

Hernease Davis ([00:00:10](#)):

Hello and welcome back into the Project Space, a podcast featuring some of the incredible artists who have participated in the Project Space Residency here at the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester, New York. My name is Hernease Davis. I'm a visual artist and the assistant curator here at VSW. The Project Space Residency has served both regional, national and international artists for many years, providing a studio space and access to VSW facilities. You'll actually learn a bit more about the history of the Project Space Residency in this episode because while VSW has had a residency in some shape or form from very early in its existence, the structure of the project space now, which emphasizes providing space for local and non-local residents, and also offering opportunities to engage with the Rochester community, actually began with the artists we hear from in this episode, Meredith Davenport. I spoke with Meredith about her experience as a returning resident and how her interactions with community impacted her work.

([00:01:20](#)):

And speaking of community, you'll hear her mention some names that might be familiar to you in this podcast space, namely Tate Shaw, who is the editor of the VSW Press and a future guest host on this podcast. Stay tuned for that. Meredith also mentions Granville Carroll, who is a former project space resident and is featured in the very first episode of this podcast. Take a listen to that episode next if you have not done so already. Meredith also speaks about Joan Lyons, who is a founder of the VSW Press, and Meredith refers to a talk Joan gave during her most recent exhibition at the Memorial Art Gallery in Rochester. Check out our show notes for links to Meredith's work as well as resources she's currently using in her research that you can refer to as we speak about them in our conversation. Alright, let's get to it.

Meredith Davenport ([00:02:18](#)):

My name is Meredith Davenport and I was born in Shreveport, Louisiana. I grew up on the East coast, but I still have a lot of family in Louisiana, and my practice brings together a sort of a life as a photojournalist and documentary photographer and the questions that arise from the way those kinds of images live in the world now and the stories that are attached to those immediate images, both personal and political.

Hernease Davis ([00:02:53](#)):

And that kind of leads into some of my questions later because we've talked about your background as a photojournalist. I'm going to hold on to that question, once we get down the line. So let's talk about the residency. And first I want to ask you, how did you come to apply to do the residency at the project space?

Meredith Davenport ([00:03:12](#)):

This is actually my third time doing a residency at VSW and it was created in part to honor Rick Hock, who was my partner. And at the time, Tate had started building the residency. Tate asked me to come and do a residency here, and this was before I was with Rick and it was anyway, but by that, by the time I came and did the residency, Rick and I were a couple and Rick got sick at the same time that I was supposed to be doing my residency here. But it was wonderful. I was able to be here and to be near him and to do my work. And in the second time, I also, I did a residency related to his death and an exhibition. I decided to apply for the residency here at VSW because I was finishing up a project I've

been working on for about seven years, and there was a certain part of the project that I'm still wrestling with, and I find the space here to be really rich emotionally and sort of creatively.

(00:04:25):

It's a beautiful old building and there's a great community around which I am very grateful to be part of. And I thought it would be a good time to both reflect on the work I had just done and to kind of try and tease out this last kind of thread that I still can't quite figure out, that was related to Louisiana and the sort of geography and the psychogeography of Louisiana related to the history of slavery and my family's relationship to slavery and sort of teasing out these ideas around levies and rivers that overflow and this engulfment that happens due to the natural cycles of the place and how that impacts the sort of psychological, what I consider extremely repressive psychological energies that can live there.

Hernease Davis (00:05:21):

Yeah.

Meredith Davenport (00:05:23):

I came here or applied to come here in part to get feedback from the community. My books had just been published at that point, so I hadn't really put them out into the world that much. And so I was interested in that. And for me, residencies are often a time to find... weirdly enough, I think people think of them as retreats, but in fact, I think they're often a time to connect and interconnect with people and get unexpected intersections of ideas. Like I was down in the lantern slide area and just messing around and looking at Louisiana and looking at levies and looking at rivers, and all of a sudden I found these weird fish egg images that are still sort of hanging on my studio wall, and I know they're going to fit in somewhere, but I can't quite figure out where they're going to go or how they're going to play out. So I think having the time is part of it and having that kind of devoted time. But I think it's also the interactions that you have with people during the open studios and then the other residents or the people who are here who work here and teach here and stuff.

Hernease Davis (00:06:35):

Well, okay, so then I'm curious about, so then what was that like when you were here? Did it meet your expectations or how did it affect the work? I'm really interested in that.

Meredith Davenport (00:06:45):

Well, it was interesting because I was interested in thinking about books, and I knew the archive here, and I've spent some time in the Research Center, but I am not a person who had that book knowledge. And so I'm interested, and I know Tate does, and so I said, Tate, would you give me a list of things you think I should check out? And he knows my work. And so he did. He gave me this amazing box of books that I just sat and spent time with and artists that I had never heard of, and I let them just kind of be there and seep into the way I was thinking about things. So that was really, really amazing. And being able to work down in the print room and just start printing things out and the conversations like Granville came in and we were just hanging out and I had a great conversation with him and then the open studio that I had these wonderful exchanges and people just spent all this time. So it worked out to be quite rich in that way and not orchestrated...I asked for what I needed and then the rest of the time I just kind of played around with the things I was getting and taking them in.

Hernease Davis (00:07:55):

Okay. Yeah. So then let's talk about those books. Just want to make sure I get the timeline right. So what did you come here to work on and in terms of the books, what books are you referring to?

Meredith Davenport ([00:08:11](#)):

So I published these books, this set of, it's actually one book, but it's got four chapbooks as the collection. It's called Membering. And it's this thing I've been working on for seven years about my family history and each chapbook in the collection has a different set of narratives that are kind of collided together. The one that's the easiest to explain is a book I call the Baby Book, which is as I started to research my family's history, my father shared a box... a big plastic storage bin of stuff with me, and in that box was his baby book, but also along with a lot of other random things, was a deed for a 14 year old girl named Elizabeth who my family enslaved. So I took the text from that book, from that document and the text from my dad's baby book and my baby book and images and kind of collided all that together to respond to that history.

([00:09:09](#)):

And there was a bunch, I used, one book has a series of surveillance images from my dad's backyard combined with this really racist text that was one of my ancestors' thesis for Columbia University, this sort of pseudo anthropological thing. And so I just finished that and that was a seven year, very long emotional process. And there was this one last piece that I was trying to figure out. So I think I proposed that to come and work on that here, but I also brought the books to share. I hadn't really shared them. So those were the two things that I was working on.

Hernease Davis ([00:09:44](#)):

I'm really curious. So the one last piece was a part of Membering.

Meredith Davenport ([00:09:49](#)):

Initially I wanted it to be part of Membering, but I could never make it fit. And I had this opportunity to publish the books with Antenna aper machine in New Orleans, and I just decided to let it go and to maybe think it might be its own book. And so there's all these images I've collected over the seven years that I've been working on it. And so I put them up, I sort of poked around the, I have some texts that I was playing around with. I made a couple mockup sort of things that I still haven't resolved it. It's one of those things we were talking earlier. I am still trying to figure out what it is I'm looking for in that work and it'll tell me when it's ready, I guess.

Hernease Davis ([00:10:34](#)):

Is that how the other books have come together or has it been more clear and less kind of amorphous or less?

Meredith Davenport ([00:10:41](#)):

The other books were a little clearer, although I also was grateful to have a year sabbatical to sit with them for a long periods of time. But the year I took the year just to sit with them, and then they came together in the last residency of the year that I had done, and they didn't change much after that. This one isn't doing that and I know it's there. I know there's something there I just can't quite figure out. I have video as well. So I shared that on the open studio. I just put, one of the things that was most interesting about the open studio is I accidentally left my journal out and then people started really

loving it and I was like, okay, I'm an open book. I'm just going to let this happen. And that was some of the most interesting responses were from the journal. Yeah. So

Hernease Davis ([00:11:37](#)):

Were you journaling right before Open Studios opened or...

Meredith Davenport ([00:11:40](#)):

I was trying to capture my thought process because what happens, I'm an artist educator, teaching artist, I guess the right word. I'm trying to use that. I think it's actually important, right?

Hernease Davis ([00:11:52](#)):

Yes, it is.

Meredith Davenport ([00:11:52](#)):

I am a teaching artist, and so as a teaching artist and as a middle-aged woman, my ideas fly out of my head and then I kind of have to spend another year trying to catch up with them again. And so I was trying to keep notes on my process to hold some of this time and this experience right before we had the open studios. So then I just left it there and then people were like, oh, what's this? And I'm like, oh, yeah, sure, you can look at that. There was nothing finished. I had the books that were finished, so that was, people were looking at those and then the rest was really just kind of all over the place.

Hernease Davis ([00:12:28](#)):

Because I'm actually interested in hearing you talk about the title "Membering".

Meredith Davenport ([00:12:37](#)):

I came up, I thought I invented the title, which I didn't, which is fine. I'm okay with that. And in fact, I've heard that it's actually maybe referencing Toni Morrison.

Hernease Davis ([00:12:51](#)):

Okay, yes, we did talk about this, yeah.

Meredith Davenport ([00:12:54](#)):

Yeah. I think. Although I've never found it, and I would love to find the reference, and I certainly didn't intend to do that, but I did feel like this process is connecting to a very deep child self, which, so the "membering", the kind of stumbling over words and making up words is definitely referencing this deeper child within me. But I also liked the play. I love a good play on words, and I think the remembering and dismembering is kind of exactly what I'm doing, and there's a sort of violent subtext to it, which is also definitely part of this process. And so that was the title. I'd be curious to hear what you think.

Hernease Davis ([00:13:43](#)):

Well, yeah, we talked so much when you were here as a resident, and I think we did exchange about this. I remember you mentioning something about Toni Morrison, and I don't know why it came to mind, the book *Beloved*, but when I was thinking about and looking through the work on your website

and then thinking about the word again, to me, I was thinking of notions around embodiment and disembodiment, which is slightly different. It's sort of the same thing, but slightly different than thinking about membering and dismembering. But I also was thinking about how we don't say membering, you say dismembering and how it conjures up the dismembering when you just see the word membering there. But there's something about the way the book looks and how you photographed the books. And also with the text, I'm wondering about the word "embodiment" because I feel like that implies some kind of presence and an absence, but not just physically, but also sort of the psycho, emotional, abstract, intangible, the intangible parts of it. And that's sort of the connotation that kept coming into my mind and thinking about perhaps what it means for you to have to go into your family's history and photograph in the present, being in Louisiana, but not being there, sort of thinking about what we take with us in terms of our genetics, but how we're socialized. And again, those things are passed down that you don't really, aren't able to put your finger on, so like these embodiments and disembodiments. So does that make sense?

Meredith Davenport ([00:15:32](#)):

Yeah, it makes a lot of sense. Yeah, I think that, and I like that association, that would be in alignment with what I would hope somebody would associate with that word. I thought a lot during this process and still think a lot about things like epigenetics and what we carry literally in our bones, and I say this, I've said this before, my sister and I are very different in this way, and my father and I were very similar that I feel like we both carried the physical memory of the violence perpetuated by our ancestors in our bodies. And my sister doesn't. She just has no, and I don't say it with judgment. I envy her in a certain way. She's like, yep, just happened, wasn't us, not me, not my problem. And it's not that she doesn't think about race or racism in the world, but my father and I, it is a very physical experience, the level of shame and it's like it's in me. And I know it was true with my father because we had some very hard and uncharacteristic conversations. Parts of his personality came out when we were talking about this that were unfamiliar to me. And I think because it's such a deeply rooted.. and I watched my father struggle with it in different ways and try and find ways to soothe it somehow.

Hernease Davis ([00:17:13](#)):

Yeah, and I'll say this just full disclosure, because I think about the word empathy all the time in terms of my practice and how complex the word is. And friends know that I go on all the time because I am very annoyed at how flighty, or I'll say shallow, the definition of empathy is, but that's sort of what came to mind. It's not necessarily that your sister doesn't have empathy, but it's like there's a lot of intangibles that go with being able empathize, and this feels like an intergenerational way of empathizing that also transcends time. And even in the photo history conversation, there's a lot of reenvisioning of how we think about time as being something that isn't linear, but also that works differently depending on who you are and your position, your circumstances. Because thinking about Mark Sealy talking about racial time in terms of from a racial point of view, but it's similar just sort of in your position, just how do you deal with this thing that happened at a very particular time, but it transcends that particular moment. How do you approach that? How do you deal with that photographically?

Meredith Davenport ([00:18:37](#)):

I think that's one of the reasons that this work isn't only photographic. And I think going back to what I was trying to do here at the workshop, I haven't found the text that helps me link the pictures together because they're kind of equally important in this process to me. One's not subject to the other, but in the books that I was working on, the text helped to solve that problem in a certain way because it linked

these different times and then the images could sort of dance with that linkage. I don't know. I think it's hard to do with just photos, and that's the thing that I also am really interested in is how they change through time, what one thing means at one point and what it means now and how that changes. Yeah.

Hernease Davis ([00:19:39](#)):

I'm glad you brought up the text. I had a question about that as well, and I don't know if this connects at all, but another way I was thinking about membering, and it kind of alludes to it in talking about Toni Morrison using it, that it's sort of the vernacular way of saying, remember where you're talking to someone back and forth, and in certain parts of the English speaking world, they don't say, oh, do you remember? They just go "member?" They don't say, do you remember? It's just "member." And that's vernacular, that's familiar. That's the way that you speak to each other casually, especially in the south. And I'm just wondering about the text because the way the text is, is really, really beautiful, and there is also perhaps this dismemberment in even the text that it is, you don't ever, I think, write in full sentences.

([00:20:40](#)):

So I'm going to read one that's kind of early, and you just write "Has long, slender fingers, like his mother's. Beautiful hands." And "beautiful hands," It's a full sentence, but it also leaves a lot of information out, and it assumes certain things that it's almost like I'm reading in on someone else's conversation, "has long, slender fingers like his mother's." And as someone who, as an outsider reading this, I don't know who this is, but it also leaves room for me to imagine what could this possibly be, especially alongside the photograph. But yeah, can you talk about how you're using text?

Meredith Davenport ([00:21:26](#)):

Yeah, so there's only one piece of text in there. Well, in the bodies of the book, the explanations at the end of the back of the books that tell you where the text is from are my text. But that text, and most, I would say 95% of the text in the book is actually excerpted from existing documents. So I kind of think of it as documentary poetry in a way, but I'm really obviously decontextualizing it. And so that particular quote is from my dad's baby book, and it's them, they described his body in great detail with reverence. And then contrasting that with Elizabeth, whose body was described as a sort of sound healthy and sound and body and mind, which is a legal term for saying she's a virgin. And the kind of difference in the way these two children were described and remembered was something I wanted to think about and confront. And there's only one section where I write a dialogue with my father, and it was a remembered dialogue. It's as close to my memory as I could get it at the time. So yeah, the anthropological text is awful, but it's all pulled from a thesis from Columbia University.

Hernease Davis ([00:22:58](#)):

Oh, interesting.

Meredith Davenport ([00:22:59](#)):

Successful doctorate of philosophy.

Hernease Davis ([00:23:03](#)):

So then they got their doctorate. Yeah,

Meredith Davenport ([00:23:05](#)):

They did. And they became a quote unquote progressive New York state senator.

Hernease Davis ([00:23:09](#)):

Oh, it's really fascinating, that language. And again, thinking how we're talking about time and what you're doing in taking these words out of context, I find it challenging to read and challenging to, I'll just kind of describe it as a lot of time traveling that has to happen and thinking about where the words come from and in the context in which that exists, and how you've truncated them and dispersed them. Then I have to deal with how I feel about the words being really beautiful as well. And then again, that disconnect between my experience and then having to relate somehow to kind of put that all together. There's a lot of confluences of space and time happening at the same time. But yeah,

Meredith Davenport ([00:24:08](#)):

I still have, I don't know if mixed feelings is the right word, a lot of feelings and thoughts about the impact that the work has on other people, specifically black people, to be honest with you, I think about that and I'm not sure there's an answer. I didn't come up with an answer with it, but I'm really aware, and I'm always grateful that people will take it on. That anybody will take it on, of any color or race because it is a lot. But I'm also, I had a really great experience in New Orleans working with Antenna Paper Machine, and there were a couple, there was one young intern named Malik who really was interested, and it was really amazing to talk with him about it because he experienced the books in vastly different ways than I do. The one that I still find it sort of enigma, but also love. I love them all, but the one with the deer, to me, I don't understand how or why it works, but it does. And that one, he found particularly intense to experience.

Hernease Davis ([00:25:35](#)):

And that's one of the surveillance cameras from your dad's camera. Yeah,

Meredith Davenport ([00:25:41](#)):

And I think that's life experiences that surveillance images and those images mean something very different to him than they do to me. And so yeah, that's a giant question mark. I don't know how, yeah, it's just a big question mark.

Hernease Davis ([00:25:57](#)):

I'm kind of curious about how people receive them here. I dunno. What was your experience with other people who are engaging here in Rochester?

Meredith Davenport ([00:26:09](#)):

Well, I really enjoyed talking to you about them when we did, actually. That's true. And I also really, Tate has given me a lot of really good and interesting feedback. I guess also, I think I had a pretty good conversation with Granville about them as well, and others. I was really almost a little overwhelmed by the open studio. There was a lot of energy and there was a lot of conversation and people were really interested. I had a conversation with a bunch of grad students from r a t and from here, that was really awesome. So yeah, I got some good feedback.

Hernease Davis ([00:27:02](#)):

Yeah, I guess, and I asked that question because I was actually thinking about your experience talking with people in New Orleans or in southern Louisiana. Louisiana - I'm not going to assume that it's a monolith. There are many different types of people in Louisiana, the South is very varied, but just kind of wondering about those experiences because we spoke about it several times and also about our experiences with family history and our family historians and going back and digging through that resistance to what you find. And I think I offered about, have an aunt who kind of was our historian, and then when she found out, I don't know what she found out, but I think in response to probably some traumatic information, she just sort of invented our origin story in Africa and was like, well, we must be from here because so-and-so looks like this and so-and-so looks like that.

[\(00:28:01\)](#):

I'm like, I don't think you can just say that without any concrete evidence. Just because someone has these characteristics that sort of look like someone from a certain part of Africa, it doesn't necessarily mean that. But what I took from that was like, I wonder what she found out, and I wonder if this is why she's fabricating a huge chunk of our history. My family's from the South, and it's not necessarily every black person in the United States' experience, of course, black people are from all over the place. Mine specifically, my background is my ancestors were enslaved, and even my parents were born in the South. So I'm very a recent, I guess, descendant of slavery and also a recent descendant of the great migration... growing up in Los Angeles, for instance. But I'm always curious about those conversations, especially out of a Southern context, and especially in a context, let's say like Rochester, which does have a history in slavery, but the Northeast ideas around slavery are very different, especially in Rochester where they really adore their abolitionist history, adore Frederick Douglass and things like that. But a lot of other histories go unacknowledged in terms of enslaved populations being enslaved here.

Meredith Davenport [\(00:29:27\)](#):

Well, that's the subject of my next project, actually.

Hernease Davis [\(00:29:31\)](#):

Okay, great.

Meredith Davenport [\(00:29:31\)](#):

Yeah, no, actually because I'm interested, having lived - and we share this in that we've lived in different, we're sort of southern but not Southern, and it's hard because most would call me a carpet bagger because I don't have the accent. And I was born in Shreveport, Louisiana, but I grew up in Baltimore, but I grew up going back and forth to my dad's. I would spend two months a year at my dad's house in Louisiana, and so I can kind of code switch back and forth. I can't put the accent on completely, but I can pretty much do everything else. And I have all the other characteristics of a Southern family, including gothic drama and inheritance stories. But I do understand, and I've always been fascinated as a young girl, even coming down, going to this world where there was this maid - I almost said I "had" this maid - there was this woman, Maddie, who raised my sister and I and was a big influence on our lives.

[\(00:30:26\)](#):

We'd been to her house and we would see how different her house was. She lived in one of these houses that used to be a crop sharing house. And then we met her family, but also I learned later that she was a gift from my grandmother to my dad. My grandmother paid Maddie to take care of us. And so going from that to Baltimore, where it was a more diverse middle class, literally working class Baltimore,



it's a different conversation. I shared this work with two white curators in Louisiana, and both of them said they wouldn't touch that work with a 10 foot pole because it's too close to the bone for their institutions. And yeah,

Hernease Davis ([00:31:15](#)):

Did they say more about that? I'm just curious in terms of too close or even, is that based off of their understanding or based off an assumption of an audience?

Meredith Davenport ([00:31:27](#)):

I think, and I'm just translating from my memory, but that they just, they're ... they weren't really ready to have that conversation yet.

Hernease Davis ([00:31:38](#)):

That's interesting because I mean, I'm just assuming that it's an assumption on the audience and also thinking of curatorial roles in this and having to also kind of relate to the work so that they can kind of translate it for an audience. How does a white curator who does not want to confront what you are confronting or does not want to translate or do the work that needs to be done in order to translate this for an audience? I think that's an interesting mediator in terms of this, only because I think that there is more of an openness than they would understand, around those subjects, because in my experience, it's everywhere. When you go to Louisiana, the remnants of slavery are everywhere. And I think that people talk about it more openly than other people would assume who are not really from there. I don't know if that's your experience, or...

Meredith Davenport ([00:32:44](#)):

I agree. I was actually, now I think that depends on what socioeconomic class you're talking about too. And I think these institutions are more connected to a certain higher socioeconomic class. But I will say my experience on the ground doing this work was beautiful in some ways because I was surprised at how many people were open to the conversation, both sort of white relatives of mine and black relatives of mine. So I would've made some judgements beforehand that actually were really surprising and wonderful to see play out.

Hernease Davis ([00:33:31](#)):

Maybe there would be some resistance from both sides of your family down there?

Meredith Davenport ([00:33:36](#)):

And there wasn't, or at least some doors opened that maybe I wouldn't have expected to open, which was nice.

Hernease Davis ([00:33:43](#)):

Yeah, I dunno. I'm really curious about that because just thinking about, especially with when you're dealing with work that has a lot of this, I'll just call embodiment and there's a lot of pain, a lot of violence, a lot of history, and a lot of undoing and redoing of these things, then it becomes complicated because you are with the work, but the work, I don't know if you would agree with this, but the work is also ahead of where these mediators are, like curators and galleries and museums. So

Meredith Davenport ([00:34:22](#)):

Yeah, no, I think also institutions are oftentimes more conservative because of the funding and their patronage and possibly at the expense of the community that they're trying to engage.

Hernease Davis ([00:34:39](#)):

Yeah. Well, my next question is where are you now with the work? And you mentioned that your next step involves Rochester somehow, but can you talk about where things are at the moment?

Meredith Davenport ([00:34:55](#)):

Yeah, so I'm still wrestling with the Psychogeography thing. It's on my studio wall, and I often like to have at least two things going on at the same time so that I can bounce back and forth. So the next part of the work, I want to look at Northern stories of my family history. And in particular, I have two stories I'm starting out with that I'm kind of following the thread of. And the way it normally works is I start digging around in the archive and then I'll find something like a narrative or image or something like those fish images, and I'll be like, oh, okay. And then I put them up and then I'll start sort of just intuitively wandering through things. One of the threads from the South is a man named Josiah Davenport, who was the founder of this, or he was the first enslaver and he had a ship that went out of Providence, Rhode Island.

([00:35:56](#)):

He was the captain of that ship. He wasn't the owner of it, and it was called the Cleopatra. It was mentioned in David Duke campaign speeches, which is a side story I'm not even going to waste time on. But I happened to follow David Duke as a young photographer. I went down there and followed him around for a couple weeks. He was born and based out of Providence, Rhode Island as were a bunch of my other ancestors. So I'm interested in following his story more and learning more about him. And he had a ship, the Cleopatra, and it was sold, and the story goes that he was paid in money and in enslaved people, and he took the enslaved people from Savannah, Georgia down to New Orleans to sell them, the people, and was convinced to use the people to drag a barge up the Mississippi River to settle this northern part.

([00:36:53](#)):

So that's how we ended up in this tiny little place up in northern Louisiana. So I'm interested in picking up his story and looking at the implications of industry and finding stories that help flesh that out. And then there's these two characters, and again, some of these people, I don't know if I'm directly related to, but they have the Davenport name, and we started in Providence in the 1600s. So I sort of feel like there's probably some genetic connection at some point, and it doesn't really matter to me. It's not a journalism work. So there's these Davenport brothers who were these two brothers who were magicians based out of Buffalo, New York, and they had this act where they would put someone in a box and they would disappear, and they were proven to be fraudsters. But I'm interested in using their story to think about erasure and this whole play of erasure and the consequences of erasure. I think in the erasure of our family memory has deeper implications than just the obvious horror of erasing slavery, but also I think it has some more deeper consequences for me personally and my family and the way that my family uses narrative to disappear unhealthy or uncomfortable facts. So those are some of the fun things I'll be working on the next couple of years. (laughing)

Hernease Davis ([00:38:27](#)):

(Laughing) Relatively so. Okay. So this is interesting because you also mention very slightly, this is not a journalism project, but because we do get to see each other and talk a little bit outside of here, and I know that you have a substantial background as a photojournalist, and again, it's important that you're also an educator. And I'll preface this with a full disclosure because I have a hard time thinking about photography in terms of genres. And so then I think how you think of a type of photograph, it's up to your interpretation and your definition, and that's kind of sometimes malleable, but I also think that sometimes these genres can be limiting when we talk about photography in silos in that way. So anyway, and also I'm saying that because I assume that the way we work as photographers and as artists is a part of a continuum, and maybe I'm wrong about that, but I'm just wondering about when you say like, oh, this is not really journalism. I totally get that. But I'm wondering about your sensibilities in your practice, and especially in this work and how you're approaching this body of work, wondering if at all you can tie them into your sensibilities, towards your work as a photojournalist, and in terms of your interests, how you approach it, your method, and even in the purposes or even in how you interpret this work. Is there a flow there?

Meredith Davenport ([00:40:07](#)):

Yeah, there is actually. I'm starting to see it. When I first did it, I remember when I went back, I have a really good friend who's a journalist at NPR, and he came into my studio, I went to Hunter, and he came into my studio when I was starting grad school, and he looked around and he goes, uh oh.

Hernease Davis ([00:40:30](#)):

What'd he mean by that?

Meredith Davenport ([00:40:34](#)):

They don't seem to play well together. Right? Interesting. It felt like, and I had another friend who is a very well-known writer and award-winning writer who I worked with very closely as a journalist, and she said, Meredith, you can't just become an artist. Artists, people are born being artists. And so

Hernease Davis ([00:40:58](#)):

Great, this is fascinating to me because I mean, it's kind of expected, but I'm just like, oh, I, I've always wondered that about, and it's also a pet peeve about photography that we don't have to really get into here, but this kind of clocks, I'm not surprised at these.

Meredith Davenport ([00:41:13](#)):

Well, and I think you can relate, right? Yeah. So I wandered into this. I mean, I think I was always an artist. I never liked the word photographer or artist or any of these things. I'm a curious person with a camera, and I understand and very much take on the contemporary concerns of photojournalism and the way that the power dynamics in that act and media and all of that stuff. And think about it a lot and talk about it a lot with my students. But for me, the camera has always been a tool for connection, and it allowed me to explore worlds. My first story when I graduated, one of the first things I did was spend, I don't know, three or four years documenting a man I met from Louisiana named Thomas, and he was black, and I met him in a squat, a squatting building in New York City, and I started photographing him and his girlfriend who were both struggling with addiction, and he cleaned up and got out of that situation, but his girlfriend didn't, and she was pregnant, and they had a daughter who was born with crack in her system.

[\(00:42:28\)](#):

I was there the day she was born and she was taken away, and Thomas spent a year or more getting her back, and he got her back and was raising her on his own in East Harlem. And I just photographed him as a project, a documentary project. Eventually it was published in the New York Times. It was great. And they had have a wonderful life. I haven't talked to him in a long time, but we kept in touch for years. And for me, that was a way to explore, like, what's this difference in race in the world and how can I understand it and how can I understand... My father's name was Thomas, his name was Thomas. There were lots of things about him that... he was really interesting and very smart and fun person to hang out with. Anyway, so the camera was just always a tool for connection.

[\(00:43:12\)](#):

I didn't really care what... it was my ticket to understanding the world, literally. And I was always interested in storytelling, and that's still a huge part of my practice now, and maybe being a little uncomfortable in the work, which is still true today, but taking away something that I could share. And as a photojournalist, I was never interested in making the same picture that everybody else was making of an event. I was always interested in finding my own way of seeing and experiencing it and to retelling it. And so that I think is the part I still hold onto. I got very frustrated with media narratives. I did this story for National Geographic on Columbia, which was a place I lived for many years, and I didn't want to be a parachute journalist. I wanted to be and experience and take things in. So I lived in Latin America for seven years and four of those in Columbia.

[\(00:44:26\)](#):

And it's a country that I really came to love, and a lot of people I came to really love there. And I proposed this story to National Geographic, and the story was, in retrospect, much more complicated than a media narrative could hold. And I wanted to talk about the same thing I'm talking about now, which is how a culture metabolizes violence. And so that was actually the beginning of where I am right now. I was really interested in things like the kind of telenovela, they have this real life telenovelas where they bring in characters that are actually on the streets and they become movie stars. And those kinds of things were really fascinating to me. How is narrative being used to tolerate this violence that this place has lived through for so many generations? So I was disappointed in the way that came out and frustrated, and I think that was kind of the beginning of the end for me in journalism.

[\(00:45:32\)](#):

I was like, yeah, I got to say some things that I can't do in this world. And I had done so much and I had this amazing career. I went all over the world. I did all this stuff. And I mean, there were other factors as well, but for me, going to grad school, the things that were hard and the things I'm still trying to find, I was used to this very kind of intensive work where I would get an assignment, I would work really hard on it, and then I would take a break. And I still have a hard time with that kind of rhythm of an art practice. I have things I want to say that are much more internal, and I want the freedom to be able to use different tools to do that. But there's still, and this is going to sound cheesy, but I'm going to say it anyway, there's this pursuit of truth that's been (it's gonna make me cry but it's true) this pursuit of truth that's important to me because it's what, and we talked about the coming from complicated family dynamics. The way that I've survived is by seeing things as they are. And so as much as I would love to make work about unicorns and rainbows and beautiful flowers, at the core of who I am is this pursuit of understanding what I see as being true in the world, not necessarily hitting somebody over the head with it at all, but that's always the core and the tools I use the same tools cause it's just what I know so well now.

Hernease Davis ([00:47:10](#)):

Yeah, I had the thought because I think there is a unicorn in the book.

Meredith Davenport ([00:47:16](#)):

Oh, yeah, there is actually.

Hernease Davis ([00:47:18](#)):

What a unicorn.

Meredith Davenport ([00:47:18](#)):

It's a dead horse head with a, it's a very violent unicorn. It's true.

Hernease Davis ([00:47:24](#)):

But also thinking about, oh man, I had a conversation earlier today about surviving difficult family dynamics or just difficult social dynamics period, not just with family, but in other places where those who see things as they are have a really tough time because other people who are dealing with it in order to deal with violence or trauma or pain cover up in ways that are really actually disordered and confusing for the person who wants to actually look and see, okay, well, it is what it is. And so then why is everyone acting in these ways? I think about that. The way I've interpreted it or the way I understand it is everyone's trying to take care of themselves in some way, shape, or form, and it comes off as some type of disordered way of thinking about the world because that's how they're coping.

([00:48:24](#)):

And sometimes it is violent, abusive, and disorienting. But also, I guess I'm getting off on a philosophical tangent with photography that is also one of, I think, a limiting factor with photographs. And so when you're talking about truth and the pursuit of that, what popped into my head is I wonder if anyone who's listening who still thinks of photography as truth, for instance, I don't think that way. I've been thinking about photography for a long time. I don't think that I was thinking of an art practice that uses photography, but thinking about the pitfalls of photographs being perceived as being the truth or being real, and then how do you approach that? And when you do take photographs and you do make photographs, I'm kind of curious what your thoughts on that in general are, but even in how you've tried to tackle this with your practice.

Meredith Davenport ([00:49:32](#)):

Yeah. I'll say one thing. I think that empathic people are often used in narratives for other people, and that can get complicated. But I think of photography, I think of photography kind of as subversive. And so it's not that one image tells the truth, but that photography builds a narrative. So I did a book, my first book was called Theater of War, and it was about these young guys who play Airsoft. And back when I did it, that was still a kind of underground thing to do. Now it's really common. And I realized as I was photographing them, and that's what I did in my grad work, and I realized I was photographing them, that I was actually recreating war images of them. So I was performing the images that they were creating. So I was recreating a Robert Kappa photograph, or I was recreating a really famous Magnum photo from Kosovo. And so I was using the same devices that I had seen and were embedded in my mind. And so I think it's not a question of whether photographs are true, it's a question of what they're trying to point to and understanding that, then you get the clarity of it and using it. So I don't know if that answers your question.

Hernease Davis ([00:51:05](#)):

Yeah, yeah. Okay. Because I'm also wondering how do you approach the photographic portion of the work when you're taking a photograph? Or in terms of this, wanting to think about uncovering truth or your interest in truth.

Meredith Davenport ([00:51:24](#)):

So that's what I was going to say is that for many years after grad school, I didn't actually make photographs the way that I used to make them as a documentary photographer, I used a lot of archival images and I did make photographs, but I didn't treat it the same way. So I did this project when I first came here, which was, yeah, it was a midtown, and they were tearing down Midtown Plaza at the time, which was this big shopping center in the middle of town. And they were doing it so slowly and ineffectively that it looked like 9/11, and it really did. I had just moved from New York and 9/11 wasn't that far away, and I could feel the energy of that. And anybody who walked by, it was like an open wound in the middle of the city. And so I started photographing it, and I just spent a couple of days, but then I did some research and I found these photos and I did this contrasting, oh, it's only recently that I started really making pictures again after grad school.

([00:52:24](#)):

And I did this series of bees documenting these dead bees from a beehive that I had, and that I guess was photographs, but it wasn't, was just photographing dead bees on my front porch. But yeah, I have been hesitant to get into a sort of similar kind of photo making practice like I was doing before. The images I made for Membering were done on the way to the project, and I did go out photographing, but it just felt differently. I don't make as many pictures as I used to, and I'm more economical with how I use them and how I think about them. I just started using this four by five Graflex camera that Joan Lyons gave me. Amazing. Yeah, I love it. And it's really slowed me down, and I've kind of come full circle. When I started our photography, the first thing I learned was the darkroom, and my grandfather taught me how to use the darkroom, and I was just enthralled with the magic of the darkroom. And then for many years until we went digital, I was in the darkroom and did a lot of black and white work. I've kind of come back around to that and the process being slowing down, I don't know how I'm going to build, but I miss making images. I love images. Images are just like, I've always loved photography. I just love it. It's never gotten old.

([00:53:56](#)):

I just didn't trust it and I didn't trust myself for a while. And grad school kind of did that. For good, I think. I can make beautiful images very easily, and I don't trust that.

Hernease Davis ([00:54:09](#)):

Oh, that's another question. Okay. Because I feel like we could go on, I'll ask you about that off podcast, and I wonder if that also relates to your transition or the appearance of a transition from a photojournalist to an artist. And I'll say from my own experience, I transitioned from being a biologist to being an artist. It took me some time to even call myself an artist because I love photography so much, and I didn't really understand the difference between photography or being a photographer and being an artist. And I still see all of that as a continuum, but I know that quite a few people who do make that transition really struggle with the aesthetics or the expectations of what it means to make things that look like art. So in thinking about you even gathering photos along the way for Membering really feels like this process of embodiment or even what I think about in terms of this collection of history and

what goes into history and that it's not, if you think about a traditional sense of an art practice, that there's an inside and an outside, not all artists are like that.

(00:55:30):

I'm not like that. And it's comes with this pros and cons of your whole life being your art practice or your art practice being based off of your life. But I really enjoy thinking about that. You kind of noticing and gathering things, going down to the lantern slide collection, finding those fish and having a response to it that's not necessarily tied to a piece or a project, but that it's a part of this journey that you're on in Membering, perhaps, and maybe not, but there's always this potential there, which I feel like is an art practice. And also, to me, it also sounds like and feels like, at least in my head, sort of what it feels like to do the type of work that you're doing that is so complicated and also rooted in things that you don't necessarily know exist yet. You don't know everything about your family. And there's also, you can't know everything because you weren't born back in the 1600s. So there's always this element of maybe this has something to do with it, or maybe I'm related to this person, or maybe I will find out more about this, or maybe I won't. So I dunno, I feel like it all kind of works together.

Meredith Davenport (00:56:47):

I think thinking about my different lives and how they're interconnected, I'm remembering this one story, but I want to tell the story, but I don't want to forget my train of thought.

Hernease Davis (00:56:59):

Okay.

Meredith Davenport (00:57:01):

This friend of mine, her mother always hid her tarot cards behind the nonfiction section of her library. And I always loved, since I was a student, how photography indicated something I didn't know I was thinking about. So going back over things, I would be like, oh, oh, wait. Oh, I didn't realize that I thought that. Or it gave me access to a part of my mind and my intuition that I didn't have or trust or know, or wasn't taught to trust. In fact, I think because of my family history, I was taught to distrust. And so I think one of the hardest things for me now... The world of journalism is easy. It's like, this is bad, this is good. This is black, this is white. And you just work in that space trusting that voice that's like, there's something about these fish embryo that I need to think about, but that's where the real good work is. I think if you can stay with it. We were talking about, I was listening to Joan Lyons talk last night, and she just kept talking about how she would see something and have a visual idea, and then it would take her maybe 10 years to find what that work was really about. And I felt so happy to hear that because I think we don't value that.

(00:58:40):

And photography is great because it's really quick. It's like mental sketches, and you see, oh yeah, there's this frog embryo or this fish embryo, or there's this levy that I photographed in this certain way. Oh, right. That's what I was thinking about. That levy actually is hiding the danger, but isn't actually effectively protecting the people. And that all comes in that photograph. And I didn't know I was thinking that until I saw the photograph that I made of that thing.

Hernease Davis (00:59:09):

I really like that \*doot-doot-doot\* that happens there because I have a different approach to photography and to photographs, and I really enjoy that that's how they for you, because I'm just like, oh, wow, that doesn't happen for me.

Meredith Davenport ([00:59:26](#)):

Your process. Yeah. You have a wonderful different process.

Hernease Davis ([00:59:30](#)):

I really love that. I really enjoy that. Yeah. Was there something else that you were going to say? I wasn't sure if there was something you were going to say and then you're going to follow your train of thought and then come back to it?

Meredith Davenport ([00:59:40](#)):

Well, that was the story, that she always hid her tarot cards behind the kind of nonfiction section. And I feel like I do that a little bit as a journalist. I always had the tarot cards, but I never told my journalist friends about it. And I remember my first day at art school being, and I was older, and I was with these younger art students, and we had Chinese food down in Chinatown, and the fortune cookies came. We all grabbed, yes, these are my people. They're going to read that fortune cookie. They're going to believe it. They're going to live it.

Hernease Davis ([01:00:13](#)):

It's so funny.

Meredith Davenport ([01:00:13](#)):

But that's the stuff we don't know. That's the science. We don't know so much of our brain we don't use, and these places that the creative process lets you tap into all of that knowledge that you don't have access to normally. I was listening on the way over here. I was listening to this and I was hoping I could work this in. I was listening to this interview with Feist, I think it's called, oh, yeah. On whatever, one of the stations here. And she said, I want to write songs that I can grow into.

([01:00:47](#)):

And I thought, oh, that's a really nice thought to make work that you can grow into. And again, I've been thinking, because I've been looking at a lot of women artists and their lifespan work, and thinking about how that devotion to a practice leads to this giant body of work that's prescient in some cases that they might not even know how prescient they, I mean, nobody does, I guess. But yeah.

Hernease Davis ([01:01:16](#)):

Do you feel like your work with Membering is something that you're growing into?

Meredith Davenport ([01:01:21](#)):

Yeah, I'm really proud of Membering. It's the thing I'm most proud of in the world that I've done. I feel like (it's gonna make me cry again). But I think it's the thing where I am most alive. I'm most present, even though I love this kind of word embodiment with that work. But I'm there. And I think we talked about this before too. I think when you're working on the edges of things, as a woman artist, it's a lonely little desert. And I don't regret it. I don't think I would want to make, do anything differently. And I don't



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know what it'll be in 10 years from now or how it will have a life or not have a life and fall flat and be disregarded. But I feel like, yeah, it's me. I'm there. It's the work.

Hernease Davis ([01:02:19](#)):

Yeah. Well, Meredith, I feel like this is a good place to conclude and also a good time to thank you for sitting with me and for sharing, talking again about your work and having this conversation and about something that is incredibly important and really, really moving and very touching as well. So thank you so much. Really appreciate you.

Meredith Davenport ([01:02:50](#)):

I appreciate you too, and I'm grateful that you engaged with it. It's been fun to talk to you about it.

Hernease Davis ([01:02:53](#)):

I'm glad.

([01:02:58](#)):

And there you have it. I encourage you to visit Meredith Davenport's website to learn more about her work. Meredith also recommended some resources on psychogeography. Those links are all in the show notes. To learn more about the Visual Studies workshop, please visit us at [vsw.org](http://vsw.org) where we have information about the project space residency and our current artists in residence. Keep following us on Twitch and Instagram at the Visual Studies Workshop. And feel free to send me an email at [herneasedavis@vsw.org](mailto:herneasedavis@vsw.org). And a special request: please take a moment to leave us a review on Apple Podcasts. We'd love to hear your thoughts on how we're doing, and that time you take to review the show really helps spread the word. Thanks so much in advance for doing that. This podcast is funded in part by the New York State Council on the Arts, with the support of the New York State Legislature and the Leonian Foundation. And thank you so much for listening to this conversation with the artist Meredith Davenport. In the meantime, please take care. Bye.