

kupferschmidt / kupferschmid / kupferschmidte

An Exhibition of sculpture and installation

by

Jill Smith

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in

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

kupferschmidt / kupferschmid / kupferschmidte is a sculpture and installation-based thesis exhibition which uses materiality and autobiography to question the role of preservation in my life, as a Jewish woman. In this body of work, I have focused on materials related to my cultural lineage (such as copper, jewellery, and pickles), as well as those associated with preservation (including paraffin wax and glass jars). I use these to develop metaphors that demonstrate the tension I feel between the responsibility to hold on to the past and the natural desire to grow. Likewise, metaphorical containers delineate the work: tethered, suspension, and potential. These containers also serve as signifiers of time, grounding the work in a cyclical relationship through past, present, and future.

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In August 2022 I drove one hour and twenty minutes from Toronto to Kitchener-Waterloo to settle into a new environment and new studio. This was the first of many commutes back and forth that would take place during my two years as a Master of Fine Arts candidate. The work that I have created here is connected to both places physically and conceptually: I explore the anxiety I feel around time, legacies, and memory, most of which is based in my upbringing in Toronto, as well as my ancestral ties to Eastern Europe. As much of this focuses on preservation, I have an appreciation for the importance and responsibility of storytelling and education as a form of honouring the past.

I would like to acknowledge the significance of land and history in the ideation and development of my work. As I became acquainted with my new surroundings, I learned that the University of Waterloo is situated on the Haldimand Tract, which is within the territory of the Attawandaron (Neutral), Anishinaabe, and Haudenosaunee peoples. In 1784, the Haldimand Treaty was signed, which promised the Haudenosaunee peoples six miles on either side of the Grand River. Unfortunately, this promise was not honoured, and today the Six Nations of the Grand River comprise less than 5% of the land guaranteed by the Crown.

Likewise, most of my upbringing, adult life, and early art career has taken place on stolen land. Tkaronto, colonially known as Toronto, is situated on the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabe, Chippewa, Wendat and Mississaugas of the Credit. This land is part of the Dish with One Spoon wampum, in which the Anishinaabe, Mississaugas, and Haudenosaunee people made an agreement to protect the land together. While acknowledging the original stewards of this land is an important part of reconciliation, actions speak louder than words. I am cognizant that treaty agreements and promises made by colonial settlers should be upheld and not broken. While not forgetting who and what came before me, I commit to caring for the land I am on, amplifying Indigenous voices, and supporting Indigenous sovereignty.

Dedication

To my dad.

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kupferschmidt / kupferschmid / kupferschmidte

introduction

The following text introduces and expands upon my autobiographical thesis exhibition, *kupferschmidt / kupferschmid / kupferschmidte*, a reference to my last name and things lost in translation. The exhibition is an installation comprised of a series of seven sculptural assemblages, each of which are described in this support paper. *kupferschmidt / kupferschmid / kupferschmidte* is a surreal visualisation of the tension I feel between desire for self-preservation and the need for personal growth. This internal anxiety is centred on my identity as a queer, Jewish woman, conflicted by my genealogical and cultural ties to a past, as well as felt responsibility for a future. As a culmination of my time spent as a Master of Fine Arts candidate at the University of Waterloo, this work became intertwined with a few key events that occurred during this two-year period. The works in this exhibition are made with combinations of altered found materials, such as glass, jewellery chains, paraffin wax, and pickles. Explored through material symbolism and paradoxes, this body of work enabled me to question the success of, and the need for, preservation. I offer three containers:

tethered¹(to the past)

suspension²(in the present)

potential³(for the future)

¹ For the purposes of this thesis, I refer to the term ‘tethered’ in past tense and based on the Canadian Oxford Dictionary’s transitive verb definition, “[bound] by circumstances or conditions.” (Barber).

² When I use the term ‘suspension,’ I am referring to “the action of suspending or the condition of being suspended, [especially] a temporary cessation of postponement.” (ibid).

³ In this text I use ‘potential’ as both noun and adjective, defined as “capable of coming into being or action: latent,” as well as “the possibility of something developing or happening.” (ibid).

fragmentation

What do you do when you are confronted with sudden information that fractures your sense of identity and experience?

Both of my parents are second-generation Canadian Jews whose families fled from pogroms and antisemitism in Eastern Europe. My mom was born in Montreal, and my dad in Calgary – two very different Jewish experiences. Montreal has a vibrant Jewish community and my mom’s family was much more consumed by their Reform Judaism than my dad’s. While in Western Canada, my dad did not have access to much of this culture. The two met in Toronto and have been there since.

On New Year’s Day, 2023, I received a text from my mom – she had news to share with me and my sister. That night, we gathered at my parents’ home for dinner, and talked. My mom explained to us that my sister and I are not biologically related to our dad. He had been infertile, and we were conceived with two different sperm donors. She mainly spoke for him, and I could see he was uncomfortable. She continued, through tears, that none of this information changed her or my dad’s love for us.

Six days after our conversation, my Bubbie died. My paternal grandmother was a tough woman. She was not always the kindest person, but she played an important role in my upbringing. My Bubbie suffered from dementia for years, causing a slow loss of memory, as well as a loss of speech. She was my last living grandparent.

Weeks before, I had sent a vial of spit to Dublin to process my DNA. I knew a bit about my mom’s side of the family, but I was curious to know more about my paternal side. Ironically, the test would not have told me anything about my dad. What I did learn, however, was that I have at least twelve half-siblings. At the time, I pushed this information to the back of my mind to process later, yet it crept into my practice, and I found myself experimenting in ways that mirrored the absurdity and confusion that I felt.

I have used the term ‘in-between’⁴ to describe the feelings of uncertainty and liminality that have occupied me. For me, in-betweenness is a feeling that blocks me from being fully present in one moment, scenario, belief, or another. It implies a binary, but simultaneously and uncomfortably defies it. It is sometimes a feeling of smallness and sometimes a feeling of being alone. It can be alienating from within. These conflictual feelings have been compounded by the current conflicts between Israel and Palestine; making my personal journey over the past two years that much more challenging to connect with and understand where and how I fit within the Jewish cultural landscape. In response, my work reflects this emotional experience that has been complex, fraught, and overwhelming.

I feel in-between as a diaspora Jew.

I feel in-between as a bi-sexual woman.

I feel in-between as an anti-Zionist.

I feel in-between not knowing how I came to be.

My thesis work speaks to this feeling of in-betweenness. Based in materiality, process, experimentation, and play, my practice has become an outlet for self-reflection and personal dialogue about questioning preservation and authenticity, as well as inevitable change and mortality.

Preservation – for example, making pickles – feels like a paradox. While the brine elongates the lifespan of the cucumber, ensuring future sustenance, the cucumber consequently changes over time.

Is true preservation even possible?

⁴ I acknowledge that the term ‘in-between’ is a key characteristic of Homi K. Bhaba’s “Third Space,” with which he refers to the dangers of appropriation and re-historicization of peripheral identities in the context of post-colonialism (37). As a white woman of settler descent, I specifically want to clarify my use of the term, ‘in-between,’ as representative of my personal experiences with feeling as though I do not fit within the containers of my own identity.

tethered

(past)

entanglement

In 2019 my maternal grandmother died in her sleep, peacefully. We were close. She had a few years of rest after taking care of my grandfather through his struggles with Alzheimer's disease. The same day of her passing, I learned that my grandmother's jewellery was stolen, and I felt like I lost the last possible bit of physical connection I had to her. In the time between the discovery of her body and the arrival of the ambulance, someone had snuck into my grandmother's room in the seniors home and fled with her Ziplock bag, which held mementos that would have been passed down to my sister, my cousins, and myself – special and symbolic heirlooms that can never be replaced.

Jewellery consistently appears in my work as a material that symbolizes connection, memory, nostalgia, and past. It forms the basis of my work, *links and broken links* (2024), in which strands of chain cascade down the gallery wall in a shape that references a family tree (see fig. 1). Eight thin jewellery chains mounted to the wall come together like a diagram of a family tree, in repetitive, messy knots that eventually becomes a single line that awkwardly hovers a foot above the floor. I feel I am filled with connections, links still in place and links that have been broken. A short thin chain lies on the floor below the hanging work. I feel the fragility of familial connections and understand the care needed to maintain them, but I also feel conflicted by the heavy responsibility of deciding what will be passed on and what will be forgotten. These entangled relationships, past and present, are part of my own dense genealogical narrative, without which I would not be myself as I am today. Simultaneously, as a Jew, I feel an obligation and urgency to preserve elements of my ancestry.

The form of *links and broken links* also mimics the tree-like shape of a chanukiah,⁵ the ritual candelabra used to celebrate the Jewish holiday, Chanukah. Chanukah commemorates the story of the Maccabean revolt, during which the second temple of Jerusalem was saved and re-established as a place of Jewish worship. The miracle of Chanukah was that the Maccabees found just one last drop of

⁵ Many non-Jews will be more familiar with a menorah than a chanukiah. The menorah is a candelabra consisting of seven arms, whereas the chanukiah has nine arms – eight to represent the eight days of the miracle – and a middle arm to hold the *שַׁמָּשׁ* (shamash), which translates to 'helper.' The shamash candle is used to light the other candles on each night of Chanukah.

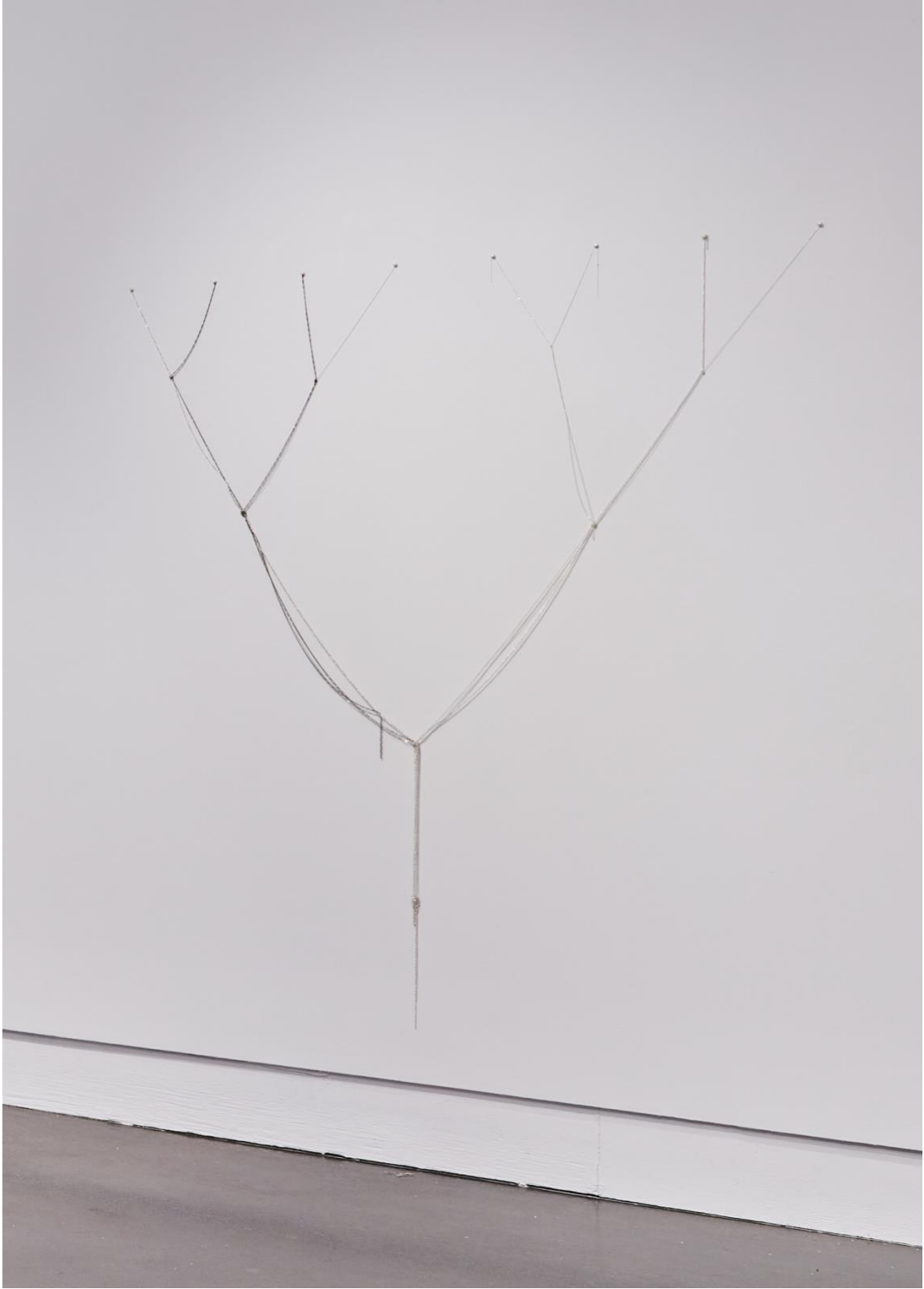


Fig. 1: Jill Smith, *links and broken links*, jewellery chain, nails, freshwater pearls, 2024. Photo: Scott Lee.

oil in the temple, yet upon lighting it, it burned for eight days. Lighting the chanukiah for eight days is a ritual that acknowledges our continuous struggle against identity-based discrimination and celebrates our collective strength and perseverance. Ursula Le Guin suggests the power of the vessel/bag/sack/container as a narrative tool (34). Rather than the violent and masculine sword or stick, Le Guin favours the bag as a gentle holder of things, a feminist approach to storytelling (30). The chanukiah, to me, is a vessel that holds this story, and, as a piece of Judaica,⁶ it preserves this narrative that is passed down from generation to generation. Sometimes the physical piece itself is also passed down. Like the chains of this curtain of jewellery, I am tethered to an identity that has been linked together through time and I cannot disentangle myself from it.

weight

for another time (1), (2), and (3) (2024) are three cardboard boxes, filled with concrete that retain impressions of jewellery embedded into each surface (see figs 2, 3, and 4). The impressions in the concrete allude to the items either existing just below the surface, or not existing at all as negative space. The sculptures function as heavy storage boxes, metaphorically opened for the first time in years. As one can see the physical weight of the concrete contents inside, these boxes serve as reminders of the emotions tied to confronting the past. Like the chains in *links and broken links*, various types of jewellery appear to be embedded into the concrete in these sculptures: strings of pearls, rings, earrings, and chains. The nostalgic element of the jewellery and the physical impression in the concrete of *for another time (1), (2), and (3)* suggest an absence. Does the jewellery exist below

⁶ Judaica refers to objects with a spiritual, religious, or cultural function in Judaism, such as a miniaturized Torah, ritual candlesticks, and challah platters. In “In the Mosaic: Jewish Identities in Canadian Performance and Installation Art,” Carol Zemel expands on how Jewish artists have used installation and performance, combined with markers of identity, such as Judaica, to communicate connection, loss, uncertainty, and desire (14-16).

the surface, or are these impressions just empty space, holding the shape of something that is no longer present?⁷



Fig. 2: Jill Smith, *for another time (1)*, concrete, cardboard, 2024. Photo: Scott Lee.

⁷ In chapter two of *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Susan Stewart elaborates on the miniature as an object that refers to a particular moment, and simultaneously transcends time and history (48). She explains that this “transcendence also links such objects to the world of the dead, the end of organic growth and the beginning of inaccessibility to the living” (57).



Fig. 3: Jill Smith, *for another time (2)*, detail, concrete, cardboard, 2024. Photo: Scott Lee.



Fig. 4: Jill Smith, *for another time (3)*, concrete, cardboard, 2024. Photo: Scott Lee.

for another time relied heavily on the processes of mould-making and casting. In my studio research, I have adopted mould-making and casting as material methodologies that preserve the physicality of a space or a thing. I am inspired by how artist Rachel Whiteread uses casting in her sculptural work, developing physical manifestations, or memories, of space and time (Bradley and Huysen 21). Like Whiteread, as I experiment with casting concrete, wax, glycerin, and glass within my own practice, I am drawn to consider how sculptural materials can metaphorically address underlying questions related to my own personal circumstances. For instance: *can the cast of an object exist as a form of preservation that retains the authenticity of the original object?* In 1993, Whiteread ambitiously and successfully cast the interior space of a house in East London in concrete, which had been set to be demolished (ibid., 22). While only a temporary public work, *House* (1993) memorialized the no-longer existing building through its material absence. Whiteread's process-based methodology made its way into my practice as a form of extending the lifespans of materials and objects, further preserving identity through things.

suspension

(present)

illumination

It is 9:22a.m., and my studio is messy with piles of different material scattered on the floor. Things are in a state of becoming and undoing, in action and pause. The scent of pickle brine drifts in and out as you move around the space. I tiptoe over bits of this and that I left the night before in a hurry to catch the bus. Almost every day I come to the studio with a plan, and somehow, every day I find a way to do the opposite – preservation sometimes has a mind of its own. Whether I am working with brine, wax, or the kiln, I am in partnership with the material and its schedule and I must adjust accordingly.

My practice is grounded in experimentation and material research which always begins with simultaneous conceptual and material questions. Every day in the studio is different. I often have multiple experiments and/or maquettes in progress at the same time. One maquette became the basis for a series of wax sculptures included in *kupferschmidt / kupferschmid / kupferschmidte*. In Judaism, candles are representative of the soul and are used in rituals, such as Shabbat, to welcome spirits inward, memorialize loved ones, and hope for the future. *timekeeper/soul (1), (2), and (3)* (2023-2024) are a set of three candle-drawing assemblages that hang on the wall of the gallery. They refer to my three suggested containers (tethered, suspension, and potential). *(1)* is embedded with a graphite drawing of a scale, *(2)* with Shabbat candle sticks, and *(3)* with an opening door (see figs 5, 6, and 7). Wicks are threaded throughout the wax, along with real and fake freshwater pearls that adorn their surfaces, marking each piece as precious. A consistent thread in the works of this exhibition is authenticity. Fake and real pearls, scattered throughout these works, become intertwined and their authenticity blurred.

The gesture of paraffin waxed preservation, a material/process historically used for food preservation, creates tension; each image is both accessible and inaccessible. For example, the graphite lines are obscured by the resulting layers of translucent wax. The suspended wick suggests the potential of each candle being lit and melted, which would expose the image. However, this risks burning the drawing in the process.



Fig. 5: Jill Smith, *timekeeper/soul (1)*, paraffin wax, cardstock, graphite, wick, plastic pearls, 2024. Photo: Scott Lee.



Fig. 6: Jill Smith, *timekeeper/soul (2)*, paraffin wax, cardstock, graphite, wick, plastic pearls, 2023. Photo: Scott Lee.

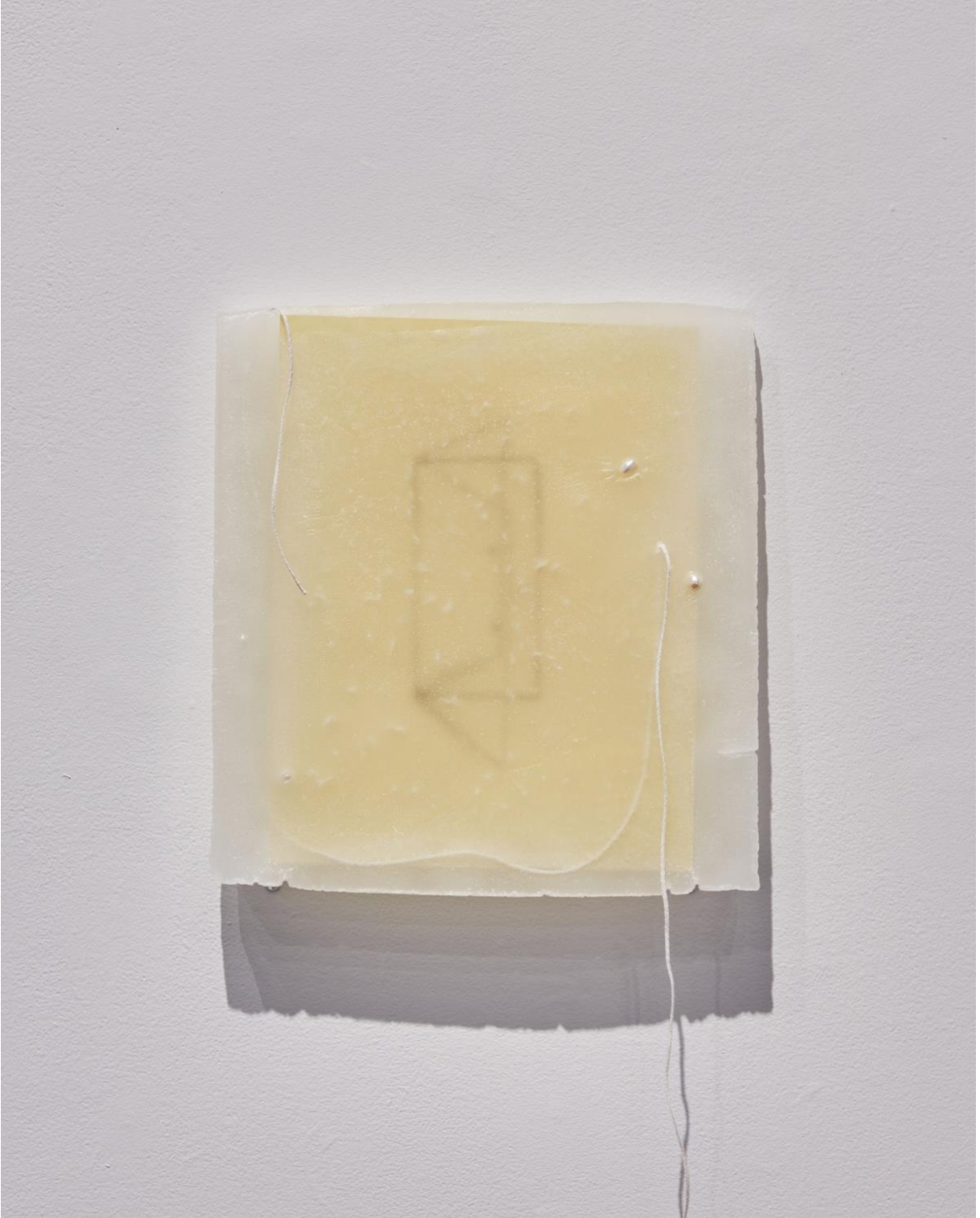


Fig. 7: Jill Smith, *timekeeper/soul (3)*, paraffin wax, cardstock, graphite, wick, plastic pearls, 2024. Photo: Scott Lee.

Assemblage is a critical element of how I work with materials. It is a methodology that first appeared with Cubism in 1914 (Assemblage). However, I also resonate with Dan Adler’s 2019 text on assemblage-based practices, “Tainted Goods,” in that my experimental approach to material is intertwined with play and testing (23). By bringing different materials together, for long or short periods of time, I work through building or breaking down material relationships, both aesthetically and conceptually; for example, how Adler’s perspective on the function of “assemblage-based sculptural practices” is integrated into *timekeeper/soul (1), (2), and (3)*, where the wax disrupts consumption of the drawings, presenting them in a way that reflects the cloudiness and uncertainty that I feel in the present. Adler writes:

Tainted goods are de-meant partially because they are assemblages that make reference to combinations of contexts in abrupt and unresolved ways: occupying a human scale and exhibiting signs of figuration, they aspire to be fully fledged characters – centred in their presentation of easily identifiable identities – but they fail to do so, coming across as flawed, faulty, and fragmented (11).

The success of the preservation of each drawing is subverted by its failure to release the image; as such, these assemblages are left in a constant state of in-between.

elongation

I feel the tension of the present, to care for and maintain my identity and that of my family while allowing myself grace and time to become my own person. My work illustrates this tension. I have come to disagree with some of the beliefs and ideas that I grew up with, which has made self-preservation feel, at times, difficult. For example, raised with Reform Jewish values, we kept kosher. Milk and meat never mixed: we had one set of dishes and cutlery for meat, and another for dairy. As I grew older, these rituals became less consistent, but the core Jewish values and sense of identity and belonging my parents instilled in me remained. For me, this was primarily cultural and spiritual, rather than religious. I attended Jewish schools from pre-school through grade eight, celebrated the High Holidays each year with family in Montreal, and spent almost every Shabbat in Synagogue. In

any case, what has remained important to me are the rituals – the blessings over the candles, the wine, the challah, and the beautiful table settings with traditional and non-traditional Ashkenazi foods.

<i>matzoh ball soup</i>	<i>kreplach</i>	<i>knishes</i>
<i>raisin challah</i>	<i>kugel</i>	<i>babka</i>
<i>chopped liver</i>	<i>kasha</i>	<i>blintzes</i>
<i>gefilte fish</i>	<i>rugelach</i>	<i>brisket</i>
<i>bagels with schmear</i>	<i>pickles</i>	<i>and more.</i>

A question I ask myself: *If change and growth are inevitable, is preservation even possible?* Fermentation is paradoxical. While we ferment foods as preservatives for future sustenance, the process transforms the contents into something new. After my parents revealed the truth of my genealogy, did I become something new? With this news, I found it incredibly difficult to focus on making art. My mind could not make sense of anything, and as a result, it went in directions that felt absurd. Pickles have been a part of Ashkenazic Jewish culture for centuries – I first introduced pickles into my practice as a nod to Jewish culture and humour. However, through my experiments, the Jewish deli pickle came to embody the in-betweenness I felt and still feel, as well metaphorically speaks to the tension between preservation and change.

hanging by a thread (2023-2024) consists of eighteen ceiling-hung sculptures: long, thin silver chains strung with plastic pearls, as well as pickles which have been crystalized and encased in layers of clear glaze, epoxy, and resin (see figs 8 and 9). Each strand is hung by a chain, which is draped over a hook in the ceiling similar to a pulley system, and precariously nailed into adjacent walls. Forming jewellery with these ‘beads’ removes the pickles from the safety and comfort of their jar. The pickles have been sealed with the glaze, epoxy, and resin, with the intention of preserving them further – a nonsensical action that reflects the absurdity I have felt. Despite these efforts, the

displacement of the pickle from its jar triggers an inevitable disintegration. While the layers of glaze, epoxy, and resin encasing the pickle slows down its decay, they ultimately do not preserve it in its ripe edible state. It is my intention that the abject quality of the glossy, discoloured, disintegrating pickles subjects the viewer to a confrontation with the tension between preservation and mortality. Just as the conditions of the pickles are distorted, so is the perception of edible desire, enabling the viewer to experience an in-between generated by the surrealist abject materiality of *hanging by a thread* (Boyd and Barenscott 15).



Fig. 8: Jill Smith, *hanging by a thread*, pickles, Krylon spray, XT-3D, resin, jewellery chain, plastic pearls, 2023-2024. Photo: Scott Lee.



Fig. 9: Jill Smith, *hanging by a thread*, detail, pickles, Krylon spray, XT-3D, resin, jewellery chain, plastic pearls, 2023-2024. Photo: Scott Lee.

Lotus Laurie Kang is another artist, whose work I feel my work is in conversation with, in how we both engage with materials and absurd presentation styles to engage in analysis of cultural traditions. Her striking use of contrasting material, often with an abject quality, and site-specificity has inspired my own experimentation (“Laurie Kang”). For example, Kang’s interest in bodies and bodily processes is reflected in her piece *Molt (2019)*, in which thin, long sheets of light-sensitive paper (unfixed and unprocessed) were draped on the floor adjacent to a light-filled window – in this case, at Oakville Galleries – producing a time-based photographic work where colours evolved through the impacts of sunlight and air (ibid.). The muted colours of these shiny skin-like film exposures are echoed in liquid-like substances contained in the steel mixing bowls of *Mother (2019)*.

I find there is a consistency in Kang’s balance between intrigue and disgust – a distorted perception of beauty. Like these mixing bowls, Kang incorporates archetypes of everyday life alongside seemingly abject materials, such as silicone, which disrupt the relationship between objects and the body (ibid.). The disorientation that Kang produces is something I try to emulate in *hanging by a thread*. The pickles, removed from the jar, hang in long strands from the ceiling that may be perceived as disorienting through the nonsensical combination of contents (pickles and jewellery) and spatial relationships (hovering in the air). Paired with the paradoxical relationship of trying to preserve something that I know cannot survive, I hope my work, like that of Kang’s, is experienced with a feeling of distorted desire.

Alongside the strands of jewellery with decaying pickles are those strung with pickles cast in glass and paraffin wax (see fig. 10). These are ghosts, imitations and copies of the real pickles that no longer exist; they are not what they once were. With the casting process, the creation of a cast is often dependent on the destruction of the original.⁸ The use of these materials was a symbolic choice, as both glass and wax are, in a sense, living materials. Wax and glass are fluid solids – they may be melted down and reused at any time. This material choice was made in opposition to the real pickles,

⁸ A corresponding example would be Rachel Whiteread’s *House* (Bradley and Huyssen 21).

that is the ability for wax and glass to be reincarnated, suggesting a cyclical process of life, death, and rebirth. While they symbolize a present past (ghost), they also imply potential and futurity.

The gallery lighting is installed in such a way that casts multiple shadows for each strand. The shadows of the pickles themselves and the criss-crossing of chains, re-enforces this messy entanglement. Alluding to memory and past, these shadow-ghosts of the physical pickles imply a life cycle: real, cast, ghost. Intentionally creating these shadows extends the repetition of *hanging by a thread*, further activating the gallery space as surreal and absurd.



Fig. 10: Jill Smith, *hanging by a thread*, detail, paraffin wax, jewellery chain, plastic pearls, 2023-2024. Photo: Jill Smith.

potential
(future)

liminality

The process of digesting new personal information while trying to make art has required much self-navigation. Like this inner processing, *kupferschmidt / kupferschmid / kupferschmidte* is intended to be experienced through a pathway which is most defined at the entrance of the gallery. *I keep telling myself there is no such thing as emptiness* (2023-2024) is a series of glass jars that appear to be melting, spilling, and folding into one another (see fig. 11). Intended to reference unpacked storage, I planned for them to sit on layers of polystyrene foam, bubble wrap, food insulation packaging, and cardboard boxes collaged on the gallery floor. During installation, it became clear that this would be a distraction from the jars themselves. I decided to place the jars directly on the floor, with a few on top of upside-down boxes and insulation foam. Some jars are lower to the ground, some are taller; some jars still retain a vessel-like shape, while others sag and fall into adjacent jars. These arrangements occupy large areas of the gallery entrance, with empty space in-between to suggest a loose walkway.

As viewers move through the space, they are welcome to kneel and examine the jars more closely. Some may even spot tiny freshwater pearls and strands of jewellery chain hidden in certain vessels (see fig. 12). By integrating jewellery and pearls into the vessels, the work moves beyond food-based preservation, including storage and expiration, speaking to my built-in anxieties around preservation in Jewish identity.⁹ Some may also spot two drawings hidden beneath the jars: one drawing is of a balancing scale, and one is a list of different variations of spelling of the name ‘Kupferschmidt’. I think of these as clues or signifiers that support a visual dialogue between the works in the exhibition. Along with these ‘clues’ are the cardboard box-concrete assemblages of *for another time (1), (2), and (3)*. Sitting amongst the jars on the floor, a directed narrative is created, suggesting a moment of searching, unpacking, or re-packing stored belongings of the past.

⁹ While my work is not about the Holocaust, this is a reference that must be acknowledged. As stated in the first chapter, I include jewellery as a signifier of nostalgia, past, and family. As Jews were rounded up to be taken to concentration camps and death camps, it was not uncommon for them to hide cherished valuables, such as jewellery, by sewing them into secret compartments in their clothing (Shallcross 2). I understand that the hidden chains and pearls in this work may be evocative of this.

The strands of *hanging by a thread* hover above some of these jars. While I have installed these assemblages as physical parameters in the gallery, the viewer has the agency to navigate the space how they wish. If the vessels are like a skin – a body – the work may be seen as a metaphor for our capacity to contain and preserve ourselves. The title, *I keep telling myself there is no such thing as emptiness*, is a nod to Zoë Sofia’s text, “Container Technologies.” Sofia’s feminist examination of containment complements Le Guin’s notions of storytelling through vessels (Sofia 182). Like Le Guin, Sofia acknowledges the lack of appreciation that containers/bags/vessels receive, especially as a “precondition of becoming” for narrative or for survival (188).¹⁰ Sofia’s analysis of containment as an active, complex process is reflected in this work, as the glass jars appear to be in varying states of becoming and undoing (193). In the slumping process, the jars have lost their ability to be sealed and to further preserve their contents. Like the jars, I feel the shape of my identity has been disrupted and my ability to preserve weakened. However, as Sofia notes, “some [jars] are [intended] for slow leakage, some for soaking up drips, others for what we hope will be permanent containment” (192).¹¹ The jars mirror the tension I feel between my ability to preserve and grow. My hope is that viewers may also experience these empty jars as possible containers for the future. Light plays an important role in Judaism as a beacon of hope, and here, light illuminates the in-betweenness of overlapping failure and potential. Light is a critical element of this work, which enables the viewer to see through the translucent jars, the twists and curves of each vessel melding into one another. Perhaps failure *is* potential, and the jars may be experienced as fruitful spaces for preservation and metamorphosis.¹²

¹⁰ Sofia’s feminist approach to containment and supply is illustrated by a range of examples including cybernetics, the environment, and the mother’s womb, all of which speak to survival (182-183). While Sofia fixates on these examples, I believe her approach can be applied to the work included in my thesis exhibition.

¹¹ This quotation comes from Sofia’s analysis of Martin Heidegger’s writing on a jug, titled “The Thing” (1971). Sofia makes note of the importance of Heidegger’s review of what may be perceived as failed containers (192).

¹² The concept of failure as potential is analyzed in J. Halberstam’s “The queer art of failure.” In his introduction, Halberstam challenges the association of queerness with failure and negativity by promoting failure as a heroic and non-conformist alternative to mainstream, heteronormative, and colonial visions of success (89). As a queer woman, I have found this text to be insightful and relatable, however, I have chosen not to expand on my queer identity as I feel that would detract from my focus on lineage and overarching in-betweenness.



Fig. 11: Jill Smith, *I keep telling myself there is no such thing as emptiness*, glass, freshwater pearls, jewellery chain, 2023-2024. Photo: Scott Lee.



Fig. 12: Jill Smith, *I keep telling myself there is no such thing as emptiness*, detail, glass, freshwater pearls, jewellery chain, 2023-2024. Photo: Scott Lee.

uncertainty

I learned that, prior to assimilating within Canada, my dad's family name was Kupferschmidt,¹³ but we did not have any documentation that confirms this spelling. I searched through Ancestry.com and other online databases to find anything that would help to understand both the spelling and my connection to my past; so far, I have been unsuccessful, leaving me in a state of limbo. What I do know is that Kupferschmidt referred to my ancestral family's trade as coppersmiths; introducing copper into my practice has allowed me to engage in a form of connection with that family. This significant consideration into my heritage further explains my artistic impulse to lyrically incorporate jeweller materials into this body of work. While it feels cyclical, I have brought back a material, an identity, from the past to help make sense of the future.

Another formative work that evolved in my studio, titled *judgement*, is a suspended scale system made of hardwood, which balances a copper-plated antique key and a murex shell (see fig. 13). The key has been over copper-plated, resulting in growths in the surface that resemble a coral reef. The key is a connection to the past and an opportunity for growth in the future. In contrast, the murex shell is like a fossil – a physical remnant of something that once lived. The shell is a nod towards an ancient Jewish ritual in which *tekhelet*, a blue dye considered mystical, was harvested for use in holy textiles (Sagiv 186). This ritual may no longer be accessible, but the opportunity to work with copper is.¹⁴ Echoed in both objects is a similar shape and a textured surface. As the key is weighed down in contrast to the light shell, the title of this work is quite literal. Much of the tension I feel between self-preservation and growth, as well as the resulting in-betweenness, is present because of my own self-judgement. This inner judgement can be related to the holiest day in the Jewish

¹³ I do not know the correct spelling of the name in relation to my family, so I will proceed to use this variation in my writing.

¹⁴ The knowledge of making *tekhelet* was lost between the 7th and 9th centuries CE. New *tekhelets* were introduced in the 1880s through the 1980s and became an emblem of contemporary Jewish Orthodox culture (Sagiv 186). It should also be noted that the colour blue has become a key symbol in Zionist Judaism, such as in the Israeli flag. In referencing *tekhelet*, I do not refer to this relationship, but rather the notion of a mystical process that exists in the past.

calendar, Yom Kippur. Our day of atonement traditionally involves fasting, prayer, and confronting the self. Here, judgement is weighed between the key and the shell – between embracing life cycles as potential, and the stagnancy of existing as a ghost of the past.

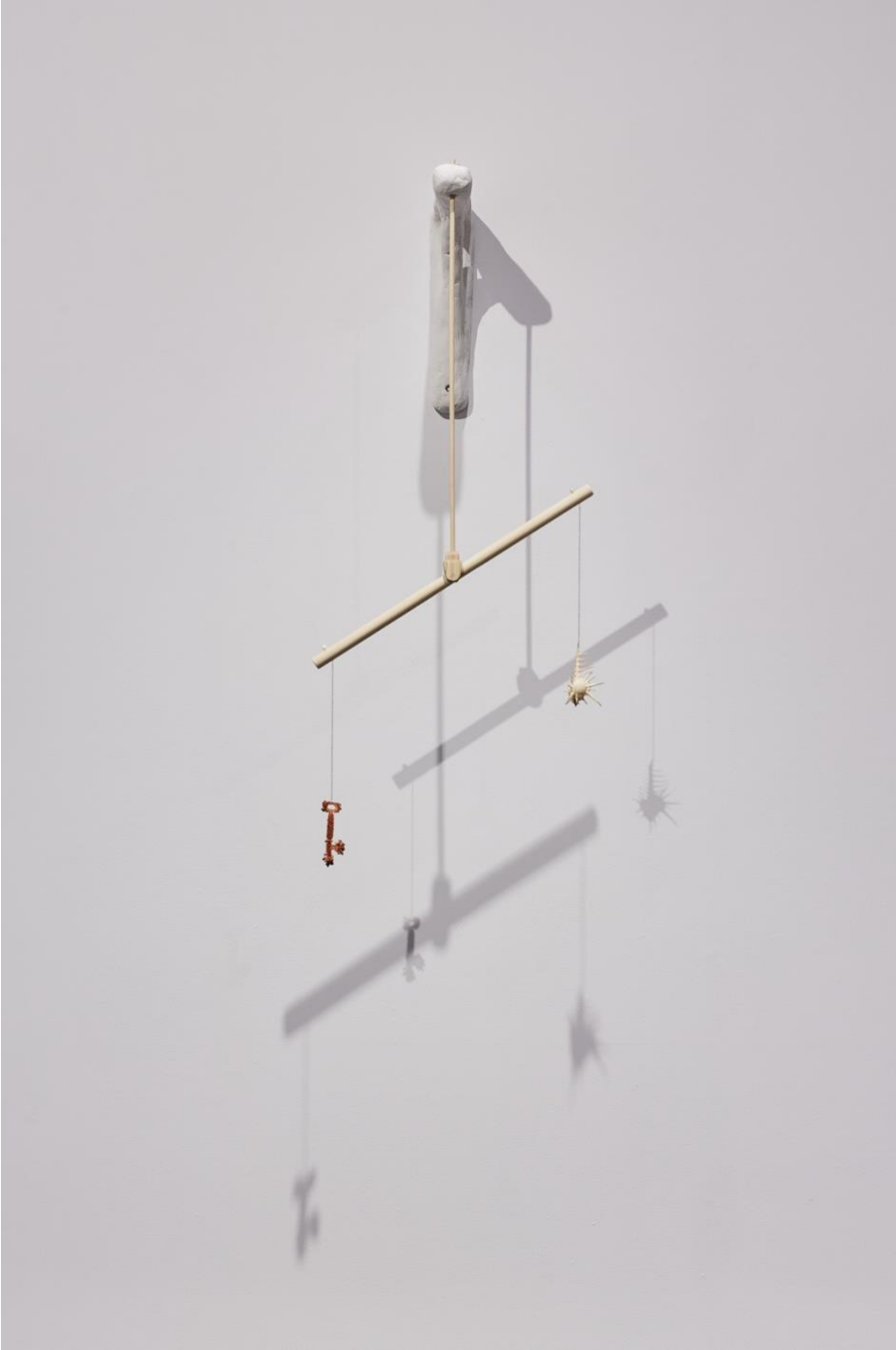


Fig. 13: Jill Smith, *judgement*, copper, murex shell, freshwater and plastic pearls, wire, various hardwood, Winterstone Sculpting Mix, 2024. Photo: Scott Lee.

A second copper-plated key can be found tacked to a large-scale sculpture, titled *untitled (open-end)* (2023-2024). The key is vibrant in comparison to the oversized primarily white sculpture, which appears to be made of a plaster-like material (see figs 14 and 15). The work may be interpreted as a portal or threshold, as the viewer passes by *untitled (open-end)* in the pathways of the gallery space. Resembling both a bed frame and a Romanesque gate, the sculpture is meant to be experienced with contrasting notions of comfort and confinement. The work is a physical manifestation of my conflicted feelings regarding my identity, which I have felt from the start of 2023 and continue to feel as I move forward. Subtly inscribed in graphite at the top of the sculpture is the Hebrew word *מת* (pronounced eh-met), which translates to ‘truth,’ ‘certainty,’ ‘honesty,’ ‘faithfulness,’ and ‘sooth’ (see fig. 16). However, if the ‘ט’ (aleph) is removed, the word becomes *מט* (met), translating to ‘dead’ or ‘death.’¹⁵

Similar to *kupferschmidt / kupferschmid / kupferschmidte* as a whole, the lightly written word reflects the fragility I feel about the future. Adjusting to a new reality of myself has required a sense of mourning. Death is a natural part of the cycle of life, but identity death is unexpected. My thesis research has taken me down a path which has led me to confront aspects of time and reflect on a reality I once thought was true. Despite experiencing loss, a new understanding of self comes with opportunity. The in-betweenness that I continue to experience is like that of *untitled (open-end)*’s sense of confinement. But like the work, I hope to find comfort in my felt in-betweenness. As I continue to grow into my own being, I am sensitive to the past and long for future comfort, while holding on to what I feel is most important. Rather than a fixed way of being, perhaps self-preservation can be re-imagined as assemblage, with fluidity and potential.

¹⁵ This work has a direct relationship to the Golem, a mythical Jewish creature created from dust. In Jewish folk and fairy tales, as well as modern day, these objects were activated through Hebrew text. The Golem of Prague, a well-known tale, was visualized with a statue of the Golem placed at the entrance to the Jewish Quarter in Prague. The rounded arch of *untitled (open-end)* has a visual relationship with the broad, rounded shoulders of The Golem (Lazarová).



Fig. 14: Jill Smith, *untiled (open-end)*, copper, graphite, Winterstone Sculpting Mix, Quickrete, plywood, Alkali Resistant Fibremesh, 2023-2024. Photo: Scott Lee.



Fig. 15: Jill Smith, *untiled (open-end)*, detail, copper, graphite, Winterstone Sculpting Mix, Quickcrete, plywood, Alkali Resistant Fibremesh, 2023-2024. Photo: Scott Lee.



Fig. 16: Jill Smith, *untiled (open-end)*, detail, copper, graphite, Winterstone Sculpting Mix, Quickcrete, plywood, Alkali Resistant Fibremesh, 2023-2024. Photo: Jill Smith.

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