

THESIS

MANAGING AND MANIFESTING MEMORY

Submitted by

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Masters of Fine Arts

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Spring 2020

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ABSTRACT

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To understand my relationship with my past, I make objects with a sense of urgency to harvest sensations and reveal truths hidden in memory. When I left New Brunswick to emigrate back to the United States, I began to feel a longing to return to Canada. I had found a real sense of home, with deeply personal and profound connections to people and places. I would not truly understand the depth of those connections until I left.

As I work to gain perspective on my longing to return to the past, I draw upon Suprematist concepts of creating irrational spaces and giving primacy to feelings over objective visual representation. Both concepts use color and shape to create these irrational spaces and to capture raw emotion.

Far from New Brunswick and the people that made me feel welcome, everything I began to make echoed their faces and the landmarks that ground my remembered experiences. To understand the extent and power of memories in my creative process, I considered how to diminish their ability to influence my practice, since everything I made was centered on the past. Could Suprematist strategies offer real ways to distill a memory without diluting the remembered experience, breaking down memory, and discovering truth within the process of longing? If I could not return to living in a comforting past, I would create a window, a portal, a way to dwell in the contentment of that chapter of my life.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank my family and my best friends for helping me over vast distances.

Thank you to all my committee members for helping me develop a voice and an understanding of how to express my process. I'd also like to give special thanks to Kristen Bukowski for her interim support and encouragement in my last year.

I'm also ever grateful to my advisor and mentor Tom for his help acclimating to life at CSU and in Colorado. His support through the last three years has been a godsend.

Thank you to the Art and Art History Department staff for their overwhelming support and community.

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Part I – Introduction: Laying the Land and Setting the Sky

The faces of people and the land of New Brunswick continuously emerged throughout my creative process. The simple township and villages in which I lived offered me a new family in a shining realm. Everything I sketched, drew, doodled or made bore the likeness of the past that I could not escape. A nostalgia gripped my ability to exist in the present, a drive for the past to “play on repeat.” *Pomeroy Moon* is an example of the feverish obsession. In this mixed-media quilt, I depict the face of a good friend within the land we used as stomping grounds (Fig. 1).¹ Realizing that I could not stop obsessing about the places and people left behind, I began to dig into my states of mind and into glimmers that lined my recollections of New Brunswick. As I dug through mental states, visions and beacons showed their way for me. I had to capture lights, feelings, and experiences. While mining the past, images came to my mind and hand in a furious rush. Feeling the strength of sensation in memories, a force compelled me to venerate my connection to my best friend, to capture the sacred in this bond with this person and place. I liken the sense of belonging to a musing from Shaker Brother Solomon Butler (1774-1837): “I have found Fathers and Mothers, Brethren and Sisters in a strange land . . . with whom [sic] I feel willing to live and die.”²

This compulsion to capture experience in material form is wonderfully mirrored in Shaker art. Colloquially called “divine instruments,” some Shakers created gift works in the “Era of Manifestations” (1837–1850). These Shaker expressions visually manifested order through dance, song, worship services, written and visual compositions.³ As with the Shakers, the

¹ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 140.

² June Sprig, *Inner Light: The Shaker Legacy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1985), 57.

³ Scott T. Swank, *Shaker Life, Art, And Architecture: Hands to Work, Hearts to God* (New York: Abbeville Publishing Group, 1999), 58.

endeavor to deliver immediate understanding of a heaven and those who live within those divine spaces drove my labor to express the passion and mystery of the unintelligible experience of my Canadian home.⁴

Shaker artist Hannah Cohoon created some of the most recognized gift works. One painting shows her vision of a feast of elders beneath mulberry trees (Fig. 3). The image employs religious text and depictions of doves to embellish the image with sacred meaning.⁵ As with this gift work, in *Pomeroy Moon* I wished to create a sacred space that mirrored my vision. I mapped out my concept of heaven. This led me to study another Shaker work, *Holy City*, created by Shakers in New Lebanon, New York, made after being visited by the spirit of Adam bearing a plan of heaven (Fig. 4).⁶ My memories would visit me and give me plans for a great design, letting me map out a slice of heaven in *Pomeroy Moon* (Fig. 1).

Most Shaker gift works were made by women, who harnessed their skills in patterning, watercolor, and ink to express their revelations, often using fugitive watercolor materials and furniture pigments, sealed with varnish to help preserve works and to deliver them through time to other believers. While the Shaker church valued simple expressions of faith, these gift works were allowed since they only venerated faith, and not the material world. After approval by elders, the gift works were distributed to communities to inspire beauty in embracing the unintelligible.⁷

Reminded of an early Shaker phrase, “I have hands to work and hearts to god,” I made *Pomeroy Moon*; I put my hands to work and connected to my memory. I used a photo of the

⁴ John T. Kirk, *The Shaker World: Art, Life, Belief* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1997), 156.

⁵ Sally M. Promey, *Spiritual Spectacles: Vision and Image in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Shakerism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 86.

⁶ Promey, *Spiritual Spectacles: Vision and Image in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Shakerism*, 67.

⁷ Kirk, *The Shaker World: Art, Life, Belief*, 158.

figure in *Pomeroy Moon*, taken after I left New Brunswick. The photo showed a place where I wanted to be and heightened my longing to inhabit this space, in the New Brunswick that I perceived as utopia.⁸ The joy in the image ignited the joy that my friend had brought to me in my recent past, and I wanted to capture what I felt in remembering. Since I wasn't present for the photo, I wanted to create a way to experience that moment in person.⁹

I was given a gift in receiving the photo, a gift I had to pass along to others. I would translate the photo into a personal vision of the rolling hills that crumble into the Bay of Fundy, embraced and warmed by the glow of the moon and the figure that rests in the sky. Like the Shakers who would transcribe religious epiphanies, I would make order of my connections, making friendship and family a source of inspiration when encountering the “divine.”

Looking to capture aspects of my time in New Brunswick, I became overwhelmed and overpowered by the faces and images of my past. These daunting forces that would inspire labor now commanded it. Working to forge the gift of my vision, my labor turned into that of satisfaction.¹⁰ I was getting closer to the gates of a utopia in the image I made. Like its painted and embellished fabric surfaces, the hanging device for *Pomeroy Moon* is highly embellished (Fig. 1). This decoration and “crowning” of the work emphasizes the importance of the experience that motivated the work. The small vignettes along the crown show moments from my time in New Brunswick: playing pool, exploring cemeteries and passageways, and Todd Mansion: an old governor's mansion in St. Stephen, New Brunswick (Fig. 2).

⁸ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 40.

⁹ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 139.

¹⁰ Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (New York: Random House, 1983), 36.

Part II – Mapping Connections

While looking for new visual understanding in art, Malevich proclaimed the primacy of raw emotion and sensation over an objective visual representation. The use of simple color, shapes, and compositions to capture subjective truths inspired me to deconstruct the images that blinded my ability to look forward. Following my creative impulses to create, I began to search for a way of making that would allow my studio practice to move beyond the glare of memory. Looking to the past, I was struck by the methodology of Kazimir Malevich in his early-twentieth-century Suprematist manifesto. I would simplify my vision to weaken their strength, since the urge to make couldn't be quelled. Malevich sparked a new epoch in art making with a seminal work known as *Black Square* (Fig. 5).¹¹ The piece exhibited at the *0.10* exhibition, proposed a new zero point for painting, and a possible new start for art making. This ability to prioritize expression over an objective understanding helped me break down memories to essential imagery and to identify essential colors.¹²

I made *Simpson Hill Shrine*, inspired by Suprematism, by simplifying a photo of a shrine I made at the summit of a hike in New Brunswick (Fig. 6). The use of the color black acts as one of my primary tools borrowed from Suprematist influences, using color to create irrational, seemingly limitless space. In *Simpson Hill Shrine*, I pair color with simple shapes. I aimed to retain enough information of the original memory to express a new place for offering and a space to return to. I sewed concentric machine-stitched lines to bind the color shapes to the depiction of this space. The boundary is contoured with a treated wooden composite. Its embedded pearls and

¹¹ Shatskikh, Aleksandra. *Black Square*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012, 55-59.

¹² Aleksandra. *Black Square*, 38.

decorative beads are intended to echo the sparkle of the Bay of Fundy that was visible from the shrine.

I use this method of simplifying imagery in an effort to eliminate information while investigating other connections to New Brunswick, including my connection to my maternal grandfather. In *Inheritance*, I explored the image of my grandfather from his funeral program (Fig. 7). I fused images of his face and mine to create a bust of a man I wish to one day become. I embedded my memories of him with pearls and precious materials to emphasize his worth. Having lived most of my life thousands of miles away from my maternal grandparents, the moments spent with them glimmered in my memory, marking moments of joy and closeness. The great distance is embodied in the color black, symbolizing the space between Texas and Canada that I couldn't always understand. After making the work, I realized the space only *seems* vast.

Part III – Material Connections

As I worked to clarify personal truths that emerged through recurring flashes of nostalgia, I found that my materials could embody other qualities, too. The aged surface of *Black Square* inspires the use of velvet and faux suede flocking (Fig. 5). The visual play of light with a velvety surface reflects the push and pull of the past. The colors chosen for each object were limited. The use of beads echo minerals and gems, such as pearls. This combination would be my formula for exploring the personal iconography that persisted.

Medium-density fiberboard (MDF), is used to make the shrine-related works and *Inheritance*. The material reminds me of the columns of steam and the steam whistle that would call through the town from a local particleboard factory, keeping time in the hamlet I called home (Fig. 6, 7, 8, 9). In my forms, the composite lumber is covered in black latex paint and flocked with black faux suede. After building and covering the surface of each vessel, I embellish the forms with pearls and found objects from the Bay of Fundy. The processes are often layered, building the surface to echo tide pools and to simulate the landscapes that fill the world of my memory.

The surface textures that I develop offer a kind of equivalence to the textures I experience in recollection. The flocking and velvet also evoke comfort and the soft diffusion of light that frosts the frame of my past visions. Some of the flocked surfaces are coated in acrylic to only offer the look of comfort. The glimmer, reflection, and refraction of light captures the radiance experienced in fondly recalling the past.

That radiance is opposed by more light-absorbing colors and textures. They express the action of standing in my own shadow, looking to moments of joy to punctuate the space that

grows between then and now. The use of the color black borrows from Suprematist ideas of irrational spaces and the manifestation of vast distances. The glow of the past is also captured in the metal “crown” constructed for *Pomeroy Moon*. The use of copper and highly decorative elements reflects the preciousness of the subjects (Fig. 2).

Part IV – Creating Cycles

Through the process of artistic discovery, I began to understand the new creative cycle of thought that I was establishing for myself. This was an escape from the preceding cycles of obsessively reliving memories (Fig. 10). I had limited my materials and processes, and now could work through ways to express the same power as I investigated smaller forms. This new creative cycle became a way to replace a previous, helpless compulsion with a rhythm of intent. In the new cycle, I laid out a process for registering when to step back with a source memory, consisting of an image for composition. Looking to order the impulse for excessive details, I investigated systems of understanding and organization, as in Suprematism.

Utilizing Suprematist concepts that influenced my process, the cycle that started with a memory edited and constructed into material studies, led to the making of *Simpson Hill Shrine* and *Shrine Shadows* (Fig. 6 and Fig 8). The image of a shrine is simplified to shape, color, and line. The materials are limited to MDF, flocking, latex paint, beads, pearls, and found objects. In the process of crafting a memory, the combinations of materials vary within this series. The works feature the recurring motif of an implied offering dish. A votive image is simplified from its complete forms in *Simpson Hill Shrine* to now emphasize the shapes of the spaces between the forms.

The Shape of the Heavens shows a final step in simplifying *Simpson Hill Shrine* to the contour of the source image, focusing more on capturing the boundary of a space and letting the interior suggest an infinite, boundless realm (Fig. 8). The simplification of *Simpson Hill Shrine* led to *Shrine Shadows* and then to *The Shape of the Heavens*. This containment is embellished to show how a wealth of remembered experience can mark emotional territory. These contours of

The Shape of the Heavens embody the need for me to find a home again, to create a space where I can feel I belong. The negative space within the contour also creates a way to connect to an “other” time, a connection to my past.¹³

¹³ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 65.

Part V – Conclusion: Projecting into the Past

The process of diving inward and looking outward to understand my relationships to my own memories has helped me to channel the potency of memory in my art making. I created a self-portrait that would combine my visual and material choices to frame the last photo of me living in New Brunswick in a new shrine (Fig. 11). Making *Past Self* allowed me to confront my past and understand that I'm not there anymore. Its colors mirror the hues in *Pomeroy Moon*, and fuse the joy in expression with the contours of a personal sacred space. I combine what I learned while spending time in mental whirlpools, with all the memories of looking upon an unintelligible majesty that dissolves into the Atlantic.

In *Past Self*, I am able to return to a safe and loving home and live in the world I helped to create. I can exist in the same space as *Pomeroy Moon*, *Inheritance*, and *Simpson Hill Shrine*. Through the process of making this portrait, I realized the figure within was someone who went to a heaven, and I had to translate what I understood. The knowledge is recorded in a smile, the feel of comfort, the brilliance of the precious people in my life, all contained in a space created by contouring and mapping my life lived in New Brunswick. Like Shakers in the “Era of Manifestations”, I would create a new self through labor. In this effort, I become one with the space, now knowing that I can return at any point.¹⁴

¹⁴ Sally M. Promey, *Spiritual Spectacles: Vision and Image in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Shakerism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 97.

FIGURES



Figure 1: *Pomeroy Moon*

Mixed-media quilt, copper, iron, silk-screened textile paints, seed beads, hand- and machine embroidery, machine-stitched appliqué on hand-dyes textiles, 93" x 106", 2017–2020.



Figure 2: Detail of hanging device for *Pomeroy Moon*.

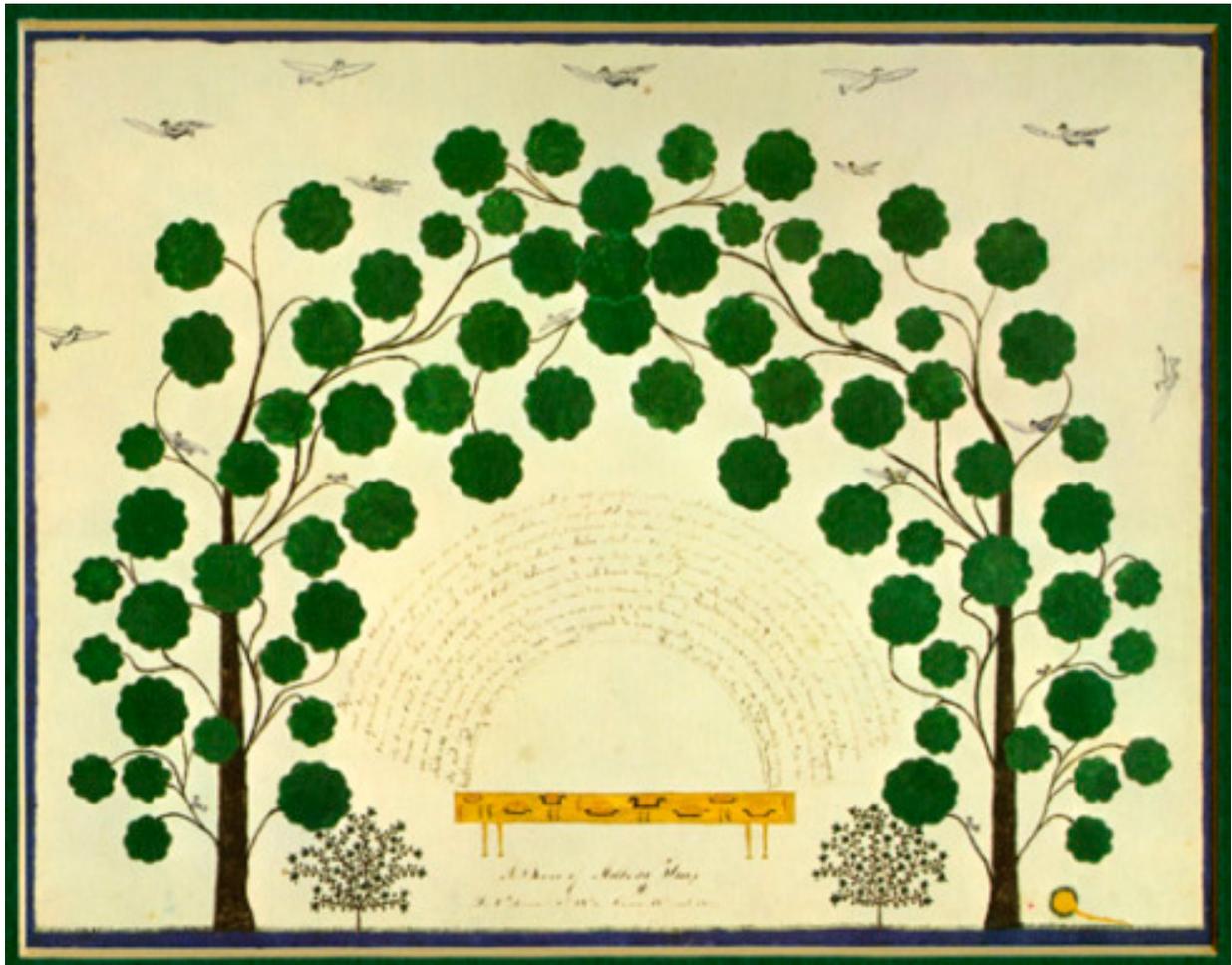


Figure 3 : Hannah Cohoon, *A Bower of Mulberry Trees*,
Watercolor or tempera and ink on paper, 18 1/8" x 23 1/16",
13 September 1854.

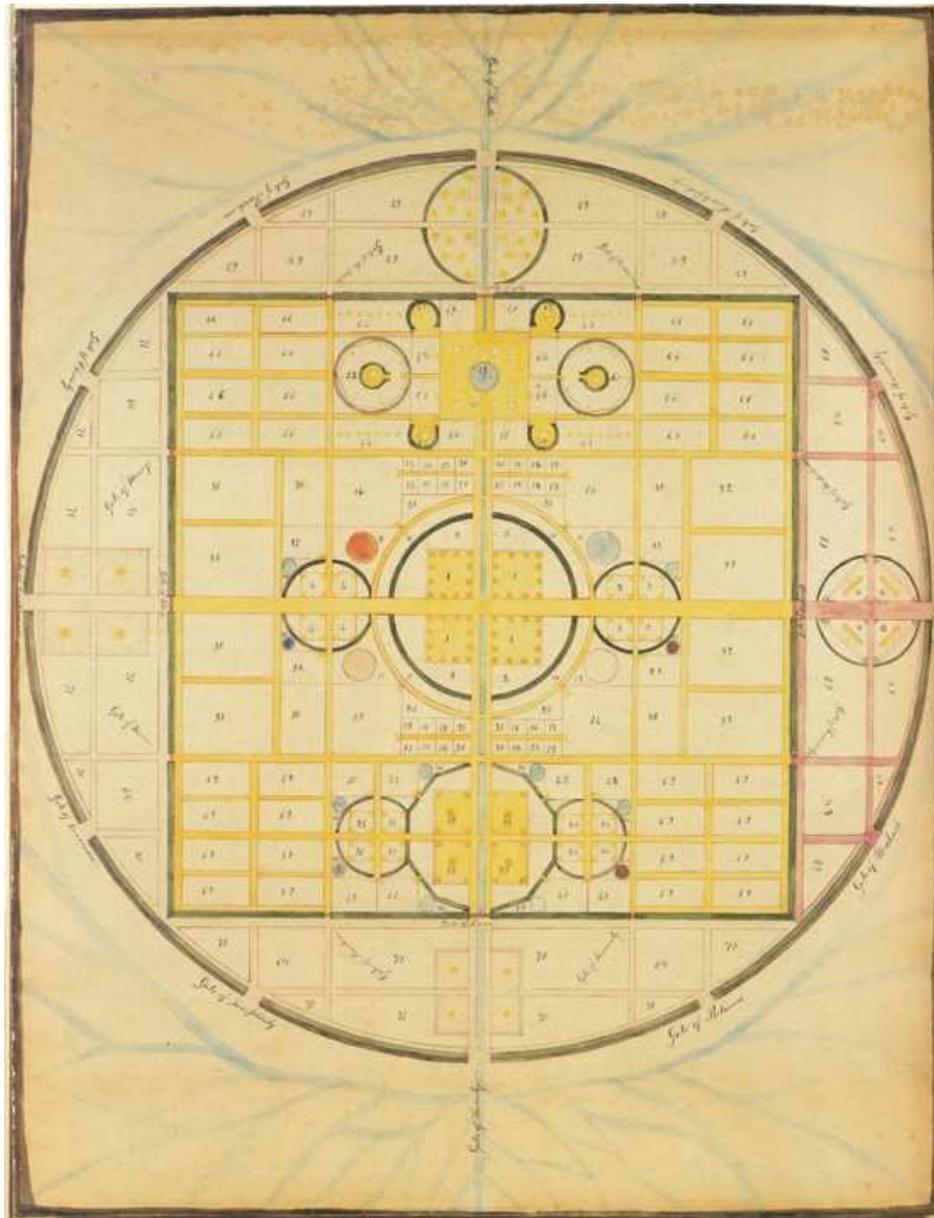


Figure 4: New Lebanon, New York, *Holy City*,
Pencil and watercolor on paper, 32" x 24 5/8",
16 March 1843.



Figure 5: Kazimir Malevich, *Black Square*,
Oil on linen, 79.5" x 79.5", 1915.



Figure 6: *Simpson Hill Shrine*

Machine-stitched appliqué with hand-dyed textiles on cotton velvet, CNC-carved MDF, latex paint, freshwater pearls, seed beads, copper leaf, and acrylic, 3.25" x 15", 2019.

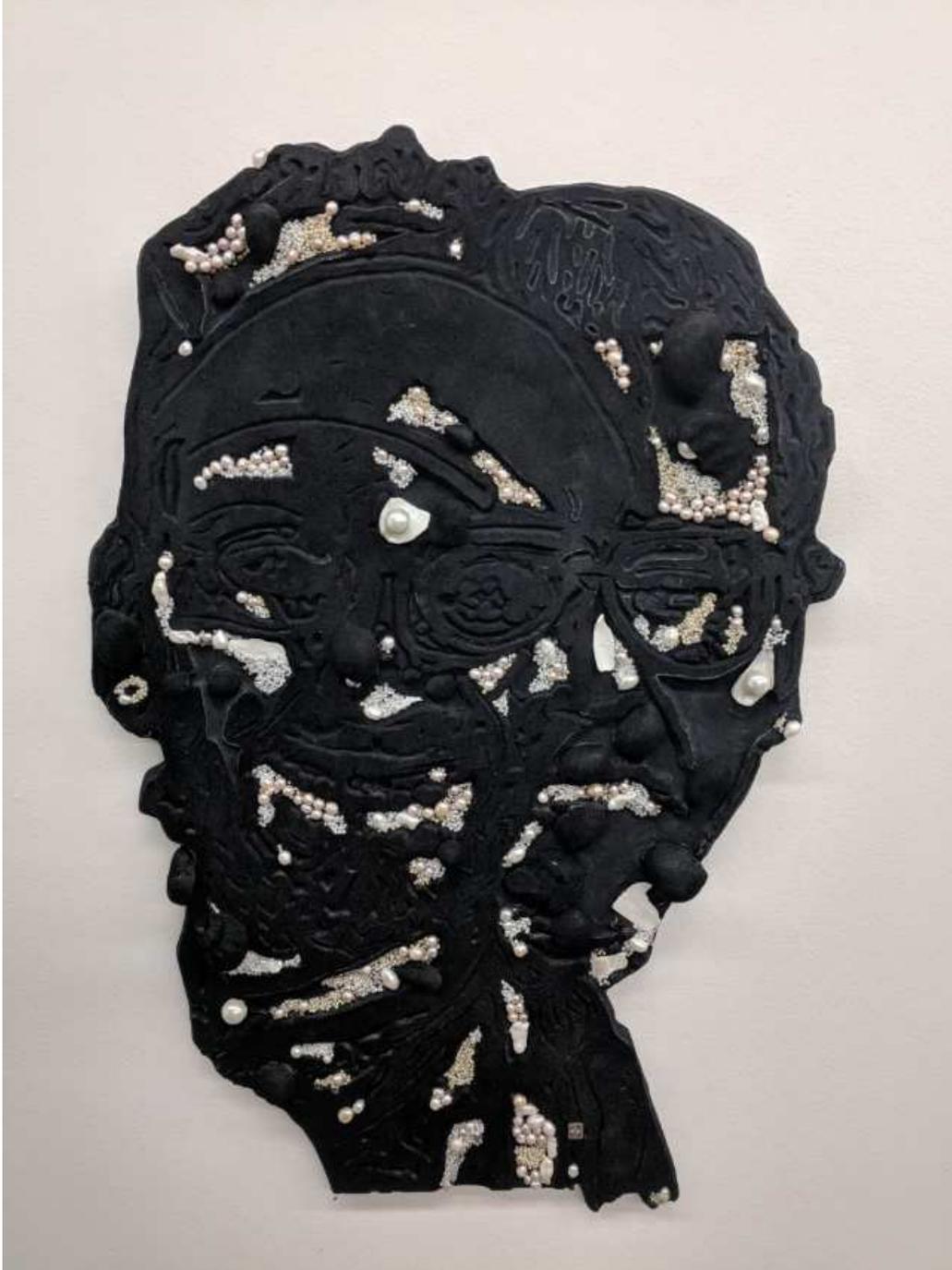


Figure 7: *Inheritance*

Faux-suede-flocked CNC-carved MDF and found objects, acrylic and latex paint, freshwater pearls, seed beads and found objects, 15.5" x 23.5", 2019.



Figure 8: *Shrine Shadows*

Faux-suede-flocked CNC-carved MDF and found objects, latex paint, freshwater pearls, seed beads and found objects, clear acrylic, 64" 16" (dimensions may vary), 2020.

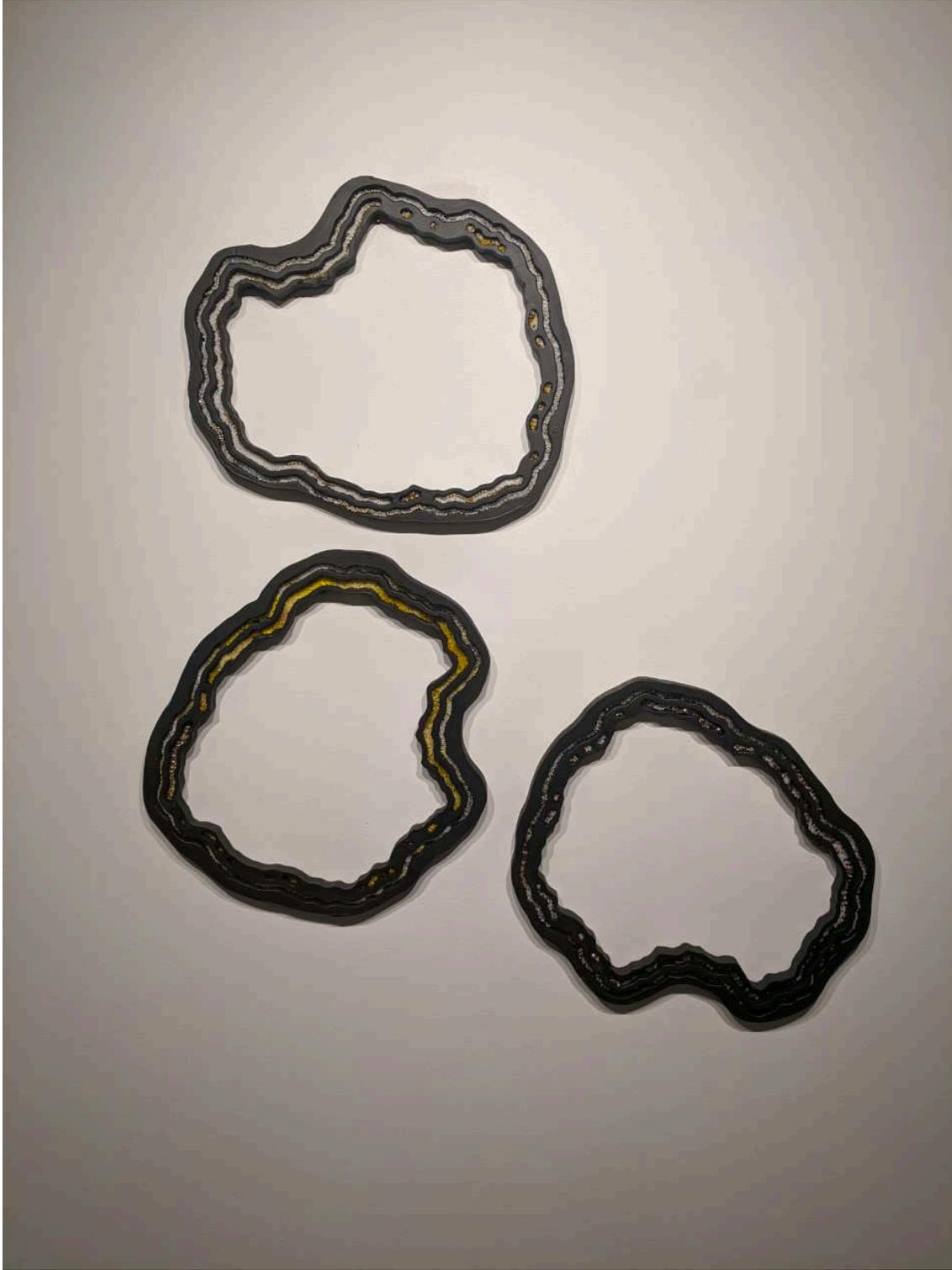


Figure 9: *The Shape Of The Heavens*

CNC-carved MDF, freshwater pearls, seed beads, latex paint, found objects, clear acrylic, 15.5" x 13.5" each (total dimensions vary), 2020.

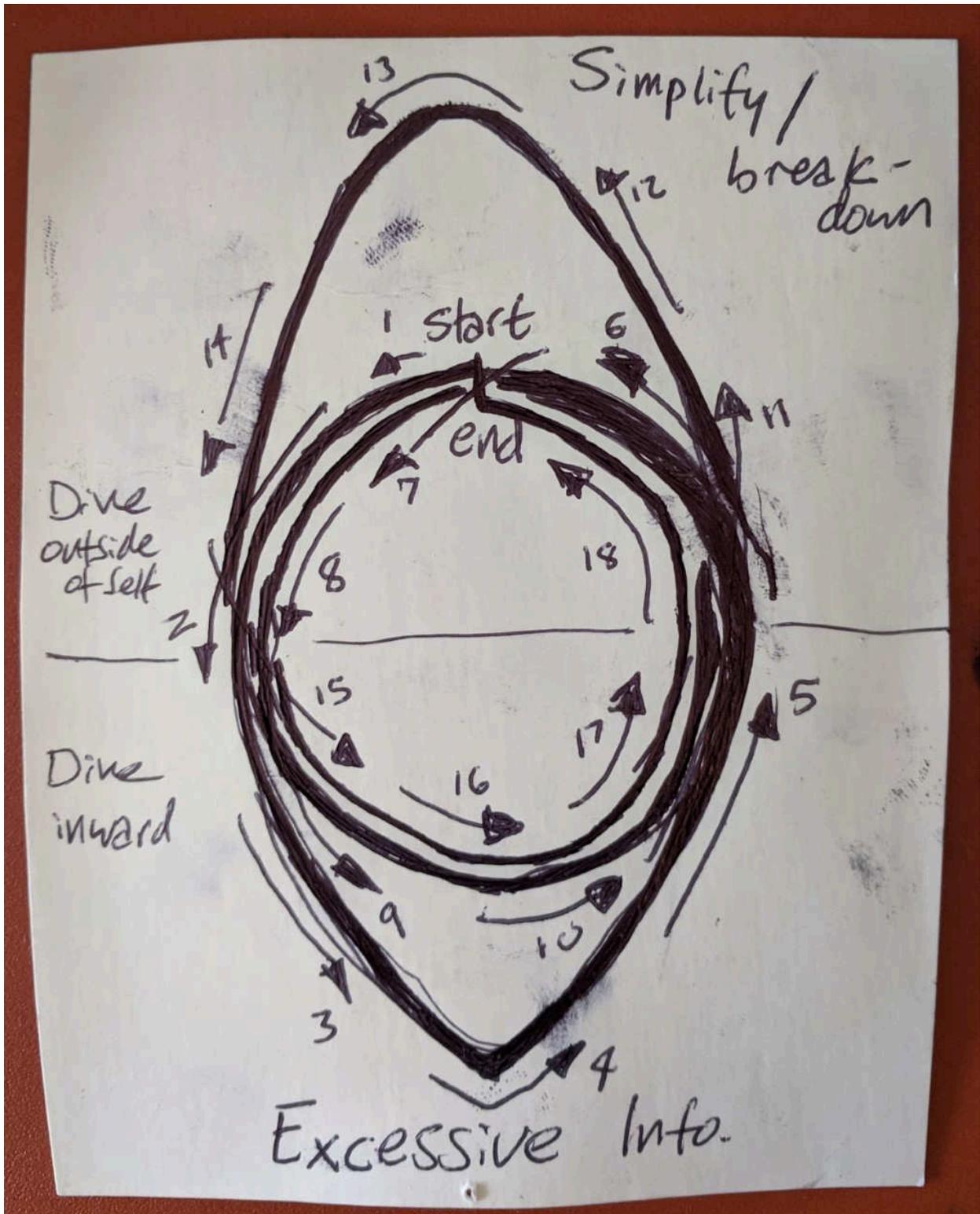


Figure 10: Cycle diagram – The cycle shows the process of bouncing from internal and external sources when translating lived experience.



Figure 11: *Past Self*

Faux-suede-flocked CNC-carved MDF, latex paint, machine-stitched appliqué with hand-dyed textiles on cotton velvet, freshwater pearls, seed beads, and found objects, 34" x 37", 2020.

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