

*Two
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days*

a solo exhibition by Bryana Bibbs
curated by Elise Butterfield

Chicago Cultural Center
February 1, 2025–May 18, 2025

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Chicago Cultural Center, 78 E. Washington St., Chicago, IL 60602

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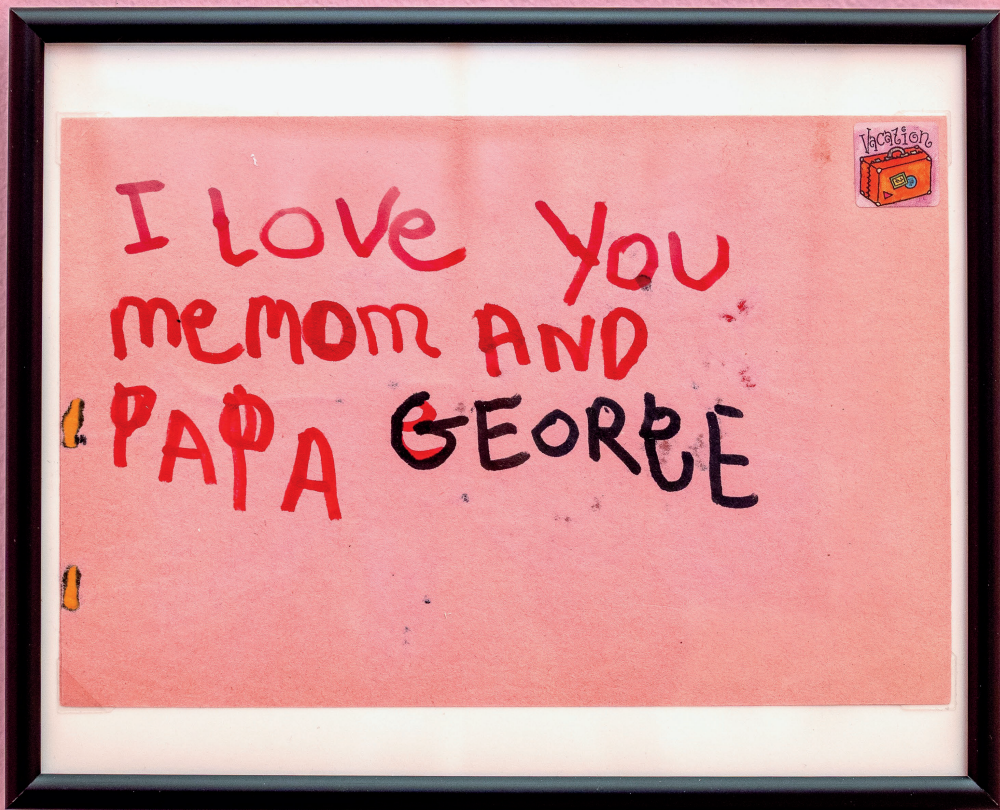
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Witness

by Erin Toale



Portals, weavings, and prints guide us through the grief-stricken days between the deaths of Bryana Bibbs' maternal grandparents: George Edward White (Papa George) 1/9/1937–12/18/2023 and Jean Harlow White (Mema, born Layne) 2/18/1939–8/25/2024. The artist, their only grandchild, transforms everyday objects into multi-dimensional archival memorials through painstaking processes. The three spaces of the exhibition provide windows into the family's intertwined, intergenerational final days together, and the roughly eight months that elapsed between the elders' transitions.

The intense bond between Bryana and her grandparents is reflected here through exhaustive undertakings that catalog the trappings of their shared experiences. The exhibition is loosely organized along parallel paths: George, an athlete, commandeers the left side with playing cards and bright tennis-ball-green, while Jean flows through the right in her signature pastel pink (Sherwin-Williams 6575: Priscilla) revealing a life dedicated to caring for her home and family with acts including cooking, sewing, gardening, and decorating. "Priscilla Pink," ubiquitous in the family home's hallways and living/dining areas, welcomes viewers into the expansive halls. These ancestors took pride in appearances; maintaining active lifestyles alongside a warm and welcoming home. Bryana's elegiac practices exhibited here echo the way she was loved in this environment by these individuals: by administering attention and acts of service—now applied in remembrance and memorial.

To the left of the entrance are seven plush pink weavings: scale reproductions of the original seven windows on the facade of the familial home. To the right, the title wall of the exhibition is rendered in a commissioned font. Designer Tanner Woodford based the font on Haydena, which adorns the exterior of Mema's urn. The thread-like script echoes the warmth of the pink walls and sumptuous weavings in the first room: the viewer is embraced by Mema's care. The final work in the exhibition is the most recent weaving from Bryana's *Journal Series* made from Mema's belongings; bookending the narrative with a resin-dipped rose from her October 2024 memorial dinner. Bryana writes: "I feel like nothing is off-limits in regards to what can be woven into a piece" (Bibbs, email to author, Oct. 30, 2024).

The middle gallery features an archive in the round of pressure-print monotypes made at Anchor Press, Paper & Print (AP3), a community-based printmaking studio in Milwaukee, WI. The prints are ghostly apparitions, embodied objects including athleisure clothing items revealing vigorous and lively individuals. Also represented here are detritus directly associated with death and dying: hospital gowns, assistive devices, and bibs. Bryana takes care to preserve the dignity of her subjects even in these anthropomorphized objects. The ephemeral apparitions honor the full cycle of birth, life, and death, and the various, ever-evolving stages of caretaking (and caregiving). The prints are monochromatic and the sources threadbare as a requirement of how it was printed; anything too thick risked harming the floor etching printing press at AP3. Printmaking, like life, is fragile.

Secular sorrow is often driftless, but Bryana is organized and direct here—creating compositions and order out of grief's messy chaos, disorder, and despair. The meditations on loss displayed are evidence of what curator Elise Butterfield calls "the transformative potential of grief" (Butterfield, exhibition description, 2025). These memorials quantify mourning (through, for example, daily rows of warp and weft) while also offering insight into two long, beautiful lives: lives full of trips to Disney World, card games, home cooking, and eternally-blooming flowers. Bryana explains:

My grandparents' passing has shifted my work completely. It's always been about archiving, documenting, and processing emotions, but now that I am incorporating objects that my grandparents used, the series is now about my processing of grief and witnessing my mother losing her parents in the house she grew up in. (Bibbs, email to author, Oct. 30, 2024)

To mourn is to bear witness to someone's life as well as their death. This collection of objects is neither a celebration nor an overt lament; it is a series of observations that range from grand gestures to minutiae. Bryana's three-dimensional scrapbook ends with a well-loved pink blanket and the show's only photograph: the artist as a girl of ten, c. 2000, pictured with domestic textiles and decks of cards featured throughout the show. The simply framed photo of a smiling child evokes feelings of youthful glee and innocence; the clock resets and the cycle of life begins anew. In these bodies of work, Bryana celebrates her late grandparents through ritualistic visual record-keeping that will keep telling their stories until the very end.

