



COURIER photo/Steven Felschundneff

Scripps College Art Professor Nancy Macko has an ongoing exhibit at the Andi Campognone Projects gallery in downtown Pomona. The exhibit, *Hopes & Dreams: A Visual Memoir, 2010*, is inspired by Ms. Macko's experiences caring for her mother whose memory was declining because of dementia.

Fading away: Scripps professor portrays mother's memory loss in art



Artist Nancy Macko's mother, Arline Kelly, seen here, as reproduced in one of her recent artworks titled *Are You Kidding #2* is on exhibit at the Andi Campognone Projects Gallery in downtown Pomona.

It is in many ways that people cope with change, pain and loss. Nancy Macko, Claremont resident and longtime Scripps College faculty member, channeled her heartache into art as she observed her mother's memory loss and decline into dementia. Though the artistic process and resulting visual memoir does not remove the heartsickness of losing her mother, who died in Claremont on November 9, 2011, it offered her solace and continues to do so.

"I made the art as a way of coping, in anticipation of the inevitable, trying to prepare myself. It helped keep the whole experience at arms length while it was going on because it was just too painful," said Ms. Macko, director of Scripps Digital Art Program and chairman of the gender and women's studies department. "You can't change

it, you can't do anything about it, so in order to be there for my mom, I rendered her experience, and my own, in these biographical and autobiographical images."

Currently, 11 of the digitally constructed prints created by Ms. Macko, which chronicle and explore the arc of a life from joyful beginnings to a difficult, confused end, are displayed in an exhibit, "Hopes & Dreams: A Visual

FADING AWAY
continues on the next page

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continued from the previous page

Memoir," at Andi Campognone Projects in the Pomona Arts Colony through January 7, 2012. A practicing artist since the early 1980s, Ms. Macko has exhibited in more than 20 solo shows and 150 group exhibitions. Her artwork is in numerous collections, including the UCLA Hammer Museum, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and the New York Public Library.

In 2003, Ms. Macko's mother, Arline Kelly, began showing signs of memory loss, growing increasingly confused as time went on. Having lived in Claremont during the late 1980s and early 1990s, Ms. Macko and her partner returned to Claremont to live in 2005 when it became obvious her mother needed more concentrated care.

"I realized she needed more grounding. I became her emotional anchor," said Ms. Macko, explaining that her mother would leave message upon message on her answering machine, forgetting she had already called, tortured in her confusion: "Where am I? Why am I here? Whose furniture is this?"

"It was heart-wrenching and poignant. I did my best to quell her anguish," said Ms. Macko.

The refrain, "I'm so confused," was almost perpetual and worsened over the years, eventually degenerating into a mere 10-second loop of memory.

"Her ability to remember what just happened became that tight, that restricted," Ms. Macko said.

The process of her mother's memory loss, observed Ms. Macko, occurred in a pattern. After a significant, noticeable decline, Ms. Kelly would enter a period of surrender and reach another plateau. After a period of relative stability, another chunk of memory would crumble away:

"It reminds me of 'calving,' a term used to describe the process when huge chunks of glaciers just break off and all into the sea. It is as if the mind 'calves' and there seems to be no end to the process."

Amidst her mother's jagged decline, Ms. Macko observed a graceful element.

"What I found to be truly poetic in the way my mom expressed her confusion was that when she asked a question over and over, she always asked it differently — changed a word, rearranged the subject and predicate, used new adjective — and I'd always answer it differently," she explained, contrasting this form of expression to the "broken record" pattern of asking the same exact question repeatedly.

The "Hopes & Dreams" series begins with 2 photos of Ms. Macko's mother at the height of happiness and vitality, having just married her true love and feeling elated to begin their life together. In the photos, Ms. Kelly is standing on the steps of her and her husband's new home in Davenport, Iowa, bright-eyed and hopeful and gorgeous. Adding to the poignancy of Ms. Kelly's later-life struggle and depres-



Scripps College Art Professor Nancy Macko's new exhibit, Hopes & Dreams: A Visual Memoir, 2010, is a very personal endeavor focusing on her mother's decline into the confusion of dementia.

overlays images in a collage style, merging figurative snapshots of her mother's life, which become increasingly hollow, brittle and torn. In one, the image of a flower, vibrantly colored and full of texture; in the next, the same flower, but only an empty, traced image, its center lost.

"They're battling it out, the blue rose and the empty rose, images of past and present tension. They represent my mother collapsing and coming apart, not together anymore, hollowed out, not whole. Her life force is empty," Ms. Macko said.

The progression of images culminates in a grouping of 3 cacophonous and jumbled prints, the faded photos of her mother, visible in some fashion in the other pieces, now completely enshrouded.

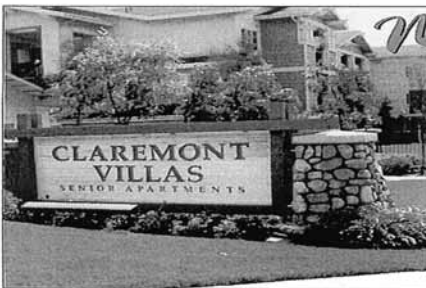
"They show the absence of her presence. You can no longer see her. What's really going on is the collapse of her memory and cognition," said Ms. Macko. "The images are confused, they give a sense of discomfort, restlessness, agitation. That's what the mind and body go through."

Beyond a project of intense personal meaning and healing, Ms. Macko hopes this artwork will be of service and significance to others.

"So many of my peers are now dealing with elderly parents, many of whom have memory loss and other similar conditions," she said. "As an artist and an educator, I wanted to represent this experience in order to open up a dialog around it not only as a personal memoir but also as a collective experience of so many of us."


Through January 7, "Hopes & Dreams" can be viewed at Andi Campognone Projects, 300 W. Second St., Pomona, by appointment only: 215-3161 or info@andicampognone.com.

— Brenda Bolinger



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