

AS A FRAGMENT POINTS TO THE WHOLE
AN EXHIBITION

To work deliberately in the form of the fragment can be seen as stopping or appearing to stop a work closer, in the process...the center rather than the sphere...If we catch only a little of our subject, or only badly, clumsily, incoherently, perhaps we have not destroyed it. (We have) allowed it to live on in our ellipses, in our silences.

— Lydia Davis from the essay “Fragmentary or Unfinished”

What is the thing we cannot name, but dance around and around, zeroing in through image, through text, through woven strands and captured light? The fragment points to the whole. Or the fragment is the whole; the fragment is everything. How do we process the beauty and the banality, the grief and joy, of living? This group of five artists each in her own way works in fragments. The parts collectively moving toward a whole expression. Cossio and Thatch work in fiber arts, making weavings and quilts. The weaving is many disparate pieces, of string, of yarn, coming together in tight formation to become something quite other. The quilt is a whole built of parts, often cast off remnants of clothing or fabrics that in themselves are no longer useful. Seibert and Cossio work in photography, light and color form poetics, and ambiguous subject matter tells fractured stories. Harlowe and Paper make autobiographical and abstracted works based in very real observation; the elements of daily life coming together to form paintings. Together, these artworks tell stories, yet those stories may be unreadable to an audience. What matters here is that they speak, they dance, they stand alone, and do not diminish their subjects, but rather cast a light on what it feels like to be alive now.

During the height of pandemic isolation, Amanda Thatch took long walks around the city of Detroit and found herself for the first time taking true notice of the trees. This intimate study became part of her thesis project for her degree in fine art weaving. Thatch conjured images of trees in her weavings, embedding unreadable text on the “back side” of the images. She is interested in both sides of a woven piece; often the side meant to stay hidden is more appealing. These past few years, Thatch’s gaze has moved from trees to the sky. Her study of clouds has a similar impetus as the trees—the artist taking notice of something that is always there, yet rarely really seen. The cloud in its very essence is in fact built of fragments—condensation, particles of water, in formations that appear solid, yet are not. Though she lives in Detroit, the city of cars, Thatch does not own one. She takes the bus to work every day and it was there, spending so much time waiting, that she began to photograph the clouds. They felt symbolic—the indeterminacy, constant change, the communalism of riding public transport and of sharing the same sky, and the individuality of existing and creating. These ideas relate to weaving as well—working together as a collective, making work as an individual, relying on the parts to make a whole.

Angeles Cossio uses fiber in her work as well, though in a deconstructive/reconstructive type of way. Cossio is a conceptual artist who explores themes of family history and personal narrative through image making and writing. It was Cossio, during our studio visit, who first mentioned Lydia Davis’s essays and the idea of the fragment pointing to the whole. The idea that artists must not destroy the subject by over

representing it, but may get closer to truth by gesturing toward the subject through muted, fragmentary attempts. Cossio's familial history—the struggles of working class immigrants in America—is one of violence, trauma, and deep devotion. Through her work, Cossio gestures toward this history, but does not name it. Through her fiber works, either deconstructing, or making new from what is found, she feels affinity for her ancestors who were seamstresses. By investigating family portraits taken by a relative who was an amateur photographer, she examines the layers of pain and trauma hidden beneath the facade of image, and mines that grief through writing. Walking in natural spaces in her New Jersey surroundings becomes a balm at the end of a day of deep historical investigation. Thus these fragments, of history, of artifact, of writing, of nature, of photography, become entwined to create the work.

The theme of exploring family ties and grief emerged many times as I talked to these artists. At the start of the pandemic, Lauren Harlowe's grandfather took ill and passed away very quickly, with only her mother by his side. Harlowe was very close with her grandfather and had no outlet for her grief, no way to mourn with her parents and extended family. Harlowe's work is intrinsically linked to her deep knowledge and respect for color theory. Each color choice in her paintings contains levels of meaning, personal, and somatic. After her grandfather's passing, she turned inward and began to do something she hadn't allowed herself to do before—make painting after painting in the same pallet of limited colors. She followed this thread deeper and deeper, always thinking this painting would be the last, and yet it wasn't. The deep grays and blues are like a mourning song for her grandfather, the splashes of yellow, light at the end of the tunnel. The imagery of the paintings is built from a collection of symbology personal to Harlowe: a family heirloom quilt, the silhouettes of weeds collected as a present by one of her daughters, the lattice of iron work and windows from the cities of her past. As a collection, the images are fragmentary, only occasionally discernible, yet together they create the framework for Harlowe's nearly abstract paintings.

Marcie Paper, like Harlowe, investigates color in depth, constantly playing with our perception through the interplay of juxtaposed colors. Paper's paintings are on the surface bright and quirky abstract images filled with forms and patterns, repeating, inverting, undulating across the paper. Yet beneath this facade of seemingly imaginary abstraction, is a story about memory and living. Paper lost her father to a slow degenerative disease where bit by bit he lost his immediate short term memory. Through her experience of care taking and baring witness to this memory-loss, Paper began to record her own daily observations of living through drawing and painting. These small paintings became like diary entries, the dates embedded within the layers of paint, and through this recording, the artist was able to recall with vivid detail each day the paintings were created. Paper began to question what part of our memories are useful or important. By elevating the banal events of life, through the transformative powers of art, Paper is able to call attention to our daily triumph of existing. The deeper we investigate these small patterned pictures, the more is revealed, though exact meaning remains ambiguous and personal to each viewer.

Like Paper, Amy Seibert lost her father to a slow disease of the brain, and though her photographs do not directly explore that event, they contain elements of it—an emergence through grief into the joy and acceptance of survival. Her work is deeply personal, narrative, and poetic. They zoom in on subject matters that are in macro, barely recognizable. In closing in on the subject, looking at them from very

close range, then blowing them up larger than life, we become consumed by this intimate gaze. On a visit to New York last year, Seibert became enamored with carved historical frames, and the idea of frame-making as a part of the whole piece. She began building her own highly sculptural frames, which combine elements of high and low arts in their materiality. They start with a base of paper mache and incorporate found objects and spray paint. Seibert's side business of selling curated vintage objects collected on trips to estate sales and resale shops finds its way into the work as decorative elements in the frames. The kitsch of these objects combines with the high brow study of photography to great effect. Both the elements in the frame and the often blurred out or hyper close photographs depicting scenes of personal narrative, vibrate with one another, speaking in this language of the fragment, the found, the broken, creating a poetics of grief, loss, and evolution.

In this post-pandemic, fractured world, these artists are working through and beyond grief, and an experience of historical and collective trauma. They explore themes of collectivity, what it means to be one among many, in pieces yet whole, memory shattered and shared. While on the surface the work bursts with color, pattern, texture, delight, just below simmers the difficult realities of living now. These are layered pieces, concealing within the web of their making, the complexities of their makers.

—Emily Church, Brooklyn, November 2023