

Ambiguous Loss©

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Abstract

This thesis emerges from lived experience following my son's continued and prolonged disappearance due to drug addiction and the uncertainty it produced within my family. Rather than treating this condition as trauma requiring resolution, I situate the work within Dr. Pauline Boss's concept of ambiguous loss. Her framework describes a form of loss with no clear ending, in which absence and presence coexist.

My studio practice takes the position that conventional art-historical symbols of grief and mourning are inadequate for representing such loss because they presume a narrative of closure. The work therefore develops conceptual, material, and spatial relationships to represent this type of loss. My studio process begins with concepts surrounding ambiguous loss, particularly boundary ambiguity and ambivalence. Rather than translating these ideas into classic narratives or symbolic representations, I consider how conditions exist as a certain interior condition such as openness, flexible sense of agency, fluid self-definition, tolerated ambivalence, reoriented attachments, embracing a non-linear sense of the future

My material exploration follows from these interior conditions. Paintings and ceramics operate as embedded sites of inquiry in which ambivalence, permeability, instability, vulnerability, indeterminacy, and tension can be tested and visualized. Porcelain was researched because of the emotions evoked by its delicacy and luminosity. Porcelain registers vulnerability

and instability, allowing form to hold a provisional solidity and even the sorrow of ambiguous loss. At first my material choices are not predetermined; multiple possibilities are explored until correspondences emerge between concept, felt condition, and material behavior.

Creating installations that combine realistic figurative paintings with abstract ceramic forms makes boundary ambiguity perceptible between two and three-dimensional works, as well as between realism and abstraction. Works are placed in deliberate proximity so that the viewer does not interpret each work independently. Instead, meaning emerges through space rather than narrative explanation.

This thesis contributes to contemporary art discourse by articulating conceptual, material, and spatial strategies through which ambiguous loss can be represented without illustration or the narrative of closure.

Ambiguous Loss

A Thesis

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By

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Preface

This thesis addresses ambiguous loss, a psychological framework developed by Dr. Pauline Boss, through a studio practice that pairs figurative painting with abstract ceramic work. Ambiguous loss describes a form of loss with no clear ending, in which a person may be physically absent but psychologically present, or physically present but psychologically absent. A spouse missing in action but not confirmed dead or a parent with dementia who may be physically present but psychologically missing are common examples.

This research is not undertaken from a neutral or observational position. My engagement with ambiguous loss emerges from lived experience. This personal proximity does not function as anecdote or illustration but establishes the conditions under which the research and making is conducted. My studio practice operates as a form of sustained inquiry, where making becomes a method for processing what cannot be explained fully through theory alone.

While Pauline Boss's framework has been widely applied within psychology and family systems theory, its implications for visual representation remain underexamined. Family systems theory understands the family as an interconnected emotional system rather than a collection of separate individuals, proposing that behavior, identity, and psychological states are shaped through relational structures. This thesis argues that unresolved loss complicates representation because many conventional visual strategies which rely on narrative closure, symbolic substitution, or redemptive framing. The work therefore seeks alternative forms capable of representing conditions that remain unresolved. This thesis treats ambiguous loss as a challenge of representation arising from relationships that remain indeterminate.

Through spatial and material relationships between paintings and ceramic objects, the work investigates how permeable boundaries within ambiguous loss can become perceptible

without relying on conventional imagery. The clear legibility of realism in the paintings contrasts with the less concrete status of the abstract ceramic forms, producing a perceptual condition in which recognition and uncertainty coexist. Atmospheric mark making in the paintings emerges through the accumulation of thousands of small pencil marks layered gradually across the surface, constructing an interior psychological space, as if I am “worrying” the paper. It is a space like a held breath in which vulnerability and quietude are suspended rather than fluidly resolved. In receptivity the ceramic forms translate these conditions into physical terms. Mark making produced through atmospheric firing methods such as salt, soda, and wood introduces material effects shaped by heat, flame, gravity, and vapor. These processes exceed direct control, allowing the surface to register moments of release that suggest agency and assertion. Spatial distance and proximity between two- and three-dimensional forms, paintings and ceramics introduce relational instability, a defining feature of ambiguous loss that operates across perceptual, material, and spatial terms. In this way, Pauline Boss’s theory is extended into my creative practice.

Rejecting Closure Through Lived Experience

My son was missing and homeless for extended periods due to addiction. The absence was not defined by a single event but tolerated as an ongoing condition. The impact of this loss extended beyond his disappearance. As Dr. Pauline Boss describes, ambiguous loss produces a corrosive boundary ambiguity, a condition in which family roles, attachments, and expectations become unclear when the role, presence and absence of the person who has disappeared cannot be clearly determined. Over time, this instability altered the structure of daily life. As a result of the instability my husband experienced severe psychological decline, reducing his capacity for reciprocity and creating a second form of ambiguous loss within the household. The labor required to sustain daily life redistributed unevenly as relational roles shifted. These conditions were not episodic disruptions but sustained structural changes affecting attachment, and joy.

Dominant Western frameworks for grief often assume that loss can be identified, verified, and eventually integrated into a stable psychological narrative. The most widely recognized of these frameworks is Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's, *Five Stages of Grief*ⁱ, which describes mourning as a progression through denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Kübler-Ross's model presumes that the status of the lost person is known and that the mourner's relationship to that loss can eventually be stabilized. Because this model is widely circulated in medical, therapeutic, and popular contexts, it was the primary framework available to me for understanding grief. When my circumstances did not allow movement through these stages, I experienced this mismatch as a personal failure rather than as a structural limitation of the model itself.

The framework of ambiguous loss disrupts these assumptions because the relational status of the missing person remains indeterminate. The absent individual is simultaneously

psychologically present and physically absent, or physically present but psychologically altered. Under these conditions, concerning my son, I could not move sequentially toward acceptance and closure because it felt inappropriate, even unnatural. Rather than progressing through stages, individuals experiencing ambiguous loss often hold contradictory realities at once: attachment alongside detachment, hope alongside despair, presence alongside absence. Dr. Pauline Boss identifies this sustained indeterminacy as boundary ambiguity, a condition requiring ongoing adjustment rather than resolution. Encountering Boss's framework allowed me to understand that the difficulty I experienced was not an individual inability to grieve properly, but a structural feature of the loss itself. The framework provided language for a condition in which relational definitions remain unstable, making movement through sequential stages neither possible nor appropriate.

A related limitation appears frequently within art-historical conventions of mourning, where loss is often represented through symbols that confirm death as completed and legible. Motifs such as the corpse, the skull, the shroud, or the extinguished candle found in works like, *Still Life with Skull, Candle and Book* by Paul Cezanne (see Fig. 1), historically function to convey the meaning of loss and its finality. These symbolic forms suggest a visual confirmation that loss has occurred and can therefore be mourned. Like the stage-based grief models, symbolic conventions when applied to conditions of ambiguous loss, impose interpretive stability onto relationships that remain structurally unstable. Ongoing absence is visually misrecognized as either temporary disruption or completed loss, obscuring the lived experience of families who must continually renegotiate attachment, responsibility, and identity in the absence of clear relational definition.

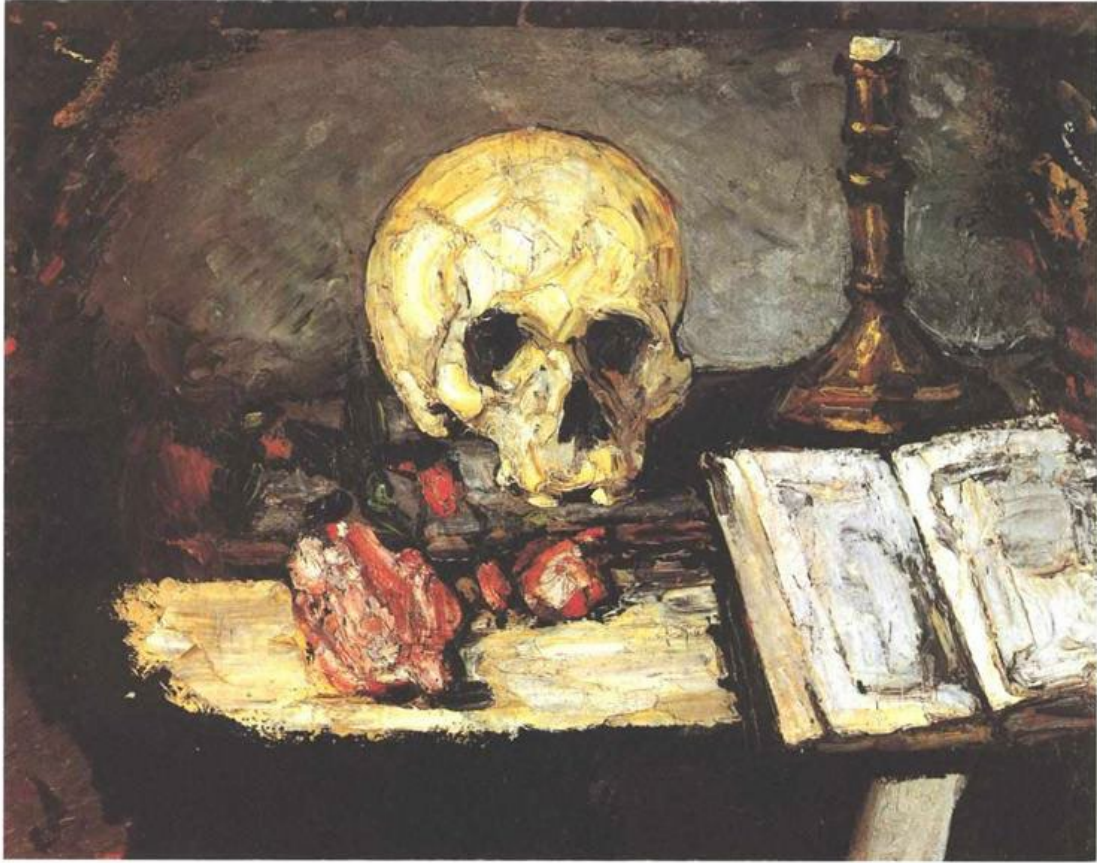


Figure 1 Cézanne, Paul. Still Life with Skull, Candle, and Book. 1866. Oil on canvas.

Vanitas still life, Dark Period, Romanticism.

This studio practice visually positions ambiguous loss as a counter-structure to both stage-based theories of grief and representational traditions that depend upon symbolic finality. Lived experience does not function as narrative illustration, but as methodological grounding that shapes how relational instability, temporal suspension, and boundary ambiguity become perceptible through conceptual, material, and spatial decisions.

Paintings: Overview

In my paintings, I depict my daughter because her suffering during her brother's descent into addiction and absence was the most pronounced and the least visible. While his absence became the organizing crisis of the family, her experience unfolded quietly and continuously within the household. She remained physically present and emotionally responsive while absorbing instability without outward disruption. Her suffering did not announce itself through crisis or defiance. It took the form of vigilance, restraint, and adaptation. This inward response made her distress easy to overlook, even as it shaped daily life. Painting her allows me to address a form of suffering that resists recognition, one that exists without spectacle and persists without resolution. Her presence in the work is not symbolic. It reflects a lived condition in which care, endurance, and vulnerability coexist under prolonged uncertainty.

Psychological distance in the paintings is established through isolation, partial obstruction, and restrained gestures. Time in the paintings is suspended. Scenes feel paused rather than concluded. There is no clear before or after, no indication that events are moving toward resolution. This suspension mirrors the endurance required to live within ambiguous loss.

Influences in Imagery: Observation, Restraint, and Psychological Interiority

My approach to painting is informed by artists whose work demonstrates how restraint, observation, and duration can hold psychological interiority without narrative resolution.

I am influenced by Andrew Wyeth's (See Fig. 2) commitment to sustained observation and repetitive mark making as a way of holding attention over time. Wyeth builds his surfaces up slowly through accumulated marks that register looking, waiting, and returning. His use of color is restrained and limited, often centered on muted earth tones, dry grasses, and weathered neutrals. Bleakness in his work emerges through persistence and restraint, allowing states such as vigilance, fatigue, and isolation to settle into the surface without dramatization. Repetition functions as a method of staying with a subject rather than resolving it, and this approach informs my own use of deliberate, accumulated mark making, where time and attention remain visible.



Figure 2 Wyeth, Andrew. Winter 1946. 1946, tempera on board, North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh.

I am also influenced by painter Johannes Vermeer's sustained observation of light and its relationship to color. Vermeer treats light as precise and limited. Illumination shapes color rather than symbolizing emotion. Blues, yellows, and skin tones are modulated by light falling across surfaces, creating subtle shifts rather than contrasts. This careful calibration produces a strong sense of psychological interiority. Figures appear in private, reflective states, separated from the viewer and from one another. Light clarifies and isolates rather than connects. In my work, this influence appears in the controlled use of light and color, where illumination structures mood and space without offering narrative resolution or emotional release.

Together, these influences support a painting practice grounded in restraint, attention, and duration.



Figure 3 Vermeer, Johannes. Young Woman with a Water Pitcher. ca. 1662, oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Sculptural Objects: Overview

My form based sculptural ceramics are nonrepresentational and do not rely on narrative. The work centers on sustained attention to surface, form, and material behavior. I approach clay not as a medium for representation, but as a material capable of holding presence.

The ceramic works are presented in conjunction with the paintings as part of installations. Forms are pared down to essential structures and scaled to encourage close, sustained looking. Surfaces are smooth or subtly worked, with glazes and slips used sparingly. Color is intentionally limited and muted. Whites, blacks and earth tones dominate, allowing proportion and material behavior to carry meaning.

Atmospheric firing functions as process-based mark making. Once placed in the kiln, porcelain is subject to gravity, heat, and flame. Ash, vapor, and mineral deposits accumulate on the surface, producing layered marks that register exposure and duration. Outcomes cannot be fully predicted or corrected. The firing records response rather than mastery.

Spatial arrangement is central to how the installation operates. Figurative paintings and ceramic objects are positioned in relation to one another with deliberate distances that structure how the viewer encounters each work. Meaning develops through controlled proximity and separation, as the space between elements introduces tension rather than resolution. The interstitial space prevents the two forms from fully aligning, sustaining a condition in which relationships remain uncertain and unresolved.

An example of spatial relationships shaping meaning in installation art is Rachel Whiteread's *House*, 1993, a life-size concrete cast of the interior void of a demolished Victorian row house installed on the original site in London. The work's significance emerges through the precise alignment between object, viewer, and architectural context: the sculpture occupies the

same footprint as the absent home, transforming interior space into exterior surface and making absence physically perceptible. As viewers move around the structure, shifts in distance reveal traces of windows, stairs, and rooms, producing a bodily awareness of scale and memory.

Meaning does not reside in the object alone but in the relational tension between presence and absence, inside and outside, past structure and current site, demonstrating how spatial positioning can construct psychological and conceptual content without narrative imagery.



Figure 4 House. 1993. Concrete. London. Photograph © Edward Woodman. Courtesy of Artangel.

In my installation *Conceal*, the porcelain ceramic elements are positioned in front of a series of paintings. The narrow passage between them initially appears to function as a walkway, inviting the viewer to move forward. Upon closer approach, however, it becomes clear that the space cannot be comfortably navigated, it is not a path it is barrier, making close contact with the paintings seem possible yet ultimately unattainable.



Plate 1 OBryant, Tansy. *Conceal* (side view). 2026. 12 Ink, watercolor, and colored pencil on paper paintings with tape-cast porcelain. Installation view, *Ambiguous Loss*, Greenville Museum of Art

Influences in Materiality: Process, Continuity, and Transformation

My ceramic practice is informed by artists and thinkers who stress the process of making, material agency, and transformation rather than fixed form. This approach aligns with principles articulated within Process Artⁱⁱ, particularly the emphasis on material behavior, entropy, and the relinquishing of predetermined outcomes. Meaning emerges through transformation rather than completion.

This understanding resonates with Andy Goldsworthy's articulation of process as something that continues beyond the artist's intervention:

"Movement, changes, light, growth and decay are the lifeblood of nature, the energies that I try to tap through my work. I need the shock of touch, the resistance of place, materials and weather, the earth as my source. I want to get under the surface. When I work with a leaf, rock, stick, it is not just that material in itself, it is an opening into the processes of life within and around it. When I leave, these processes continue." ⁱⁱⁱ

Similarly, Ana Mendieta's framing of art as an engagement with continuity and energy offers a parallel to a ceramic practice grounded in exposure and persistence rather than containment:

"My art is grounded in the belief of one universal energy which runs through everything: from insect to man, from man to spectre, from spectre to plant from plant to galaxy."

"My works are the irrigation veins of this universal fluid. Through them ascend the ancestral sap, the original beliefs, the primordial accumulations, the unconscious thoughts that animate the world." ^{iv}

New materialist theory further supports this approach by emphasizing the vitality of matter and the agency of nonhuman forces. Within my practice, material vitality parallels the lived conditions of ambiguous loss. Meaning arises through sustained engagement rather than symbolic closure.

My Work

Installation Title: Ambivalence



Plate 2 O'Bryant, Tansy. Ambivalence. 2026. Ink, watercolor, and colored pencil on paper with porcelain sculpture on a light box. Installation view, Ambiguous Loss, Greenville Museum of Art.

This work considers ambivalence as a coping skill within ambiguous loss. Ambivalence is not a psychological state requiring treatment, but instead a functional, healthy capacity to hold competing realities about loss at once. Ambivalence is the confounded boundary between indifference and connection. As a psychological metaphor it is like the space where the ocean touches a silted, wave-bitten shoreline, or a gray sky meets storm-worn water. In ambivalence, relational coordinates dissolve and orientation becomes uncertain. What remains is the individual's awareness of holding contradictory truths at the same time. This condition produces a quiet form of loneliness, not because connection disappears, but because it cannot fully stabilize.

In the painting, my daughter's body holds an invisible tension, as if the boundary between interior and exterior experience is revealing itself. Covered in a thin sheet of plastic that obscures without fully concealing, she appears cold within bleak surroundings. Her feet turn bright pink in the freezing water. The plastic sheet seems entirely inadequate against the weather. This describes the way traditional narratives about closure and loss are inadequate, offering the appearance of protection without the capacity to resolve the underlying condition.

Thin porcelain becomes the material analogue of this fragility. Its bone-pale waves and soda ash washed edges produce a tide-scoured landscape that creates a conversation between the painting and itself. The surface registers exposure, pressure, and duration, holding evidence of forces that cannot be fully controlled. Together, the painting and porcelain sustain a visual condition in which attachment and distance coexist without resolution, forming a spatial expression of healthy ambivalence.

Detail Images of the Installation: Ambivalence



Plate 3 OBryant, Tansy. Ambivalence (side view). 2026. Ink, watercolor, and colored pencil on paper with porcelain sculpture on a light box. Installation view, Ambiguous Loss, Greenville Museum of Art



Plate 4 O'Bryant, Tansy. Ambivalence, detail. 2026. light box, porcelain sculpture.

Installation view, Ambiguous Loss, Greenville Museum of Art.



Plate 5 O'Bryant, Tansy. Ambivalence (detail). 2026. Ink, watercolor, and colored pencil on paper. Installation view, Ambiguous Loss, Greenville Museum of Art

Installation Title: Discovering Delicate Things with Claws



Plate 6 OBryant, Tansy. Discovering Delicate Things with Claws. 2026. Ink, watercolor, and colored pencil on paper with porcelain sculpture. Installation view, Ambiguous Loss, Greenville Museum of Art.

This work reflects upon my daughter coming of age and falling in love for the first time while living with the corrosive and destructive nature of ambiguous loss in her family. Family relationships remain in a liminal space and coping skills to manage the sense of disconnection can feel inaccessible. The ambiguity of the boundaries between one family member and another become unclear and confusing. But in this suspended environment of grief, she chose to fall in love and assert her own agency.

By choosing to give herself the gift of love and sexual agency, she emerges not from confidence, but from the willingness to act despite uncertainty. Learning, experimenting, and reaching toward another transforms the act of tolerating unresolvable loss into the investigation of a profound mystery. It becomes a form of self-reassurance, a way of discovering that movement toward connection can create its own stability.

The tenderness required to reach outward and fall in love intimately can feel terrifying. Yet becoming a sexual human requires accepting this tenderness as an essential part of her humanity. Falling in love for the first time is not without peril. Discovering her sexuality and giving herself this gift carries risk and consequence and managing them is also an additional act of resilience.

In the painting, she holds a delicate crab pinched between her thumbs at its claws. It is bright and mysterious; it holds her curiosity but letting go of the claws could lead to an unwanted pinch. Just as falling in love and discovering sex for the first time requires mitigating and navigating unforeseen consequences. I chose to accentuate the tension between wonder and danger with bright color against dark blacks and atmospheric lighting in a similar way to *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose*, an oil painting by the American painter John Singer Sargent (See Fig. 4) that highlights the magic of curiosity.



Figure 5 Sargent, John Singer. Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose. 1885. Oil on canvas. Tate Britain, London.

The ceramic component of this work sits in conversation with her emerging agency depicted in the painting. It reminds the viewer that first desire marks a shift into a tangle of feelings, where dark uncertainty and illuminating risk exist at once. When constructing the sculpture, the ribbons of clay initially held a more rigid shape. I could easily follow each shape's beginning and end with my eye. By mixing paper and additional fluxes into the porcelain, I ensured they would slump and collapse with gravity in the heat of the kiln, a process known as pyroplastic deformation. When the material becomes soft at high temperature and begins to move under its own weight. Conceptually, this process causes the porcelain ribbons to slump, bend, and intertwine, creating a precarious structure that conveys fragile courage. Although ambiguous loss is an ongoing form of grief without resolution, the resulting tangle suggests a history that cannot be reversed or disentangled, where past events remain active within the present structure.

Within this charged vulnerability, my daughter decides how close to stand to another body, how much to reveal, and when to let go. Intimacy becomes an act of authorship, a negotiation between exposure and self-possession. Choosing thin ribbons of porcelain to describe this tender threshold felt appropriate. I used mason stains (*Mason Stain is a proprietary ceramic pigment produced by Mason Color Works, composed of calcined metal oxides that provide stable, predictable color in fired clay and glazes across varied firing conditions.*) similar to colors found in the painting to introduce vivid, radiant moments of color that function like flashes of discovery and the uncertain beauty of becoming whole.

Detail Images of the Installation: Discovering Delicate Things with Claws



Plate 7 OBryant, Tansy. Discovering Delicate Things with Claws (detail). 2026. Paper clay porcelain sculpture. Installation view, Ambiguous Loss, Greenville Museum of Art.

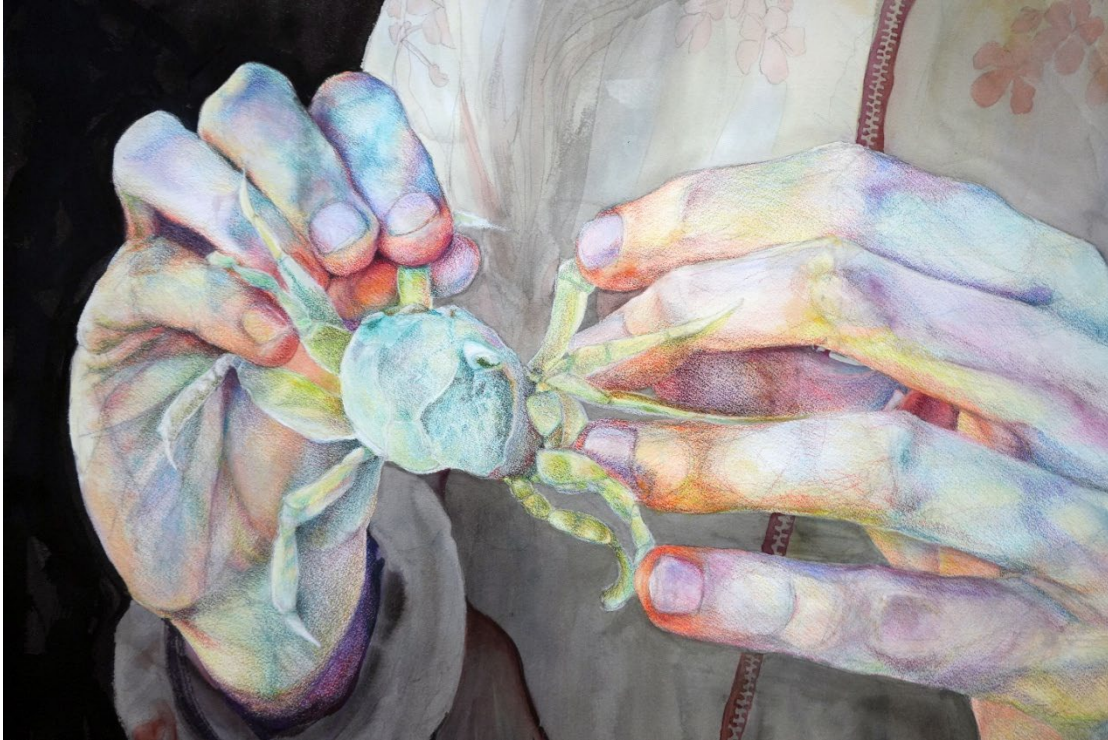


Plate 8 OBryant, Tansy. Discovering Delicate Things with Claws (detail). 2026. Ink, watercolor. Installation view, Ambiguous Loss, Greenville Museum of Art.

Installation Title: Ill-prepared at the Shoal



Plate 9 O'Bryant, Tansy. Ill-prepared at the Shoal. 2026. Ink, watercolor, and colored pencil on paper with porcelain sculpture. Installation view, Ambiguous Loss, Greenville Museum of Art

It is appropriate and deeply human to want to preserve a protected space for my daughter. For her, I wanted a period in which she was allowed time, safety, and emotional room to grow without carrying the full psychological weight of my adult reality. As a mother, I want my daughter to trust others, to feel cared for without needing to earn that care, to imagine multiple possible futures, and to make mistakes without devastating consequence. I want to shield her from onerous responsibility, chronic instability, and exposure to sexualized or adult experiences she cannot yet understand. These are the treacherous waters of living. This impulse is not about denying hardship entirely, but about pacing encounters with difficulty. Allowing her to learn to swim gradually so that identity, agency, and resilience can form gradually rather than under pressure. Within this protected space, the boundaries between dependence and independence remain intentionally blurred, a condition of boundary ambiguity that allows belonging to exist before full differentiation is required.

Yet as the volume and intensity of society's transgressions press closer, I find myself doubling down in my effort to protect. In doing so I missed that my daughter is moving into adulthood, and ill-prepared for the cruel and all-too-common realities of the world. The metaphors that come to mind are about survival in the ocean. In trying to shield her from danger, I have not taught her how to swim in turbulent waters, nor how to recognize or defend herself against the "sharks" of exploitation, coercion, and harm that move beneath the surface of ordinary life. Here ambiguous loss emerges as she is both protected and exposed, both held and unprepared, present yet not fully equipped for the conditions she inhabits.

At best, I have handed her an inherited form of protection, an "old life jacket from my grandfather's day." The life jacket in the painting is from 1945, I doubt it still works. It is a metaphor for values, warnings, and strategies shaped by another era, which once offered real

safety but are no longer sufficient for the conditions she now faces. As she moves toward what appears to be safety, a metaphorical shoal suggesting stability, belonging, or safety. She may not yet see that it is encrusted with oysters, whose razor-sharp shells symbolize the hidden injuries embedded within seemingly protective familial structures. An oyster shoal, that appears to promise refuge will lacerate, and without a new embodied literacy of the shoreline, she will not make landfall. The boundary between shelter and danger becomes unstable, a condition of boundary ambiguity in which care and injury occupy the same structure.

As I reflected upon my daughter at this pivotal moment, I recognized her fragility, and I was drawn to porcelain for its ability to present fragility. Porcelain appears thin, light-bearing, and vulnerable. In the painting my daughter is not a transparent shadow, but she is attenuated, marked by an interior thinness, positioned against inky blackness that suggests fathoms upon fathoms of depth. The darkness functions as a metaphor for the overwhelming loss pressing in around her, conditions that are difficult to fully see or measure. This is ambiguous loss, where presence and absence coexist.

In the painting, I render this psychological thinness through ink washes, watercolor, and pencil. These materials allow the figure to remain present while also appearing permeable, as if the boundary between interior and exterior experience is under strain. The figure holds together, but with visible tension, describing a state that is intact yet vulnerable to disruption.

The small black porcelain bowls paired with the painting materialize the metaphor of the oyster shoal introduced earlier. The shoal represents structures that appear to offer stability or safe landing yet are encrusted with sharp edges capable of wounding. Black porcelain conveys consequences and density, giving physical form to environments that sustain life while also

containing the potential for harm. The collection of bowls representing an oyster shoal is placed in close proximity to the painting but not touching. There is space between the ceramic objects and the painting. This is an ambiguous boundary. The space is not large enough for a view to walk through nor so close that the painting and ceramic objects become one.

In more stable conditions, her agency might feel as immutable as gravity, an internal force strong enough to command the oceans. Here, however, instead of density there is a hollow brightness. For this reason, white porcelain is introduced. Its luminosity suggests both presence and incompleteness, an agency still forming under pressure.

I chose the bowl form because it directly relates to domestic life. Hundreds of bowls placed together resemble families gathered for a meal, yet visually they begin to suggest an oyster shoal, something that provides nourishment and support, but whose boundaries can also be sharp and unforgiving.

Part of this work is experienced only by me during installation. As I place the porcelain objects, there is scraping and tinkling. This sound carries devotion. I hear the resonance of people gathered at a family table, bowls and cups gently striking one another. It is also the sound of those who are missing. Ambiguous loss resonates here, presence registered through absence, relationship persisting without resolution. For me, the sound of families gathering for a meal gives porcelain its elegance. At the same time, the slight tremor in the hand as the bowls touch, a clink and rake like singing ice across a pond, produces a quiet sense of aloneness and held stillness.

I stack the bowls so that they describe not only an oyster shoal, but also visually contain the devotion and stillness I believe porcelain holds.

Each bowl is embedded with coal slag. In its raw form, coal slag resembles ground black glass, a material that appears dirty, industrial, and inelegant beside porcelain. Juxtaposed together, they create the beauty and grit of an oyster shoal. Their pairing speaks to the effort we provide for one another within family life where care exists alongside loss. Within ambiguous loss, provision and injury are not opposites but coexisting conditions.

We misinterpret pottery when we think only of its function or its beauty. In the black porcelain, especially where coal slag is present, the surface records its transformation through heat, wood, and soda ash in the kiln. The surface of each cup is not simply beautiful or functional; it describes the conditions that formed it. In this way, the material describes us.

Detail Images of the Installation: Ill-prepared at the Shoal



*Plate 10 OBryant, Tansy. Ill-prepared at the Shoal (detail). 2026. White and black
porcelain sculpture, salt, soda and wood fired in reduction. Installation view, Ambiguous
Loss, Greenville Museum of Art*



Plate 11 OBryant, Tansy. Ill-prepared at the Shoal (detail). 2026. White porcelain sculptural object, salt and wood fired in reduction. Installation view, Ambiguous Loss, Greenville Museum of Art



Plate 12 OBryant, Tansy. Ill-prepared at the Shoal (detail). 2026. Black and white porcelain sculptural objects, salt, soda and wood fired in reduction. Installation view, Ambiguous Loss, Greenville Museum of Art



Plate 13 OBryant, Tansy. Ill-prepared at the Shoal (detail). 2026. Black and white porcelain sculptural objects, salt, soda and wood fired in reduction. Installation view, Ambiguous Loss, Greenville Museum of Art



Plate 14 OBryant, Tansy. Ill-prepared at the Shoal (detail). 2026. Ink, watercolor, and colored pencil on paper. Installation view, Ambiguous Loss, Greenville Museum of Art.

Installation Title: Conceal



Plate 15 OBryant, Tansy. Conceal. 2026. 12 Ink, watercolor, and colored pencil on paper paintings with tape-cast porcelain. Installation view, Ambiguous Loss, Greenville Museum of Art.

In this series of paintings, ambiguous loss unfolds through the actions of claiming, concealing, and finding, all performed by the figure of my daughter. She is shown wearing a thin sheet of plastic commonly distributed by FEMA after hurricanes as temporary protection when structures have been damaged. Although intended to provide shelter, the material often appears visibly insufficient to the scale of devastation. In the paintings, the plastic functions as a permeable barrier that neither fully protects nor fully conceals the body. Its inadequacy parallels the limitations of conventional grief models when confronted with ambiguous loss, where conditions remain unresolved and resistant to closure.

Within this compromised state, the figure discovers a small object. Rather than presenting it outward, she removes it from view. In this gesture she both claims and conceals what she has found. The viewer understands that something has been discovered but is denied access to it. Claiming, concealing, and finding operate as interdependent actions, each containing its own ambiguity. Finding does not produce clarity, claiming does not secure stability, and concealing does not fully protect. Each action demonstrates agency while sustaining uncertainty. The figure determines what becomes visible and what remains withheld, asserting control even within conditions that cannot be resolved.

In the installation *Conceal*, porcelain elements are positioned in front of a series of paintings, producing a spatial structure that reinforces this condition of partial access. The narrow passage between the ceramic forms and the paintings initially appears to function as a walkway, inviting the viewer forward. Upon closer approach, however, the space cannot be comfortably navigated. What first appears to be a path reveals itself as a barrier, making close contact with the paintings seem possible yet unattainable. The viewer encounters proximity without access and visibility without full disclosure.

The nonrepresentational ceramic forms are constructed from extremely thin tape-cast porcelain whose fragility echoes the insufficiency of the plastic covering. During firing, the material undergoes pyroplastic deformation, bending and warping under heat and gravity. The forms are arranged across the floor through patterns of accumulation and dispersal, producing shifting areas of density and exposure. Some elements cluster while others remain isolated, creating a field of unstable relationships in which presence is incomplete, and absence is not fully defined. Variations in thickness produce subtle differences in opacity and translucency, allowing some forms to appear more perceptible while others recede.

The installation does not resolve into a fixed configuration. Instead, the viewer encounters spatial relationships that gather and disperse without establishing permanence. Across painting, sculpture, and installation space, conditions of ambiguous loss are made perceptible through partial visibility, structural vulnerability, and constrained access.

Detail Images of the Installation: Conceal



Plate 16 OBryant, Tansy. Conceal. Reproduced from Plate 1



Plate 17 OBryant, Tansy. Conceal (detail of tape-cast porcelain). 2026. Porcelain.

Installation view, Ambiguous Loss, Greenville Museum of Art.



Plate 18 OBryant, Tansy. Conceal (detail of tape-cast porcelain). 2026. Porcelain.

Installation view, Ambiguous Loss, Greenville Museum of Art.



Plate 19 OBryant, Tansy. Conceal (detail of tape-cast porcelain). 2026. Porcelain.

Installation view, Ambiguous Loss, Greenville Museum of Art.



Plate 20 OBryant, Tansy. Conceal (detail of tape-cast porcelain). 2026. Porcelain.

Installation view, Ambiguous Loss, Greenville Museum of Art.



Plate 21 OBryant, Tansy. Conceal (detail of tape-cast porcelain). 2026. Porcelain.

Installation view, Ambiguous Loss, Greenville Museum of Art.



Plate 22 OBryant, Tansy. Conceal (detail of tape-cast porcelain). 2026. Porcelain.

Installation view, Ambiguous Loss, Greenville Museum of Art.



Plate 23 OBryant, Tansy. Conceal (detail of tape-cast porcelain). 2026. Porcelain.

Installation view, Ambiguous Loss, Greenville Museum of Art.



Plate 24 OBryant, Tansy. Conceal (detail of tape-cast porcelain). 2026. Porcelain.

Installation view, Ambiguous Loss, Greenville Museum of Art.

Detail Images: Paintings in Installation

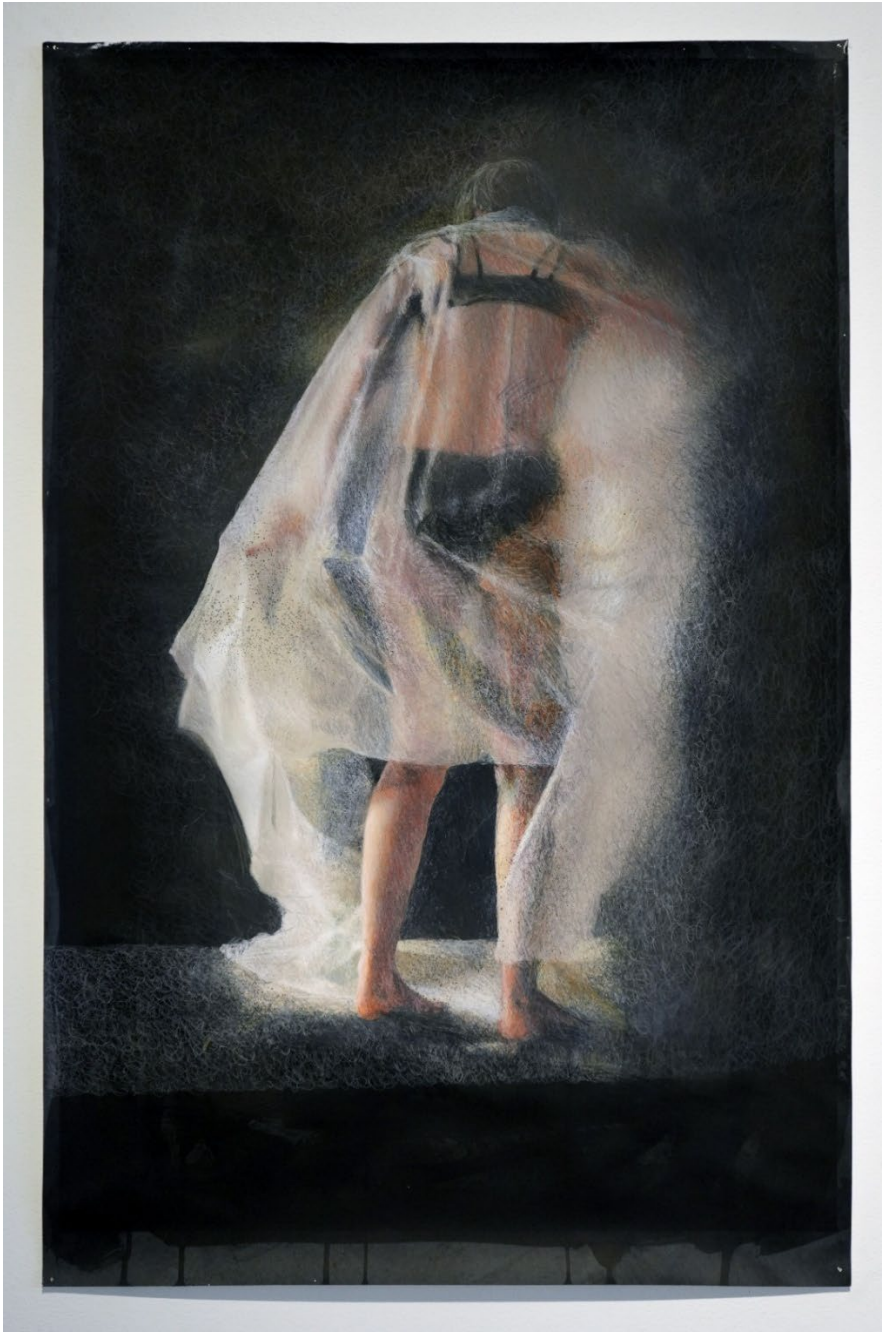


Plate 25 OBryant, Tansy. Conceal (detail of paintings, painting 1). 2026. Installation view, Ambiguous Loss, Greenville Museum of Art.



Plate 26 OBryant, Tansy. Conceal (detail of paintings, painting 2). 2026. Installation view, Ambiguous Loss, Greenville Museum of Art.



Plate 27 OBryant, Tansy. Conceal (detail of paintings, painting 3). 2026. Installation view, Ambiguous Loss, Greenville Museum of Art.



Plate 28 O'Bryant, Tansy. Conceal (detail of paintings, painting 4). 2026. Installation view, Ambiguous Loss, Greenville Museum of Art



Plate 29 OBryant, Tansy. Conceal (detail of paintings, painting 5). 2026. Installation view, Ambiguous Loss, Greenville Museum of Art



Plate 30 OBryant, Tansy. Conceal (detail of paintings, painting 6). 2026. Installation view, Ambiguous Loss, Greenville Museum of Art



Plate 31 OBryant, Tansy. Conceal (detail of paintings, painting 7). 2026. Installation view, Ambiguous Loss, Greenville Museum of Art

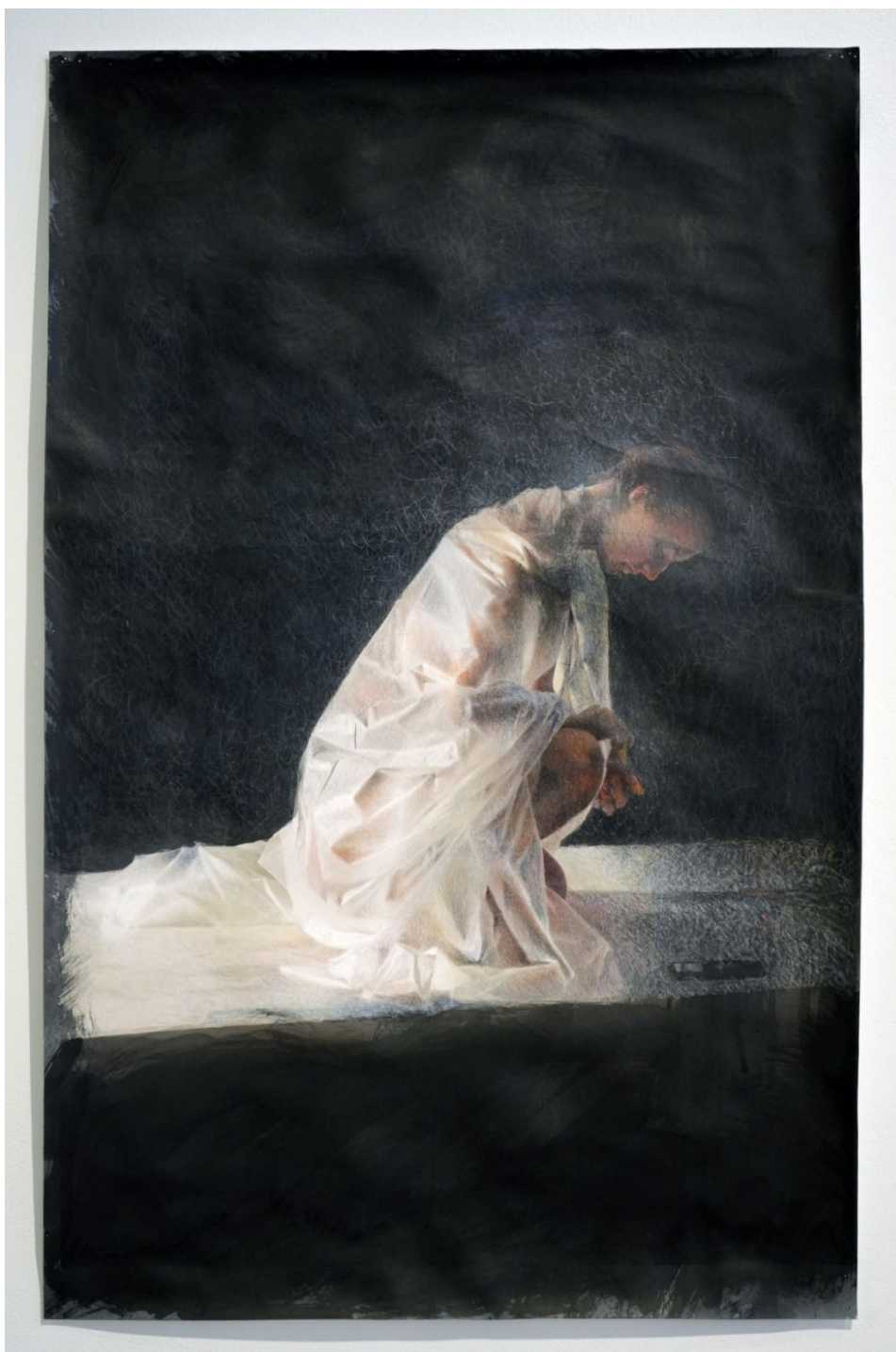


Plate 32 OBryant, Tansy. Conceal (detail of paintings, painting 8). 2026. Installation view, Ambiguous Loss, Greenville Museum of Art

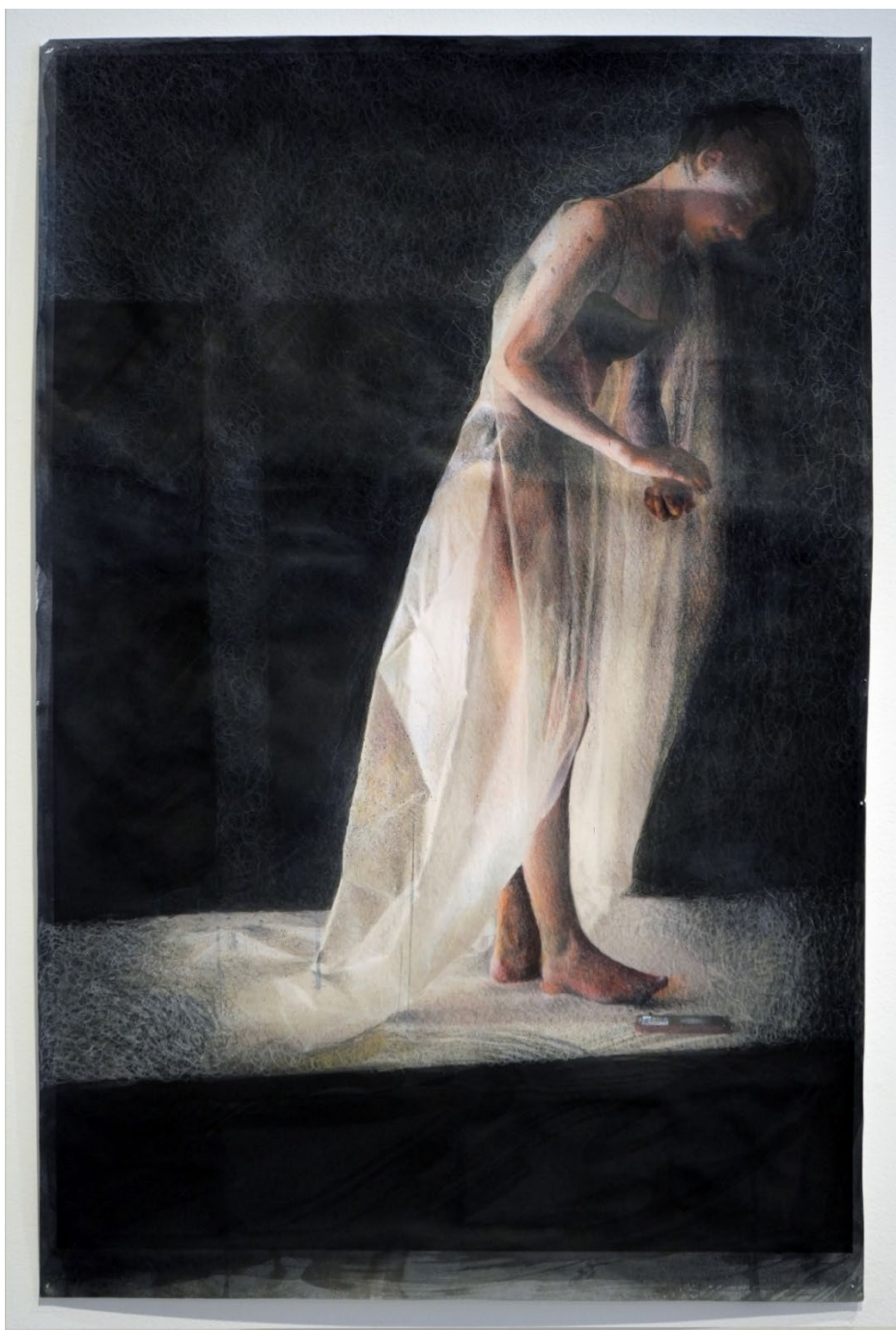


Plate 33 OBryant, Tansy. Conceal (detail of paintings, painting 9). 2026. Installation view, Ambiguous Loss, Greenville Museum of Art



Plate 34 OBryant, Tansy. Conceal (detail of paintings, painting 10). 2026. Installation view, Ambiguous Loss, Greenville Museum of Art



Plate 35 OBryant, Tansy. Conceal (detail of paintings, painting 11). 2026. Installation view, Ambiguous Loss, Greenville Museum of Art



Plate 36 OBryant, Tansy. Conceal (detail of paintings, painting 12). 2026. Installation view, Ambiguous Loss, Greenville Museum of Art

Conclusion

This thesis demonstrates that ambiguous loss can be represented visually without relying on symbolic imagery or narratives of closure. By pairing figurative painting with nonrepresentational ceramic forms, the work establishes a spatial and material structure capable of holding uncertainty rather than resolving it. Through this process, I learned that ambiguity does not require illustration to become perceptible. Instead, ambiguity can be registered through relationships between forms, materials, and distances that prevent meaning from stabilizing completely.

The research shows that boundary ambiguity can operate as a visual condition. Realistic paintings provide points of recognition, while ceramic forms resist fixed interpretation. Meaning does not reside within a single object but emerges through the interval between two- and three-dimensional works. Spatial distance, proximity, and obstruction become formal strategies that allow presence and absence to coexist without resolution. In this way, the work answers the central question of the thesis by demonstrating that ambiguous loss can be represented through relational structure rather than narrative depiction.

Material investigation further clarified how instability can be made perceptible without symbolic reference. Porcelain's fragility, translucency, and susceptibility to pyroplastic deformation allows form to register gravity, atmosphere, and heat. Tape-cast clay, atmospheric firing, and accumulation-based installation structures produce objects that appear provisional rather than fixed. Through this research, I found that material behavior itself can operate as a

form of meaning, allowing the work to embody conditions of vulnerability, tension, and partial visibility without illustration.

This thesis positions my practice within a broader contemporary discourse that values process, relational structure, and material agency as sites of meaning production. Rather than presenting loss as an image to be decoded, the work creates conditions in which viewers encounter uncertainty directly. The installations do not provide narrative closure, but instead sustain perceptual experiences of proximity without access, recognition without certainty, and attachment without resolution.

Through this investigation, I have come to understand ambiguous loss not only as a psychological condition but as a spatial and material problem. The work demonstrates that visual form can hold indeterminate relationships without stabilizing them into fixed meaning. In this way, the thesis contributes to contemporary art discourse by proposing that ambiguity itself can function as a primary structure of representation.

References

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ⁱⁱ Tate. *Process Art*: The term process art refers to where the process of its making art is not hidden but remains a prominent aspect of the completed work, so that a part or even the whole of its subject is the making of the work. “Process Art.” Tate, www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/p/process-art

ⁱⁱⁱ Goldsworthy, Andy. *Andy Goldsworthy: A Collaboration with Nature*. Viking, 1990.

^{iv} Mendieta, Ana. “A Selection of Statements and Notes.” *Sulfur*, vol. 22, 1988, p. 70.