Family, War, and Identity

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Honors Senior Capstone
June 2022
Claire Smith

Family, War, and Identity

In the Winter of 2021, I remember being on a walk with my mother. I was brainstorming ideas for my Senior Capstone project with her and thinking about what I wanted to show with my work. I knew I wanted to make something that was in the art realm because being an artist is important to who I am. Growing up, I knew that my grandmother on my mother’s side had immigrated from the Ukraine to the United States when she was a young child. Her name was Nadia Myronznck and her parents were Julia and Maxysm Myronznck. An idea had come to me about wanting to share this story somehow for my capstone, and I asked my mother if that was something she would be okay with. My mother was able to find many old original photographs that her grandfather had taken in Ukraine and Germany, and that launched my ideas for creating an art piece centered around family history and photography. I thought it would be a good way to honor my grandmother’s memory, as she passed in 2018 and I never got to hear much of her personal experience.

During the time that I have curated my ideas for this project I have come upon so much information that it is too much to fit into one capstone presentation, and so this process has allowed me to focus on the things that are at the forefront of my mind. Artistically, I knew I wanted to create mixed media pieces that combined paintings, drawings, and photo transfers. I learned how to do photo transfers in Cynthia Camlin’s Experiemental Painting class; it is a method that uses laser printed copies of photographs and a gel acrylic medium. Through this process, I was able to transfer copies of family photos onto a piece of paper, and then remove the paper using a wet sponge, but leave the image on the paper. This allows me to create a base layer of images that I can choose to reveal or cover up with acrylic paint. I used a Japanese style of paper that was durable enough to withhold both the transfer process and paint, and I created two pieces using this method.
Many ideas and thoughts were coursing through my brain during this creative and research process, but at the core I was ultimately thinking about family, war, and identity, and how they intersect with each other. My grandmother immigrated from the Ukraine to Germany, and then to the United States, and existed in a war torn country amid World War II. I was able to obtain a family video that tells the story of where her family lived during this time and what was happening. I learned that for a few years she lived in a displaced persons camp in Germany that was run by Americans for Ukrainians. My grandmother’s father was Ukrainian and her mother was German, and I began thinking of what it was like to have these intersecting identities, but also be disconnected from them. I will never experience being born in a war torn country or having to uproot my entire life to immigrate to a country I have never been before, yet this history is still a part of me.

For my first piece, “my grandmother’s smile” I was thinking about how Nadia, my grandmother, experienced World War II through a child’s eye. Many of the photographs that I have show her and her brother smiling and laughing; there is one specific picture that is my favorite because of the pure joy that is on their faces. I wanted to exhibit these smiling faces and overlap them with my personal journal entries and writings. While some of the writings on the pieces are from journals I have written, I also used the work I created as a canvas for my thoughts and reflections. I wrote down I was feeling and thinking in those specific moments, motivated by what I was seeing. I then painted blue flowers and vines on top and surrounding the images to signifying new growth and life. I feel like I am the new life on top of all these past events and past faces, yet they still peek through because they will, in some ways, always be present.

My second piece, “through their eyes,” I was specifically thinking about the tragedies of war and wanted to show bloodshed with color and the overlapping of images. I was also contemplating identity with this piece and the stripping of identity. I have both my grandmother’s and her father’s original identity cards used for immigration and naturalization services. I wanted to show these in the pieces by copying the exact font using a carbon copying process and then painting over the words to make certain ones stand out. In some places the paper has torn or fallen apart, or the image isn’t shown completely, and these things were intentional in order to
represent how these kinds of histories through every generation become less clear and parts of it are missing and parts of it still stand.

I truly enjoyed this process of creating art based on my feelings about my own family history, and I wanted to show vulnerability and authenticity throughout these two pieces. I hope to further explore my family history and connect it to current events in the future. I felt like my research was lining up exactly with the current war in Ukraine and it felt surreal. I want to explore ideas of historical patterns in future projects, and I am grateful for the opportunity to share and publish my work.
“my grandmother’s smile”

2022

17.5” x 19.5”

Mixed media, photo transfers, and acrylic paint
“through their eyes”
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