

For | Billions of Years | Now

By

Brandon Joseph Lavergne

Submitted to the graduate degree program in Visual Art and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

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certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

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Chairperson Michael Krueger

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## Abstract

*For / Billions of Years / Now* is a Masters of Fine Arts Thesis exhibition of seven prints, two metalsmithing sculptures and an x-ray film. There are five traditional Intaglio etchings on the right side of the gallery. The back and left walls are each covered by a 20 foot, black and white print of an alligator. The matrix for the alligator prints resides in the center of the gallery, curled and gazing back on its twin apparitions. At the intersection of stares is a choker fashioned in the image of the artist's mandible, formed entirely by hand and finished through electroforming. A panoramic x-ray image of the artist's jaw hangs above. Five smaller prints are hung in a line on the right and are inspired by the artist's personal history. These are traditional intaglio prints with etching, hard ground, soft ground, aquatint, and dry-point. In addition, I used techniques of burnishing, electric engraving, and intaglio wiping.

I use metaphors such as: inhabiting, haunting and being imprisoned within vessels. Spirits cling to homes, lamps, boats, and bodies as they make their way. Sensual and tactile processes like drawing, molding, scraping, stretching and inking are ways in which I create and maintain intimacy with the work. These techniques generally guide me more than words are able. I tend to scabble through work, feeling for a way forward. Infusing energy into copper to create something somber and contemplative has become my primary way of working. Sinking, crushing, burying, disintegration and a two-faced nature are themes I explored in this work. There is also the situational theme of being trapped and striving for escape. This exhibition represents the converging of the outlined ideas, personal truths and emotions.

## Acknowledgments

Jaime, my love - Thank you for sharing your smiles with me on so many sun dappled mornings and your hand with me in the darkest of night. I still cannot believe it has already been 15 years.

It has been such a wonderful beginning with you and I'm so thankful to know your love.

My father, Joseph - Coming home from the rigs, you would pick me up and hug me like your father seldom did. You taught me how to be a human being. You taught me that hard work and ingenuity are the keys to freedom, and that a good attitude is the first and last step. You also taught me that making mistakes is how we learn what we like. I remember you telling me as I would leave the house; "Don't do anything I wouldn't do!" followed by "But you know I will try anything once!" which always makes me smile. The time we shared together has made me into the man I am today. Thank you.

My mother, Marie - You are such a nut! You taught me how to belly laugh and I am so happy to still laugh with you over the phone. You showed me how to be empathetic of the challenges every person faces. When I sit with a student, I feel confident that I can put them at ease from your example. I can find the bedrock of what they care about and help them to arrive at their own understanding. You stressed to me the importance of reaching out to those you love and, equally important to me, when it's time to burn bridges and never look back. You are the strongest woman I have ever known and I love you dearly.

My Metals faculty: Gina Westergard, Jon Havener, and Lin Stanionis:

Thank you so much for all your support, patience and understanding. I have grown to be a confident and capable Metalsmith under your tutelage.

My committee members: Gina Westergard, Michael Krueger, Norman Akers, and Shawn Bitters:

Thank you for your sound advice and trust in my abilities. Through all the ups and downs, you have pushed me and I am so proud of the work I have made with your help.

Thanks also to the dozens of wonderful people who have impacted my time here at KU.

*For | Billions of Years | Now*

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Gallery view

The alligator is a holdover that somehow stays relevant. A prehistoric ambush predator, whose body has remained in a kind of stasis for eons. I find this inert confidence uncanny. I find it poignant to reflect on this creature as a kind of promise that long after we are gone there will still be these ancient, awkward creatures basking on the shore, as if nothing ever happened.



*Memory Dragon*, Copper Repoussé, ink, acrylic, 32” x 216” (dimensions variable)

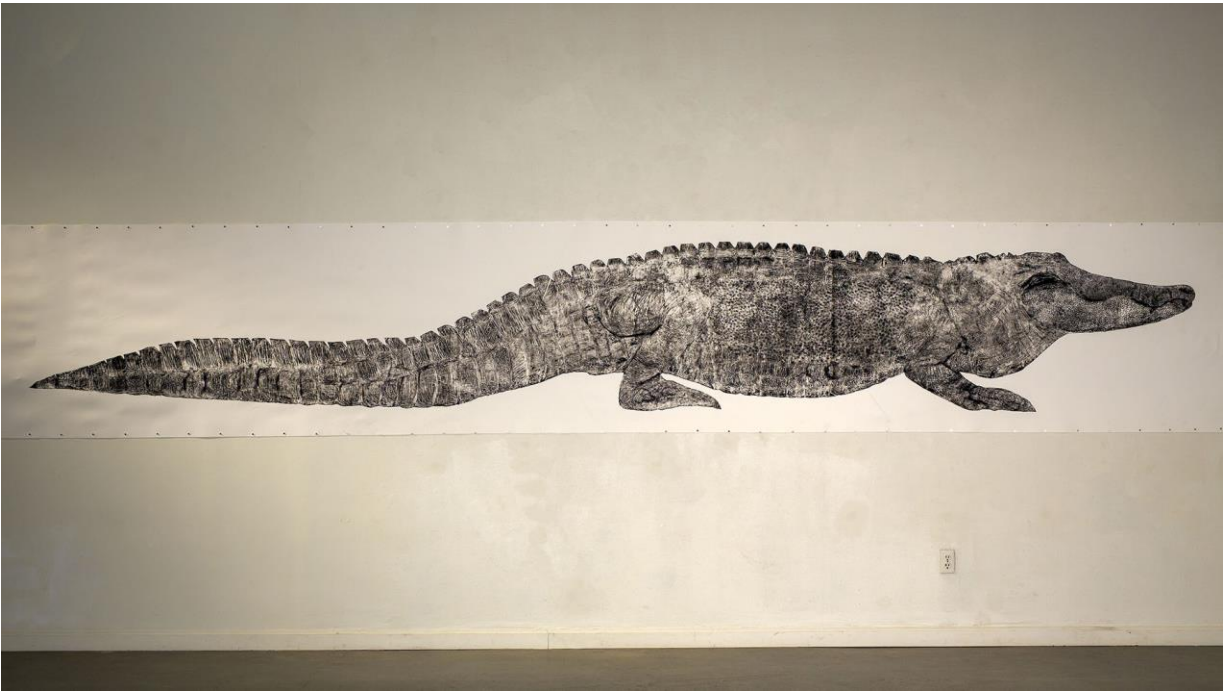
*Memory Dragon* grew from a desire to distinguish myself from southern Louisiana where I grew up. Now in my thirties, I am reflecting on my place of origin. The alligator is an icon for my feelings about Louisiana - rugged, wise, and storied, but also awkward, a trickster and an opportunist. The alligator is a mythological entity to me, like a guardian spirit or a morbid specter. I see it as my cousin; we share a basic body plan and lineage. I take this physical connection as evidence that we share mental space with these prehistoric yet endearing creatures.

*Memory Dragon* is a copper printing matrix which has been printed on both sides. Both sides of the sculpture contain a drawing. One side has been left inked while the other side has been cleaned to show the difference in the inked Intaglio versus the marks in metal. One side's impression is the other side's expression. The forces used to create the image are evident from both perspectives. The Intaglio technique utilizes acid to etch lines into the copper and hold ink while printing. However, this work is not a true etching, it is more of a “stretching” as that is the technique used to create it and no acid was used. However, the stretched areas hold ink well, resulting in a successful replacement of the traditional Intaglio process.

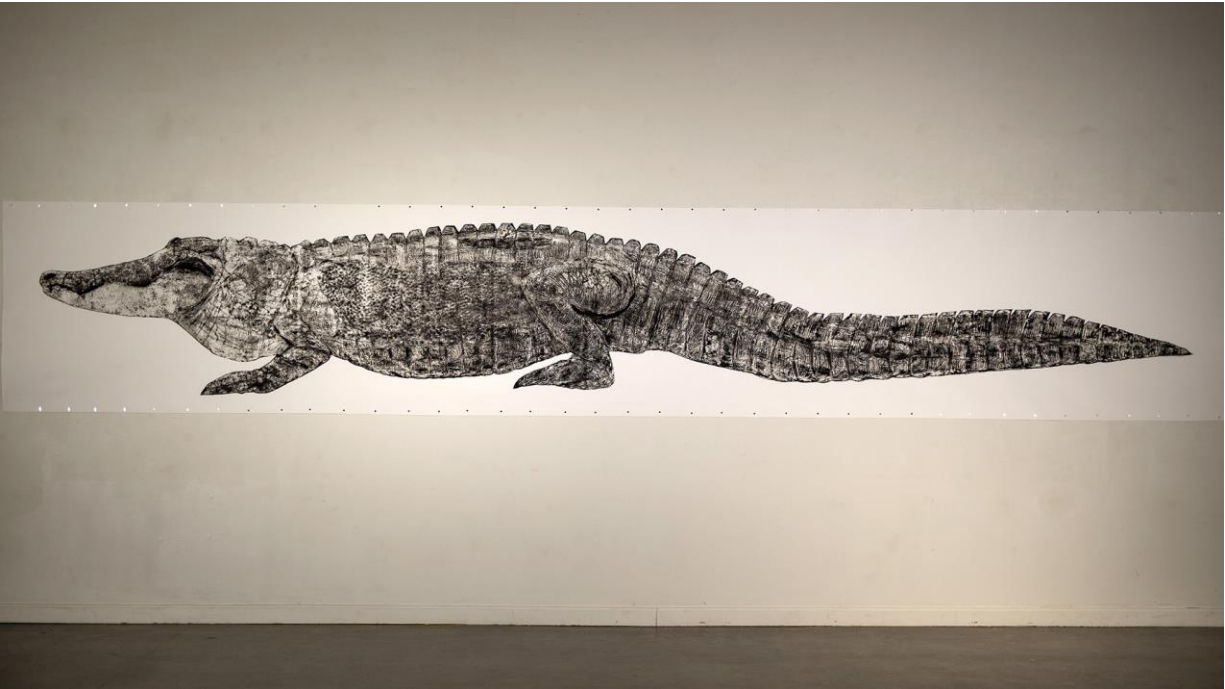
A 20' x 3' roll of 30-gauge roofing copper was used to form the metal. The roll of copper was delivered annealed and was not heated at any time. A dapping stake traditionally used in metalsmithing for making domes on a dapping block was used. I held it in my hand and drew out the form of the alligator which was then embellished in passes with a variety of stakes and burnishing tools. This continued for about three weeks until it was a low relief sculpture resembling a frieze.

The silhouette of the alligator was cut out with shears and the edges filed before being crushed through the intaglio press. This crushing flattened the extra surface area created through stretching and reunited the two sides into one plane. The matrix has been printed four times, and the final two prints were shown in this exhibit – the left and right sides.





*Pooyai!*, Intaglio Print, 40" x 234"

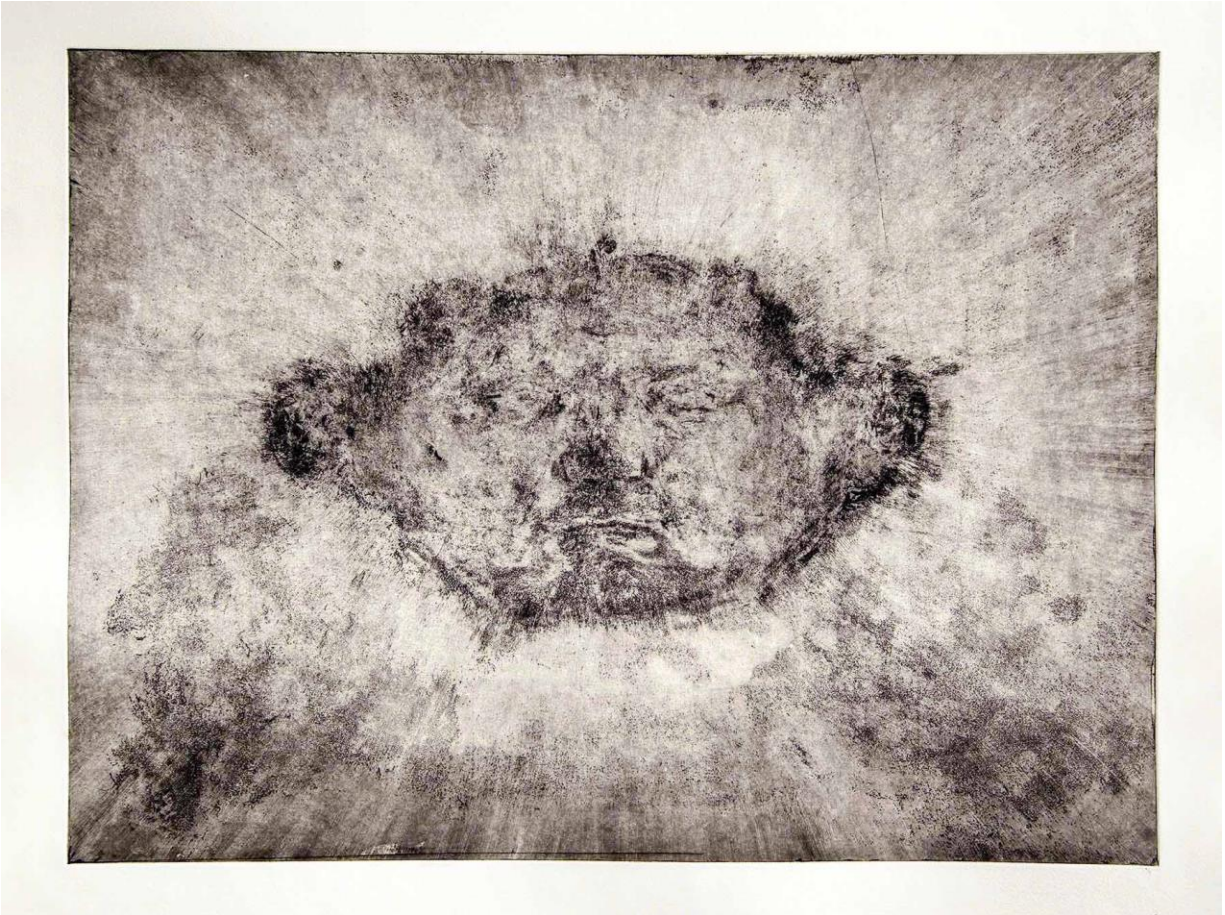


*Kyaw!*, Intaglio Print, 40" x 234"

*Pooyai!* (poo-yiee) and *Kyaw* (kee-yaw)! are Cajun exclamations and intensifiers used when something is impressive or overwhelming. These prints are a result of playing and experimenting with metalsmithing and intaglio traditions. I began the MFA program at Kansas University in the Metalsmithing and Jewelry program with the goal of increasing the volume of sculpture I was making, which tended to be flat and highly textured. I found that despite my best efforts, I continued to create flat, low relief objects. I learned that I was attracted more to direct manipulation and less to fabrication processes. Fabrication bores me and reminds me of oil field work, refineries and pipe fittings – all the ready-made jobs I dreaded while growing up.

I have drawn since childhood. Drawing has always felt natural to me as an expression of excess energy. Marks feel innately valuable to me and I now know that as a signature holds clout, my marks do as well. The mobility and fluidity of drawing enables nuanced relation with the media and with the surface, even in the most energetic and cutting marks. The space of the picture plane allows for a psychological depth, which I find hard to achieve otherwise. After taking an Intaglio class, I started to see an overlap in metalsmithing and printmaking processes. I had been driven to impart emotional energy into material, but it was not until printing that I realized sculpture could be compressed and captured on paper. In 2018, I began assimilating the two bodies of knowledge into my practice and searching for ways to combine both passions.

At the outset of this work, my goal was to make a two-sided print out of copper foil which could also stand up as a sculpture. During printing, I added two 4'x8' tables on each side of the printing bed and fortified the space under the printing bed with duct tape and wooden slats to support the alligator matrix as it passed through the roller. Each printing took three people to maintain registry between the print paper and copper matrix.

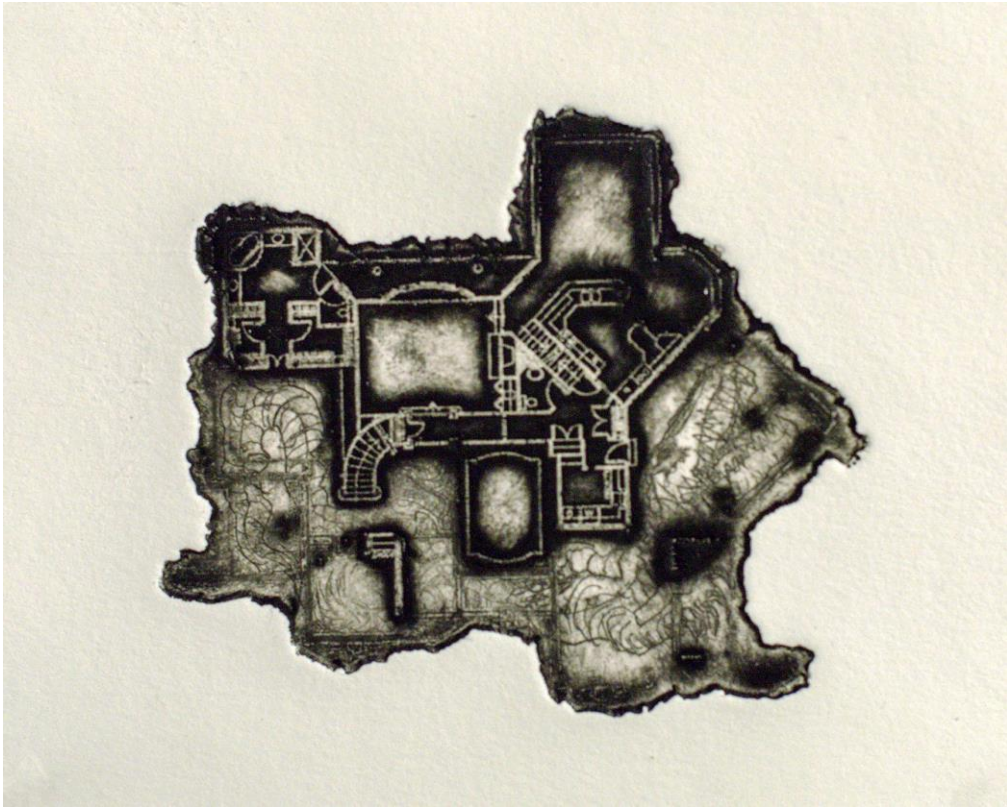


*Lightspeed*, Intaglio Print, 22" x 27"

*Lightspeed* is an Intaglio etching created from a casting of my face and was made to correlate with the alligators printed body. Artifacts have a strange quality of gaining value as their existence wanes. I wanted to make something with the visual power of the death mask of Agamemnon; an impression that could gain gravity with time and sink down like an anchor as it dissolved.

I started casting my body with alginate and electroforming it, to produce a resilient printing matrix. I made several attempts, but eventually skipped the electroforming and pressed the fresh casting directly into soft ground. The etching resulted in a scene reminiscent of a lunar landscape. Like *Memory Dragon*, an image has been created through the flattening of a form. The etching had the right ground but needed activation, which was negotiated

during the wiping process in the form of the radiant lines. Radiant light, a symbol of residing power, is a theme in this body of work.



*Suburban Crush*, Intaglio Print, 6"x 6"

*Suburban Crush* came out of witnessing the replacement of traditional Cajun homes and the lifestyle that accompanies them with homes designed for wealthy Americans. The Cajun culture values the primacy of self-governance above all, yet this mindset has not paired well with the reality of living in the state most often ranked 50<sup>th</sup> in the US according to a wide range of indicators of health and well-being. Cajuns are pushed to purchase large homes with large acreage of land, new trucks, boats and other markers of status through TV advertisements and southern culture. This lifestyle is growing more dependent on industry and the government to stay afloat.

Building Home Depot style homes is all the rage in Louisiana and every time I see a crisp new home cutting into a land of scar tissue it feels like an offering, a payment to a broker or a gravestone to keep clean. I am interested in how the shaping of our homes and buildings reflect an inner space so the floor plan of a 4,000 square foot home was

chosen to emphasize the values of excess and emptiness embedded in American home design. A plate with hard ground was prepared and laser engraved to expose the body plan of the home. Etching would be the next step under normal circumstances however, I wanted to grow the walls of the home instead.

I reversed the voltage, thereby electroforming a layer of copper. Some of the growth was incompletely fused with the exposed areas of the copper matrix. This part was removed. Within the removed portion of the home, I etched a line drawing of an alligator trapped and claustrophobic. The cutting and filing of the edges around the building created a kind of prison island and emphasized the isolation and helplessness of the situation.

I have seen a few homes in the traditional Cajun style. One was in the I-10 Oil and Gas Park in Jennings, Louisiana. This park still has an alligator petting zoo and a large alligator snapping turtle held in a fenced facility not unlike a concrete swimming pool. I loved the thought of seeing the gators and the turtle as a child and like so many things in life, the reality differed from my expectations. They just sat there, rarely moving and lazing around. They seemed content, not even bored. Year after year, I started seeing that they knew something. Trapped as they were in that cage, they had some elusive knowledge that freed them.



*Three Dinosaurs and a Boat, Intaglio Print, 5" x 10"*

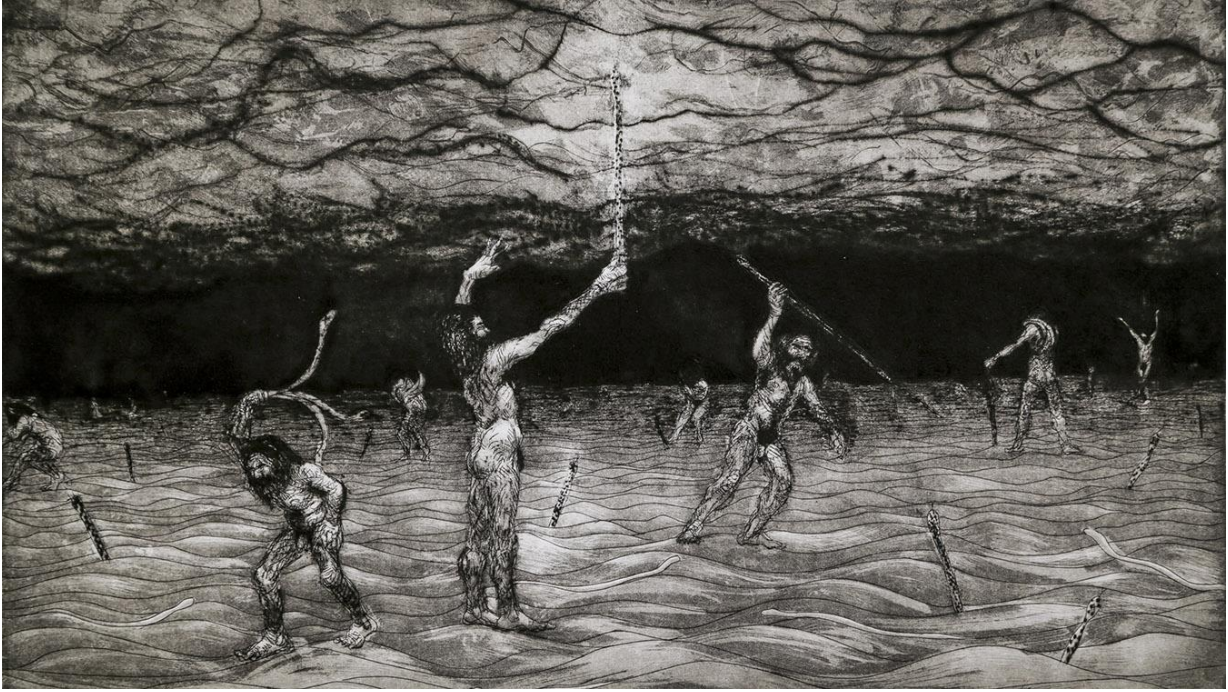
I used the traditional Intaglio process to make this print using dry point, aqua tint, and soft ground. The scene is somber and lonely. There are three figures in a boat. They are slumped and tired, sitting apart from one another. The boat is inkier and darker than any other place in the scene to emphasize the weight of their isolation. The alligator, alligator snapping turtle and alligator garfish look on from their own distance. Even though a viewer may not understand the specifics of the imagery, I feel the somber mood carries well. This work reflects traditionally masculine ways of life in Louisiana. I thought of myself, my father, and my paternal grandfather and the volume of our lives spent apart.

My grandfather, Joseph Lavergne Sr., was an American by birth but spoke no English, he spoke only Cajun French and considered himself independent of the United States. He would often refer to the rest of the country as "ces Americains" or "those Americans". He and his wife had fourteen children, and they all worked Buddy Salver's farm as sharecroppers. Cotton and soybean were the crops they raised and the children would work the farms as soon as they could walk. I remember meeting him a few times when I was young, but we could not communicate.

My father's name is Joseph Lavergne Jr. "T" means "little" in Cajun French and being the youngest of fourteen made Dad "T-Joe". He told me once that being little was helpful when you were picking cotton from the raspy husk of the cotton plant which was only a few feet off the ground. He dropped out of high school to go work on the rigs. He has fallen twice, once he broke a leg and once his neck.

When Dad was twenty-one, he fell from the rig floor and cracked several vertebrae in his neck. The doctors working on him were not sure he would recover. However, after six months in traction and a further three months with a halo bolted to his head for support, he made a full recovery. I was conceived shortly thereafter. This series of events make me wonder about inheritance and how much of our trauma and physical history is passed to our children.





*Husbandry*, Intaglio Print, 15" x 22"

*Husbandry* regards the spiritual side of humanity and the high degree of emotion inherent to notions of transcendence. Humans have a hind-brain inherited from reptiles which is still responsible for producing basic drives and emotions. I wanted to create an image reminiscent of works by old masters, a portrayal of high energy and high suspense condensed into a moment.

I was also thinking about our relationship to nature and the feeling of being stuck in the human condition - stuck between the sky and the ground like a caged animal. In the work, cavemen are chasing, catching, manipulating and communing through the snakes. They are feverish and striving, desperate for release.

I gained appreciation for the thrall of belief from time spent with Pentecostals. I saw such otherworldly highs from the congregation which caused me great envy. Rarely do I feel such rapture as the snake handler bit for the first time by the serpent.

This piece features hard ground etching, aquatint, electric engraving to create the inky shadows, more dry point to

bring out the hair, and burnishing to bring up highlights. Some effects were created through the wiping process as well.



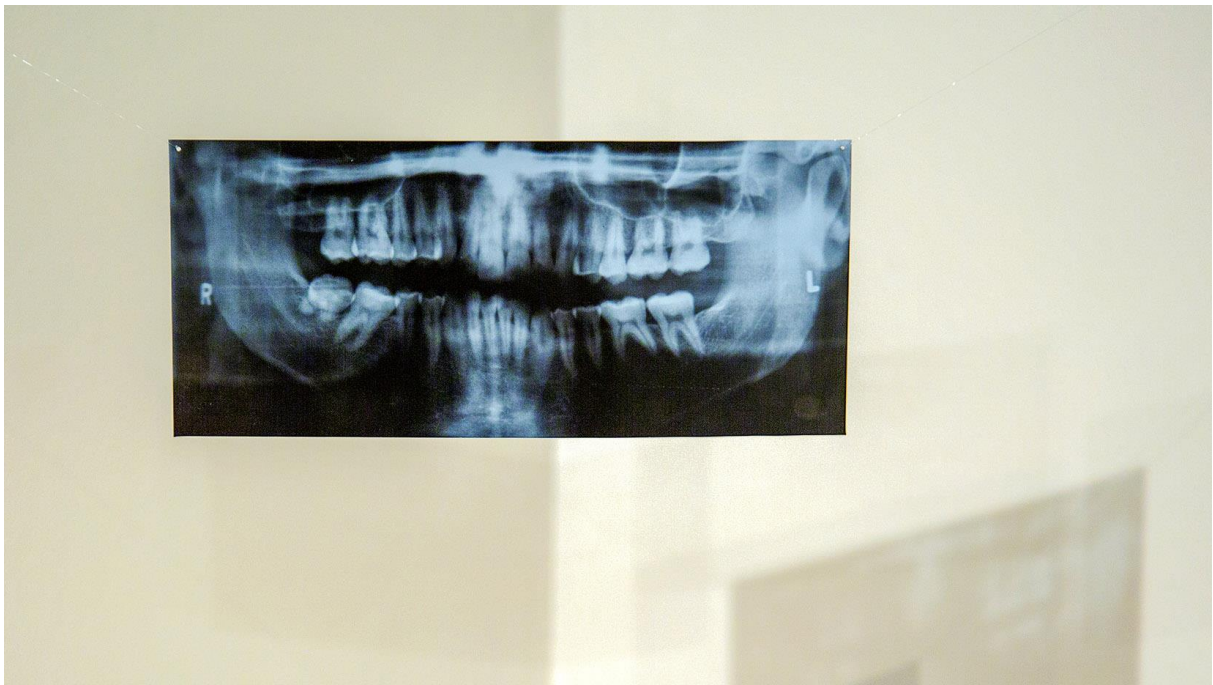
*Be Careful*, Intaglio Print, 10" x 5"

*Be Careful* came out of revisiting childhood anxiety. I grew up mostly alone, and I still struggle with maintaining a sense of self in a society with concerns that differ from mine. Joining the U.S. Air Force as a linguist was my ticket out of an ill-fitting life. After leaving Louisiana, I feared returning and being pulled back down into a hopeless and powerless mindset. Where I am from, emotions are not valued as much as physical labor, and a life full of desperation reinforces poor coping strategies which become normalized.

For this piece, I thought about this derelict house with a lamp inhabited by a genie - a frantic alligator spirit. It has scared itself out of the lamp and is chasing its own tail. The genie is a powerful spirit who is usually trapped in a vessel; however, this genie is unable to rest. The point of view is canted to the side to heighten the dysphoria and the

alligator is depicted as a headless spirit. There is a snout coming into the frame from the left side which is the spirit reentering the scene to start the cycle anew.

*Be Careful* is a mostly traditional Intaglio print, however the electric engraver was used to rough up the surface and create a velvety black background. Soft ground impressions and extensive burnishing were used to bring out the lamp and the shine of the dragon/alligator.



*Wormhole*, Raised and electroformed copper, x-ray film, 10" x 6" x 5"

*Wormhole* references both a worm's mouth and a fictional portal. I see these two gateways as references to a past we detest and a future that may never come. I locate myself in this timeline by using my own anatomy as a reference point. We exist somewhere between dirt and heaven and I wanted to make a restrictive choker which would seem at home in the dirt and as a ceremonial object.

Human beings are tied to our history and our ancestors by our bones. The panoramic x-ray of my own jaw highlights the bones against a black void and unwraps the mandible into a map. The metal jaws were sculpted using the x-ray as a guide although my own jaw was referenced by comparing and rolling the jawline of the pieces onto my own jawline between rounds of forming.

To make the teeth, I bit into wax to make an impression. I then pressed warmer wax into the same impression. This created teeth which could be fitted to the bald mandible. The inside of the mandible was molded from sculpting wax and finally, electroforming was used to deposit copper over the whole piece and link the separate elements.

## Summary

This work is in many ways a homecoming. Drawing and sculpting practices and techniques have allowed me to express unspeakable feelings that lay within me for a long time. Awakening to life within the Cajun culture, being steeped in Chinese and military culture as a linguist and then training in the metalsmithing and intaglio traditions have produced many lenses through which I can view my personal history and speak.

Metalsmithing has given me a passion for copper and its unique qualities, especially its plasticity, which I now know by heart. Teaching metalsmithing students has given me deep appreciation for our feelings which seem both precious and easy to overlook. I am aware of the fleeting qualities of my own life, because I have felt for the lives of others.

Life implies death, and the space between is all we have. The starkness of the black ink on white paper reflects a binary system, however the ink streaks and the paper smudges reveal a spectrum. As opposite as they may seem, the two merge at the margins and require each other for full resolution.

Additional photographs

