrible, and couldn't imagine why my grandmother had stored it in her basement.

When I took the item she had requested upstairs to the kitchen, I asked her what the disgusting-looking stuff was in the big glass jar on the top shelf. She explained that it was lye soap that her mother-in-law (my great-grandmother) had made many years ago. My great-grandmother had been deceased only about a year at this time, and I didn't think to ask if grandma had gotten the soap at her passing, or if it was a project they did together, each taking part of it. My mother is of the opinion that it was made in the 1930s or 1940s. I showed my displeasure at the thought of using the old soap (probably rancid and so strong it would burn the skin), and asked Grammy why she didn't get rid of it. She was clearly annoyed with my attitude and rebuffed me by stating, "If we ever had another depression like the one I lived through, we'd be darn lucky to have that soap! There's nothing wrong with it!" I went away thinking she was very eccentric, and perhaps a little bit deranged.

Grammy Ruby lived about 20 more years after this discussion, and when she passed, her daughters (those who were interested in it, that is) divided up the homemade soap. This brick is one my Aunt Loa had, which she graciously loaned to me for this work.

*13 Notes*. Covered with paper made from images of her sheet music and theory notes, *13 Notes* celebrates my Grammy Lou, who taught me that one *can* teach old dogs new tricks (see Figure 23). Grammy's husband died in a farming accident when they were both just 55 years old. Gram had raised 8 children, two of whom were still in her care at the time of her husband's death. She had seldom worked outside the home, but she knew what hard work was.

After her husband died, and her son, Forrest, took over the farm, Gram had a little bit of free time, and one of the things she chose to do with it was take piano lessons. She kept two little notebooks that documented her learning – one to list assigned practice pieces, and the other to record theory notes. She was 90 years old when she died, and these notebooks were carefully tucked among her things. She never thought she played the piano well, and always praised her grandchildren as virtuosos when we played a piece for her, but she did play for me on a few occasions and it was such a treat.

This box was constructed from masonite and book board, glass and wood. The inside back is covered with a scanned copy of a page in Gram's calendar that notes the date and time of her music lesson (see Figure 21). A rod running the width of the box holds one of her theory notebooks suspended above a glass enclosure full of notes I wrote to Gram, each one tied with twine. Across the front of the inside contents is a bar of Gram's sheet music that I carefully cut away sections of to allow the viewer to see past it, and to give the feel of delicate laciness (see Figure 22).

The doors of the box are fastened closed with an antique button and a section of twine to loop around it. The box sits atop a simulated piano bench covered in black paper standing delicately on cabriole legs.

*Skate Key* (see Figures 24-26). In my youth, there were few items in my collection of toys that ranked higher than my skate key. There were no shoe skates to be had by the average family when I was young, so the only roller skates available to me were the kind that clamped onto the toe box of the shoe, with the heel held in place by an ankle strap of leather pulled through a shiny silver buckle. The skates were adjustable in length, so that as one's foot grew, the front and back pieces of the skate that were held together with a bolt and a nut could be slid apart to accommodate the new shoe size. This also allowed one to share skates with a friend or family member (an act which I don't recall being on the sharing side of).

The wheels were metal, and had no ball bearings. It took a lot of work to make it up any incline, and as one skated, the bolt that kept the skate the right length and the one that adjusted the clamp on the toe box, would vibrate and work their way loose. If the skater let them become too loose, the skate would flop off the top of the shoe and make one fall. Therefore, misplacing one's key made enjoying the sport impossible. Each manufacturer used slightly different sizes and styles of equipment, so if I lost my key, it was a long process to find something in Dad's toolbox that would do the job. I kept my key tied on a shoelace or string, and it stayed around my neck whenever I went skating. It was one of my treasures.

In order to portray the importance of what this small article meant to me as a child, I decided to embed it in layers of book pages. Reading was another of my childhood passions, so the two interests have been combined in this piece.

The box was constructed using masonite, book board, and glass. I wanted it to appear as a repository for something precious, so I chose a feminine, floral-scrolled, Italian book-end paper with gold leafing. Four doors overlap each other to create the opening or presentation of the key. Each flap is hinged on a different side of the box so that all may lie open at the same time. The doors are all attached with paper hinges, and are held closed by a rotating tab fashioned in the

same shape as the top of the key. The outer door has a tiny brass handle attached to allow the viewer to open it easily.

Through concepts linked to physical objects, connecting the past to the present, *Freer's Sunshine Guernsey Dairy Cream Jars* is meant to give the viewer a glimpse into the way I view the world and the people in it (see Figure 24).

Each individual jar was cast in bronze from one of the original glass jars used in restaurants to advertise the dairy business. Only a few remain, and in the making of the mold for this set, I broke one that had been entrusted to me by my aunt. I was heartsick about it, and could not find a way to repay such a loss. She was very gracious and forgiving, and expressed her love for me, in spite of her disappointment at the loss. These small bronze replicas are a metaphor for my life, and the lives of all humans, I suppose, as each one of us has flaws and may be a little rough around the edges (see Figure 25). At the same time, each little jar has intrinsic beauty, similar to, but different from the others, and the viewer will likely see one or two that are more pleasing to the eye, as we all perceive beauty in different ways.

The table the jars are presented upon is my mother's sewing machine cabinet. The sewing machine was a gift to her early in her marriage, and it's the one I learned to sew on when I was little. It is presented to the viewer with all of its flaws, because it is more beautiful, in my estimation, than anything new.

My grandparents, who owned the original glass cream jars, being a part of the human race, were like the rest of us; perfect yet flawed. Grammy was perfect at baking bread, singing funny little ditties, amusing all with her Oklahoma accent and idioms, yet she had a covetous streak she didn't try to temper (which also amused us). Grandpa was a stern man who had a hard time showing his love and letting down his hair, so to speak, and yet he worked hard to provide for the

family he couldn't quite emotionally connect to as well as he might have liked. For me, weaknesses in others make them more human, sometimes more approachable, and hopefully, more humble. For this reason I chose not to polish the bronze jars to a high polish. Although they are capable of a brilliant shiny surface, I love the flaws and imperfections that make them unique.

*Nine Thousand Souls* began as a way of visualizing how many family members are currently in my genealogical database (see Figure 29). Each time I start a genealogical research project I am amazed at the sheer numbers of persons who have lived before me. All of those lives, those people who once lived here on earth, are long gone, forgotten by most, just as most of us will be one day. With each new individual I uncover in my research I feel I make a new friend, and when that friend happens to also be an ancestor, the feeling is magnified.

These people are not just names to me, but their names give them a place in the world – a way of leaving a mark that denotes their existence. I wanted to bring all of these individual's names from my database into one physical place, to put them side by side, to make them all visible at once in a work of art. I decided to create a scroll for each of them, with their names written upon each one, and to tuck these scrolls into sturdy wooden boxes (see Figures 30 and 31).

The names were written upon pages from old books, cut to different widths, so that few are of the same size, once rolled and fastened. I used pages from old books partly for their aesthetic appeal, and partly because each leaf of a book tells a part of the story, just as each person in a family gives more perspective to the whole. Each page is similar to, but completely different from the one that came before and the one that comes after it – just as siblings are. There are so many ways in which I see books as metaphors for people, our lives, our psyches, and our relationships to each other that it just made sense to use the pages to represent the people that are a part of my human family.

There were over nine thousand people represented in this work when it was displayed for the first time, and the number has grown to more than 10,000 at this writing. It is a living work that will never stop growing, as long as new connections to family continue to be discovered.

*Gathered Earth* is a collection of soil samples taken from locations where my ancestors experienced significant life events, i.e. births, deaths, employment, marriages, etc. (see Figure 32). Each jar of soil has been gathered by me and my husband as we have gone to see these places. So far, this project has taken us from Brooklyn, New York to Boise, Idaho, with many stops in-between. *Gathered Earth* will continue to evolve over the years, as opportunities present themselves to gather soil from more and more ancestral homes. Currently, it only includes soil from the United States, but as time and funding allow, one day its contents will include soils from lands overseas.

The purpose behind this soil-gathering eluded me for quite some time – I just knew I wanted to do it. After a while, I began to consider how often dirt/soil has played a significant role in my life. My earliest memories of playing with/in dirt are from about the age of 7. My parents had built a new home on nearly an acre of land, and although they planted grass in the front yard the first summer we were there, the back yard was left as a dirt field for about a year. My sister, Jeanmarie, and I, along with our best friend, Brenda, would take our little brothers' toy trucks and create roads, bridges, and tunnels for them to run on. We made pathways for rivers that quickly turned into mud flows, and we played with the mud as if we were sculptors creating masterpieces.

Being fond of fossils, I decided to try to make rocks from the mud. I formed my mud into the shapes I thought would make interesting rocks; animals, four-leaf clovers, hearts, and the like. I knew my mother would never allow me to keep mud of any shape, regardless of how pleasing it may be, in my room, but I also knew that if I left them outside, my brother would find them and



break them to bits at the first encounter, so I had to find a safe place for them to reside until they became the rocks they had the potential to become. I tucked them carefully into a little shoebox and carried them into my room without being seen. I removed the wood apron from the front of my dresser and secreting the box into the cavity, replaced the apron so that no one would suspect that I was growing rocks in my bedroom.

I checked on my embryo rocks every day for weeks, and then less often, until eventually I forgot they were there. About a year later, as I was moving furniture around again, the little shoebox under the dresser was rediscovered, and when I removed the lid, I found my little sculptures. Some had flaked off in places, and some were cracked and in pieces, but most were still recognizable. Sadly, none had turned to stone. I was disappointed, and took the box outside to set the little sculptures free. I never tried making rocks again, but my love for dirt never went away – I still gather it and gently preserve it, but my reasons for doing so have changed.

We don't think about soil very much in our pre-packaged sterile world, but it is vital for life. We build with it, grow our food in it, make things from it, and make our homes on and in it. Soil can make or break a farmer or rancher, and its minerals once (and in some places still do) determined what crops would thrive in a given area, thus dictating the diet of those living there. Because my family members were mostly farming folk, it seemed natural to combine my love of soil with my interest in connecting with ancestors. I feel I am gathering just another bit of evidence of their existence when I gather the soil from where they lived.

In order to relay the importance of this collection of soil samples to the viewer, I have chosen to house it in a glass-fronted medical cabinet with heavy glass shelving, inviting the viewer to look at it from all angles, while protecting the samples and giving them a sense of importance. The samples themselves are stored in glass specimen jars with stoppers (see Figure 33). They are precious to me, not simply because they represent different places, but because there is something

about them that binds me more securely to my ancestors who lived and farmed and are buried in these soils. I find the soil beautiful to look at, contemplating the difference in the qualities of each sample, and discovering other bits and pieces of stones and plant-life, feathers, and desiccated insects that may have been swept up in the sample when it was gathered.

Perhaps viewers will locate a sample that they connect with on a personal level, having lived where one of my ancestors lived, or having a relative who lived in the same locale. The more ancestral research I do, the more soil samples there are to gather, and the broader becomes the scope of those who will find common ground.

I hope that what began as a personal journey for me will have more far-reaching implications as this body of work evolves and is interpreted by others. I want it to touch a nerve or awaken a sense of curiosity in viewers that might provoke them into considering their own ancestors in ways they might not have done before. If just one effect could be realized through this exhibition, I hope it would be that the viewer came away from it with a sense of wanting to know more about their own family history.

TRACES OF EXISTENCE – IMAGES OF WORKS

*Powder and Lace*



Figure 7



Figure 8

*Lew's Homestead*



**Figure 9**



**Figure 10**



**Figure 11**



**Figure 12**

**Tuxedo**



**Figure 13**



**Figure 14**



**Figure 15**

## Grandpa's Character



Figure 16



Figure 17

*Ruby's Brick*



Figure 18



Figure 19



Figure 20

13 Notes

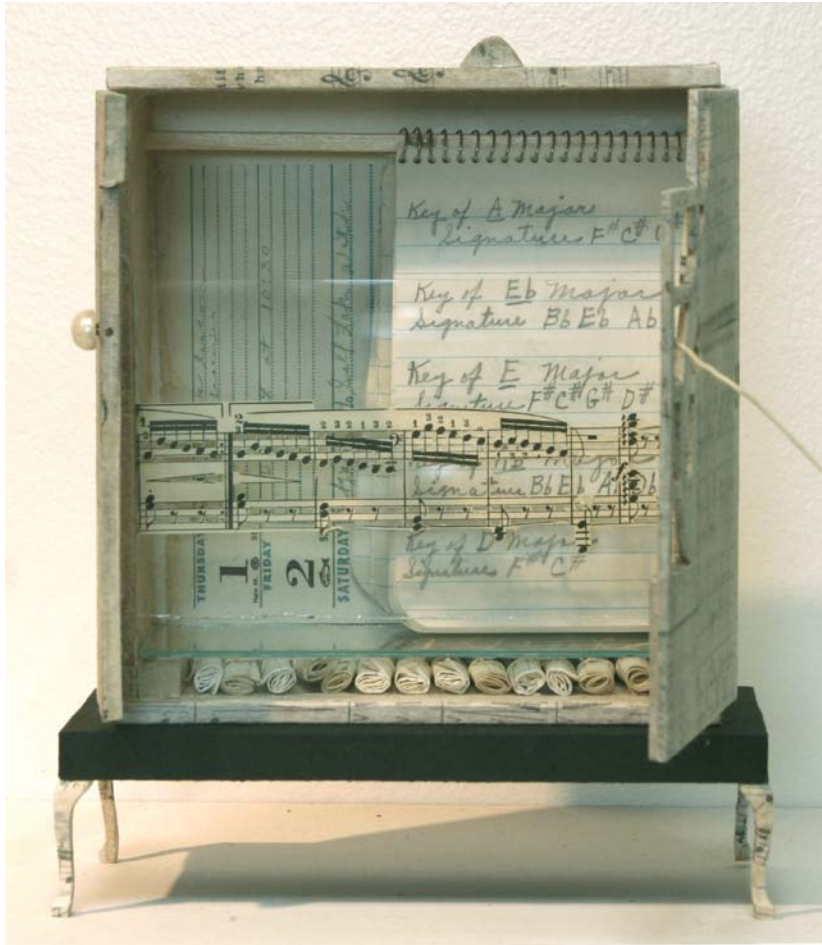


Figure 21

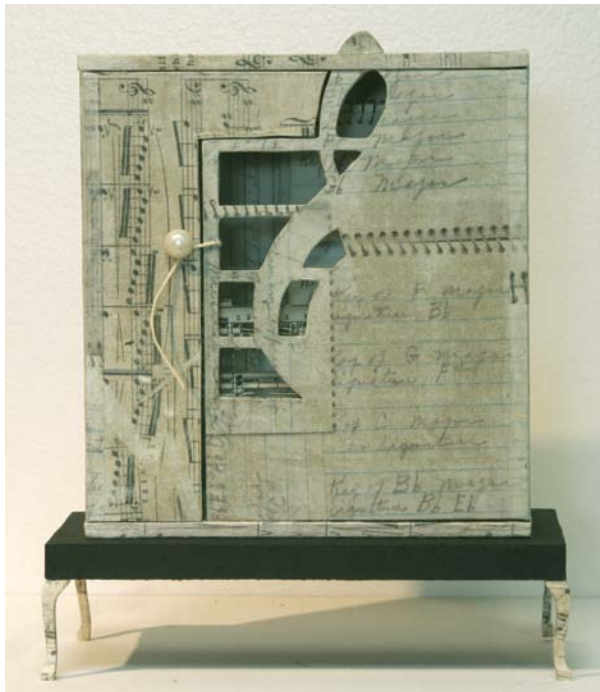


Figure 22

Figure 23



*Skate Key*



Figure 24



Figure 25



Figure 26

*Freer's Sunshine Guernsey Dairy Cream Jars*



**Figure 27**



**Figure 28**

*9000 Souls*



**Figure 29**



**Figure 30**



**Figure 31**

*Gathered Earth*



**Figure 12**



**Figure 33**

## WORKS CITED

1. **Muirhead, Naomi.** SACI Gallery: Recent Exhibitions. [Online] July 2005. <http://www.saci-florence.org>.