

Practitioner's Statement

Unconditional: Five stages of grief

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Losing my auntie in 2014 initiated the beginning of a difficult journey of grief, along with a prevailing sense of growth and maturity within myself. This has been a very personal and special topic to pursue. It was because of my realisation how close this has been to me, that I chose my auntie Maria to be the subject of my artwork throughout the year. My memories of her only really relate to those of her illness and how those times appeared 'suffocating' for her and our family. With a desire to successfully pay tribute to the life of my auntie, as well as to the people who lived beside her while she fought her battle with cancer, I decided to create a body of work that connected a portrait of Maria with a representation of the 5 stages of grief. I intended for both pieces to encapsulate Maria's memory before and after her death.

In order to feel my work having the authenticity in which it needed, I spent a lot of time with my family, allowing myself to really get to know their individual personalities and the stories they had about and around Maria's life. Through this, I especially strengthened the bond between my auntie's daughter and myself. Although she lives some distance away, I found the time to connect with her and through this learnt just how much losing her mother had affected and still affects her. The loss of a loved one is an extremely traumatising experience. I still remain quite shocked and in awe of how strong my younger cousin was throughout this time. Losing such an important and significant figure in her life is something that I, as 18 year old struggle to comprehend, and could not imagine facing. Through my cousin's mature and humorous nature, the loss of her mother presented me with the understanding that with death comes an unusual paradox, "following death, you are reminded of life."

Within the first component in my body of work entitled 'Unconditional', I have tried to represent some of the common misconceptions around breast cancer. Breast cancer now affects 1 in 8 Australian women. Sadly, this horrible disease has taken two women in my family, therefore this art study at times, has been extremely tough to complete. In order to produce a moving, intimate artwork focusing on cancer's misconceptions, I decided to look at several images showing my auntie in a very positive light. I found two images where she looked incredibly happy and carefree, the polar opposite of generic cancer images that focus on the negative side of the illness. Through working with a variety of mediums, I was able to eventually make an informed decision about which medium to use. I fell in love with oil paints; with the way in which the paint could move across the canvas as well as its ability to be altered at any stage, whether it is wet or dry. Deliberately choosing black and white, I felt that this created some intimacy in the work. The soft greys, tints and shades allowed me to emphasise the image as more of a distant memory rather than a visual representation.

The idea of black and white representing a memory was further explored within the second component of the body of work entitled, 'The 5 Stages of Grief'. I wanted to keep constant the theme of the loss of my auntie, yet this time pay tribute to those who have been affected outside of my auntie herself.

Looking into the psychology of grief and loss was extremely interesting as I began to understand the healing process in which many people find themselves after the passing of a loved one. Involving my cousin as the subject and the information I had gathered, my aim was to represent the five stages of grief photographically.

The five stages of grief are: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance. Placing my cousin in front of my camera, I would simply say these five words, denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance on a loop and, overtime observing her responses becoming more natural and less staged. Thus producing a natural and organic representation of each word.

My influences include Bill Henson and Rosemary Laing. Some of their work portrays incredible intensity and subtleties of emotion. These images have certainly influenced the way in which my images were taken and then how I chose final images.

I took photographs on three separate occasions. Following this, I discovered diverse ways of manipulating the images in order to best represent each stage of grief. However, I decided to work with the simplicity of the elements in the actual photograph without adding and manipulating the subject matter or surface of the photograph. I found that Tyvek fabric successfully communicated this idea of 'simplicity', as the images would move with the air due to its thinness, symbolically representing the ever moving, fragile life in which we all find ourselves. With this 'stripping back' my images has the ability to be perceived as authentic and intimate.

It seemed appropriate, with my work being intimately connected, that I present my work as an installation. Creating an installation has allowed viewers to become more involved in the works and experience the significance the artworks hold, as well as the tribute and homage that is being payed towards a specific person. I feel that connecting the works together in the environment of the installation gives the work as a whole a sense of being more complete.

I never expected this artwork to become such a large part of my Year 12 year. From this, I have learnt so much about myself as a person, including my strengths and weaknesses. I have learnt about my family, the importance of them and the belief that love is eternal. Although my auntie has been gone for over two years now, her life lives on within her daughter, within me, and within the rest of my family.