

(Un)spoken Truths: *Ellie Loo*

by Zoë Latzer



"The activity of 'archiving' is thus always a critical one, always a historically located one, always a contestatory one, since archives are in part constituted within the lines of force of cultural power and authority; always one open to the futurity and contingency - the relative autonomy-of artistic practical always... an engagement, an interruption in a settled field, which is to enter critically into existing configurations to re-open the closed structures into which they have ossified."

-Stuart Hall "Constituting an Archive"

Situated on a dried blood-red rug with a hand-painted white cursive script is an archive of items artist Ellie Loo has accumulated over the years. *(Un)spoken Truths* takes the form of a living archive and speaks to storing memory, processing family history and trauma, and learning to document to move forward. The installation suggests a home space with a dark wooden desk, a metal chair with a ratty, ochre knit blanket, a clothing rack, and an open suitcase. A pile of postcards sits on the desk asking the viewer to please interact and engage with her work.



Ellie Loo, *(Un)spoken Truths*, 57" x 111" x 78", furniture, acrylic paint on a rug, acrylic paint on suitcase with twine and photos collected within displayed on a luggage rack, bleach on fabric clothing displayed on a valet stand, blanket on a metal folded chair, photos collectibles and books displayed on a wooden desk, all images are manipulated either digitally or by hand using ink, paint and/or scratching.

Photo credit: Nicholas Lea Bruno.



The desk drawer is stuffed full like a family's unkempt junk drawer. It contains a heap of loose photographs, handwritten short stories, letters from her mom, journals, drawings from friends, and birthday cards—and it is all open for rifling through. Atop the desk is a photo album, journal, jars, framed photographs, and books, including *The Body Keeps the Score*, by Bessel van der Kolk, in which the author discusses how trauma gets stored in the body. Sitting on the desk is an accordion-style hand-made book where Loo wrote a memory per day as a journal-like practice. Loo's installation oscillates between personal and public life through a gesture of vulnerability by sharing her archival practice and asking the viewer to become a part of the work.






A vital component of the installation is the encouragement for viewers to go through and interact with every aspect of the work, from opening jars, one containing the artist's own hair, to rifling through photographs and journals. Visitors' interaction and engagement with the archive create a public engagement with her history. Loo asks us to contemplate our position in dealing with precarity, struggle, and familial trauma.

Utilizing text and personal encryption code in her work, Loo paints enlarged handwritten letters on the suitcase and rug to a past self, a current self, and a future self. This practice is a mix between a memoir and a self-help book as it connects memory and personal healing. She utilizes both the past and future tense through letters and poetry to keep the futurity and contingency of a living archive. The rug, stained from viewers walking on it, holds the debris of those who have come before and the dust they left behind.

The writing on the rug reads:

"There is so much to be felt, said, feared, loved, thought and rarely is anything ever done for the sake of it. So, what happens to all the things left unexpressed, Do they get stronger with time until you become a ticking time bomb, waiting to spill your guts? Or do they disappear into an abyss full of regret and broken memories, never to be felt, said, feared, loved, thought, addressed or missed ever again? I wish it were as easy to deal with and consider all things similarly; Pain, guilt, regret, trauma, loss, abandonment, and all of the twisted gory details that have seasoned my life thus far. If only it were that easy to let go of or to be able to forget."



The text on the rug emphasizes the triangulation between repressed feelings, regrets of words not spoken, and dealing with trauma that last with you forever. The rug connecting the body and the cyclical nature of life and death evokes the sentiment “ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” The open suitcase represents Loo’s rootless childhood— she lived in twelve different houses and never felt like she had a home. On the outside of the suitcase, Loo includes a drawn letter to her mother in a white cursive script. On the interior of the luggage filled with photographs and letters is a blue and red written code that only Loo can read. The use of code acts as a way of separating the personal and public spheres to hide or conceal thoughts or emotions that she wants to keep private. The code began as a tool for Loo as a child to log private information and is often written in an anxious, scared, or nervous tone.

(Un)spoken Truths allows Loo to make her own archive function as a culmination of different artworks and actual objects made and amassed from her teen years through her MFA studies. Loo’s practice asks us: How do we heal? How do we begin to process, uncover, and recover? What is the archive’s role in storing memory, thinking of cultural and familial power, and our relationship to life in flux?

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Ellie Loo is an interdisciplinary artist who draws from past traumatic experiences and their impact on her identity. She focuses on the chaos within life and how trauma embeds itself into who we are.