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Remedies

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Remedies

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Date: **5-23-08**
Remedies

“We strive to come to terms with our identity through analysis of memories from the past. Episodes from childhood are key.”¹

Statistics show that by the age of twenty-five, one in four women have been sexually violated however, 90% of actual rapes go unreported. According to the United Stated Department of Justice, a forcible rape occurs every six minutes in the United States.² I believe the general public does not understand the seriousness and severity of this issue of sexual violence, and a large number of people are unaware of its frequency. By the age of eighteen I was raped and I did not report it. This incident has inspired me to take action through my art. It has become my drive to create a body of work reflecting not the event of sexual violence itself, but how triggered memories affect the process of healing for all survivors of trauma. With this body of work, my intentions are not to create a confrontation with the viewer by turning them off when faced with such a serious issue. By using a language of the past to speak of the present, I am promoting an awareness and understanding of sexual violence.

¹ Stockwell (2006, interview with author)
By investigating how memory works, the historical aspects of domestic labor, and how washing and mending lend itself metaphorically to healing, I determine how the triggered memories of the violence affect the process of healing for all survivors. Healing is about the removal of a stain of a memory. It is about cutting out a section of a history and repairing the remainder, stitching together with the previous life in an attempt to create a new life ahead. In my current glasswork, washing and mending are used as metaphors for healing after a sexual assault has occurred. I have chosen these domestic acts because they involve familiar images and objects to which the audience can relate. These objects act as associative memory triggers. They link the viewer to the process of healing after a sexual violence has occurred. These triggers often jar the memory of the viewer, reminding them of a past event of their own, buried deep within their sub-conscience. When interviewing ten women, I discovered how they, themselves, have put their lives back together after their sexual violence experience.

There is a theory that everything seen, heard and experienced is stored in the memory. Much of this information is never retrieved. It remains catalogued into the faculties of the brain, lying dormant for years in the subconscious. A memory is experienced because there is a link that reawakens it, bringing it up from the subconscious to the conscious. Forgetting represents only the loss of access to that memory. \(^3\)

Sigmund Freud considered most forgetting to be psychologically motivated, and recognized the possibility of literal or biologic forgetting.

\(^3\) Goldenson (1963, pp 29)
"Perhaps we have gone too far in this. Perhaps we ought to content ourselves with asserting that what is past in mental life may be preserved and is not necessarily destroyed. It is always possible that even in the mind some of what is old is effaced or absorbed—whether in normal course of things or as an exception—to such an extent that it cannot be restored by any means or that preservation in general is dependent on certain favorable conditions. It is possible, but we know nothing about it. We can only hold fast to the fact that it is rather the rule than the exception for the past to be preserved in the mental life."4

The mind and body have ways of protecting themselves by ignoring a memory of a traumatic experience and shoving it back into the subconscious. The mind protects the body until the person is ready to begin healing.5 For example, in cases of childhood incest, the long-term maintenance of secrecy and hidden silence related to the abuse facilitates repression. When disclosure of prolonged traumatic experiences leads to parental denial, it serves to compound the use of repression. When the abuse is severe and repeated, shame and guilt are internalized and directed at the self. This stimulates a split between self and others as either all good or all bad. In order to maintain a sense of goodness, even at the cost of developing a false persona, the memories of the negative and intolerable abuse perpetrated by the parent or caretakers are repressed.6

Research has shown that exposure to trauma has the potential to alter brain chemistry, affecting among other things, the way these memories are processed and stored. A complex system of ego defenses emerges, preserving the emotional memories in an attempt to control the anxiety and pain of a trauma. The memories can then resurface unexpectedly when triggered by a sensory cue after the physical body has healed itself. Women with a history of severe and repeated sexual abuse, however, tend to exhibit defenses that prevent normal adjustment to their

4 Freud, (1927, pp 86)
5 Allen (1927, pp 128)
6 Shapiro and Dominiak (1992, pp 50)
external environment. Thus, professional and personal relationships are difficult, if not impossible to maintain. In Remedies, the glass installation “Preserve or Forget” (see plate two) demonstrates the various ways our mind protects memories. I represent memory with thread; using various experimental fiber-like materials, I demonstrate ways that thread is contained and stored in relation to the domestic act of mending.

In researching memory I look to the contemporary artist Louise Bourgeois. In her mature work, Bourgeois speaks of memory by associating spiders (as archetypes) with herself. The web permits her to trap her poisonous anguishes and control them. A web is both an archetype and a universal metaphor for life: a thread spun out of one’s own body connected from a central core to form a network that is both large and fragile, permeable and transparent, yet capable of holding one’s self and other, usually smaller, creatures. The spider wants to be in control, yet is also vulnerable to attack and dislodgement. For Bourgeois, the spider develops into a strong feminine presence, showing us how to conquer fear. The conquering of fear is something intrinsic to healing and memory.

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7 Shapiro and Dominiak (1992, pp 35-36)
9 Ball (2001, pp 20)
The motivation to commit to heal arises from a different set of life circumstances for each survivor. For example, a thirty year old may lose a grip on reality when her daughter reaches the age when the mother’s own abuse began. An older woman might begin healing upon the death of her abuser. This point just before the healing starts to take place has been described as “bursting apart at the seams,” or “hitting bottom” for a survivor.10 “Disabled Pins” speaks of this point using straight pins as the physical trigger of memory. The function of the pins has been immobilized by the wrapping of thread around the pin shaft. (See plate five) The mending of the survivor can be disabled for a time as they dwell on the events of the trauma, either consciously or sub-consciously. The commitment to heal begins with the washing of the stains of this traumatic memory.

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10 Bass (1988, pp 71)
Before the mid-twentieth century, when the use of household clothes dryers became more common, the clothesline was incorporated into a woman's repetitive chore of laundry.

The image of a clothesline brings us, as the viewer, into a nostalgic mode of memory, reminding us of our mothers and grandmothers hanging the clothes out to dry. For example, “Wash” recreates this scene using a clothesline with a garment suspended from it, an old crusty sink, cast glass washboard and clothespins. The use of a stain on the floor speaks of a specific memory the viewer might have. (See plate nine) The multiple lines set up, back and forth, become a memory web, linking the conscious with the subconscious. Metaphorically, the line becomes a timeline of a personal history, a pathway back to past memories. The clothespins become the marks and emotional pulses of the memories and periods of someone’s life. But as technology marched in, the quaint habits of an era of clotheslines slipped away. Gradually, laundry chores moved indoors, and flapping wash became a symbol of folks too poor to own a dryer. “I wish I could

11 Magazine Ad mid 1900’s, ’57 designer pink machine (right). Santiago (1997, pp 84, 90)
hang my laundry in the backyard, but the neighbors would think it’s tacky,” exclaims Lane Wilder, cofounder of Ecomat, an environmentally sensitive clothes cleaners and Laundromat franchiser in New York.¹²

Before the household washing machine and dryer appliances became readily available to the individual at home in the mid-twentieth century,¹⁴ the women of the town would gather and hang the laundry out to dry as a group. Streets and alley-ways were strung with clotheslines, criss-crossing back and forth from window to window, floor to floor. Laundry day, which historically was on Monday, became the one social time of the women’s week. They would come to the windows and hang their recently washed garments. The smell of clean sheets and fresh clothing filled the dirty, grimy streets below. As the lines were filled, the town news was shared and the gossip ran fast. Only the deepest dark secrets were avoided. Secrets, such as domestic violence stayed at home behind closed windows and doors, not to be mentioned to anyone.

¹² Santiago (1997, pp 89)
¹³ Target Images of magazine adds for washing machines, mid 1900’s. Santiago (pp 84, 90)
¹⁴ Santiago (pp86)
There is something intriguing about what can be learned about those untold family "secrets" just by observing the clean garments and sheets on the line. An interview taken from a study done on clotheslines in 1969 describes what can be gathered:

"It looks to me like you’ve got two boys, Mrs. Watkins. One must be about three, and one about seven."

"That’s right," said Mrs. Watkins.

I could tell the ages of the kids from the dungarees, but I always checked out the underpants to tell the girls from the boys. Dungarees all zip down the front, but luckily the drawers are still heterosexual.

"There’s a girl about twelve, and another that looks like fourteen."

Mrs. Watkins nodded, so I went on. “Your family is English.”


"From the handkerchiefs. Mr. Watkins drives a truck."

"Where do you see that?"

"His shirts are worn across the shoulders." At this point Mr. Watkins appeared. He came out of the shed and walked up to me.

"Now it’s my turn. Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Can you tell a Democrat from a Republican?"

"No."

"I’ll tell you. If you are a Republican, there are pajamas on the line. If you are Democrat, you sleep raw."

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16 Mather (1969, pp 8)
When the clothesline is examined closely, stains in the clothes can become apparent. It can demonstrate where the woman was at in her cycle, based on the blood stained menstrual rags hung on the line, before personal products were readily available. The clothesline revealed if she was pregnant, based on the lack of menstrual rags, or if she had recently miscarried her pregnancy. The garments on the line might show rips, repairs and stains in the clothing, perhaps from an assault the night before. Metaphorically, the clothesline becomes a study of stains of memory, a stain being a permanent, discolored mark on something or somebody, detracting from a good reputation. Stains become a reminder of an event that will never be forgotten, no matter how many times the garment is washed clean. In Remedies, “Never Ending” uses stains to demonstrate the secrets that go untold, getting folded up into the bed sheets over and over, every Monday washday (see plate four).

Storyteller Isak Dinesen, recounting a tale of nuns, tells an interesting story about history and stains.

High in the mountains of Portugal, a Carmelite order grows flax to produce the whitest and most exquisite linen to use as bedding for royal nuptials. The morning after each wedding night the sheets are solemnly and publicly displayed to verify the purity of each princess bride. The convent then reclaims the sheets, carefully mounts the stained panels, and beautifully displays them in a long gallery, each with a gilded frame bearing the name of the princess whose virginity marked the royal wedding sheets. Princesses and pilgrims alike travel from near and far to view the fabled exhibition for “each separate canvas with its coroneted name plate has a story to tell…” Tucked amidst the procession is a framed canvas with an uninscribed plate that displays a scrap, “snow white from corner to corner, a blank page,” conjuring perhaps a most fascinating tale.17

17 Dinesen (1991, pp 95-105)
Over the course of history, sewing has also played a fundamental role in the lives of countless women. A woman would spend her day on Tuesdays mending her recently washed household clothes. When a woman’s husband would wear his mended shirt, there was a sense of pride in the repair. It was a testimonial to the skills his wife had in her needlework and sewing skills. The more prominent the repair, the more pride the man showed. "A woman who does not know how to sew is as deficient in her education as a man who cannot write," was the critical advice given in 1838 to the readers of *The Young Lady's Friend* by author Eliza Farrar.\(^\text{18}\)

Today, the idea of repairing worn clothing is almost absurd in our western culture. Instead of taking the time to repair a rip or wash out a stain, we buy new clothing and dispose of the worn or stained garments. Pride in repairs has been replaced with a shame at having to wear “the stained and tattered” clothing.

Conceptually speaking, mending and fabric are inherently about memory and emotion. Louise Bourgeois believes that the beauty of sewing fabric is precisely the fact that things can be done and undone without damaging the material. “The process of sewing has to do with binding and stitching things together (memory)...it is a prevention of things being separated.”\(^\text{19}\)

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\(^\text{18}\) [http://www.rubylane.com](http://www.rubylane.com) (May 29, 2007)

\(^\text{19}\) Sonnenberg (2006, pp 36-39)

\(^\text{20}\) “Femme Couteau.” Bourgeois. Fabric, steel, wood. 22.8 x 69.8 x 15.2 cm. Cheim and Reid Gallery, New York 2002
Interestingly, when a repair is made, the mended part often becomes the strongest part of the garment. This part will never undo itself or need to be mended again. It is like a scar on the body—a mark left in the skin by the healing of injured tissue. Once the wound heals over and the scar tissue fills in, the skin will not split there again. The mend is too strong. The scar becomes the mark of strength, even though it will always be there as a reminder, a stain.

Another artist who has been a great influence on my work and uses staining and mending as major themes throughout her work is Anne Wilson. Wilson’s work builds upon originally stained and imperfect linens, cataloguing the physical record of daily behavior. A series titled *Edges* uses strips of white hotel bed sheets to focus on the wear, use and disrepair of the cloth’s borders from endless folding, bed tucking, or straightening. She uses long strands of black or auburn hair to mend and repair the edges that have been touched by numerous hands and kicked by countless feet. These *Edges* are a paradox, clean in appearance yet unclean in content.

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21 Wilson. “Mourning Cloth (drape)”. Reconstructed cloth, hair, thread. 72 x 32 x 2 inches. Revolution Gallery, Detroit 1992-93

22 Wilson. detail of “Edges, no. 6”. Cloth hair thread. 10.25 x 75.75 inches. Revolution Gallery, Detroit 1999
In *Remedies*, six of the pieces metaphorically and conceptually speak of the mending process. Physically, they are the familiar tools used to repair a garment, acting as associative memory triggers for the viewer to experience their own memory of a past event, buried deep within their sub-conscious. Metaphorically, the six pieces relate to a part of the mending and healing process a victim of sexual violence goes through. For example, “Unravel” uses knitting needles, conceptually, as a way of portraying the stitching together of an unraveled psyche and physical life after a sexual assault. (see plate ten) The concept of “Communicate” is about how the process of healing is enriched by talking and communicating with other survivors, sharing their experiences together. (see plate three) A needle has an affinity to artist Louise Bourgeois as well. “When I was growing up, all the women were using needles. I always had a fascination with the needle, the magic power of the needle. The needle is used to repair the damage. It is a claim to forgiveness. It is never aggressive, it’s not a pin.”

By investigating how memory works and how washing and mending lend them metaphorically to healing, I seek to discover how women of today experience the process of repairing themselves after their own sexual violence. For this thesis project I was interested specifically in women’s stories of how they have dealt with violence in their own lives. By interviewing a group of women, I discovered how they have tried to metaphorically wash and mend themselves after their sexual violation occurred.

These oral histories and interviews were taken from a total of 10 women, from a wide range of ages and backgrounds, who have experienced some form of domestic sexual violence.

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23 Bourgeois (1998, pp 222)
Some of these women were friends of mine who voluntarily participated in my project when I approached them with the idea. Others heard of this project via word of mouth, and approached me, wanting to participate. My interview tactics ranged from letters and emails, to phone conversations. Other interviews, where the woman felt comfortable enough and was in the Rochester area, were conducted in person. All of these interviews remain private and confidential.

Each interview was varied, depending on the person; however, my essential interest in the healing process remained consistent. The questions I asked included:

- How have you carried on with your daily habits and domestic chores in the physical environment where you had been violated?
- What is your system of memory when it comes to the choice of preserving or forgetting your assault?
- What has been the most effective tactic or tool, you have used to heal yourself after your rape?

An important point that I made clear to each interviewee was that I was not asking for the narrative of the violent event itself. I did not want that type of story to influence my thesis work nor did I want my work to reflect the act of the violence. I explained to the interviewee that my thesis was about the healing of her life after the incident and that that is what I wanted to talk to her about.

Based on the information I gathered, I created a body of work, *Remedies*, that reflects the interviews and connects them to the process of washing and mending. Throughout these interviews I discovered that healing is not a random process, but rather involves recognizable stages that all survivors share. All of these women experienced the same feelings of fear, denial,
guilt, rage and trust. These are typical feelings of any person experiencing a trauma, be it, physical or mental.\textsuperscript{24}

\textit{Remedies} has not only been a response to the interviews, but it also has become a collection of stories of past memories, good and bad, old and new. For example, multiple viewers had a story of the container of buttons their grandma had, reminding them of the different kinds of buttons within the collection. There was a story about a 97-year-old aunt and her 123-year-old basement. Her dusty jars of mysteriously unlabeled preserves lined the shelves of the pantry storage. People remembered their mother hanging the clothes out to dry, or smelling their grandmother's sheets, freshly dried in the sun on a clothesline.

\textsuperscript{24} Bass (1988, pp70)
As an artist, I have chosen glass as my primary material for its inherent physical properties. Glass resembles the concept of a translucent, cloudy memory, perhaps left behind and forgotten. Glass has ghostly reminiscences, or lack of remembrance, representing a history of an event that has taken place. Glass indicates an invisibility and fragility of an emotion. It is a window into an interior for the viewer to explore what otherwise would never be seen. In an explanation Louise Bourgeois gives of one of her installations—"Precious Liquids"—she says, "It is about memory, and the fragility and isolation of the individual—how even a heart of stone is as fragile as a bubble of glass, at the core, nothing more than air and dust." 

The choices of the glass processes of casting and blowing also feed into the concepts of my work. Glass casting can freeze a moment, or a memory in time. The solid mass tends to look cold, hard, and impenetrable. My work reflects this process by dealing with memory in this sort of frozen moment in time. The process of blowing glass is often associated with traditional craft, utilitarian objects, and domestic ware made for containment and preservation. The blown glass objects that I make are not traditional, however, conceptually, they are made for containing and preserving the memory.

26 Bourgeois (1998, pp.234)
The techniques and uses of windows, stains, stitching, scarring, and thread become important metaphors for memory and violence as well. Windows are metaphors for the investigation into the memory. The windows become lenses into our sub-conscious, available for examination. I use stains as evidence of a past history, a reminder of an event that will never be forgotten. Stitching represents the mending and repairing of a life. The act of stitching together an old life with a new life or sewing up a rip or a hole can heal and restore things, leaving behind a scar or mark of repair. The use of thread is apparent throughout many of my pieces, as well. I relate thread to memory. There is that age-old custom of tying thread round your finger as a reminder for something or some event. The thread is a link to the memory, linking the conscious to the sub-conscious. The thread becomes the trigger to retrieve the memory from the sub-conscious to the conscious. Some memories will never be retrieved but others will surface every day and affect our stream of consciousness.

Everything considered, when viewing the glasswork in Remedies, it was not necessary for every viewer to connect with the detailed experience of rape, but most people experienced some connection with the metaphors and domestic objects within the show.

The nine pieces in Remedies as a whole is seen as a cohesive body of work using memory and consistent referencing to washing and mending. Individually, there are some sculptures that can stand alone, and some that need the other work in the show as a reference. For example, Wash could be it's own installation in a room filled with cris-crossing clotheslines. (see plate nine) Preserve or Forget, Never Ending, One Time (buttons), Two Spools, and Cushion, could all work individually in a gallery, separate from each other, and still send the same message of memory or violence. (see plates two, four, six, seven, eight) The concept of Disabled Pins might not
communicate well if displayed on its own without the other mending references, due to the lack of indication to what they actually are—sewing pins. (See plate five) In all, each piece in Remedies has it’s own memory. There is a consistent reference to washing and mending that brings the show together as a whole. Every piece has a reference to a sexual violation by means of staining or the color red. By using a language of the past to speak of the present, I am promoting an awareness and understanding of sexual violence.

In summary, throughout my exploration of memory and the healing processes from domestic sexual violence, Remedies depicts the historical aspects and conceptual theories of washing and mending. In the course of my research I conducted a series of interviews, asking women to describe to me how they have washed and mended themselves after their domestic violence experience. Remedies is a response to this examination, tying in the study of washing, mending and memory and demonstrating how it affects the human process of healing. Throughout this research, I also looked at other contemporary artist’s work, such as Louise Bourgeois and Anne Wilson who have similar themes paralleling the mending process and use of staining that frequently appears throughout Remedies. In conclusion, by using memory and reminiscent familiar objects my intentions are to promote awareness with in the viewer of the frequency of sexual violence that such a large population of women in our society is suffering from. As Louise Bourgeois says, “In our refusal to confront fear, we retreat into nostalgia. Fear condemns us to a rejection of the present. The present is kept intolerable. We must call for help from the past to solve the problems of today.”

27 Bourgeois (1998, pp 232)
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Freud. The Psychopathology of Everyday Life


http://content.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/kt7f59q0sz/?jsessionid=UAwNBmzJNG6CxaF0?docId=kt7f59q0sz&brand=oac&layout=printable-details California Online Archive. June 18th, 2007


Stockwell, Susan. From an interview with the author upon a visit to RIT, April 10th, 2006

Remedies Thesis Exhibition
Cassandra Straubing
Canal Street Gallery
April 20, 2007
Preserve or Forget installation
Hot sculpted glass, steel, ceramic shell, fiberglass, copper
60”h x 70”w x 3”d
**Preserve or Forget** details
Hot sculpted glass, steel, fiberglass
6"h x 3"w x 3"d
Preserve or Forget details
Hot sculpted glass, steel, copper, fiberglass, ceramic shell
6”h x 3”w x 3”d
Communicate installation
Hot sculpted glass, thread
5”h x 120”w x 120”d

Communicate detail
Hot sculpted glass, thread
5”h x 20”w x 20”d
Communicate detail
Hot sculpted glass, thread
3”h x 8”w x 8”d

Communicate detail
Hot sculpted glass, thread
2”h x 3”w x 5”d
*Never Ending*
Cast glass, oil stain, rust stain, wood
36”h x 144”w x 18”d

*Never Ending* detail
Cast glass, oil stain, wood
3”h x 7”w x 10”d
Never Ending detail
Cast glass, oil stain, rust stain, wood
6” h x 30” w x 18” d
*Disabled Pins* detail
Blown glass, steel, thread, cotton
12”h x 100”w x 70”d

*Disabled Pins* detail
Blown glass, steel, thread
24”w x 70”h x 20”d

*Disabled Pins* installation
Blown glass, steel, thread, cotton

plate five
**One Time**
Cast glass, found steel tin, rust stain
2”h x 12”w x 12”d

**Two Spools**
Cast glass
4”h x 6”w x 2”d
Cushion
Flame worked soft glass, found tomatoes
6”h x 11”w x 4”d
Wash installation
Cast glass, steel, clothesline, found material
Wash detail
Cast Glass, steel, found material
36”h x 36”w x 36”d

Wash detail
Cast Glass, steel, found material
6”h x 6”w x 6”d
Unravel installation
Blown glass, muslin, yarn

Unravel detail
Blown glass, muslin, yarn
24”h x 7”w x 3”d
Mended Quilt
Cotton
60”h x 60”w
Mended Quilt detail
Cotton
12”h x 12”w

Mended Quilt detail
Cotton
12”h x 12”w

Mended Quilt detail
Cotton
12”h x 12”w

Mended Quilt detail
Cotton
12”h x 12”w
Remedies Quilt
Cotton
60”w x 60”h

Remedies Quilt detail
Cotton
24”w x 12”h