Art Project

**CARE**

(description by an independent curator and cultural worker Emily O’Leary)

The body of work which comprises the Care project utilizes diverse media to document the often unseen daily process of caring for an Alzheimer’s patient at home—in this case, the artist’s mother-in-law, Dorothy. Through charcoal drawings, fresco, installation, sculpture, and painting, Maryna Bilak delves into the diverse roles that the process of caregiving requires from each person, including the experience of the patient. Each work in Care examines a changed state of being: familial roles that overlap and may become at odds with one another, physical and psychological fragmentation, and material remnants left behind that provide testament to seemingly mundane daily events.

Dorothy—mother, patient, older woman, mother-in-law—is the conceptual and physical nexus for Care. In a series of traditional charcoal portraits, for example, Dorothy’s life is depicted chronologically, starting with softly rendered portraits of girlhood that gradually become harshly rendered scenes of the subject in the last vestiges of the disease. The small-scale frescos provide limited glimpses of Dorothy’s features—an eye, a mouth—and reflects on the disintegrated and fractured mental state that accompanies Alzheimer’s.

The installation piece and sculpture focus on the tangible and intensely personal, incorporating clothing, nail clippings, hair, and plaster casts of hands and feet. Bilak transmutes ordinary objects into abstract assemblages and sculpture. A series of cast-off hangers, clothing, parts of beds, and a headboard that once belonged to Dorothy turned on its side become delicate, conceptual artworks. Also included are plaster sculptures formed from clothing rejected by Dorothy since she can no longer remember that they belong to her, functioning as static symbols of what has been forgotten and is now literally cast still in time.

In Bilak’s most overt testament to Dorothy, her sewing table has been arranged as installation, a single drawer left open that contains hair and fingernail clippings, and a plaster cast of her foot placed where it would naturally rest. By engaging directly with these once-utilitarian objects, they adopt newfound significance and become an artistic language in which Bilak speaks to the experience of what it is to be a caregiver.

Plaster casts of the hands and feet of the artist, her husband, Dorothy, and other caregivers highlight the intensely corporeal nature of caregiving itself as well as the equally acute emotional labor involved with caring for someone with a debilitating disease. This is especially prominent in the grid of plaster casts of hands painted in single colors and encased in simple box frames, representing individual people who have been involved in Dorothy’s care in some capacity. This grid continues to grow as more people take on the role of a caregiving.

Care is an aesthetic response to the impact of Alzheimer’s on a family even as Bilak addresses her own self-described roles of wife, daughter-in-law, woman, and artist, reflecting on the psychological and emotional states that occur as identity changes, fragments, and reforms, whether as an Alzheimer’s patient or a caregiver.