

Holding On or Letting Go: a journey to release

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Abstract

Holding On or Letting Go: a journey to release is a sculptural series of five art pieces which visually explore the process of letting go of ideas and memories that prohibit growth. In each of the five pieces the organic wood represents the self or individual, while the inorganic metal depicts the detrimental thoughts which need to be relinquished. I use the contrasting qualities between the organic and the inorganic to suggest the release of negative emotions that are not part of oneself. Letting go is the inner action that stops the resisting. My mind is often filled with images of what I should look like, what kind of career I should have or hurtful words that linger with me. Creating this work has helped me shed some of these images. Now instead of resisting, when I feel stress bubbling up over something that in the big scheme of things really isn't that important, I repeat the mantra, "just let it go." *Holding On or Letting Go*: a journey to release is the visual translation of that inner action.

Introduction

Depression and anxiety are common and serious illnesses that effect productivity, functional status, physical health and quality of life. According to the Center for Disease Control, between 1988–1994 and 2007–2010, the use of antidepressants increased more than four times from 2.4% to 10.8% in use among adults 18 and over. Studies have shown that letting go of unhealthy thoughts, desires or memories have multiple benefits such as healthier relationships, stronger immune systems, lower blood pressure, less stress, anxiety and hostility, fewer symptoms of depression, improved heart health and higher self-esteem. For this reason I wanted to create sculptures which helped people visualize this process and actively participate in it.

Three sculptors who influence my work in general, but particularly for this series are Dame Barbara Hepworth, Constantin Brancusi, and Claire Morgan. All three artists work with the ideas of space and mass and have the aesthetic quality I am drawn to.

Dame Barbara Hepworth believed there is an inside and an outside to every form. Occasionally, they are linked with threaded string. The strings open up space without volume. In her piece *Wave* 1943-44, she uses mathematic organization of strings to reveal the direct contrast of her organic form. Here, she explores inner and outer shapes in order to free the form. The oval shape gives a sense of place. The strings give a sense of a movement. I used the influence of Hepworth for my biomorphic form and sense of intimate space.

Constantin Brancusi had the ability to grasp the reality hidden under outer appearances. He believed objects had souls and wanted to bring this soul out in his sculptures. In *Bird in Space* 1919, it was not the feathers and beak of the bird he captured; it

was the flash of spirit. I took from Brancusi his ability to capture just the essence of letting go through simple abstract forms.

Claire Morgan uses space to depict mass. She concentrates on the relationship to nature through the passage of time and ideas of change while using thousands of suspended individual items to create an apparent solid structure. Unlike Brancusi and Hepworth, however, she uses realistic objects, usually a taxidermied animal within the suspended objects to tell a story of the relationship of the space and object. In her installation *Gone to Seed*, she displays thousands of thistle seeds with a taxidermied carrion crow falling through the seeds. It gives the viewer a sense of falling through the air as the crow appears to be doing. I used her depiction of space and movement to represent the idea of letting go, but do so with abstract forms not realistic ones. All three artists have impeccable craftsmanship and an incredible aesthetic I will continue to strive to emulate.

Project Design

After researching ideas about letting go and studying the aesthetics of those who influence me, I began each sculpture with pinpointing the part of the journey I wanted to express. I made drawings in my sketchbook and continuously refined the image. I began looking for materials which best represented this process and settled on using organic pieces of wood to represent the self or individual and inorganic metal to show the detrimental thoughts which need to be relinquished.



The first piece in this series is *Abide*. Here I depict the feeling of holding on to something that is debilitating. *Abide* is a two foot tall piece of cottonwood carved into a teardrop shape with aluminum cast into it. The metal creates a heavy cold mass in the center, again representing the harmful object. It darkens everything around it, cracking and stressing the wood. Fractures start appearing on the polished outward appearance. The definition of abide is to accept or bear someone or something bad or unpleasant. This is what we do when we grasp tightly to this negative emotion.

My second piece is *Entangle* and represents the next phase of this journey. It is a small spruce root with pewter cast in the junctions of the wood. Often good memories or feelings get tangled up with bad ones and trying to separate them becomes difficult. The metal is so entangled with the wood that the wood seems to be strangled. The center has a reflective disc reminding us that we often see ourselves in these hurtful elements, but it is actually just a distorted reflection.

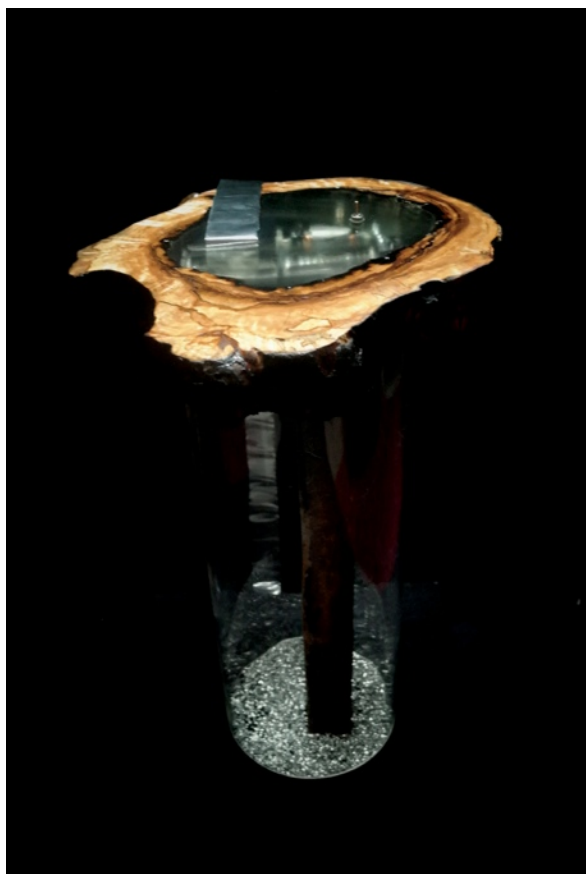




My third sculpture is Release. I spotted a hollowed out old birch log and noticed there were upward lines within the wood that mimicked my vision of release. I photographed the log and began sketching loose drawings of how I wanted the finished sculpture to look. After removing the bark, I slowly started taking away sections of the wood. I often had to implement the idea of “letting go” even as I worked as some of the wood had dry rot, and I had to detour from my original design. After the desired shape and finish were finally obtained I used a ladle to pour molten pewter directly into the naturally created spaces on the inside of the log. I’ve found that one way of releasing these bad feelings is by breaking down the pieces into smaller elements. A way of sorting through and keeping those things that bring love, joy and happiness, and letting go of

those things that bring sadness, pain, and fear. If a family member throws a hurtful comment at you. You don’t just decide they are hurtful, and you are no longer going to let them in your life. You deal with the thing that caused the hurt and get rid of that, not the whole person. These negative emotions have now moved from a solid core mass, to a tangled mess and are now slowly starting to release because they are beginning to get separated out.

Shred is the fourth piece in this series. Identifying the unhealthy element and putting it into words is often the hardest part because words so often can’t convey the whole feeling, but sometimes even just putting down some of the words help. In my piece *Shred*, I invite the viewers to do just that. It is an interactive piece where you can engrave the things you want to release on metal and then get rid of it by putting it through a shredder. The metal goes through the last piece of hollow wood releasing it from the self and into a clear acrylic tube.





This sculpture flows into the next where the viewer can see these negative emotions releasing into the air. In the final piece, *Let Go*, there is no wood, no self, it is just all the bad stuff let go. *Let Go* is made up of thousands of shredded pieces of aluminum suspended from acrylic string nine feet into the air releasing from a smaller clear acrylic tube.

Results

This sculpture series project accumulated into an art show at the Kimura Gallery, April 27th - May 1st 2015, entitled *Release: the art of letting go*. During opening night at least 100 people came through the doors with many more throughout the week. I talked with many of the viewers and discussed the idea of release and it's effect on overall health. I can not say what the impact of this show was on the individual viewer, but the idea was discussed and brought to attention.

So many of the hard decisions and challenging moments in life come down to holding on or letting go. When is it time to let your children go and have more freedom? Should I hold on to them and still protect them? When is it time to let go of those memories from the past? Isn't it said the only way the deceased can continue is in our memories?

My life consists of my family, loved ones, objects, beliefs, and experiences. I gather and hold tightly everything that has happened in my past believing that to let go of any of it will diminish the person I am, but it seems that the tighter I hold on the more rigid, tense and immobile I become. The act of moving forward becomes difficult. This series of five sculptures have taught me to loosen this grip and begin to let go of those ideas and memories that prohibit growth. It is as the British Philosopher Havelock Ellis said, "*All the art of living lies in a fine mingling of letting go and holding on.*"

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