Latent Interiors: Memory, Environment, and the Body Ian Sherlock Molloy

Master in Fine Arts Terminal Thesis Report Spring 2021



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Context

The last few years of my life and studies have been primarily focused on unburying old trauma, treating my struggles with bipolar disorder, dissociative disorder, anxiety, depression, and interpersonal relationships. In particular, the stability, safety, and access to mental health resources I've been privileged with have allowed me to reflect on my relationship with my body and mind in meaningful ways. Despite its challenges, the work has mostly been positive. Yet, it has also given me space and clarity to be critical and contemplate my former untreated self and consider the factors that continue to shape me and those around me.

Entering this program, my work focused on the landscape and my interpersonal relationships within it, yet neglected balance in representation between myself and those I depicted. Recognizing this, I created work that then focused on my own experiences and relationship with myself. Doing so encouraged me to use art making to record the healing and reconciliation that was occupying much of my energy. The work that formed at the beginning of this shift was focused on the renegotiation of formative childhood experiences and the ambiguity that surrounded them. Centered around experiences in an abandoned army depot near my hometown in Upstate New York, the work began to disentangle the layered histories of personal and cultural memory, scarification, and the unseen.

With plans to continue maturing the work at the depot, the limitation on travel due to the COVID-19 pandemic encouraged me to focus further inward and make work that resembled a broader experience, free from a specific and inaccessible location. This change challenged me to lessen the layers between myself and the viewer and to illustrate my lived experience in the present moment versus a reflection solely on the past.

Through research, photography, sonic composition, and clinical intervention, I consider the complex and conflicted relationships I have with the act of remembering, my relationship to my environment, the interconnectedness of mind and body, reflections on the notion of conventional beauty, and its influence in the making of this work. My aim in operating within these considerations is to articulate the conflicted nature of each, understand more fully my draw to these distinctions, and most importantly, better communicate an intangible and challenging series of illnesses. In this process, I hope to better align with my values on health, interconnectedness, and recovery.

Memory

The reliability and consistency of memory have been an insistent consideration in the making of the work that constitutes my thesis project. The instability and unreliable nature of memory is exaggerated when paired with my traumas and biology. The inability to be grounded in a consistent reality, and to reflect on long-lasting memories, exacerbates my issues. This is particularly evident when said memories involve my relationship with others. The inability to recall coherent memories, both monumental and trivial, leads to unrealistic connections drawn from an urgent desire for narrative cohesion. The pursuit to better understand and validate my environment, actions, and experiences have led me to documentation, both in a literal and metaphorical sense. I intend to use this project as a means of grounding myself, of communicating to others my idiosyncratic experience, and as a way to come to terms with the inevitability that details will be lost to time and the fallibility of perception.

The balance between remembering and forgetting is challenging to strike, but the pursuit of doing so is integral to the process of healing and reconciliation. To remember, build upon, and validate experiences is crucial to better understanding myself, my actions, and the line between valid and exaggerated concerns. Similarly, forgetting and letting go are equally important. Not letting the past determine my present and future, and accepting the malleability and subjectivity of experience is a necessary component to remembering and healing as whole. To accept this is to let go of an element of control and objectivity, while acknowledging the shortcomings of my mind.

It is easy to see these processes as conflicted or two sides of a binary. But memory and forgetting work together in tandem, sometimes interchangeably, to collectively aid in the process of healing, growth, and reconciliation. In their book *A Primer for Forgetting – Getting Past the Past* Lewis Hyde defends the importance of forgetting when they write, "forgetting is a falling away from the ideal, a falling into birth and into time... if forgetting is a fall into birth and time, then a pure, triumphant memory will mean an end to emerging life and a fixing of time..." (73). They expand on this further by saying "forgetting is the erasing angel that murders particularity so that concepts can be born, so that time can flow again" (142). The goal is not to discredit the importance of memory but to highlight the potential significance of forgetting and its relationship to time. Hyde argues that forgetting is not a lack of acknowledgment of the past but a decision not to act upon it, to not lend itself to impulses.

Through my interest in using this research to understand better my relationship to my past, present, and future self, I began thinking of my work in two modes. The first mode was as documentation. The photographs and sounds were immediate reactions to an environment made to solidify an experience and make its memory tangible. I appreciate the utility of this mode, as it encourages me to lean into my impulses, remember, and provide myself documents to aid in doing so. To disallow the ambiguity that fuels my fears and exaggerations and encourage a heightened self-awareness and intentionality that protects myself and ensures care for those around me.

To accompany a documentary approach, I have also been making more abstracted and arranged pieces. Composing in this way allows a similar sense of devotion and intention without

the necessity to respond to my environment but rather create an environment in which to reflect in. These pieces are less grounded in objectivity and truth. Instead, they allow the creation of a symbolic truth that communicates my internal experience more accurately than the external environment they are surrounded by. This process aims to point at the ambiguous, to purposefully remove information and distort the subject in a way that aligns with the ambiguity and opaqueness of experience. John Mann's series The Echo's Wait is a striking set of images that influenced this process. I am inspired by their use of distortion in perspective, mastery in tone, and unwillingness to reveal their process fully. These abstractions amount to works that ask questions and slowly reveal themselves, but never wholly so. I want my work to evoke a sensibility that is as much about forgetting as it is about remembering. By visualizing this process, I can allow the possibility to forget the motive behind the image. A particularly impactful moment in Hyde's book describes this process: "They say that one way to lay a traumatic memory to rest is to create a particular kind of symbol: a grave marker... Once a trauma has been properly buried, you can call it to mind, but you do not have to. It's available but not intrusive, not haunting... If the story cannot be fully told, then the trauma persists" (141).

These two approaches are not as rigid and incongruent as they may seem. Images and sounds fluctuate between the two and are intended to do so. These distinctions predominantly organize themselves into how each piece was originally made along with their personal utility. The difference helps organize the images by approach and contextualizes the research behind their creation. However, it neglects the ambiguity of the images and the impact that processing and sequencing the works have on their supposed distinctions. I appreciate the lack of discernibility between these two, as it reflects my experience more wholly. An image of a light

bulb on its dimmest setting could be seen as an impromptu document, however the image has been carefully planned, constructed and manipulated (fig. 1). Whereas an image of a car tire was made in the moment, and could be seen as mediated in a similar fashion (fig. 2). Sonically, dialogue that has been obscured through physical and digital manipulation distorts the distinction between document and creation. They are unified in their utility to communicate my experience



Figure 1: "Untitled 5" - Inkjet Print, 06"x08"



Figure 2: "Untitled 4" - Inkjet Print, 12"x16"

and aid in a practical sense of recollection and reconciliation. Their uniform tone in obscurity, removal, and mediation further distorts these distinctions and more accurately conveys the conflicted and cyclical nature inherent in the process. Katrin Koenning's series *Dear Chris*, which documents the nuances of loss and memory after the wake of their cousin's suicide, sets similar distinctions or "chapters", which consist of vernacular photographs, photographs of their cousin's objects, and photographs of significant places. These images work together to convey an

idea that is too expansive to document with a singular approach. While the chapters are more discernible than the distinctions I employ, this work serves as a testament to the value of approaching a subject with various strategies and the potential for healing in doing so.

To visually depict an experience that is often internal and intangible has been an immense challenge. Through this challenge, I hope to better understand my relationship to memory, loss, trust, and better improve my relationship with the unknown, the subjective, and the malleable. By approaching with the intent to both document and compose, I hope to represent a conflicted and nuanced experience: to use images and sound making in tandem as a tool for growth and communication and to materialize the traumas and etherealities in an attempt to lay them to rest. In sharing this process, I hope to echo both the lived experience and the mystery that persists around it.

Environment

Despite the work's focus on the self and the ethereal, depictions of the environment play a prominent role in the series. Mental illness holds physical space; it both influences and is influenced by the space in which it is contained. Environments contain a web of these relationships across cultures and generations and are highly interpretive based on the individual. Like memory, the malleability and inconsistency of these spaces are rich for documenting the places I inhabit, and I am drawn to document the land as a site to convey more ambiguous relationships beyond it.

In *Spectral Evidence, The Photography of Trauma*, Ulrich Baer writes, "The aura of the photographed landscape seems to tap into a region of our memory that we did not know existed. We find a significance that is at once directed at us yet seems not part of us. Conceptually as well as visually, we are subjected to something that we recognize to be crucially important but that finally eludes us"(79). This elusion brings depictions of the landscape that are compelling for several reasons. It mimics the indeterminate nature of my memory and grounding, and it also allows the work to expand beyond the specificity of my experience and into a broader context. It contextualizes my experience and places it within the expansion of the environment on a macro and micro scale.

To articulate that my lived experience has a physicality, I have made photographs in places that felt conceptually and holistically relevant. For example, the river that I grew to know over the three years of weekly walks along it is depicted in a light that evokes a sense of thickness and slowness (fig. 3). The ripples feel torn, yet my hope is that it is not read as aggression but natural conflict. Less pastoral depictions of the landscape are represented through depictions of human-centric intervention such as a patch of road with black paint to obscure what was communicated beneath it (fig. 4). The highlight from the sun blends the paint into the



Figure 3: "Untitled 3" - Inkjet Print, 24"x32"



Figure 4: "Untitled 7" - Inkjet Print, 06"x08"

pavement beneath it and confuses the perspective slightly. Sonic recordings of the road and alleyways surrounding my house communicate the interconnectedness of the sonic landscape, placing cars, birds, people, and wind on the same plane of significance.

Interiors function similarly to depictions of the landscape. While evoking a stronger sense of confinement, they too point my internal investigations to a tangible place. This is particularly evident in images such as a window photographed at dusk with the blinds drawn, disrupting its symmetry (fig. 5). These moments are grounding in their creation and evoke a contrast between explicit representation and opaque obscurity. The tensions surrounding documentation and symbolic "fiction" are most present in these interior spaces as they are so sensitive to the influence of composition and lighting. For obvious reasons, much of my relationship to place has been depicted through interior spaces, which is practically and conceptually relevant to the aims of this series.

With a longstanding interest in landscape art, there have been a number of influences who have shaped my perception on what is possible within the medium. KMRU's album *Peel* is an incredible collection of field recordings,

meticulously blended and treated to a minimal



Figure 5: "Untitled 1" - Inkjet Print, 12"x16"

drone that permeates the room and harmonizes with the listener's surrounding soundscape. Their predominant use of field recordings paved the way toward my thinking of how even representational recordings can be mediated to transport and obscure the environment they originally depicted. William Earle William's *Unsung Heroes* has influenced me greatly as well. While I do not intend to draw parallels between the histories and subjects of my work and theirs; their representations of historic markers for African American Civil War soldiers encapsulates the complicated narrative of landscape and raises questions of the record, ethereal presence, and reclamation. Their work expanded my criticality on the medium and showed me what is possible within it. It encouraged me to consider the histories beyond myself, and how my representation of the land can create or disallow space for other such considerations. Their work compelled me

to look further into my own practice and my relationship to both the camera and the land in front of it.

When communicating an inward experience, I have found that looking outward is often the best place to start. Considerations of how the environment has influenced me, how I have influenced it, and how I can consciously represent it gets closer to communicating the intangible and interior. Environments are bodies in and of themselves, with rich histories held both internally and externally. Their histories are integral in understanding my own. Through interacting with my environment, my hope is to further ground myself within it, and to continue using representation of the land to speak to forces both internal and external, immediate and timeless.

Self

My relationship to my physical body is changing drastically in the process of treatment and in the making of this work. Due to a variety of circumstances both environmental and biological, a disconnect between my mind and body has persisted throughout my life. As I have undergone growth and treatment, I have realized how my physical body has been affected by less tangible means. The stress and conflict in my head have manifested themselves not only in my perceptions but in my body by the way of physical illness and injury. It is increasingly clear that the path toward true healing, toward the ability to move forward, lies in reconnection with my physical self. In *The Body Keeps the Score*, Bessel van der Kolk illuminates on this idea when writing "Trauma victims cannot recover until they become familiar with and befriend the sensations in their bodies... Individuals who lack emotional awareness are able, with practice, to connect their physical sensation to psychological events. Then they can slowly reconnect with themselves." (102-3). This process is crucial in my renegotiation with myself, and I feel it is important to represent this aspect of the experience in the work.

To introduce this concept they also write, "We have learned that trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on mind, brain, and body. This imprint has ongoing consequences for how the human organism manages to survive in the present." (21). While the distinction between mind and body is valuable as a perspective of simplification, it can also lead to the belief that the mind and body are indeed distinct and singular. I have a conflicted relationship to this perspective, as I have improved the relationship with my body through the lens of attempting to unify them, and yet I also know that the distinction is and should be considered purely symbolic. To see them as separate is to elevate

the mind beyond its biological limit which can have troubling consequences of further disconnection.

I have used self-portraiture, both representational and abstract, to represent this quandary and renegotiation. The process has allowed me to strengthen the relationship with myself, by providing me the possibility to examine, direct, and compose my physical body in a way that conveys this renegotiation. This process is uncomfortable and vulnerable, but it is necessary as it physically and directly manifests the motivation behind the work. With the work's broader intention to critically examine myself and communicate the realities of my experience, using my physical body is an essential aspect.

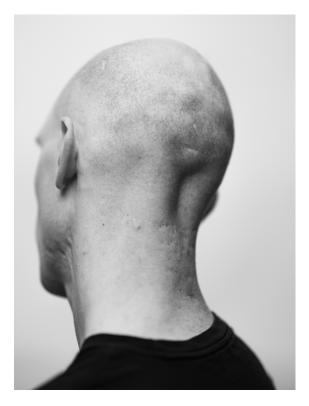


Figure 6: "Untitled 6" - Inkjet Print, 24"x32"



Figure 7: "Untitled 2" - Inkjet Print, 06"x08"

A portrait of the back of my head plays a central role in the sequence (fig. 6). Evenly lit, printed large, with limited but sharp focus, the viewer can examine the features of my

anonymous figure as I am able do to myself. I am turned from the camera, evoking a sense of defense or even shame, unable or at least unwilling to confront the viewer directly in the fear of dictating the narrative too directly. More ambiguous representations of myself are present in pixelated textures of my skin taken with a phone in a moment of crisis intervention (fig. 7). I am drawn to the vastly different levels of fidelity the images contain, and how the mechanics of the photograph can describe further my relationship to the self in those moments. The contrast between these depictions are unified in the desire to document my process of criticality, both productive and harmful.

The sound piece focuses on the self in a different, less direct way. The recordings are all made with a handheld recorder, allowing my footsteps, grip of the recorder, and breath to subtly enter into the soundscape. Cracks from my ankles as I walk around the house act as an uncanny punctuation or sense of percussion. Drawn to how sound can represent the self in this way, I studied Claire Rousay's sound pieces intensively. Much of their work, notably *A Softer Focus*, captures the self through recordings of their movement, the use of text-to-speech software, percussive performances, and instrumentation. Sound's ability to encourage motion, to conceal representation, and to reveal the subtleties of my interaction with myself and environment have been a symbiotic companion to the more critical and confrontational photographic process.

Depiction of the self has been a new and intimidating endeavor. Combined with my more habitual art making practices such as landscape photography, it has encouraged me to use the creative process for reflection, to provide the viewer with greater context, and to confront the often imbalanced relationship between artist and subject.

Beauty

The work's aesthetic sensibilities concerning its effectiveness, both as a tool for recovery and a form of communication with others, has proven to be an integral aspect of the process. Despite the often contradictory, unpredictable, and conflicting thoughts and experiences throughout treatment and recovery, I have chosen to embrace an aesthetic sensibility that evokes a sense of order, consideration, and precision. The neatness instilled in the works serve multiple functions, unified by a desire to distill, contain, and ground my experiences and thoughts. This strategy enables me to combat the expansiveness and unreliability of my anxieties and use the process to better articulate my experience to myself and a viewer. This process is intertwined with traditional notions of 'beauty.' I hesitate to qualify my pieces with such a nebulous and loaded word; however, a pursuit toward such a quality and a better understanding of said implications is integral in my motivation in this work.

There is beauty in distillation and containment. The process of translating a complex experience into a concise series of images and sounds encourages the viewer to look inside the frame rather than speculate the environment on the periphery of its edges. This process allows me to look at the works which may reflect aspects of myself or my experience that are difficult, and to see them in a way that feels finite and of a particular moment, rather than an endless expanse.

Raymond Meeks' work was the catalyst for my interest and investment with ideas around beauty. Their work has inspired me immensely, and has been a crucial component toward my understanding of beauty's relationship to intimacy and devotion for years. Books such as *erasure*

continue to be highly influential due to their poetic nature, tangibility, and highly considered yet not clinical approach.

This methodology is by no means the only or perhaps even the best means of communicating my thesis. To represent the entanglement of experience in a way that visually opposes it risks a loss in translation or perhaps a false sense of stoicism or opaqueness. The impulse to contain experiences within 'beauty' has been challenged, particularly by Elaine Scarry. In their book *On Beauty and Being Just,* Scarry wrote, "Something beautiful fills the mind yet invites the search for something beyond itself, something larger or something of the same scale with which it needs to be brought into relation" (29). This lack of containment while seemingly opposing my impulses describes an experience where the beautiful occurrence is expanded upon and re-contextualized with experiences that may broaden the limitation of the subject depicted or, in this case, my lived experience. A case of redirection more so than contradiction.

Scarry expands on this idea when they write, "...what is beautiful prompts the mind to move chronologically back in the search for precedents and parallels, to move forward into new acts of creation, to move conceptually over, to bring things in relation, and does all this with a kind of urgency..." (30). I am drawn to this idea, that an aim toward 'beauty' can encourage contextualization of an experience that initially seems incredibly solitary. As the creator, it enables me to ground my experiences in a history and a biology. As a viewer, I hope that this function can open the images to become more malleable to their histories and understandings as well. There is potential for healing to make work that encourages an impulse to contextualize the

subject within a chronology, find parallels, and weigh their scale against personal and collective experience. In this process, I recognize that the events I construct or document are not siloed and are instead an entanglement of internal and external forces. This practice is grounding and positions the work not as a reaction to an environment or self but instead as a composed response.

The resulting images are translated and mediated, removing them from their visceral and immediate moment of creation. Images of a plant during golden hour (fig. 8), carefully and unapologetically composed despite its relation to the picturesque or even cliché, or works such as the glimmer on an medical I.V. pole (fig. 9) meticulously composed despite the circumstances in



Figure 8: "Untitled 9" - Inkjet Print, 12"x16"



Figure 9: "Untitled 8" - Inkjet Print, 06"x08"

which it were produced hopefully evoke a devotion to form. Making images that do not evoke a sense of urgency or catharsis allows me to look at the works after the fact, to be able to reflect on

their creation and contents and use this ability for speculation and consideration. The images allow for healing in the process of their design and as a reflection after the fact as well. I hope that the images are more accessible and less demanding for the viewer than what may result if meticulous compositions were not a consideration. The quietness of the images through a minimalistic approach is intended not to demand attention from a viewer but instead merely offers the opportunity to engage with the work. There is a balance that must be struck in this regard, to be generous but to encapsulate the subject's complexities; to make the layered and challenging nature of the work more accessible and to not dictate the atmosphere.

When I am working in the sonic realm, the process is very much the same. Treating the audio recordings with post-production and effects, as well as layering the recordings to allow for feedback feels similar to processing a photograph in a particular way. The tones that are generated are consciously constructed to convey order, harmony, and composure, while attempting not to do so in a heavy handed manner. My work with sound feels looser in form than my photographic practice however, largely due to my lack of formal training in the craft.

To communicate and to be concerned with notions of beauty can be challenging and paradoxical when doing so when documenting suffering. By emphasizing formal qualities such as light, texture and frame, my aim is not to make the subject more alluring, soften its impact, or romanticize my experience. While this is an inevitable risk, the positive attributes of aestheticizing the images outweigh this concern for me.

The term 'beauty' is rightfully challenged in numerous other ways, from its roots in western culture and colonialism, to its complex relationship to gender and justice. Elizabeth A.

Bohls illuminates this complex history by analyzing the language of 18th century travel logs of Janet Shaw among others in The Aesthetics of Colonialism: Janet Shaw in the West Indies, 1774-1775. In it, Bohls highlights how Shaw softens or shifts the gaze of the landscape of the oppressed toward the pictorial, describing atrocities of the colonization of the West Indies similar to paintings rather than happenings (368). They also cite that the appreciation of colonial beauty was seen as an attribute that elevated settlers beyond the enslaved (378). Because of this history, declaration of beauty is an idea that requires serious consideration. While my intentions and use of the term is far from intended to recall such a time, it is important to consider the varying histories and understand as fully as I can the potential implications of aesthetics. The distance and dissonance produced by aestheticizing trauma can be utilized in an ignorant and / or malicious manner. I hesitate to qualify my work through this lens for this reason, and do so solely without a better categorical term for it. I want to articulate my position with 'beauty' to be an active investigation amidst speculation rather than evidence toward an argument with authority. To use the dissonance of aestheticizing trauma to provide the distance necessary to see myself, and do so with respect and consideration of its histories.

The impulse to organize, contain, and compose is a response to the lack of control I have felt before my active investigation and recovery in myself, my traumas, and my diagnosis. To contain a moment, confine it to a predetermined space, and create an environment for safe and productive reflection after the fact has proven to be a fulfilling process personally. This aesthetic sensibility can express my experiences in an accessible and polite manner and provide a similar introspection and inquiry opportunity for the viewer. To use the aesthetic qualities as a vehicle not to expand the subject beyond the frame but to bring the issue in relationship to more

significant contexts, both personal and cultural. Despite its complicated histories and implications, the consideration of slow, calculated, and composed aesthetics has rewarding utility in reflection and communication. By better understanding its histories and practitioners as well as its ability to communicate challenging ideas thoughtfully is an enduring process in my work.

Conclusion

While admittedly formulaic and at times long winded, the process of researching and deeply considering notions of memory, space, self, and beauty have provided me the framework to better navigate these dialogues. Dismantling the binaries that separate remembering with forgetting, the land from its history, and the mind from the body has proven to be a fulfilling and endlessly expansive endeavor. Understanding their limits, complications, and advantages pushes me closer to operating effectively and respectfully within them. The work is still forming as much of the subject of the work is my inability to communicate and make sure claims, which proves challenging in articulating a process with confidence.

Through making this series, I aim to reflect on, illustrate, and accept my lived experience and to embrace a new relationship with myself and the world. Though it is a record of a personal process, my hope is that it communicates a broader narrative on healing and reconciliation.

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UO MFA Thesis Show - Disjecta Contemporary Art Center - Portland, Oregon - May 2021

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"Untitled 2" - Inkjet Print, 06"x08"



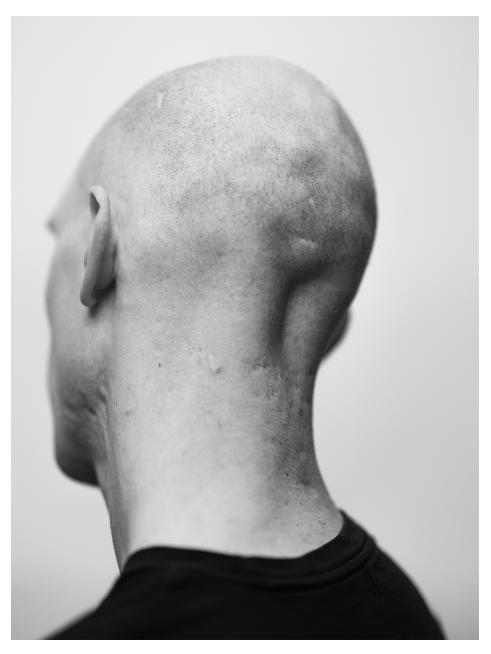
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"Untitled 4" - Inkjet Print, 12"x16"



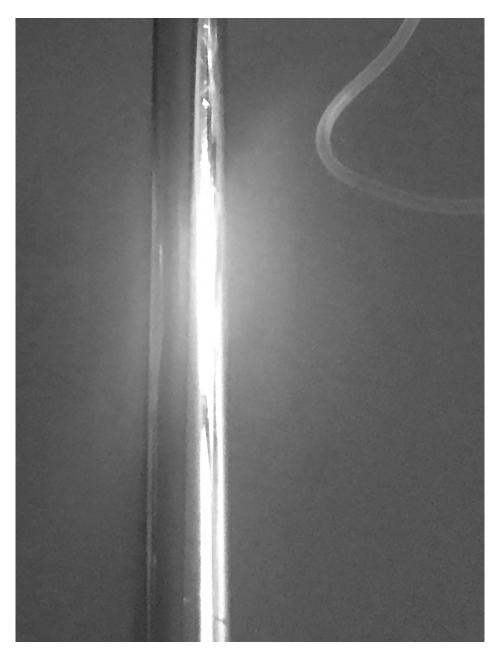
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"Untitled 7" - Inkjet Print, 06"x08"



"Untitled 8" - Inkjet Print, 06"x08"



"Untitled 9" - Inkjet Print, 12"x16"



Drafted Album Art for Sonic Component