

“Things You Can’t Outrun”

By

Bonnie Marin

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Abstract

My Master of Fine Art research explores emotional scars and physical manifestations associated with death and the creation of nightmares that emerge from one's experiences. Through the development of a series of sculptures, which I think of as surrealist story fragments, nightmares are revealed. I examine the psychological space of fear and loss via the surrealist strategies of metamorphosis of objects, tapping the unconscious mind, dreams, and offering clues to hidden mysteries.

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Lisa, I truly could not have done this without you.

Dedication

For Mom, Dad, and Lisa

Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Acknowledgements	3
Introduction	5
Storytelling	6
Metamorphosis	10
Tapping the Unconscious Mind	13
Clues	16
Family and Loss	20
Conclusion	26
Works Cited	28
Installation Photographs	29

Introduction

“Has anybody seen the Devil? Mephistopheles does not have a clear-cut image anymore. The iconic personification of evil has disintegrated and become absorbed into all other aspects of modern life. Hell is no longer simply a destination after death. It is within the landscape and the architecture, within our own bodies, within communities, within technology. Hell is humanity itself.”
(Gavin 6).

The artwork I have created for my thesis explores the implications of this quotation from a Surrealist perspective, and in particular focus on references to the body and everyday objects as sites for a loss of control, and a potential for abuse. Through my artistic practice, I have been interested in exploring fear and irrational thoughts by means of visual storytelling. As a society, we often create nightmares for each other. We also experience our own personal nightmares by succumbing to our fears and battling irrational thoughts by way of mood disorders or psychological trauma.

When I began my Master of Fine Art Degree at the University of Manitoba, I started keeping a journal for each project I was working on. Each journal would contain notes on historical references and research, personal notes on the intent of the artwork, drawings of what the work would look like, and lists of single words that could be used as inspiration for creating the work. Through the making of these journals I was telling myself stories of the life of the art I was making.

Reflecting my interest in storytelling I have included poetic/short story fragments alongside the images of my artwork included in my thesis. This format expands on the narrative quality of my work. I view my artistic practice as storytelling and I think of the artworks as three-dimensional surrealist short story fragments.

Storytelling

An artist who has had a strong influence on my early work is Edward Kienholz. Kienholz began working as an artist in the late 1950's and began building freestanding mixed-media assemblage sculptures such as *John Doe*, (1959) and then moved onto life-size interior tableaus such as *Roxy's*, (1961). He created sculptural assemblages using found objects, which he altered and manipulated to make them his own. The motivation behind his work was social commentary and criticism of society around him.

In *John Doe*, the combination of found objects is transformed into a suggestion that means more than its individual parts. The artist brings new concepts to the viewer about how to see the piece as a whole and how to consider the application of its materials. In the book, *On A Scale That Competes With The World*, Robert L. Pincus writes, "It is a kind of visual invective, a savage attack on the archetypal American male. Kienholz portrays his everyman as infantile: the head and torso of a mannequin rests in a baby stroller."(12). From this we learn that sculpture can be more than the traditional notions of the figure; it can be a collection of unrelated objects combined to create a new piece of art.

In my recent work, *The Oval Portrait*, an interpretation of a short story by Edgar Allan Poe, I take the idea of an assemblage further by using an overarching narrative structure as its foundation. Poe's short story centres on an artist's obsession with

painting his wife's portrait that captures the essence of her life. This obsession results in neglect and her death.



Bonnie Marin, *The Oval Portrait* - An Interpretation of a short story by Edgar Allan Poe, 2017, wood, wax, paint, doll eyes.

A black shuttered cabinet hangs on a wall. Its size seems off, usually four doors or more not only three. The black paint that covers the cabinet is dense and suffocating, a claustrophobic feeling hangs with it. Two small round knobs invite me to pull open the shuttered doors, exposing all at once what lies inside. I think the invitation from the

vertical rod that is clipped to the louvered slats offer a safer reveal. There is hesitation because I fear there is something sinister inside. I could walk away and never know what is lurking within this black box but curiosity dares me. I reach out and gently move the vertical rod upwards being careful not to accidentally jerk the door open. Inside the darkness obscures the interior and I'm not really sure what I am seeing. Is it eyes? I reach for the second pull rod and slowly move it up, more light comes in and now I see they are eyes staring back at me. But it's not just eyes there is also a texture. Now I have to open the cabinet so I grip each rod, I quickly pull the release and jump back as far as I can without falling over myself. Is that skin stretched around those eyes? It's pink, and blue and translucent and opaque with drips of red and pink streams flowing in all directions. Its beautiful yet repulsive at the same time, it feels alive. It is enticing me to reach out and touch it. My hand cautiously skims the surface, its cold, its smooth and bumpy and does feel like skin. I run my fingers across the eyes, they don't flinch when I touch them but I think they could.

The sculpture I have created is her portrait from the story. The new development in artistic process with this work is that I have edited the story down to its component elements: her eyes and her flesh. The cabinet (frame) becomes her tomb. The shuttered doors obscure our view of her just as her husband's obsession obscured his view.

Before coming to the University of Manitoba, my work was often about creating a full stage, or scenes with many complex parts. Kienholz was also an influence in this aspect because his life-sized works were three-dimensional narratives. For instance, looking at Kienholz's work further, his tableau *Roxy's* depicts a brothel in an

unfamiliar scenario. Instead of an energetic and sexual theme, he exposes a hidden element that is the pathetic and depressive nature of this setting:

Upon entering *Roxy's*, the viewer is greeted by a Madame who establishes the oppressive and morbid ambience of the tableau. She is simply a wigged boar's skull, attached to a propped-up dress-form and placed on a pedestal. As the aged prostitute, she confronts us as a graphic juxtaposition of the dead dressed up in the clothes of the living; she is an assembled metaphor for death in life. (Pincus 26)

Roxy's is a complex tableau made up of figure after figure, each telling their own sad story through their physical appearance and each figure adds to the collective story of the brothel. It is this narrative aspect of his work, the telling of stories with a strong sense of place and emotion, and giving a voice to the lonely, displaced, and rejected people in society, that inspired my work. This inspired me to make work that deals with various aspects of human emotions that explore fears and anxieties. My artistic journey while at the University of Manitoba has involved distilling each element of a tableau into strong, singular pieces. The individual works I have created stand on their own as powerful evocative works, but also function together as a collective to form a narrative.

Metamorphosis

Various Surrealist artists, such as Rene Magritte, Max Ernst and Alberto Giacometti have long influenced me. For Surrealist artists, there is a fine line between dream and reality, the conscious and the unconscious: "I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*, if one may so to speak" (Breton 14). Dreams can be thoughts of illogical scenes that may turn into nightmares, playing with the balance between life and death, and what is real and not real. Dreams offer us the possibilities of unexpected mutations and metamorphosis, and these qualities of Surrealism lend themselves to the nature of my work.

I view the sculptures I make as a metamorphosis not just by transforming old objects and materials into new artworks but also by transforming inanimate objects into suggestions of the body. The body is a subject that has always been an important element of my artwork. I have been able to expand and explore the expression of the physical and animal in the work for my thesis.

I am interested in metamorphosis as a representation of the life cycle and the inevitability of death. The body undergoes its own metamorphosis and eventually dies. This process of change encompasses the experience of living, and mortality - everything that is associated with dying.

In my work, the objects that I create experience a process of metamorphosis across the life cycle, and particularly dying, where a spike becomes an erratic pulse that surges into a heart attack. A spike becomes a finger: not through realistic mimicking,

but through abstract elongated forms. These same elongated forms are also nerves, and pulses of blood flowing through veins and limbs. A process of metamorphosis - from wood, to spike, to body - creates the art just as the human body goes through a metamorphosis over its entire life until death.

My sculpture *The Sacred Heart (Attack)* started with a story idea based on the experience of many who suddenly become ill and find religion in hopes of surviving their illness. The *Sacred Heart* is a traditional religious symbol of Jesus shown holding his heart in his hands as a symbol of love for humanity (Batoni). I am interested in this iconography to depict the metamorphosis from a sacred object to an object out of control with transformative power. The *Sacred Heart* becomes the *Sacred Heart (Attack)*. It moves from a sentiment, to something in the physical world as a heart attack. Instead of love there is crisis. Hundreds of delicately carved spikes come together as a congested group of nerves and panic.



Bonnie Marin, *The Sacred Heart (Attack)*, 2016, wood, paint.

*Long spikes surrounding tiny spikes
Cold but not cold to the touch
Pink spikes: elongated fingers of Christ? Only in prayer not in reality
Red spikes: a slowly fading pulse, too faint to be heard*

The sculptures in my thesis have been made from a variety of source materials incorporating both found objects and handmade objects. Some of the materials I use include wood, wax, tools, and utilitarian household objects. In the same way that the meaning of *The Sacred Heart (Attack)* has evolved, the materials that I've use to create the art have also evolved.

Spruce planks are pushed through the spinning blade of a table saw, 3/4" of an inch is the space between the blade and the saw guard, the planks become long sticks, 6ft and 8ft long then chopped down to various sizes, anywhere between 2inches and 2 feet. Then the sticks become carved spikes, hundreds of spikes now becoming fingers poking, pointing, pushing, stopping, killing. The spikes become nerves, unsettling, chilling, panicking, and dying. Spikes become weapons, puncturing, ripping, tearing, and killing. Spikes become memories slowly being pulled from the body and from the brain, and spikes become loss.

Wax mixed with paint becomes skin. Covering multiple doll eyes hiding underneath the wax and behind shutter doors with handles. Handles, doorknobs, and hand cranks are all inviting the viewer to turn, touch, and open – to be interactive with the art - it's about life and death and about participating in life and death.

Rusty saw blades, combined with new saw blades manipulated to look rusty for a feel of age and neglect, once used to cut into wood to build and create things we need are now have the capacity to threaten and destroy. Old hand tools also used for creating and building are now meant for slaughtering animals, and not in a humane way but in a cruel and tortuous way. Rusty and old objects suggest of ideas of decay. Objects shed their history of their original purpose; now begin their new

sinister purpose. Spikes become weapons, wax and paint become skin, objects become bodies, and their metamorphosis is complete.

Tapping the Unconscious Mind

Surrealism supports a process of discovery by the viewer to conceive the meaning of artwork as more than what is on the surface, where meaning shifts, and one thing symbolizes another. In Gaeton Picon's book *Surrealists and Surrealism*, he comments that one characteristic of Surrealism is that it allows the viewer "through verbal or pictorial expression, to tap those resources of the mind which are capable of giving life another meaning" (116). This statement is integral to my work and process. I aim to tell open-ended stories through the objects that I create, non-linear stories without a beginning, middle, or end. I am interested in the viewer deciding how to arrange the story and coming up with his or her own conclusions, in order to tap their mind's resources in finishing the story.

My sculpture *The Red Room* is based on a short story by H.G. Wells. It is a horror story that tells the tale of a mysterious room that takes the life of anyone who enters it. I was interested in foregrounding the story of my artistic process by starting with an actual short story as inspiration.



Bonnie Marin, 2017, wood, paint, *The Red Room (a panic attack)* Inspired by a short story by H.G. Wells

The *Red Room* is a room full of menacing spikes emanating from both floor and ceiling. The room sits atop carved legs suggesting that the piece is actually a figure, some kind of living being; and the upper portion, the room, is the mind. In this work I wish to tap into the unconscious mind of the viewer. The mind is racing with anxiety and nervous energy, thereby mimicking the story's protagonist. Here the character cautiously enters the room intent on debunking its myth.

There is a fabled room of death. Its history suggests that those who enter might never exit alive. Victims are so frightful that they may fall dead before even stepping foot into the room. Images created from the light from many candles form spike-like shadows that run with fury across the walls and floor. The room is fear, the fear is panic, the catalyst of death, and the journey to death has begun.

Panic begins from the middle of the brain, it snaps and the symptoms begin, heat rises from the body's core pushing outward, limbs start to shake, breathing and heart rate escalates, and thoughts burn hot, a cold sweat ripples over skin. Every nerve is alive. The walls of the box, that your body is trapped inside, are suffocating - escape is hopeless and death is imminent. You must escape the box or you will die. Your mind wonders, "what is happening?... this can't be real, make it stop, leap out of the box and escape that room!" In order to survive you must escape the box but your mind won't let you. Your mind constantly keeps reminding you of the fear of the room; your fear won't let you go. The cycle of fear is constant and it chains you to the box inside the room inside your head.

I think of *The Red Room* as a visual representation of psychological space. It is an invitation to the viewer to enter and experience the strong personal emotions available to them. They are led somewhere without certainty, without conclusion. The viewer's journey through the artwork is possible because they are freely encouraged to access their unconscious minds.

My sculpture *The Red Room* was inspired by *The Palace at 4 a.m.* (1932) by Alberto Giacometti. This sculpture is minimal in construction yet very suggestive with meaning and includes a spine, a female figure, and a skeletal bird. The viewer is free to create any luxurious, horrific, simplistic, or personal story about anything they want inside this palace. Just as Giacometti has invited the viewer into *The Palace at*

4 a.m., I am inviting the viewer into *The Red Room*. The beauty of Surrealist sculpture is that the unconscious mind is encouraged to emerge.

Clues

“As if some god, visiting them in their sleep, arousing that “power within them which they did not know was there” (Aragon) thereby released them from the outer world and the common circumstances of time. While these images floating before the half-awakened sleeper ... they were at once perceived as utilizable, as capable of forming a sequence.”
(Picon 12)

I have often had strange and powerful dreams that I couldn't fully explain. At one point, I realized that if I took the time to analyze these dreams I would find that sometimes a word, or an image, would enter my mind during the day and would manifest itself in my dreams that night. I found this very compelling: just the hint of something as fleeting as a word or a quick glimpse of an image could have so much power over the subconscious mind. My subconscious mind gives me clues to the mysteries of my dreams; I put the clues together to make sense of my dreams. I use this same approach of using clues when I make a work of art.

Surrealist artist Rene Magritte's work has had a big influence on the way I work in relation to my visual storytelling and visual language. In his book, *Surrealists and Surrealism*, Picon describes Magritte's work as set apart from the other Surrealists, “he combines incongruous elements and reveals the strangeness lurking behind the most familiar things... Sometimes this incongruity functions with a certain

gratuitousness, as an unspecified clue to a mystery” (144). For me this process of hinting is a fascinating means of visual storytelling.

The potential for mystery and use of clues in creating Magritte’s art is expressed further in *Magritte: The True Art of Painting* by Harry Torczyner, who suggests that once the unconscious mind has been tapped and the dream-state exists, the mind is free to discover and accept mystery: “Freedom of thought alert to mystery is always possible if not actually present, whatever the nature of the possible: atrocious or attractive, mean or marvelous. It has power to evoke mystery with effective force. (Magritte)” (66). Looking at Magritte’s art, he challenges me to think for myself, find my own way, guiding me through the journey of his art while I contemplate the strange objects within his paintings. The mystery and clues that he offers are tools that I can use in the process of advancing a story.

The Butcher Block is a piece in which I leave clues for the viewer. For me, the work is a symbol of death. A butcher block is a very ordinary utilitarian object used at butcher shops. I have animal fur attached to the legs as a clue, because it does not normally belong on this object. The idea of butchering a piece of meat on this table isn’t enough to recall that the animal was once alive. The fur connects the viewer to the experience of the animal before its death because one can be disassociated from a chunk of meat but not as easily from the reality of the fur. The fur is a real physical part of the animal’s body.

In my thesis project, I am also interested in telling the story of the death of animals. The animal becomes an object just as the table it is slaughtered on is an object. We

don't consider the animal any more or any less than we consider the table. There is loss and pain. Once the animal is consumed its story has disappeared.



Bonnie Marin, *The Butcher Block*, 2017, wood, fur

Find a large and sturdy tree and chop it down. Strip off the bark and run the tree through a saw. Take the cut pieces of wood carve out the shapes that are needed. Four pieces for the legs, and twenty pieces for the tabletop. Glue and laminate the wood for the top to the desired size then attach the legs. Sand down the wood making it smooth and free from splinters. Apply edible oil over the entire surface of the tabletop. It is now ready to be used. A well-built butcher block will last a forever.

Find a large and healthy animal and kill it. Strip off the fur and the skin and run the animal through a saw. Take the trimmed carcass and butcher it into the meat cuts that are preferred. Throw away any parts of the animal that may not be desirable to eat. Wrap the pieces of meat and store away for future use. Repeat as many times as wanted.

Another example of my artwork that uses the idea of giving clues to the viewer is *Butchery Tools*. This is an artwork made up of twenty repurposed utilitarian hand tools. Take for example the scythe, a farming tool with a long, curved metal blade attached to a long wooden handle, used for cutting vegetation such as grass or wheat. As a repurposed object the metal blade is gone and is replaced with a long curved tubular wooden spike adorned with multiple tiny wooden spikes, resembling a weapon. No longer practical for use on plant life, the spikes are a clue to a more devious purpose, as the name *Butchery Tools* suggests.



Bonnie Marin, *Butchery Tools*, 2016-17, wood, metal, paint, various sizes

Old wooden tools from the 1930's found abandoned in a run-down barn. Some of the tools were once used for carpentry, drills and saws, while others had a life devoted to farming, a brush for horses, and a scythe for reaping

crops. Tools to help daily existence be a little easier at a harsh time to live. Years of demanding use followed by years of neglect have left these tools with a time worn patina. Wooden handles are carved with cracks and full of splinters while metal blades are chipped and browned by rust. What use are they now? But someone with a resourceful mind can repurpose these tools and give them a new life. Remove some blades and add some spikes, flesh-toned spikes, some long, some short reminiscent of fingers. The tools become an extension of the user. They look medieval almost tortuous but they are beautiful objects. What is their purpose now?

The Butcher Block and Butchery Tools confront death in the subtext of the killing and slaughtering of animals and how most people never give the idea of death in this circumstance much thought. But death, no matter whom or how it happens, is still difficult and filled with traumatic emotions. I have always been sensitive to the emotions surrounding death and have been mindful of damage that is inflicted onto others, human or animal. This sensitivity began for me at an early age and was intensified with the loss of my mother.

Family and Loss

I have always been afraid of dying. This fear began for me as a small child around the age of five. I was afraid of the dark and suffered from night terrors. Anything could be hiding in the dark and I was afraid of my room and I was afraid to be alone. It was from my fear of being alone that my fear of death arose.

Many people in my family were religious and talked about an afterlife so my thoughts were that after I died I would still be alone, but alone in an unfamiliar place. I thought this because in my mind nobody I knew had died. This fear caused me great anxiety for years and I needed to find a way to calm my fear.

*A little girl discovers that she has died.
She has to travel to the other side,
It's dark and scary, she is all-alone
no one is there to bring her to her new home.
No one she remembers has died
no one is there to be her guide.
Now she is lost and wanders and cries
how long will she wait until someone she knows dies?
At seventeen her grandmother died
she now had her guide
no longer alone
she is finally safe in her new-found home.*

Through the years, other family members died, and with each death I asked myself more questions about the feeling of loss, grief, helplessness, and mourning. These feelings were never more important to me than when I suffered the loss of my mother. She was only sixty-two years old when she died. She had suffered anxiety and depression for most of her life and then one day she decided that she had had enough and chose to stop the pain. With this one single event my life changed in a way that I could never have imagined. *Coffin/Cradle* is the story of a family's loss of an infant but it is also emblematic of my fear of death, (which haunted me as a child) as well as the reality of my mother's death.

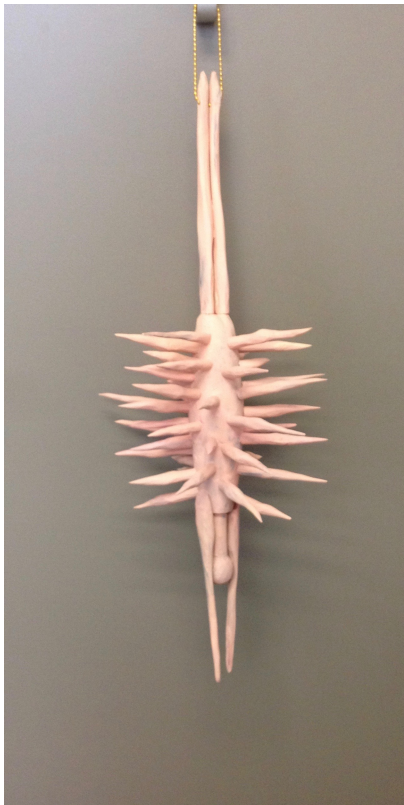


Bonnie Marin, Coffin/Cradle, 2017, wood, metal, collage.

Coffin/Cradle

In December 1941 a man and woman, excited in the anticipation of the birth of their child, built a cradle out of wood. This would be the baby's new intimate resting place, the baby's place of comfort and peacefulness. A place of joy, a place to watch the baby smile and cry and to be everything a baby should be. The parents had a joy unimaginable to anything they had ever felt before. A few weeks after their daughter's birth, she died in her sleep. What was joy? It was gone, ripped out from the core. The joyous cradle must now become a coffin, as the grieving man and woman had nothing else to give. Joy becomes a nightmare; rusty jagged saw blades tearing through delicate flesh and soft bones.

For many years, it was hard for me to come to terms with the fact that my mother's death was a suicide and not an accidental overdose. I didn't want to believe this was possible because I couldn't accept that she could she leave us in this way. I was angry with her for a long time, but my anger was a selfish emotion as I realized this was the only way she felt she could deal with the mental pain she had suffered all of her life.



Bonnie Marin, *The Melancholy Woman*, 2016, wood, metal, paint.

*What you must have gone through
For the end to come like this
Nightmares that grabbed your thoughts
And chased you all those years
I hope you found the simple peace
That eluded you for life, and
Never mind what Thomas said,
Do go gentle into that good night*

Children always expect their parents to be there for them when they are needed, there to comfort and protect. With the loss of my mother I felt that that part of my security was gone. I only had my father to rely on.

A few years ago, my father was diagnosed with dementia. For the first few years he was managing well and was able to live on his own, but suddenly his health began to deteriorate and he had to be placed in a nursing home. As I watched the decline in my father's health I began to prepare myself for the inevitable. I thought that because he is ill and that he probably doesn't have much time left, that his eventual death may be easier to cope with than was the sudden death of my mother.

Just recently he suddenly became very sick with an unexpected illness and wasn't expected to live. I realized that I was wrong about death being easier to cope with when you know it's coming. Death, whether expected or unexpected, is still a loss that is followed by feelings of grief, helplessness, and mourning. The harsh reality that both of my parents would be gone left me feeling like I was about to fall into a pit of solitude. His illness has him in palliative care and his dementia is getting worse, his memory almost gone.

The figure in *The Hanging Man* is a metaphor for my father's dementia. The body represents the injured brain; it is torn apart and placed back together with wires and hooks. The head, arms, and legs, are replaced with long carved spikes, which are the memories that are fading away, and slowly being pulled from the mind and the body.



Bonnie Marin, *The Hanging Man*, 2017, wood, metal, paint.

The Hanging Man

Many years ago, there was a little boy, his family was poor, they lived in a dilapidated shack on a farm and did what they had to in order to survive. The little boy had to quit school by grade five so he could work the farm; he learned how to take care of himself and his family. He lived many adventures including surviving a plane crash during a blizzard. To survive he dug a cave in the snow and lived there for three days until the storm stopped. He was a survivor. He worked hard all of his life. One night his life changed forever. A head injury left him in a coma for days and when he finally awoke he would never be the same. Dementia would be the prize at the end of the concussion.

Memories are long until we can't hold them anymore, then they become scattered bits and pieces. The pain you feel is the only thing that lasts.

Conclusion

When I was a child and I thought about what I wanted to do with my life as an adult, I decided I wanted to tell stories and make art. Having a limited talent for writing, I became an artist. Through my exposure to art and art history I realized I could tell stories visually.

Surrealist strategy underlies all my artwork and continues to allow me to tell these stories about fear, loss of control, and death, in a provocative way. Using strategies of Surrealism like metamorphosis of objects, tapping the unconscious mind, dreams and clues to hidden mysteries, enables my artistic expressions to be realized.

I explore the theme of the body in my artwork and incorporate a metamorphosis of the objects I use as their initial meaning evolves.

I have also undergone a transformation through my two-year journey in the Master of Fine Art program at the University of Manitoba. I discovered that I am able to tell the stories I need to better with a more economical use of imagery. My work has undergone its own metamorphosis, from staged, complicated scenes in the past to minimal suggestions of the story I wish to narrate at present. I have also exposed the personal side of my work by discussing ideas that I once thought taboo, and now I am able to reveal my vulnerability as exposed in my artwork, to the viewer. This journey has been challenging but cathartic and has strengthened my ability as a visual storyteller.

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Installation Photographs



















