



Art Feature

Jody Servon and
Lorene Delany-Ullman

Saved


Introduction

Saved is an ongoing photographic and poetic exploration of the human experience of life, death, and memory, addressing how memories of the dead become rooted in everyday objects, and how objects convey those memories to the living.

Jody Servon, Artist

The project was conceived after my father and three friends died in a single year. I was affected by how friends and colleagues shared stories of their own lost loved ones with me; my grief made me a member of a new club in which people candidly laugh and cry about those who have died. In an earlier work, *Hanging On and Holding Out*, I had photographed my late grandfather's dentures, and was intrigued by how this somewhat uncanny color image resonated with viewers. Many felt prompted to tell me about things they held onto after the death of a loved one. In time, I began to borrow objects from the bereaved and photograph them. The items, ranging from a below-the-knee prosthetic leg to an old Atlantic City slot machine, are photographed by themselves on a seamless white background, focusing attention on the wear apparent on each surface. It is important for each object to have a unique presence, so the scale of the photo is based on the personality of the item. Most of the images are larger than actual size to reveal intimate details, such as the loose threads on a scapular or the remnants of food caught in the rolled lip of a well-worn colander.



Lorene and I met at Vermont Studio Center in July 2009. During our four-week residency, I showed slides from the *Saved* project to the artists and writers of the VSC community. My presentation triggered our initial discussion about how the stories embedded in these photographs could be told in words, which led Lorene to share



her writing with me. I was especially captivated by her prose poems of life on the road with her first husband, a minor-league baseball player. The work was intimate, spare, funny and disturbing—in key with the images I was making. Together, we composed interview questions for the owners of the objects I'd borrowed to photograph. By email and in person, I corresponded with the objects' owners, and then forwarded their answers to Lorene.

Lorene Delany-Ullman, Poet

The prose poems, based on the interviewees' responses, are meant to evoke the relationships between the objects, the relatives and friends who saved them, and the original owners. We ask the new owners to describe their relationship with the deceased, any distinguishing characteristics of that person, and what it is that makes the object special. Often the language of their answers is directly incorporated into the poem. *Saved* is a collaborative work not only between Jody and me, but also between us and the new owners, who lend their objects to be photographed and tell us the intimate, provocative, and sometimes embarrassing stories that we then preserve along with the images.





Mom's Chili Cup

In her cookbooks, hundreds of dog-eared recipes. Or sometimes she wrote on strips of paper: *I like this because.* Everybody thought she was a redhead; she was the cool mom on the block with shades and wigs. She cooked her favorite five, though her son only remembers three: Hawaiian pork chops, chuck wagon mac, and BBQ spare ribs. How he hated Hawaiian pork chop night. Even Mom's ribs weren't that good (God bless her). The first meal she cooked for her husband, chicken à la king, she crushed the whole garlic bulb into the skillet instead of one clove. Mom believed in recipes, the microwave, and Wendy's Chili. (*Belly up to a pot of rich and meaty, award-winning taste.*) She'd buy four or five cups and keep them in the refrigerator. In the new condo, she never turned on the oven. Her son found the broiler pan still wrapped inside.

Mom's Chili Cup from the *Saved* project, Ultrachrome, 22" x 22"



Daddy's Leg

Amputate—to cut away what can't be spared. Once he recovered from surgery, Daddy was fitted with several legs. When the stump healed, a permanent leg was made for him. A meticulous man—he played a ruthless game of gin rummy, and walked well with a prosthetic limb. No one who watched him knew. Daddy had other uses for his leg: at the park, it became a pillow as he napped under a tree, soft foam and fabric beneath his head. At the opera, he removed his leg and let it rest on the seat beside him. He'd ask folks to wait while he joined leg to stump. After his wife died, he cooked for himself and made a mess every time. His daughter joked she'd turn his leg into a vacuum cleaner. He could cook and suck up the crumbs, too. Now that Daddy's gone, she's thought of turning it into a lamp.

Daddy's Leg from the *Saved* project, Ultrachrome, 28" x 40"



Momma's Toys

Men may work from sun to sun, but women's work is never done.
—West Virginia farm women's saying

Raised in the eastern panhandle of West Virginia, Momma was a twin and the only girl of four children. She was given “woman’s” chores at a very young age. She received these toy figurines for Christmas, and not much else, except fruit and some candy. Her brothers didn’t play with the fair maiden and her animals. Did Momma pretend her farm girl tended the sheep, milked the cows? Even her toy lass had chores. Momma didn’t allow her daughter, Robin, to buy sweets; instead they made sea-foam candy. *It’s like Divinity*, Robin says. *Boil brown sugar in water till it makes a soft ball. Slowly pour into stiffly beaten egg whites. Add vanilla and nuts. Spoon onto wax paper to cool.*

Momma's Toys from the *Saved* project, Ultrachrome, 19" x 26"



Grandpa's Cabin

Bud kept a war diary. At seventeen, he joined the Navy and was sent to France, where he wielded a rifle capable of firing multiple rounds. Though he inhaled enough mustard gas to give him emphysema, he loved to smoke cigars. A bald man, Bud had a large freckle on the top of his head. He pointed to the freckle and told his grandchildren, "This is a nail head. The nail holds my head on." His wife, Dot, draped doilies over the backs of all the armchairs in the living room. She said to her grandchildren, "The doilies absorb the grease from Bud's head." When Bud retired he didn't know what to do, so Dot told him to pick up sticks in the adjacent vacant lot. From branches and twigs, he built the cabin. His granddaughter adored the small leather hinges, the tiny metal screw eye as doorknob. As a young child, she loved looking through the small cabin windows, admiring the small rooms that suggested the possibility of small people living inside. Once, when she was in college, and many years after Dot had died, her grandfather pushed his tongue into her mouth during a goodnight kiss. She jerked back and hurried off to join her friends at their campsite on the Florida shore.

Grandpa's Cabin from the *Saved* project, Ultrachrome, 21" x 28"



Uncle Ebby and Uncle Reese's Slot Machine

On their bar, beside the bourbon and vodka, the slots. And a crock of buffalo nickels. Uncle Ebby—he'd always tell you what he thought, good or bad. That's a decorator for you. Uncle Reese used to relax with a Pall Mall and a vodka tonic before cooking. He'd set the table with the best china, silver, and crystal. Wine with dinner and a stinger afterwards. Their seven-year-old niece played the slots. A green machine with three spinning reels out of Atlantic City. She'd spend summers in their central A/C, watch their TV with more than three channels. Every Christmas, the uncles had two trees. One full of antique ornaments, the other upstairs, white flocked, red velvet ribbons and birds. Ever the gift, the winter coats, for her and her brothers. Later, she'd stand at the bar drinking quinine, sliding the coins into the slot—Bell Fruit Bell Fruit Bell Fruit. Jackpot.

Uncle Ebby and Uncle Reese's Slot Machine from the *Saved* project, Ultrachrome, 28.5" x 24.5"



Mom's Scapular

She was the most devout Catholic in the South, a single mother who worked three jobs and double-shifts. She wore this scapular all day (except when bathing) during her oldest daughter's nine-month coma. Mom became obsessed with Mary sightings, drove the family to see Nancy Fowler, the visionary of Conyers, GA, where the Virgin Mary sometimes appears in a farmhouse or sometimes as a sign in the sun. Katherine, her youngest daughter, remembers the spectacle: *30,000 people in a cow pasture, the Rosary prayed in four languages, "live" Stations of the Cross, and Polaroids of the sun at noon.* She kept her smart mouth quiet on the drive home. The faithful believe if you're wearing a scapular when you die, it's a fast track to heaven, no stops in Purgatory.

Mom's Scapular from the *Saved* project, Ultrachrome, 19.5" x 19"



Grampa's Golf Shoe Tree

Grampa called her “Gaelic” rather than Gayle, said, *It's a GEORGeous day*, when it was a gorgeous day. When they walked together around town, dozens of people would tip their hats, and say, *Hello, George!* and his granddaughter would feel like royalty. She loved it when her Grampa wore his knickers, argyle socks, sweater vest, and two-tone golf shoes. To make way for his bunion and to keep his shoes in good shape, Grampa put split-toe shoe stretchers into all of his footwear. No need to crowd the toes. And the wooden skeletons absorbed the odors. His shoes, leather and mostly wing tips, were given away. But his granddaughter kept the shoe trees. Gayle had his knickers and vest altered to fit her, and kept a sport coat for the scent of his good cigar.

Grampa's Golf Shoe Tree from the *Saved* project, Ultrachrome, 15" x 30"



Toosa's Colander

To furnish a kitchen: Of knives and forks there must be half a dozen of each, a broiler, a toaster, and a colander. A native Mobilian, Toosa had a privileged Victorian-era upbringing. She knew everyone in polite society, could tell you three or four generations back who was family. A slender velvet bow upswept her snowy white hair. When she drove her late 1950s Chevy, she planned her routes so she'd make only right turns—her neck too arthritic, she couldn't look to the left. This humble, pitted colander, its diamond pattern of small holes—it's this everyday object her great-niece cherishes more than the strand of amethyst beads Toosa bought at the Chicago World's Fair. Let the liquid drain through, but retain the solids.

Toosa's Colander from the Saved project, Ultrachrome, 19" x 26"