

CLONINGER, TONI CAITLIN, M.F.A. Remain Tender, You Are Here. (2020)
Directed by Leah Sobsey. 22 pp.

We can never be linear about ourselves – Interview, David Foster Wallace

You will develop a palate – *Sweetbitter*, Stephanie Danler

It's the form I'm in love with, not the content – *The Argonauts* – Maggie Nelson

This thesis explores my final series of photographs. I also weave together a visual log with a textual counterpart. This includes excerpts from my sketchbook (both visual and written) documenting the entire time I was in graduate school. This accompanying text dives into themes of intimacy, connection, unveiling, and the complex delicacies of being known.

REMAIN TENDER, YOU ARE HERE

by

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A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro
2020

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APPROVAL PAGE

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PREFACE

I definitely do not want to tell you this. Just to be totally transparent, here. But, here we are. It will be exactly what you want to hear. Wait, no. That's not entirely true, I guess. It's more likely I'll share with you what I'd like to hear. Which is this: I always wanted to be a certain type of woman.

Something of the type to do with water. The ebb & flow, the rhythm, the wetness, the waves, the crashing, the power.

This has gotten off-track already. Let's start again.

I have always wanted to be the type of girl to tell you everything. Open myself up like a sleepy yawn or a blooming flower. Flow easily forth, like water into your hands, my voice into the world. Become an endless offering. I'm always holding my breath, getting water in my mouth.

However, I am not that type of woman. I'm the kind of girl that exists in hints, nuances, inflections, innuendoes. See? I'm doing it even now, making things appear differently than they really are. Using words as a weapon, instead of as a welcome.

This has always been about my innate thirst for language and the rhythm of words. I think in pictures, all the time and I live in between the space of sentences. The things that propel me also almost always pin me down.

You're underwater. You're under the water of my words and sentences and images and feelings. Everything I make is a sentence, constructing a context, longing for a tender connection. Desiring to know as well as be known. Tethering me back to myself

(and maybe to you). That's how I'd like you to feel and what I've been getting at this whole time.

I've strung these sentences together, just for you. Is that enough?

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CHAPTER I

THE PRACTICE

The light was going, but going, as it so often does, with a fanfare – John Cheever

How do I navigate the world? Through a lens. I've had a camera in my hands since I was three years old, ever grateful for a father who gave into my every creative whim. At the heart of things, there are two primary aspects of photography that have kept me tethered to a camera: the light and photography's innate relationship with time.

Light is perpetually shifting, slipping, sliding. It remains just out of reach, untouchable yet it is the only element that illuminates the seeing world. I consider light an integral tool, a material. It is my content, and my context. It is my enduring ally, my closest and longest friend. After all these years, it feels much like a confidant. We have forged an intimacy together that goes beyond the bounds of the frame. It is always making an offering to me, calling out to me in otherwise ordinary moments.

The moment I'm struck by a certain slant of light, I pause, and then pull out my camera. I often linger, watching the light change. It never gets old for me. Golden Hour will always be my most cherished time of any day. I will stalk around my house during golden hour making sure I have savored all that day has tenderly extended to me; all that it has offered for me to encounter. It feels just like that: an offering. Light is an endless

well that replenishes each night, fresh and ready for more moments each morning. Its constantly shifting nature makes me feel at ease.

I often think of the way that Emmet Gowin views photography, “If you set out to make pictures about love, it can’t be done. But you can make pictures, and you can be in love. In that way, people sense the authenticity of what you do.” I’m making photos while being in love with the moment, the present, the way light engages with world.

Another lens I use to tie myself to this world is words. I’ve always been an extremely avid reader. I’d like to say I’m a wordsmith here, but that wouldn’t quite be true. I tell time with books. Let me be more precise: when I try to recall a specific time in my life, the first question I ask myself is, “What was I reading?” I’ve always wanted a command over the English language that would be something to rival.

Words and light, together, are the aspects of the physical world that keep me tethered to the present, myself. They are tools in my arsenal that help me see, feel, connect to my everyday self. They keep me present, grounded, feeling alive. They make myself seem more knowable, accessible. In turn, I feel they will open me up, allow me to be known and accessible.

CHAPTER II

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SELVES

I moved to graduate school after spending a very hot summer deep in the woods of rural East Texas, behind the pine curtain, attempting to salvage a drowning relationship. I'd also found out my dad had cancer, for the third time on the day I moved to Greensboro. I was an emotional wreck my first few weeks here. I could not stop crying. My relationship continued to distract and destroy; I sought comfort in what I knew: alternative process photography and flowers.

I began walking, long distances to distract my mind from the turmoil. On these walks, I would pick bouquets from the campus flora. I've always been an avid flower lover, having dried out every bouquet I've picked or bought over the last 5 years. My house is full of dried bouquets, hanging on every wall, or vases lining windowsills. I began meticulously putting tiny flower arrangements in plastic bags, in a desperate attempt to preserve them, their beauty. I did not want these to dry out, I wanted to keep them vivid and vibrant for as long as possible. Once inside the bag, I would run them through a heat press to seal them up tightly. Then, as the weeks passed and the inevitable decomposition began, I obsessively photographed them in their varying states of decay. I'd lay them on a light table and they'd become transparent, their veins clearly defined. The petals bleeding, juicy and vibrant. The photos I made during this time were extreme

close-ups. They looked human, organic. I did this over and over, with many different varieties of flowers that created many different juicy liquids. I hung them on my studio wall when they weren't under the scrutiny of my camera lens. I still have these tiny bags of dead things. Once that semester ended, my five-year relationship ended for the last and final time that winter as well. It left me reeling, feeling totally unmoored and untethered from this thing I'd felt secured me to this earth. I felt compelled to turn inward, investigate the person I thought I knew, but clearly didn't know at all. I leaned into feelings of being lost, foreign, unfamiliar.

The following spring semester, I began obsessively making self-portraits. I made these with my DSLR on a tripod. First, I did long-exposures using a very slow shutter speed, slowly moving my entire body out of frame and disappearing, my body becoming more transparent the longer I worked on this series. I continued experimenting with this, photographing myself during different times of day and night, under different lighting circumstances, roaming throughout (what felt like to me) my very empty and lonely house. These were about expressing my feelings of loss and isolation: I felt I'd lost myself, couldn't see who I was supposed to be any longer. Yet, who knew me better than myself? I deeply fought with feelings of worthlessness portrayed by the continued disappearance of myself from these self-portraits. I was constantly repeating a sentence by Joan Didion in my head, "I've already lost touch with several of the people I used to be." I desperately did not want to become any more lost, but didn't know how to let the right parts go.

Next, I began focusing on “abstracted” self-portraits, closing in on intimate yet unreadable parts of my body. I took these with a self-timer as well, with the focus tight, only very small parts of the pictures were crisp. I used my hair as a shield between the lens and my body. I also incorporated the shadows my hair created over the surfaces of my skin. These photographs were taken in low light, creating the atmosphere of intimacy and closeness. It was no longer about feeling lost, but an attempt at locating myself in the chasm between feeling no one could know me better than myself and feeling unsure of anything about me. In the words of David Foster Wallace, “Although of course you end up becoming yourself.” Throughout self-discovery, I was always going to always be me. It isn’t some huge transformation into another being, I was always who I had always truly been. At this point, I was photographing myself every day. These became their own type of ritual.

As always I was reading. *Crush* by Richard Siken played a huge role; “You Are Jeff” in particular captured the tenuous thread between who you think you are and who you hope you are not. It’s a many-paged poem offering a space of acceptance and permission, whichever way the coin flips.

There are two twins on motorbikes but one is farther up the road, beyond the hairpin turn, or just before it, depending on which twin you are in love with at the time. Do not choose sides yet. It is still to your advantage to remain impartial. Both motorbikes are shiny red and both boys have perfect teeth, dark hair, soft hands. The one in front will want to take you apart, and slowly. His deft and stubby fingers searching every shank and lock for weaknesses. You could love this boy with all your heart. The other brother only wants to stitch you back together. The

sun shines down. It's a beautiful day. Consider the hairpin turn. Do not choose sides yet.

I was attempting to create that space for myself. Capturing these moments: the between moments. These are also very early attempts at visual sentences (which I will attend to shortly). I was investigating textures of feeling, in less successful ways than I'm pursuing now. All of this equaled a certain vulnerability in me, the artist that was foreign and unforgiving in her desires.

Over the summer, I took a much-needed breather from thinking about myself for a while. I went to Europe and felt relaxed for the first time in a year. I began consuming words and books and smells and visuals I hadn't allowed myself the space or permission to do in a very long time. I consider this an incubation period, I was gathering tools to strike at these ideas. I was researching, collecting, thinking, and processing.

CHAPTER III

DEVELOPING A PALATE

In the fall semester of my second year, I wanted to continue exploring vulnerability, as this is the crux of most of my questions. How can I be more vulnerable? How can I create deeper intimacy? How can I be known? How can I let people know me? Why is it so hard for me to do these things? In most of my friendships, I do most of the listening. I ask a lot of questions, I'm an extremely attentive listener. My attention, once gotten, is acute. I skirt around anytime anyone turns that attentiveness back on me. My desire with these pieces is turning my own attention to myself. Letting myself squirm underneath my own intense attention.

So, I began scanning in pages of my sketchbook, my most prized and secretive vault. I even used code language at the start because I was so scared of anyone else's eyes. I had no idea where this would lead, but just the act of scanning these pages made me deeply uncomfortable so I kept going. *Untitled I-Untitled III* are what came from this process. In order to ease my growing sense of dread at my choices to go down this path, I began obscuring the words by jumbling them up in Photoshop. I would then project these mangled pages onto a large sheet of paper and converse with it. I would write in response to what I saw, what I was feeling. In this way, these pieces became a conversation I was having with myself. I was spending large chunks of time getting to know myself,

attempting to be comfortable with being known, at least by my own self. I would do this over and over. Then, I added fabric. I'd layer the transparent fabric over the paper and, again, create conversation with my past self (harkening back to the Didion quote from earlier). Once finished, I'd hang the fabric on top of the paper and play the slideshow of 5 sketchbook pages I'd interacted with. Some parts would only be legible at certain times, as the pages shifted and changed through the presentation. Only certain words could be read at certain times.

I remained slippery, just circling around vulnerability, still reluctant to jump right in. I was struggling with the balance between total opacity and a gentle transparency. I wanted to be more direct, clearer. I needed to pry open the door that I was so bent on keeping locked. I think I had been developing a palate; a palate of ways to offer intimacy, to be vulnerable.

I began rethinking my approach, utilizing my developed palate to form maps. *Untitled* is a piece where I mapped the word feeling in any instance I had mentioned it in my sketchbook. *Untitled* is a piece on transparent gauzy fabric that is a mapping of my feelings over the entire time I've been in graduate school. I would project my sketchbook and transcribe anytime I used a "feeling" word. It became a jumbled map of feelings. Gradually, through these avenues, I became more and more comfortable sharing the shared pages of my sketchbook with curious eyes.

CHAPTER IV

THE HARVEST OF A QUIET EYE

The harvest of a quiet eye – William Wordsworth

Be Felt, Like A Knee in the Chest is an accumulation of photographs over the past two years; moments when I've been struck and permitted myself to take pause. It was compulsive. I am slowly building a vocabulary, a language, constructing sentences, sharing an experience. In the words of artist Alex Da Corte, "Objects are just another kind of language that makes sentences." I consider our sentiments similar and that our work creates parallels in this way. I find endless inspiration from his perspective. This is what I call visual nonfiction, a compilation of visual sentences that comprise an essay. It has a visual rhythm that carries a weight. As a whole, they create a texture of feeling. This gets at the underlying idea of what exists between things (sentences, images), the awareness of absence, and how this is just as important as the actual words and images. The undefined things can often be the most compelling. Made from a place of longing. Grasping towards a familiar ache, like when you're a child, running your tongue along your gum where a tooth used to be: compulsive, intimate, sure. This piece is an illustration of my slow descent into feeling revealed but not exposed, slowly loosening, like a fist after a fight.

Why do I think of these as sentences? These images convey information; they translate meaning. These are photographs of a time that lived and died in the span of just moments. They've become almost an altar, a devotion. They were habitual, compulsive. They are composing a self-portrait, which is why I have coined them visual nonfiction. It offers the chance to be known. I want to not only be known, but also be felt. The images are meant to be felt, in the present tense.

To explain my process, I'll quote the author Lorrie Moore: "To know something you had to be to go inside and feel, then step outside and look. And then do that again, go inside and feel, then outside and look. You had to do it twice. That was knowledge." These acts of experiencing, documenting, regarding that experience and then engaging with that material in a different way has always been at the heart of my practice and process. Even back with the flowers, I would make them and revisit them again and again. The visual nonfiction is a way of working through experiences, making sense of things that are hard to understand, a way of getting more acquainted with myself, finding ways to let others try to know me. It's important to be inside of a thing and then to have space to look at it from that distance.

I installed *Be Felt Like A Knee in the Chest* chronologically, into two symmetrical grids, facing each other. These 4x6 photographs I've been accumulating over the past two years while pursuing my degree. They mirror and converse with each other. They are both collections, representations of moments, feelings, and perspectives. They are a

visual account of my thoughts, feelings, experiences from the day. Or more so, a visual representation of my interior life.

Since photography is inherently a time-based medium, temporality is an essential aspect of my work. “Time is the longest distance between two places” Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie*. Time is based in perspective. Feelings can heavily influence one’s relation and associations to time. Time creates memories and memories almost immediately become an iteration of fantasy. I want to be present but also I love keeping a record, as is obvious with my everyday use of my sketchbook to record thoughts, ideas, things that happened that day, ways I was feeling.

I am trying to eliminate the layers, unmask myself. From *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City*, “Nakedness can be both a threat and an offering.” I’m trying to find the delicate balance of that. Not feeling threatened by feeling known. Offering the opportunity of that knowingness to others.

The second grid, titled *The Chronology of an Unveiling* is composed of a grid of 4x6 prints paired with an excerpt of text from my sketchbook. Each photo and text excerpt is a diptych that composes a larger scale grid. This grid offers a more concrete visual display of pulling back the curtain of protection and offering a vulnerability to the viewer from the artist.

Seen and exhibited together, they provide two different perspectives on the same concepts, which are longing and knowingness. Even though we make very different work, I consider my work directly in conversation with Nan Goldin who has said, “For

me it is not a detachment to take a picture. It's a way of touching somebody—it's a caress." These images feel like it's an act of reaching out the viewer, a caress if you will. As previously stated, I'd like them to be felt, like a touch from a friend.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

In the end, it is always hard to conclude things. My practices I've described here will continue, as they are daily rituals for me. I only know how to navigate the world through the lens of words. I only know how to document the daily reminder of perspective through photographs. Reading connects me to myself and to the world in ways I'm only ever more aware of and thankful for each day.

So, I'll leave it with this, in the words of another photographer who has left a deeply intuitive impression on me and the arc of my work, William Eggleston, "One has to keep looking ... intelligently ... hopefully."

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CATALOG OF IMAGES

Figure 1. Install Photo, Close-Up, of *Like A Knee in The Chest*, 4x6 Prints, 2020

Figure 2. Install Photo, Close-Up, of *Like A Knee in The Chest*, 4x6 Prints, 2020

Figure 3. Install Photo of *Like A Knee in The Chest*, 4x6 Prints, 2020

Figure 4. Install Photo of *The Chronology of an Unveiling*, 4x6 Prints, 4x6 Written Notes, 2020

Figure 5. Install Photo, Close-Up of *The Chronology of an Unveiling*, 4x6 Prints, 4x6 Written Notes, 2020

Figure 6. Install Photo, Close-Up of *The Chronology of an Unveiling*, 4x6 Prints, 4x6 Written Notes, 2020



Figure 1. Install Photo, Close-Up, of *Like A Knee in The Chest*, 4x6 Prints, 2020



Figure 2. Install Photo, Close-Up, of *Like A Knee in The Chest*, 4x6 Prints, 2020



Figure 3. Install Photo of *Like A Knee in The Chest*, 4x6 Prints, 2020



Figure 4. Install Photo of *The Chronology of an Unveiling*, 4x6 Prints, 4x6 Written Notes,

2020

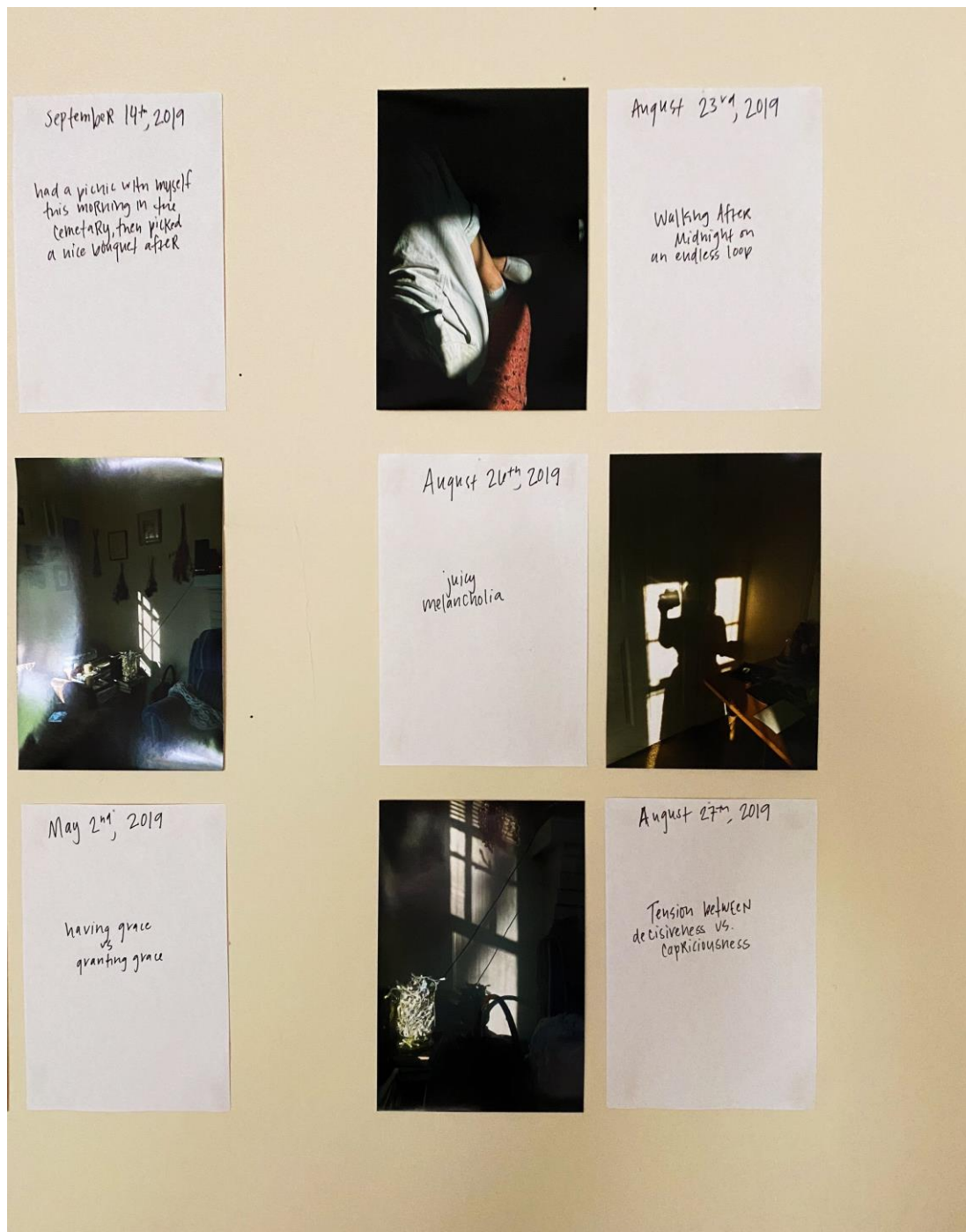


Figure 5. Install Photo, Close-Up of *The Chronology of an Unveiling*, 4x6 Prints, 4x6
Written Notes, 2020

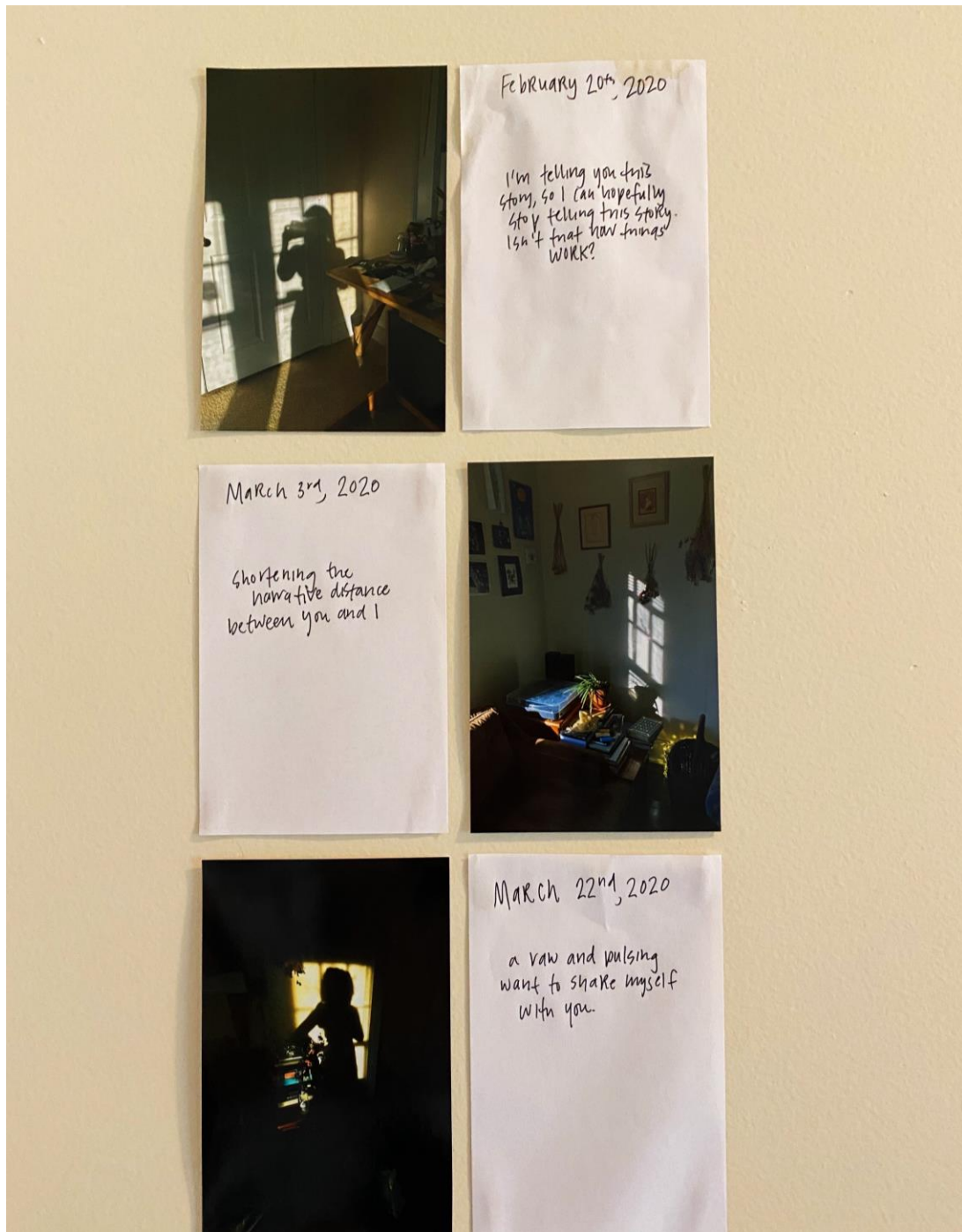


Figure 6. Install Photo, Close-Up of *The Chronology of an Unveiling*, 4x6 Prints, 4x6 Written Notes, 2020