

# My May Cleary

by

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# Abstract

My research explores intergenerational connections through the creation of spatial experiences based on photographic documents depicting my grandmother. Having never met this person, I have no tangible memories attaching me to her: no sounds, no smells, nor tastes. By reviving archival images, I aim to capture her essence while evoking and carrying on conversations regarding the past with the present and future. Through the creation of this work I specifically ask the following questions: can intergenerational connections be made through the photographs of a passed family member? What lives in a photograph after a person passes? Can the creation of artistic works be used to form a better understanding of one's origins? By reviving my familial photographic history and reconstructing a possible past through the production of objects, I invite the audience to reflect on the importance of generational relationships in a time of accelerated innovation.

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# Dedication

To My Grandmother, May Cleary (1925-1974).

# Chapter 1: Introduction

My research explores how I have formed intergenerational connections through candid interpretations of photographs of my grandmother. I have no tactile memories, sounds, smells, or tastes to connect me to her, but by sharing my response to photographs of her, I am welcoming the audience to embrace my connection in the sincerest form. By reviving these photographic images of my grandmother, I capture her essence while evoking and carrying on conversations of the past with the present and future. In effect, reawakening my familial photographic history and depicting the captured narratives through the spatial experience of my thesis show. This invitation prompts the audience to pause and reflect on the importance of generational histories in a time of perpetual innovation.

Throughout my childhood, I was frequently reminded that I exhibited uncanny similarities to a woman I had never met, my maternal Grandmother May Cleary, who died of breast cancer in 1974, at 49. It was not just that we had the same moss-green eyes and lightly-freckled, fair complexion, as the fact that my mother often spoken of similarities in mannerisms I have inherited from May despite never meeting her. These similarities struck my curiosity from a young age, and I have always yearned to know more about her. I am now focusing on the importance of knowing where I come from to create a better understanding of who I am today. I was born to a woman who lost her own mother as a teenager and a father who was adopted as a baby. What remains are irretrievable relationships of my biological grandparents on both sides, and my lingering

curiosity about these possible connections. These prominent facts are the starting point in my journey of reconnection.

As an artist, my goal is to engage conversations about the importance of family histories through the depiction of my own constructed memories, and to trigger a desire in my audience to maintain a connection with their ancestors. With everyday life's acceleration generated by technology, social media and advertising, it is difficult not to sense a constant pressure to project myself into the future. To challenge this ceaseless spring forward, I want to facilitate a dialogue that works through family histories and recognizes them as integral to understanding one's origins. Through the installation of a collection of wooden cutouts and mixed media pieces, I ask the following questions: Can intergenerational connections be made through the photographs of a passed family member? What still lives in a photograph after a person has passed? And can the creation of works help to form an understanding of one's origins?

My exploration is framed in four main sections. The first section explores the importance of intergenerational relationships to both grandchild and grandparent; these relationships provide important emotional and developmental support for each family member. I focus on the significance of creating a strong family narrative with the help of intergenerational relationships that create self-awareness reassuring a child that they are part of a larger familial continuum. I will use Robyn Fivush, Jennifer G. Bohanek and Marshall Duke's "Do you know?" scale that examines the amount of information known about one's elders in cohesion with the feeling of belonging. In the second section, I draw on the German concept of Sehnsucht (life longings), which "refers to thoughts and feelings about something in life that would make it complete or perfect" (Scheibe &



Freund 121). This feeling of longing is the reason I am on this journey of ancestral exploration and reconnection; and I challenge my case of Sehnsucht through artistic pieces in hopes to remedy this life longing. In the third section, I examine photography and how images are used to construct the past, framing family histories and evoking a time that is irretrievably lost. I begin by examining Susan Sontag's writings on photography, which claim that the "aesthetic distance seems built into the very experience of looking at photographs, if not right away, then certainly with the passage of time" (21). Through this examination, I encourage the audience to envision their own familial images by engaging with, and reflecting on, mine. Next, I use *Oral History and Photography*, a compilation of essays edited by Alexander Freund and Alistair Thomson, to provide evidence of how photographs can be used as tools to restore and reflect on ideas of the past. Finally, I explain Roland Barthes' theories of studium and punctum and how I am using them to pull meaning from my family photographs. In my last section, I explain the progression and development of my creative work that consists of objects, photographs and text-based pieces that culminate to uphold my beliefs, principles and philosophies.

# Chapter 2: Intergenerational Relationships

In this chapter, I highlight the importance of intergenerational connections through the readings of Jerónimo Gonzalez Bernal and Raquel de la Fuente Anunicibay, who talk about the positive effects that generational roles can add to the wellbeing of all parties. The role of the grandparent is not stereotypically seen as a crucial part of the nuclear family, but through the notion of creating a strong family narrative the role of the grandparent becomes more significant to understanding one's origins, one's family identity and the inheritances that shape one as an individual.

## **2.1 Grandparent/Grandchild Roles**

Prior to starting kindergarten in 1994, I was brought to a woman's house for daycare Monday to Friday. The babysitter's name was Annie, and I quickly formed a bond with her and her husband. They became like a second set of parents; we explored the swamps behind their house, made crafts in the basement, and ate apples with peanut butter. What now strikes me as odd is that my older sister was looked after by our paternal grandparents, the LaFrance's home, before she entered kindergarten while I was not. As I dig deeper into this matter, I question if the relationships she was able to form with our grandparents differ from the ones I was able to form with them. I use the interactions that I had with my adoptive-paternal grandparents, the LaFrances, and the only grandparents I have met, to position myself in what the rapport possibilities might have been with my maternal grandparents. I investigate the reasons why I was brought to

daycare, while my sister was in the care of my grandparents? In their text, “Intergenerational Grandparent/Grandchild Relations: The Socioeducational Role of Grandparents”, Gonzalez Bernal and de la Fuente Anunicibay discuss the rearing of children by someone other than the parent which is, more often than not, a grandparent (71). I do not know what fuelled this change in the parenting style of my parents from one child to the next. While my sister was forming bonds with our paternal grandparents, I was forming bonds with people outside of our family. While ‘babysitting’ or ‘surrogate parenting’ a grandchild is not a requirement for a grandparent, it does appear to be a role they frequently adopt. This role is noted by Bernice L. Neugarten and Karol K. Weinstein in the “Changing American Grandparent”, where they describe the five styles a grandparent can adopt including: (1) the formal (provides special treats but leaves all the child rearing to the parent), (2) the fun seeker (relationship is based on playfulness), (3) the surrogate parent (caretaking responsibilities to the grandchild), (4) the reservoir of family wisdom, (distinctly authoritarian patri-centered relationship), (5) the distant figure (appears on special occasions and relationship with grandchild is fleeting) (202). From my reflection, it appears to me that the early relationships my sister formed with my grandparents had allowed for a strong bond to blossom between them. Thinking back to their closeness, the bond I formed with them was weak in comparison, from what I speculate can be tied to being raised outside of their care. From my reflection, I see her relationship with our grandparents fitting into Neugarten and Weinstein’s category of the “surrogate parent” style of grandparenting. However, I would place my intergenerational relationship with my grandparents in the category of a “formal” style of grandparenting because I received a welcoming environment within their home, but less nurturing than

the attention my sister received. This early connection has given her a larger familial support system and the time she spent in their home grew as she matured into her adolescence. Further, as I matured my intergenerational relationships with the LaFrances grew more distant, which I attribute to my lack of time spent with them.

As people age, responsibilities, such as education, work and child-rearing, tend to decline and, upon entering senior years, one may return to a dependent state, manifested in institutions like seniors' pensions and nursing homes. This return to a dependent state is part of a human life cycle as Gonzalez Bernal and de la Fuente Anunicibay elaborate:

It came about from a personal interest in dwelling on a stage in life in which some people think that passing the time is all that is left, but in which the relationships that are established between grandparents and grandchildren take on a life of their own, which favours the psycho-social development of the grandchildren at the same time as making grandparents feel satisfied with their role, constituting very often an essential part of their life cycle (71).

Small actions like picking the grandchild up from school, going to their sports games, and having weekend sleepovers help create a stronger bond to both parties and this "passing time" then becomes filled with responsibilities and accountabilities for the grandparent. An important aspect to remember is that caretaking responsibilities may come full circle, and the grandchild, in the adult stage of life, may be in the position to care for the grandparent as they age. Gonzalez Bernal and de la Fuente Anunicibay support this assertion in saying that, "...the grandchild will not only play a role of a child grandchild, but he or she will also be an adolescent and adult in the same role" (71). As the grandchild grows the relationship between grandparent and grandchild will change; the

grandparent's role can change from a role of responsibility to role model and to dependent, but through all these stages they can remain a person to confide in. The significance of intergenerational relationships is particularly important during preadolescence, as Robyn Firvush, Jennifer G. Bohanek and Marshall Duke state in their paper, "The Intergenerational Self: Subjective Perspective and Family History", preadolescents who are embedded in intergenerational family context have higher levels of self-understanding in comparison to their peers who lack these family frameworks (9). Though the significance of intergeneration relations may have differing results when comparing grandchild to grandparent, it is easy to see that these relationships cause positive effects on the life and wellbeing of both parties.

## **2.2 Family Narrative: Part of Something Bigger Than Yourself**

"The stories we tell are remembrances of the past situated in connection to the present moment in which they are recollected and projected toward an anticipated but uncertain future."  
(Jorgenson & Bochner, 200)

"What makes a narrative meaningful is the relationships that emerge in the telling of it and how it draws from existing narratives in order to be understood. Of particular importance are the stories we tell of those we call 'family'."  
(McLaughlin, 268)

Coming from a family whose make up is disorderly, I struggle to know where I fit. I have no relationships with my biological grandparents, my parents are divorced, I have a half sister, and an estranged half brother as well as a full sister who struggled with substance abuse and mental illness through the majority of my teen years. Bruce Feiler of *The New York Times* wrote about knowing where you come from to help create a better sense of who you are now, stating "...the single most important thing you can do for your family may be the simplest of all: develop a strong family narrative" (Feiler). Throughout

my investigation, I have been able to piece together a number of stories and timelines about my grandmother, and was able to put together a family tree. However, knowing the names and placements of family members on paper does not equate to actually knowing them as people. Few members remain alive on my mother's side of the family, and little connection is left after years of distance between my mother and grandfather, both geographically and emotionally, after her father remarried. In her paper, "Displaying Families", Janet Finch articulates that, "Narratives are seen as stories which people tell to themselves and to others about their own family relationships, which enable them to be understood and situated as part of an accepted repertoire of what 'family' means" (78). The narratives that I have been told in connection to the Cleary family seemed to dwindle after the death of my grandmother May in 1974. The narratives all come from one source, my mother, as she is the only member of the Cleary family that I have a relationship with. Additionally, I am getting only one perspective of what May was like. I then add my grandmother's photographs to enable me to create my own perspective of this woman I long to know. My created works act as a type of family narrative, as I seek to ensure that my grandmother's impact on family and myself is not forgotten with her passing. Though I have never met her I believe it is important that I attempt to understand her and by surrounding myself with photographs and oral stories that capture events in the narrative of her life, I better understand her triumphs and hardships. Her teachings and lessons have been conveyed through my mother and down to me, ultimately informing me of why I am the person I am today. Narratives are important in understanding family and as families grow and change the elders in that family hold the stories and memories of that family's past. I have a void in the elder's position in my family, and I seek to make sure

that my history is not lost due to this void. I have always been encouraged and pushed to be the best I can be by a mother who was often told that higher education was not for her and because she is a woman she should settle for mediocrity; she never settled. This was most likely a generational shift and from the perspective of my grandparents believing girls were to be homemakers or hold minimum wage jobs out of high school. She rebelled against her parents who didn't think that girls needed postsecondary education and the confidence she has in herself is an inspiration to my sisters and myself. Bruce Feiler says this about struggling with hardships, "When faced with a challenge, happy families, like happy people, just add a new chapter to their life story that shows them overcoming the hardships. This skill is particularly important for children, whose identity tends to get locked in during adolescence" (Feiler). Throughout my adolescence, my mother worked full-time and decided to go back to university after 25 years to complete her degree. This was a defining moment in my family story, as it allowed my mother to progress to a management position within her workplace. I look to her as a role model, and saw her resiliency as she juggled her time between 3 children, working full-time, classes, and homework. She took on a heavy workload to provide her family with not only what we needed but also what we wanted. In her paper, "Family Ties in Genes and Stories: The Importance of Value and Recognition in the Narratives People Tell of Family", Janice McLaughlin describes "What this discussion of narrative points towards is how the narratives embedded in the stories people tell about family do not just provide insight into a family's identity (as articulated by that person), they help inform the development of that identity" (McLaughlin 268). I am who I am today because of the mother that raised me; she is who she is because of the mother that raised her. This is

why I seek to familiarize myself with my grandmother. The correlation between narrative and identity is impeccably put by Jane Jorgenson and Arthur P. Bochner in their chapter, “Imagining Families Through Stories and Rituals” in the *Handbook of Family Communication*: “To a large extent, we “receive” these formative stories passively; they become “our own story,” though they are passed on to us by others, usually significant others; often we grow into the stories until they fit as tight and are as unnoticeable as a layer of skin. Eventually, these received stories wield considerable power over us, shaping our values and our ways of perceiving—making us who we seem to be” (200). I struggled to claim May’s stories as my own because they did not come directly from her, the stories become like fiction, but through her intense photographic documentation the fragments begin to fit together. The absence of direct memory or narrative enriches my artistic works as I am able to create imaginary constructs and can form a utopic sense of the subjective relationship I am creating. I chose to focus on positive aspects of what I think an ideal relationship with my grandmother would have encompassed. When creating my artistic works I can purposely avoid constructing hardships, I feel no need to focus on or include those aspect in my creative works because I want only positive memories.

### **2.3 The Did You Know? Scale**

Children who know their family history, who have shared in these stories, develop a sense of self-embedded in a larger familial and intergenerational context, and this sense of self provides strength and security. It is through language that we are a unique entity, a self with a personal and familial history through time. (Fivush, Bohanek, Duke 9)

Through my exploration into intergenerational relationships I came across the research of Robyn Fivush, Jennifer G. Bohanek, and Marshall Duke of the department of Psychology at Emory University who developed a quiz to scale how well you know your



family narrative. It is called the “Did You Know?” Scale, consisting of 20 ‘yes-or-no’ questions, some examples include: “Do you know where your grandparents grew up? Do you know where your mom and dad went to high school? Do you know where your parents met? Do you know an illness or something really terrible that happened in your family? Do you know the story of your birth?” (Feiler). The test examines the amount of information known about your life and your elders’ lives in cohesion with the feeling of belonging.

I remember asking my parents about where they went to school, how they would describe themselves as teens and stories about their youth. Additionally, I would ask them stories about my childhood, and things I could not recall about myself. Fivush, Bohanek, and Duke speak to the inquisitiveness of children while trying to situate themselves to the context of family saying, “This increased interest in hearing stories about events outside of their own personal experience or memory suggests that children are becoming intrigued with how to make sense of their own lives in the context of other people’s lives” (4). When I took the quiz, my result was 14/20, or 70%; these results conclude that I know an average amount about my family but in particular, I had to respond with “no” on many of the questions regarding grandparents. This quiz only included 4 questions regarding grandparents, 3 of which I had to answer with “no”, concluding that I have 25% knowledge of my grandparents lives.

This lack of knowledge could contribute to the strong impulse I have in learning more about my grandparents. In his *The New York Times* article, Feiler states that “if you want a happier family and the ability to bounce back from difficult situations, it is important to create, refine and retell the stories that make up your family, this act

increases the odds that your family will thrive for generations to come.” Furthermore, it will help to ensure that your children will have a sense of belonging and be able to position themselves in the context of family. The “Did You Know” Scale that I took had only 2 questions directly asking about grandparents, and I question if the scale had a more balanced amount of generational questions would my results be under the 20 percent amount? The questions they did have, *Do you know where some of your grandparents grew up?* And *Do you know where some of your grandparents met?* are not particular on which side of the family or information pertaining to grandmother or grandfather specifically. Through my investigation into my grandmother’s life, I now have a greater sense of the life she lived and would be better equipped to answer questions about her in particular.

## **2.4 Identity and Family**

We are who we are because of what we have experienced and what we have been told; our sense of self is constructed from both personal history and the social cultural history in which our personal history is embedded. (Fivush, Bohanek, Duke 2)

A solid understanding of identity starts with knowing where you come from. Our social interactions with friends, family and the outside world help to shape the person we become. Fivush, Bohanek and Duke support this statement with, “Who we are and how we understand our personal experiences is also shaped by how we understand others’ experiences. Self both emerges from and contributes to ongoing social interactions, such that how we narrate our experiences with others shapes how we come to understand these experiences for ourselves” (2). Generally, the first people we look to growing up are the people around us, most often, our family. Furthermore, families share similar physical features and lifestyles, and as we grow we pick up traits and characteristics from them,

but we also acquire a unique set of personal perspectives that individualize us. These individualized perspectives can ensure that different family members will remember the same experiences differently. Fivush, Bohanek and Duke explain that "...it is the realization that one has a unique set of memories and a unique perspective for understanding and evaluating these memories that makes one a unique self, and it is this subjective perspective that links these experiences together to form a coherent sense of self from the past into the present" (4). Each unique outlook on experiences and memories create a distinctive understanding for the past, the present, and then future. As an artist I want to engage my audience through nostalgic images and encourage them to investigate their own individualize familial histories. By understanding the vacant relationship with my grandmother and reviving her essence through art, I am creating personal memories and moments with her that are exclusive to me as the artist and creator of this artistic body of work.

Identity can be linked to inheritance. Janet Finch speaks of inheritance highlighting "...the considerable importance of passing on 'keepsakes', typically domestic or personal objects of little monetary value, but which symbolize the relationship between an individual who has died and one who is still alive" (77). In addition to keepsakes, I believe that inheritance is about traits; for example, you might be a great shot because your grandfather was an excellent hunter. Inheritance is about traditions, such as family suppers at your grandparents' house every Christmas, Easter and Thanksgiving. They are also about appearance, these inheritances are not chosen, but genetically passed down and include, eye colour and skin tone. These inherited traits and traditions become connections to your family and weave together your personal identity.

In her book, “A Body of Writing 1990-1999”, Bronwyn Davies discusses, “Most theories of ‘identity’ dwell on the interactions between oneself and others, attributing much power to those others in their naming or shaping of the emergent self” (27). I maintain that the visual repetitions of my grandmother’s image in my creative works are fuelled by the creation of interactions between my grandmother and myself. Some of the photographic documents that I use are over 80 years old and the historical variety of these documents allows me to connect with my grandmother at various stages in life. Like a mosaic, I piece together her images as remnants of time, each image does not convey much meaning alone, but the accumulation of images is necessary to the emergence of the significant story of her life.

# Chapter 3: Sehnsucht

The things longed for were perceived as unattainable but still created a want that guided passionate striving towards it.

(Scheibe & Freund 123)

Sehnsucht articulates a majority of the intentions that focused my creative works around the theme of constructing intergenerational connections. In their paper “Approaching Sehnsucht (Life Longings) from a Life-Span Perspective: The Role of Personal Utopias in Development”, Susanne Scheibe & Alexandra M. Freund articulate the term as refers to “life longings” that “have important developmental functions, including giving directionality for life planning and helping to cope with loss and important, yet unattainable wishes by pursuing them in one’s imagination” (121). My longing for a true, physical relationship with my deceased grandmother has propelled this investigation, and the German theory of *Sehnsucht* captures my desire for the unreachable wish to physically exist together.

In their article, “What is it we are longing for? Psychological and demographic factors influencing the contents of Sehnsucht (life longings)”, Dana Kotter- Grünh, Maja Wiest, Peter Paul Zurek and Susanne Scheibe state, “Sehnsucht represents thoughts and feeling about all facets of life that are unfinished or imperfect, paired with a yearning for ideal alternative experiences. It has also been referred to as ‘life’s longings’; or an individual’s search for unattainable wishes” (428). Over the past five years I have been using my grandmother’s old photographs as an integral part of many art works. I could never quite communicate why I had such a strong attraction to these photos but, in her book “On Photography”, Susan Sontag articulates this attraction as, “...the sense of the unattainable that can be evoked by photographs feeding directly into the erotic feelings of

those for whom desirability is enhanced by distance” (16). In my case, distance is space and time-based and the allure is heightened when I see the old photographs. I was always curious about my grandmother, but it wasn’t until I was in my early 20’s, when a box of photographs was given to me, that I had this compulsion to dig deeper into my matrilineal history and start creating connections. I started by asking more questions and wanting to hear stories from my mother about what it was like growing up with May. After creating a sense of who she might be I began to create works with her image. Now when I see her face, posture and attitude in her pictures it is familiar to me. Scheibe and Freund articulate that, “Sehnsucht denotes longing or yearning for these things missing, yet believed to be the pieces of the puzzle that would make the whole picture perfect” (121). This theory depicts the connection that I crave; not only wanting to know where I come from but also to create a bond that I was never able to have. Through art I have continued to use my grandmother’s photographs as puzzle pieces to piece together the narrative that is her life. I have created works that focus on this missing matrilineal link, and being able to connect on this level allows me to create idealistic situations and scenarios as a therapy to my longings. I created photographic works when I was in Thunder Bay over the Christmas holidays. Thunder Bay is significant as my Grandmother lived there after she was married and had children, my mother currently lives in there and I also lived there and completed my Undergraduate degree at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay. These works create an anachronistic composition that suggests to the viewer that my grandmother and I actually shared a moment in time. (Figure 1 & 2).



Figure 1. Grain Elevators



Figure 2. Sleeping Giant

I may not be able to bring this person back to life, but I am reviving her spirit and creating the connections I have longed for through my thesis works. Her pictures are reminders of the time I have spent with my grandmother's essence, getting to know her through my own utopic constructs. Scheibe and Freund write that "at times, people seek out experiences of Sehnsucht, for example, by listening to certain music triggering the feeling of something or someone very important missing in their lives" (123). This speaks to the entirety of my masters' thesis experience; I have been trying to explain why I was so attached to using my grandmother's photographs and why I am trying to trigger a feeling or understanding of something missing in my life. The comparisons between my grandmother and me are not only physical but also in mannerisms and these are a constant reminder of her. These comparisons have become a part of my identity, and ultimately she has become a part of my everyday self awareness. When my green eyes are mentioned I automatically think of my grandmother, as she is the only person linked to me with the same eye colour. My mother is the only one that can speak to similarities in mannerism, but when I am frustrated with a situation or displeased with someone, a furrowed brow and stubborn pout are often drawn on my face, the same look seen in some of May's photos. Scheibe and Freund articulate an influence that Sehnsucht can have on a person, "They are bitter because of the lack of something or someone is contemplating, and they are sweet as they are connected with positive fantasies of the past or ideal life. Such experiences can motivate people to actively strive for their ideals and thus stimulate individual and even collective progress and innovation" (123). This statement is true in the fact that, I have focused on her pictures and make it important to understand the person in those images. I make comparisons to our lives but understand



that when she was 26, my current age, the expectations and limitations for women were much different than they are now. When she was 26, her focus was on marriage, mothering her children, and maintaining the perfect housewife image. In contrast, my goals as a 26-year-old woman in 2016 are about completing my education and focusing on paying off my university debt. Even with the large lifestyle contrasts, I can identify with her because I know the life she lived impacted my mother, who then impacted my life. Whether the impacts were passed down or learned from observation, this linkage of a strong female presence is why I strive for the spiritual connection that my work represents.

# Chapter 4: Photography

But photographs cannot tell stories. They can only provide evidence of stories and evidence is mute; it demands investigation and interpretation. Looked at in this way, as evidence of something beyond itself, a photograph can best be understood not as an answer or an end to inquiry, but as an invitation to look more closely, and ask questions.  
(Phillip Gourevitch 148)

Growing up, I can recall only one photo of my grandmother; it was often displayed on the sideboard in our dining room. A professional headshot of her looking over the shoulder of the photographer, her hair perfectly curled, flawless skin, and just the right amount of makeup. For twenty-two years that is who I knew my grandmother to be; until my mother exhumed a box of old photographs for me during my final year of my Honours Bachelor of Fine Art, this was when I became enthralled with my family's matriarch. In this chapter I focus on inherited photographs as an opportunity to investigate the past. I also consider the ever-changing process of taking and sharing photography. Further, this exploration of my grandmother's life has led me to ask what still lives in a photograph after a person has passed?

## 4.1 Photographs as an Inheritance

It didn't take long before I was using inherited family photos as a source of inspiration in my artistic works. I became intrigued by the effect that my family's historical imagery had on me, creating a connectedness to my roots and, a sense of familial belonging. In her text "Photography Changes How Cultural History is Told," Lonnie Bunch describes photographs as a, "...great resource; they are historical artefact and great pieces of evidence. Looking at photographs is a wonderful way to make people

feel comfortable. Photography provides important entry points into the complexity of history, and makes whoever views images want to know more about the people represented in them” (116). I have explored images of my grandmother, gathering meaning through the interpretations of my mother and myself, and each photograph captures a moment in time signifying an event, occasion or emotion in my grandmother’s life. To guide my interpretation of these photographs I look to Roland Barthes’ theories of Studium, the intended purpose of the image, including the composition and form, and Punctum, the element of a photo ‘that pricks’ each individual a little differently (25). These theories are helpful in analyzing these photographs and drawing out the meanings and emotions from them, and particularly, because these are family photos, my Punctum will be different from someone who is not in my family. My knowledge of my grandmother’s life story helps to create a stronger sense of punctum for me, while the use of studium helps to explore the differences in generational times.

#### **4.2 Changes in Family Photography**

In the last 20 years family photography has changed significantly. What used to be a laborious manual process is now simple, computerized and instantaneous operation. With the invention of the digital camera, and even more recently with smartphones having the ability to take high-resolution pictures, the visual quality of images has become sharper better and the perspective on the importance of photography has changed. Photographs used to be taken in great majority on special occasions such as family trips and birthdays, now people take countless banal photos everyday of irrelevant things because the technology is so readily available. Marvin Heiferman, in his text

“Photography Changes Our Life Stories,” explains:

Today, snapshots are no longer one-of-a-kind, fragile keepsakes that we make to document special occasions. We’ve moved beyond snapping and posing for pictures at birthday parties, graduations, and sightseeing opportunities to taking and sharing digital images of whatever it is we find provocative, weird, amusing, and embarrassing. Today, photography isn’t special; it happens all the time. And snapshots are no longer by nature private anymore; they can and do reach unintended and unprecedented audiences in a matter of seconds (129).

Photographs are no longer physical objects; they are taken on digital devices and transferred to other digital devices, and sent to others, digitally. As Merry Foresta states, in the Forward for the book, “Photography Changes Everything” created by Marvin Heiferman, “Everything about photography itself seems to be at a crossroads: how it is made, how it is shared, and how it has changed and is changed by the people who make and use images” (9). Images are now made up of pixels, like building blocks stacked on one another, whereas pictures used to be taken using light and light-sensitive materials, and miraculously, an image would appear on the film. Advancements in technology have taken away the one-of-a-kind nature of traditional photography. Pictures were collected and kept in physical albums that would be taken out on special occasions, or when introducing someone new to the family. Now, photographs are plastered all over the internet providing an almost limitless number of people who can see your images once one is posted on popular media sites. Technology has removed the preciousness of photographs, holding a photograph in your hand was once a personal, intimate

experience, and the image was one-of-a-kind or in limited edition prints. Now, a single digital device holds thousands of images that can be shared with the press of a button.

Family photo albums are becoming a thing of the past and are being replaced with digital albums kept on phones and computers for easy access anytime, anywhere with the ability to store them on virtual, or “cloud”, drives. As thousands of photos are taken and uploaded, they are also easily forgotten in the mass amounts of images and the significance changes from quality to quantity. Photography plays an important role in portraying the identity of family; as the family album was a place for collecting and documenting important events, it also documents the change in family dynamics and identity. In his chapter, “Family Photographs and Migrant Memories”, Alistair Thomson supports this statement by writing “...family life involves constant change as families separate and re-form, grow and sometimes dislocate, in an evolving and perpetual cycle. Family photographs play a role in dealing with change and creating and articulating new family identity” (172). With the disappearance of the physical family album, so does vanish the evidence and discovery of family histories and identities. Few household bookshelves now have a family album that a child can explore and ask questions about the familiar and unfamiliar faces that they see. In her paper, “Towards Total Archives: The Form and Meaning of Photographic Records”, Lorrain O’Donnell explains that a family can construct itself according to certain images and it is often when putting an album together that negative, stray or unflattering photos are weeded out (111). Now with the option to see every photo immediately after it has been taken, phones and cameras are filled with a large quantity of repetitive shots that were taken in an effort to capture the perfect image. Pre-digital photography was shot on cameras without the option to

previewing your photograph after it was taken, minimizing the obsession to get the perfect shot and enhancing the candid expressions and emotions found in old photographs.

Photographs are captured instances of our lives. When I look at my grandmother's photographs I see them as remnants of her life that have lasted through time. Pictures of her from the 1940s clearly show the differences in time, fashions and lifestyle. Heiferman elaborates: "Old snapshots, too, get new lives and audiences as paper-based snapshots from the twentieth century are discarded, become rare, and end up in museum collections, poignant evidence of our primal and constant need to be seen, recognized, and remembered" (129). It has become a rarity to see familial photographs being shared with others in print, we live in a society where the album has been upgraded to fit in your pocket, and a moment is never missed. What lives in a photograph after a person passes are recollected memories, fragments of their existence, and evidence of their lives.

# Part 5: Creative Production

“While people’s familial connections may be narrated as permanent, contemporary accounts of family highlight the significant work that lies behind the making of such connections. Carsten argues that ‘for most people kinship constitutes one of the most important areas for their creative energy’. She makes an important distinction between family as something ‘given’ to us, and also something that is ‘made’.” (McLaughlin, 268)

The body of work that I have generated during my two years in the MFA program at the University of British Columbia Okanagan Campus, has culminated and matured into my thesis exhibition. Although my methods and materials have changed which I discuss further in this chapter, my source material has remained the same and an integral part of this investigation. The box of timeworn photographs holds precious moments, expressions and events and I have been compelled as an artist to use these images to create a bond with someone who has passed. In this chapter I trace back my creative process to my first semester to demonstrate how my artistic process is integral to this familial exploration. The culmination of works concludes with my thesis show held, May 2016 in the FINA Gallery at the University of British Columbia Okanagan.

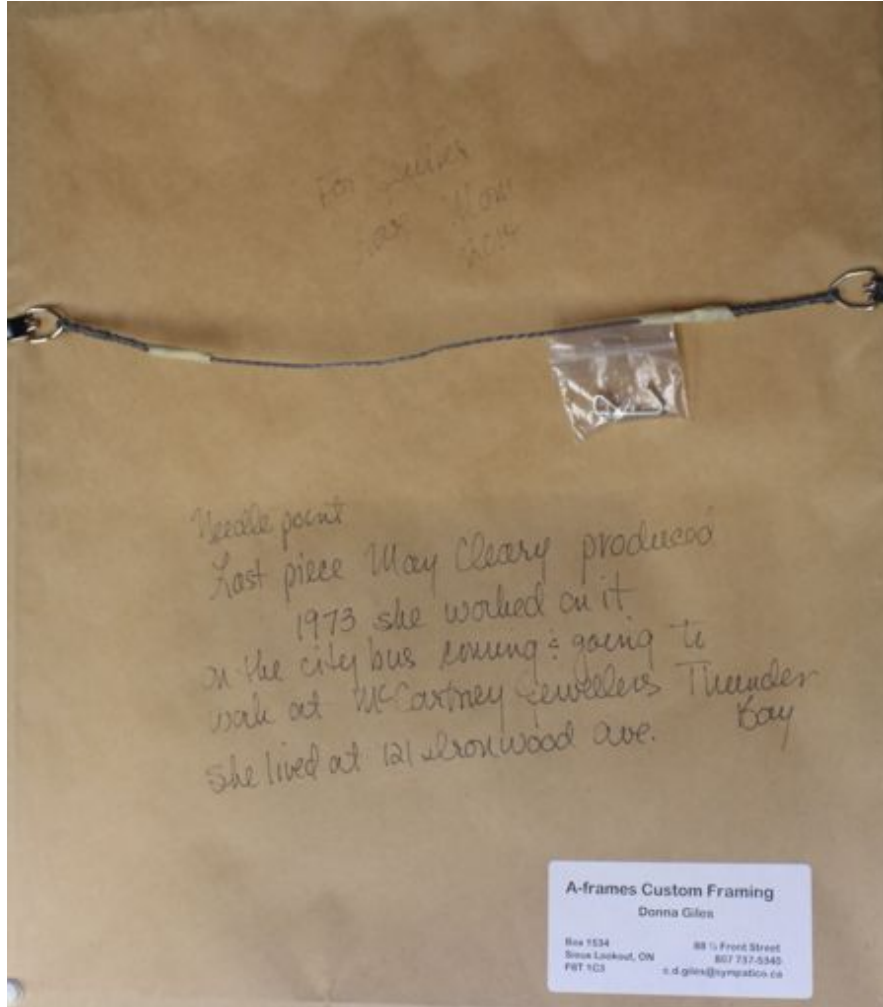
## **5.1 Tracing Back Through Life Skills**

During my first few semesters in this program I experimented with needlepoint, a craft that I knew little about but was prepared to dive into and explore, as it had been a hobby of my grandmother’s. This was inspired by a gift that my mother had framed for me before moving to British Columbia – a needlepoint bouquet of flowers (Figure 3) that my grandmother had made. On the back of the frame, she wrote (Figure 4):



Figure 3. May's Flower Cross-Stitch





**Figure 4. May's Flower Cross-Stitch (Back)**

*For Jenifer, Love Mom 2014*

*Needlepoint*

*Last piece May Cleary produced 1973 she worked on it on the city bus coming and going to work at McCartney Jewellers Thunder Bay. She lived at 121*

*Ironwood Ave.*

4 works came from this cross-stitching venture: a figure of my grandmother (Figure 5) and 3 school portraits of my grandmother's children, son Michael (Figure 6), daughter Candace (my mother) (Figure 7) and son Scott (Figure 8).



Figure 5. That Hat



Figure 6. Michael



Figure 7. Candace



Figure 8. Scott

These school photos were taken a few days before my mother's older brother Michael was shot and killed in a hunting accident. I stitched only 16 rows of his portrait to symbolize the 16 short years of his life. This piece in particular was difficult to craft as it held such a strong representation of such a traumatic time in my family's history. While completing these works it felt as though I was being educated through reviving my grandmother's hobby and being endowed a patience and skill through the intricate details and fine motor skills it takes to create such involved pieces.

A studio visit from David Khang expanded my imagination to materials that were visually repetitive in her photographs. In nearly every picture my grandmother is fully made up, hair, make-up and clothes all picture perfect. Lipstick was a staple in her signature look so I purchased a few tubes and started to draw over printed portraits of her (Figure 9). The shades are so rich and the lipstick leaves a thick, encaustic-like texture to the pieces but also remains tacky and oily to the touch. This application creates awareness that the material is sensitive and can be easily smeared, just as it can be when worn on the lips. Next, I decided on a pantyhose portrait, cleaning out every Kelowna

thrift shop's nylon section. I tacked hundreds of dress pins into a wooden base and stretched the pantyhose over the pins to create the image (Figure 10). The pantyhose created a lot of different textures, frays and pulls, enticing the audience to want to touch it. The materiality of this work also speaks to its temporal origin, as pantyhose are no longer a wardrobe staple and bare skin is more acceptable than before.

I then resorted back to my comfort zone and began doing image transfers on to wood. I



Figure 9. Lipstick May



Figure 10. Nylon May

wanted to create small diorama-style snapshots, using photos of my childhood and adding my grandmother into them as if she was alive and able to share memories with (Figures 11, 12, 13). These small works show the strength of anachronisms in creating connections between past and present as the images blend together creating an achronological sense of time. These 'false memories' have led to my more current pieces.



Figure 11. Beachin'



Figure 12. Surprise



**Figure 13. Sharing**

I took part in a show in the FINA Gallery in the fall of 2015 with two other students, Lindsay Diehl and Tomas Jonsson. We were all working with themes of family, home, and belonging so we named the show *Dwelling* (Figure 14). I created a 12'x8' space where one would have their kitchen table. I put up wallpaper, laid flooring and hung a low hanging tiffany-style lamp from the ceiling. I added a small, retro yellow melamine kitchen table and 3 turquoise chairs that I purchased from Kijiji. The chairs were in rough shape – the seats were torn, some of the screws were missing and they needed to be washed. With zero experience I decided to refurbish them. I went to the fabric store and picked out vinyl closest to the original as I could get, furniture tacks and a staple gun. I cut the vinyl to size and stapled it to the chair, somehow intuitively knowing what to do.



**Figure 14. Comforts**

Based on stories my mother has told me about my grandmother, I felt as if this would have been a job that she would have done. I think this is something that was passed down to me from my mother who is also crafty, from her mother. My grandmother was a seamstress and homemaker for many years and my mother can attest to her doing a lot of chores to keep her house in tiptop shape. I finished off this installation with a jar of fresh baked cookies, an ashtray filled with lipstick-covered cigarette butts, a photo album of her old snapshots and a wooden cut out figure of May. By constructing my own achronological memories with my grandmother and challenging the rules of linear story telling I am bringing her into conversation with today's realities. Each piece of the installation is either from the 1960's or 1970's or is made to look it like it. The dated presence of this installation exhibits the changes in time and reminds the viewer of the

importance of family, comforts, home, and our generational histories in a time of accelerated innovation.

Throughout the show we encouraged people to sit and engage with each work. I invited the audience to sit down, have a look at the album, have a cookie and feel comfortable, like you are with your grandmother reminiscing about old memories and learning new family history through this spatial experience. This work inspired a short stint working with photography of my own.

## **5.2 Thesis Exhibition Works**

The artistic creations included in the thesis exhibition, *May Cleary*, are figures extracted from family photographs going back as far as the 1930's. By creating cut out forms that are mobile but hold a static pose I am able to place May in the gallery, sharing a space with her image and, by extension her essence (Figure 15). The abundance of images that fill the gallery were created to not only fill the space with her spirit but also to create an atmosphere of an overwhelming presence of my grandmother. The spiritual connection that I have gained after embarking on a project of this extent is something I don't think would have been possible without the hundreds of hours of obsessive creating. My fixation on reconnections fueled my studio time with long days and repetitive creative practices. I ask the audience to participate in my work through self-reflective thinking. I encourage audiences to come into the installation and explore how the non-image side of each cutout gives a sense of figure and form, but the faces of the cut outs are not revealed until the viewer walks to the other end of the space. When only seeing the figure and form side of each piece, the viewer is able to create their own



constructs of what this face on the other side of the cut out might look like. The images and cut outs in the gallery space ask the viewer to imagine if they could reconnect with a lost one, how would that look?



**Figure 15. May Cleary Installation**

My methods of creation are particularly important to my process of reconnection as they establish a relationship between the physical world and the spiritual world. Choosing which images to extract from their original context is important, as each representation is an instance in my grandmother's life that signifies a part of her narrative and, ultimately, a part of my maternal history. After an image is chosen, it is extracted from its original context and printed into fragments that I then cut out and piece together, adhering them to a sheet of wood. The figure is then cut out and goes through another

process of construction. I adhere pieces of lumber to the backs of each cut out and carefully cut around the edges of the figure one more time (Figure 16).



**Figure 16. May Cleary Installation**

The process and repetition of cutting around the figure whether it is on the computer in Photoshop, with scissors and paper or a saw with wood, this process allows me to feel the figure and shape of my grandmother. After the excess wood is trimmed from the back of the cut out it then has a constructed look that resembles that of the framing of walls in a home (Figure 17). This method of assembly is important not only for structural reasons, but it becomes a metaphor of the importance of connections to stability, familiarity and home. Home as a physical space plays a role in the understood context of family, as a place that shelters loved ones and is established as a gathering place. The structure of home tends to hold memories, belongings and comforts that are associated with family.



Figure 17. May Cleary Installation

The view from the entrance of the show is significantly different from the back wall; as the cut outs are free standing objects in the gallery space, the audience is encouraged to walk around and through the installation. Each cut out piece is positioned with a narrow easel type stand that encourages the viewer to be mindful when carefully walking through the installation. From the image side of each piece, a well-dressed, well-groomed woman stares back at you, a woman with elegant taste quickly is contrasted with the rough, constructed forms visible from their opposite sides (Figure 18).



**Figure 18. May Cleary Installation**

The lighting arrangement is important as the direction of the cast light forms shadows on the wall creating even more silhouettes of varying sizes. The use of proper lighting also allows the viewer to cast their own shadows, allowing their shadows to share the same realm as the shadows cast by the figures. These faceless, race-less, ageless shadows allow

the viewer to construct their own ideas of intergenerational connections. By using the remnants of my grandmother's photographs and extracting her image from the confines of the pictures borders, I am able to bring a sense of her past reality into the present while the repetitiveness of her image infuses the room with an overwhelming sense of her essence (Figure 19).



**Figure 19. May Cleary Installation**

# Chapter 6: Conclusion

This body of work and supportive paper represent the development of a relationship originating from an intense desire to fill the gap left by my late grandmother in my matrilineal past. This research and artistic undertaking has situated my understanding and strengthened my awareness of familial influences, and established a sense of belonging to something larger than myself. I see the development of my artistic work presented in this paper as the spearhead for my exploration of a life-long confrontation with acceptance into a familial kinship.

It is important to revisit the questions I posed in the beginning of this paper to rearticulate my research intentions. My objective in this thesis has been to investigate the importance of intergenerational connections and the impact that they have on family. I have come to realize that there has been no lack of love in my family, but the visible gap of my grandmother's absence has pushed me to fill those holes with pictures and narratives, constructing a sense of her essence.

First, I ask: Can intergenerational connections be made through the photographs of a passed family member? In my case, yes, with creative works I was able to establish a connection through the thread of needlepoint designs. By reviving her photographs through her hobby I was able to connect with May and was quickly educated in the patience and fine motor skills that she must have had in the undertaking of such intricate pieces. Further, my re-creation of May's children's school portraits represent a traumatic time in her life and in my family's history. By linking her hobby of needlepoint to this tragic event, I was able to experience familial storytelling through craft.

The next question I posed is: What still lives in a photograph after a person has passed? Collections of family photos have changed from physical to digital but photos still contain remnants of family histories, memories, and traditions. From photographs, conversations are sparked and ask the viewer to reflect on the past, in the present, and on the future. As Marianne Hirsch articulates in “Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory”, “Photographs, as the only material traces of an irrecoverable past, derive their power and their important cultural role from their embeddedness in the fundamental rites of family life” (5). Family photographs hold material evidence of what once was, highlighting the complexities of family histories and of the people represented in them. In my thesis show *May Cleary*, the created cutouts of my grandmother’s image break the confines of the pictures’ borders and bring a sense of her past reality in the present. The repetition of her image permeates the room with an overwhelming presence of her essence.

Lastly, I ask: Can the creation of works help to form a better understanding of one’s origins? My deep involvement in the thesis investigation of my grandmother’s life has instilled in me a sense of maternal history that was formerly sparse and patchy. The exploration of my grandmother’s photographs has propelled an inquiry into my grandmother’s life. Through this, I have heard stories that correlate with photographic evidence forming a valued bond between my mother, my grandmother, and myself, producing a true sense of intergenerational connection.

By investigating the role that creative works could play in building my own intergenerational connections I am better able to understand and clarify why these relationships are important. An intergenerational-self is formed through comparing and

contrasting the past and the present, which creates an outlook for the future. An outlook that strengthens familial roots creating a confident and secure sense of self. Additionally, the participation of intergenerational roles contributes to the social connectedness to family and belonging.

Through this process I intended to find out as much as I could about my grandmother, the good, the bad and the ugly. I was introduced to a lot of stories about my grandmother that were positive, uplifting and encouraging, and to contrast that I also found out a lot of unflattering and disheartening stories about her. My objective was not to create works that would air my family's dirty laundry. In respecting the process of sharing stories between family members, I decided to not use the less desirable stories and photographs and instead focus on creating a utopic relationship with the person who I hoped my grandmother was. I also did not find it necessary to include an overwhelming amount of personal information, and what I do include generally has a connection to me, whether it's in physical appearance or in personality. These are links that provide me with a Punctum and pull at my heartstrings. I do not speak to race or social class and although our upbringings may have been similar in those circumstances, those are not things that I connect with. The overarching knowledge that I have gained through this research has generated new questions. The experience that I have created through my art touches on positive aspects of an intergenerational relationship and I question if the glorification of the relationship may be setting myself up for a disappointment with future generational relationships. I have constructed a particular image of who I want to see my grandmother to have been, and perhaps the absence of unflattering pictures from this exhibition has altered my expectations of what a true relationship would look like.



The significance of this research centred on myself, the artist, but in a broader spectrum can influence others to seek generational connections through the creation of their own work. Most people live in the context of family but many do not dare to inquire deeper into the past to understand the present because we are in a time of innovation and always looking ahead. This research is the beginning of a life long journey of reconnection to familial backgrounds. Next I would like to investigate the roots of my father and the complexity of his life, as he grew up adopted.

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