

Lest We Forget: Exploring My Mother's Journey Through Dementia

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Abstract

Lest We Forget - About My Mother" is a poignant visual essay comprising a series of small and medium-sized oil paintings that serve as a tribute to the artist's 93-year-old mother, who grapples with dementia. Through these paintings, the artist delves into their personal journey as a caregiver, reflecting on their mother's life, challenges, and the impact of memory loss. Each painting depicts significant objects from the mother's life, serving as touchstones to her past and symbolizing the richness of her experiences despite dementia's challenges. Knitting emerges as a recurring motif, embodying comfort and routine while conveying moments of resilience and resourcefulness. The consistent use of Naples Yellow as the background color unifies the series, while shadows subtly underscore the fragility of memory. Through emotional realism, the artist explores themes of love, loss, and memory, offering viewers a glimpse into the complex emotions surrounding dementia. Ultimately, the series serves as a heartfelt preservation of the mother's memories and a celebration of the enduring power of connection amidst the shadows of mortality.

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My series of paintings is a heartfelt exploration into the world of my 93-year-old mother, delving into themes of dementia, memory loss, memory preservation, and love. In a world where more than 55 million individuals grapple with these conditions, my aim with this series of paintings is threefold: to shed light on the often-overlooked realities of Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia, to challenge the stigma that surrounds them, and to advocate for greater support and compassion for those affected by these challenging conditions (Alzheimer's Disease International, n.d.). Additionally, these paintings serve as a tribute to my mother's experiences as a Holocaust survivor and as my mother, capturing her memories and preserving them for future generations. In my mother's generation, those who survived the Holocaust are now old, many are victims of the ravages of memory loss. It falls on the second-generation survivors, and their children, to keep their memories alive. Through my art, I aim to honor her legacy and the resilience of those who have faced unimaginable hardships, while also exploring my role as her caregiver and the universal experience of confronting mortality.

The paintings depict objects that were once relevant in my mother's life or have been altered to help her function. I become an archivist who observes and pieces together artifacts to reconstruct, explore and understand both her past and present journey. Several paintings show objects from her life and include reflections on their importance in her journey with dementia. Objects carry memories and meanings, often becoming the only testament to a person's life. They can evoke emotions through their appearance, a concept known as appearance emotionalism (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, n.d.). In my artistic practice, I emphasize the emotional resonance of objects, viewing them as vessels of memories and meanings. This emphasis on emotional resonance led me to define the style of my work as *emotional realism*. This style involves rendering objects from observation in a realistic manner, akin to contemporary realism which focuses on realistic depictions of the modern world (Realism Today, n.d.). Both emotional realism and contemporary realism share a commitment to capturing the essence of their subjects authentically. However, through the materiality of lightly applied impasto paint, I aim to convey the deep emotional connection I have with my mother and her experience. Emotional realism allows me to blend realistic depictions with an expressive quality that communicates the emotional resonance of my subjects. This approach emphasizes the dual focus on realistic representation and emotional depth, capturing not just the physical reality of my mother's world, but also the profound emotional landscape of our shared journey.

Throughout her life, my mother faced numerous challenges, including being a hidden child during World War II. Jewish families often placed their children in orphanages, convents, or with non-Jewish families to protect them from the Nazis. My father stayed hidden in an orphanage, while my mother found refuge in a convent where she was converted to Catholicism. These experiences resulted in a struggle with introversion and subservience. I had a complicated relationship with my mother during my childhood and was a parentified child, taking on responsibilities typically meant for a parent (Newport Academy, n.d.). As I grew older, we developed a deep bond, and she found her voice after my father passed away. Unfortunately, her memories began to slip away, and she was diagnosed with dementia. This experience has been both heartbreaking and illuminating, forcing me to confront my own mortality and the fragility of memory.

With these paintings, I hope to preserve my mother's memories in a tangible form, offering a glimpse into her life and experiences before they disappear. The objects depicted in the paintings are touchstones that connect my mother to her past. They symbolize the richness of her life despite the challenges posed by dementia.

Each narrative accompanying the paintings reflects my reactions to the objects and memories that my mother holds dear. They explore themes of love, loss, and memory. Knitting is a constant thread throughout the series, symbolizing comfort and routine. One painting, in particular, portrays a poignant moment in my mother's life. She unraveled the sweater she had knitted for my father and used the yarn to knit a sweater for herself. This painting is a tribute to my mother's resilience and resourcefulness, as well as a reflection of the enduring power of love and memory (see *Figure 5*).

Throughout, I use the same color, a neutral Naples Yellow, for each background, unifying the series as a cohesive whole. The presence of shadows in each painting serves as a subtle reminder of the fragility of memory and the ever-present threat of dementia.

In conclusion, the series "*Lest We Forget: Exploring My Mother's Journey Through Dementia*" serves as a profound exploration of the human spirit. Through the realistic yet emotionally charged depiction of objects from my mother's life, I have attempted to capture the essence of her experiences and our shared journey. The artworks embody the lifelong learning that comes with caregiving, illustrating how we adapt and find meaning even in the face of devastating illnesses like dementia.

By documenting these objects and their significance, I aim to preserve my mother's legacy and provide a tangible connection to her past. This series is not only a tribute to her but also a reflection on the universal experience of dealing with dementia, offering solace and understanding to others in similar situations.

Ultimately, "*Lest We Forget*" is a celebration of my mother's life and a testament to the strength of our bond. Through this work, I seek to understand my evolving relationship with my mother, which remains fluid and growing despite her dementia. It is a call to remain curious about our loved ones, to seek connections in new ways even if they are different from what we had hoped for, and to honor the memories that shape who we are. Through art, I hope to inspire empathy, compassion, and a deeper appreciation for the journeys of those affected by dementia and their caregivers.

How this series about my mother began



Figure 1 Untitled

Three years ago, my mother was in the hospital. While sitting beside her, I felt an impulse to create a quick study of her lying there. This moment sparked a series of paintings, each one compelled by the desire to capture her story and my reaction to this phase of her life. I began with a quick sketch done while she slept, using only a pen and a small scrap of paper (see *Figure 1*). Drawing felt so intimate, a way to hold on to the moment. I created this sketch eight days after my mom turned 91. We had taken her out for supper to celebrate her birthday. Two days later, she

fainted and was hospitalized. It's a stark reminder of how things can change in an instant.¹ I was watching my mom sleep after she came back from the hospital. Bathed in soft light, my mother sleeps peacefully, her face reflecting a sense of calm despite a bruise from a recent fall.



Figure 2 Watching my mom sleep

My Mother's Love of Knitting

My mom was about 6 years old when sitting beside her mother, who was knitting. She began to twist bits of wool into knots. That's how she learned to knit. She doesn't knit anymore.



Figure 3 Rolling Yarn

¹ All paintings in this article are by the author, Cynthia van Frank.



Figure 4 Ball of yarn

When my dad passed away, my mom unraveled the sweater she had knit for him. She then knit herself a sweater from that wool.

We noticed my mom's memory loss a few years ago, and by the time she turned 91, she began losing more long-term and short-term memory. One day, as she was showing me how she winds yarn into a ball before knitting, she accidentally dropped it. We watched as the ball rolled away and started to unravel.

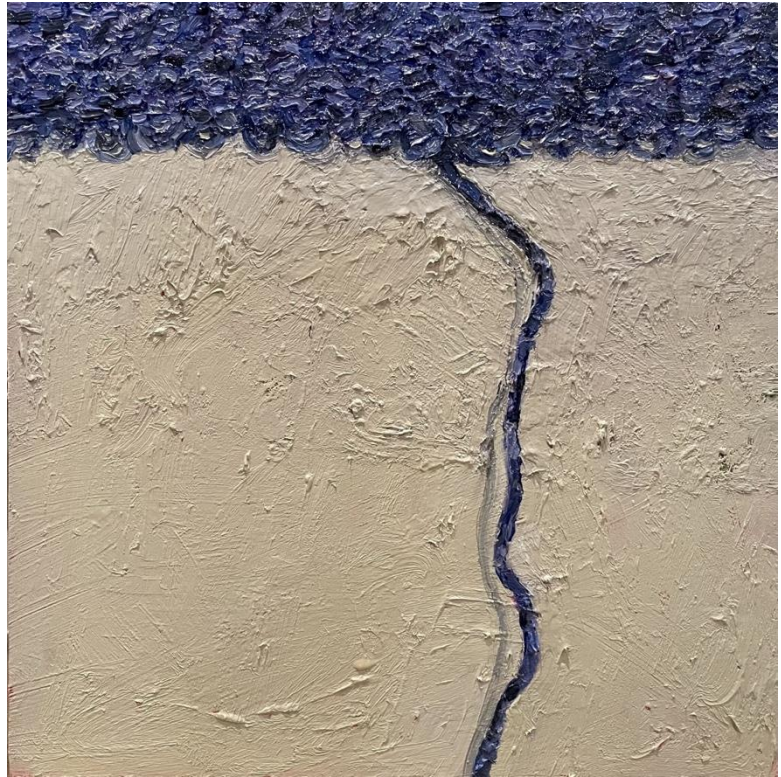


Figure 5 Unravel



Figure 6 Mock Cable Stitch

My mom never finished this last knitting project. One day, I placed knitting needles loaded with a few rows of stitches in her hands and she immediately began to knit.

It's difficult to understand what is happening in my mother's mind as she navigates the challenges of losing words and executive functions.



Figure 7 Tangled



Figure 8 Fading Tangle

I watch my mom slowly slip away.

Objects in my Mother's Life

My mom and dad were married for 62 years. They had a complicated love, and it was sometimes lopsided, but it was always there. For many years, after my dad passed away, my mom would kiss his photograph good night and ask him why he left her so soon. She forgets to do this now.



Figure 9 My dad's photograph



Figure 10 TV remote control

My mom spends a lot of her time watching TV. She wants to be busy, but dementia stops her in her tracks. My brother rigged up her TV remote controller with blue electrical tape blocking all the buttons except for the ones she uses repeatedly. It worked!

My mother always has a crumpled-up Kleenex in her pocket. She has suffered from nonallergic rhinitis for as long as I remember. As her dementia worsens, she blows her nose more often.

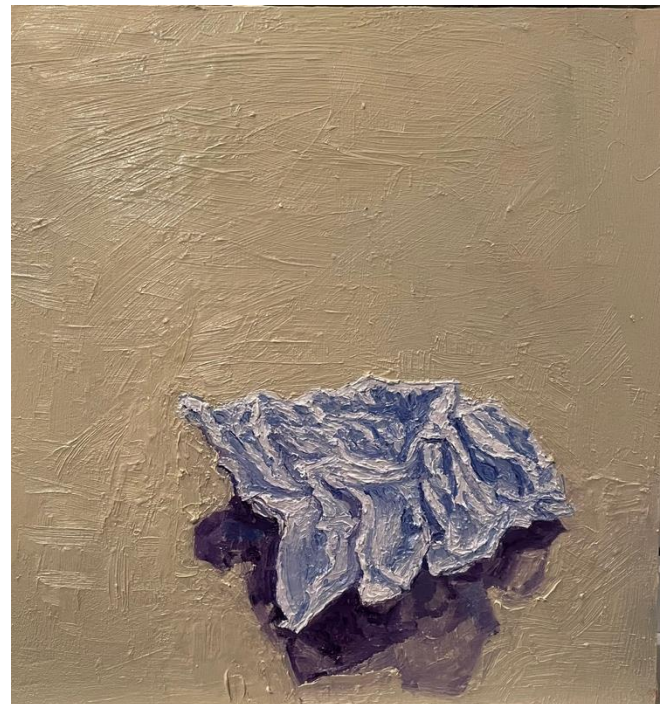


Figure 11 Kleenex and Shadow



Figure 12 My mother's chair

My parents had a pair of matching mid-century style chairs for over 60 years. They were a beautiful gold colour and were placed side-by-side with a small nest of teak tables between them. My mom always sat on one and my dad on the other. At one point, my parents moved them to the basement, where they faded in colour and from our daily lives. When my mom sold the family house, we salvaged and recovered them in a beautiful blue fabric. Now my mom sits on the same chair again.

Caregiving

Washing and styling my mom's hair every week has become a special time of tenderness for both of us. My mother never prioritized herself when she was a mom of three children. This pampering and connection transcend words; it's an undemanding exchange through touch alone. With closed eyes, she finds peace in the tranquility, and so do I.



Figure 13 Hairbrush



Figure 14 Purple Shampoo

In this painting, my mother's hand delicately feels the gentle cascade of water, a moment of intimate care and dignity. As her caregiver, I strive to honor her autonomy, supporting her in the tasks she can still accomplish.

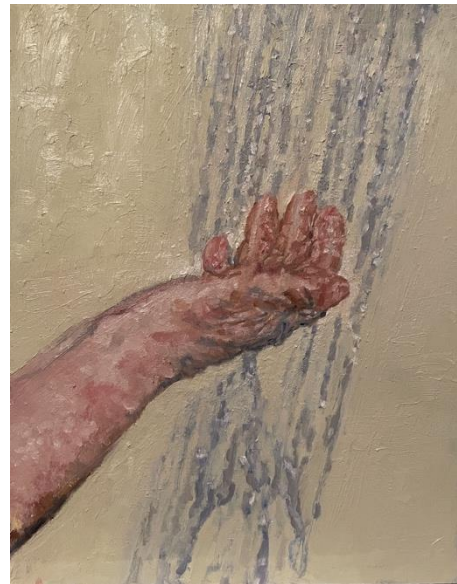


Figure 15 The Shower

My mom loves it when I wash her hair. I use purple shampoo for her white hair. She looked so regal when I piled her shampooed hair on top of her head. Occasionally, she sighs, reminiscing about when she used to wash my hair.



Figure 16 Bandaged

My mother always downplayed pain and sadness. Sometimes I witness small bruises or sores when I assist her as she showers. I often feel sad and powerless to help her.

After showering, my mother slips into her shoes almost instinctively. In a candid moment, she confided that these days, she often feels adrift, unsure of what to do or where to go. When I inquired if this saddened her, she simply replied, 'I'm fine.'"



Figure 17 My Mother's Shoes

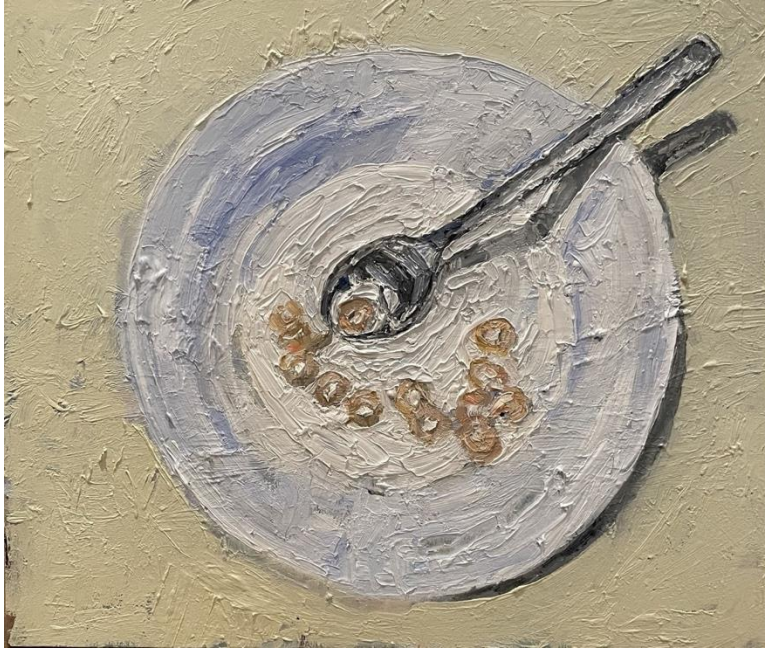


Figure 18 Cheerios

My mother often has Cheerios for breakfast. The handle of the spoon, resembling a clock's hand, and the scattered Cheerios, mirroring the jumbled numbers of a clock face. It suggests the test my mother underwent before her dementia diagnosis, where she struggled to draw a clock face.

My mom has a cup of coffee at every meal. It's her preferred beverage.



Figure 19 Coffee Dregs



Figure 20 Glass of Water

When my mom was a young girl in Belgium, she was told by her mother not to drink water. Water was only good for one thing, and that was bathing. Of the many things she has forgotten, my mom still remembers this. Dehydration is a constant worry for us, and it has had some dire consequences for her. Now, we ensure she drinks water every few hours to keep her hydrated.

My mom was an amazing baker, renowned for her apple cake. A few years ago, my freezer was filled with her delicious apple cake loaves. I shared some, discarded others, and now I wish I had kept more. Since my mom doesn't bake anymore, I've taken up the task using her recipe. Whenever I bake her apple cake, I bring her a piece and ask if it's as good as the ones she used to make. She always tells me it is.



Figure 21 Apple Cake

Plants in my Mother's Life

Figure 22 African Violet and Shadow

My mom had a knack for growing African Violets. When the last one died last year, I bought her a replacement for Mother's Day. My brothers and I care for it and it's thriving.

My mom planted a few grapefruit seeds with my brother when he was five. That was over 50 years ago. Those seeds grew into a 6-foot-tall tree, almost the same height as my brother. It nearly died a few times over the last few years, but it is resilient.

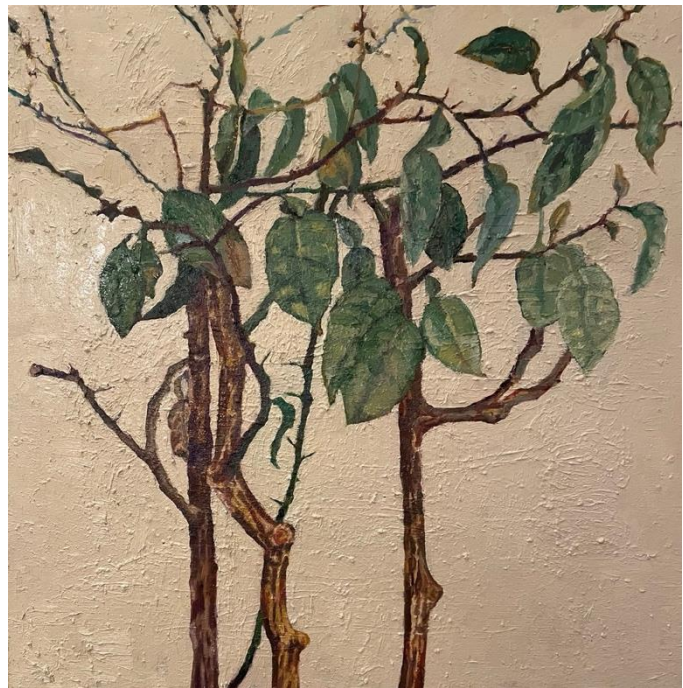


Figure 23 Grapefruit tree



Figure 24 Orchid

My mom inherited my father's six beautiful orchid plants when he passed away. She cared for them, and they flourished and flowered until a couple of years ago. This orchid plant is the lone survivor.

During a visit with my mom, I stumbled upon a poignant scene: a cyclamen plant wrapped in vivid pink foil. It had two remaining leaves one of which was withering.



Figure 25 Cyclamen

Childhood Memories, Mementos, and the War



Figure 26 Handkerchief

This painting, inspired by my mother's hankie from her childhood days before the war. My mother, along with many other Jewish children, was hidden in a convent. They were all converted, and that tested their identity and innocence. Even after the war's end, my mother, feeling confused, sought comfort in churches as she grappled with her sense of belonging. Raised agnostic, our parents understood the dangers of being Jewish, striving to shield us from the shadows of the past.

My father came to Canada as a teenager after World War II. He had very few keepsakes from his life before the war. In *The Kiddush Cup*, — a survivor of the Holocaust, brought to Canada by my father. It's engraved with my grandmother's name, the same as my mother's, connecting generations.



Figure 27 The Kiddush Cup

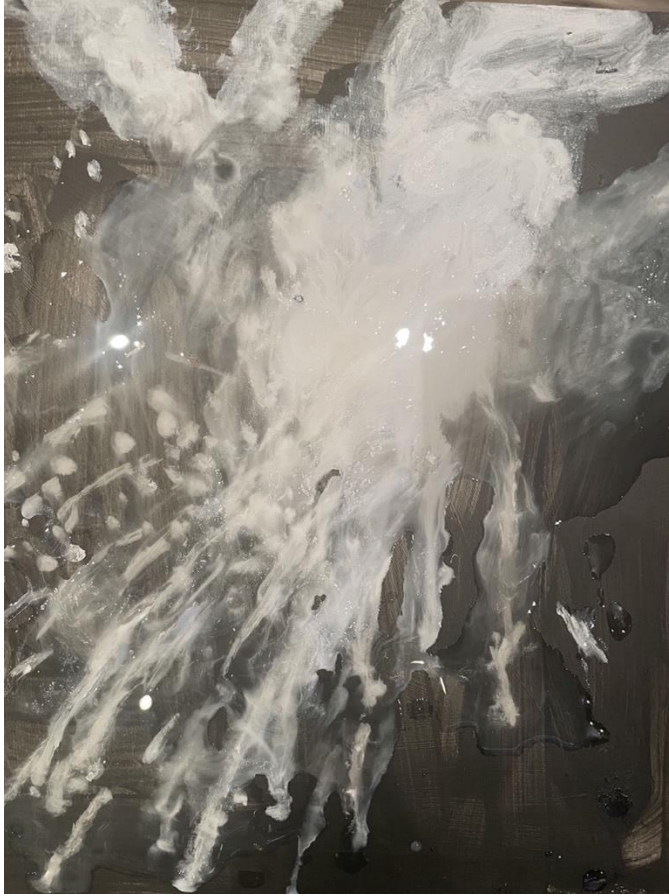


Figure 28 Bomb

My 93-year-old mother, a hidden child during the war, found solace on a convent rooftop, convincing herself the bombs were fireworks. My two paintings—one, bombs over Brussels, echoing her innocent perspective; the other, Disrupted Navigation, symbolizing her battle with Alzheimer's.

Inspired by my mother's resilience as a hidden child during WWII, this piece reflects her unwavering optimism amidst chaos and danger. I see a connection between her perception of bombs falling as harmless fireworks and the narrative of disrupted neurons.

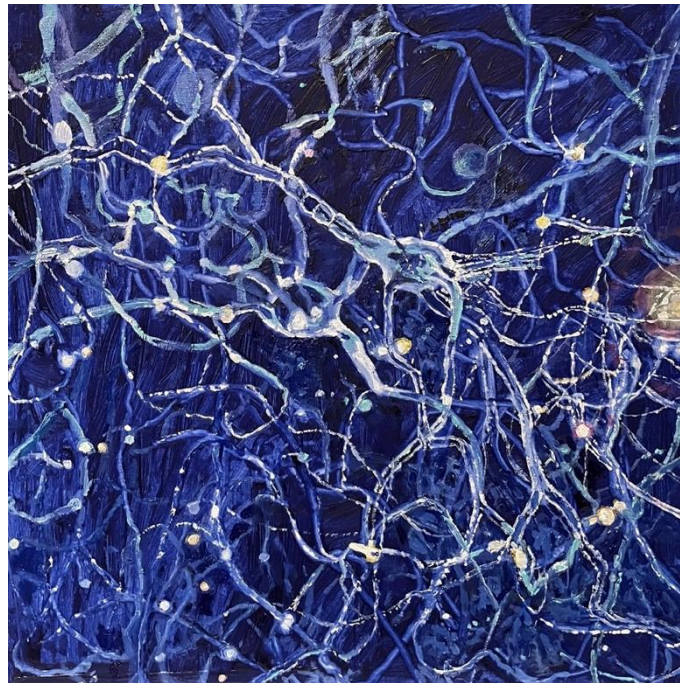


Figure 29 Disrupted Navigation

Head and Hands

Figure 30 Untitled

This underpainting said it all. I stopped, dead in my tracks, as I saw the look I captured in my mom's eyes. I left the painting unfinished.

I used to think my hands looked like my father's. Painting my mother's hands, I saw how similar they were to mine.



Figure 31 My mother's hands



Figure 32 Dancing

My mom and dad loved to dance. They met at a dance hall in the early 1950s. A few months ago, my mom attended a piano concert at her residence. There were a few men in the audience. One man took it upon himself to ask some of the women to dance. When he asked my mom, she reluctantly agreed. Once the music started, she gracefully moved around the dance floor. I loved how gently this man held my mom and how the movement came so naturally to her.

Werther's Candies

My dad used to have a bowl of Werther's Original candies in his den. My mom used to carry them in her purse. These 3 candies are for me and my brothers.



Figure 33 Three Candies



Figure 34 Candy

A solitary Werther's Original. This sweet candy is a reminder of both the sweetness of our bond and the solitude of the caregiving role.

This bowl was a favorite of my parents. Four Werther's candies sit within, symbolizing my mother and her three children.



Figure 35 Mid-Century Bowl with Four Werther's Candies

My Mother and Me



I wanted to portray my beautiful mother in a dignified way. I tried to capture the combination of her relaxed posture with what I saw as a bit of anxiety in her eyes.

Figure 36 My mom wearing pajamas and a watch

I FaceTime with my mom every night. We laugh together and always end the call by saying, 'I love you'. She is my mirror, and we are bookends.



Figure 37 Bookends or Face to Face

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Cynthia van Frank was born and residing in Montreal, Cynthia was a natural storyteller from a young age, enchanting her neighborhood friends with fanciful tales about her parents' wartime experiences and miraculous survival. These narratives often portrayed her parents' daring escapes, such as jumping from one train car to another to evade pursuers. Unbeknownst to Cynthia, both her parents were "hidden children" during the war, a fact they never discussed with her, adding an aura of mystery to her imaginative stories. It felt as though she was tapping into the collective memory of those who endured the war's hardships. Now, with dementia eroding her mother's recollections, Cynthia has taken on the role of family historian, dedicated to preserving their story for future generations. In addition to her passion for storytelling, Cynthia is a practicing artist and art educator. She approaches her art in series, each one a reflection of her current life experiences and perceptions of the world around her.