

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

DISPLACEMENT

A graduate project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Arts in Art,

Visual Arts

By

Mona Seyedin

May, 2014

The graduate project of Mona Seyedin is approved:

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Date

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Date

California State University, Northridge

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the chair of my committee, Professor James Kelley, to push me to explore my ideas and guide me throughout the masters program. I am truly grateful for your creative and constructive suggestions. I wish to thank Professor Paula DiMarco for your incredible amount of support, encouragement, your comments, and ideas. Sincere thanks to Professor Samantha Fields, I appreciate your generous help, insight, assistance, and criticism. Also, thank you to all the professors who helped guide me through the program.

## Dedication

In loving memory of my grandmother, Aziz.

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## ABSTRACT

## DISPLACEMENT

By

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Master of Arts in Art, Visual Arts

*Displacement* is a book that contains visual interpretations regarding my separation and resettlement from my native Iran to the United States. The narrative chronicles my struggle to adapt to a different community and culture within an unfamiliar geographical setting. As I recall details from my homeland, I create an imaginary world from memories of the past.

Utilizing symbolism (such as the tree, the rose, and the nightingale) and a range of monotype, Xerox Lithography, drawing and digital graphic techniques, each two-page spread in *Displacement* conveys various complexities of my experience as an émigré. By combining poetry and design in the form of a book, *Displacement* allows a more personal and sequentially accurate conveyance of my experience to the viewer.

## Background

I've been told that there were many people around me, but I did not know them. This was because I was a newborn, and I was unfamiliar with people and the wonders of this world. I was born in a house and in a city where everything was unfamiliar to me—a home that had my grandmother, Aziz. My grandmother's alarm clock awoke me each morning. I would open my eyes and look at her, then at her clock, the clock was her only reminder of her past. Little by little, I would feel that this house becoming my own house, and as much as I belonged to it, it belonged with me. I had the same feeling about the city where I was born. I belonged to this city, and I gradually became familiar with it also.

Days passed, and I grew up. I no longer saw my grandmother, Aziz, when I woke up every morning. The clock did not ring anymore. The house and the yard were the same, but my childhood was gone from there. The only thing that remained was the memories that came to life each time I looked at the corners of the rooms or when I went to the yard. The memories of the yard were full of the scent of roses and one lonely tree that I planted just to see it grow. Many years passed, little by little everyone had gone. My life changed. I knew I needed to move forward and learn about the world— so I moved out of the house as well.

Now I am in another house, on another street. I live in a city where sounds are unfamiliar to me. When I open my eyes, I am in a place where everything appears strange to me. Here, everything is different, and I have to start over to get to know everything again. Here, everything has a different shape, color, and smell. But, wait a second! “What is this smell?” “This sound is familiar to me.” “What a soft fabric!” “This tree is also dead.” I am here, but I see everything there. Here, everything is dark and unfamiliar, but



this sound, this smell, this tree, the familiarity lightens everything. Am I imagining? Or do I want to imagine? Or maybe time has stopped for me through the frame of that old clock, which was opening a familiar world to my eyes every day.

During the experience of life, losing or separation from individual desires accompanies significant struggles for an individual. I grew up in a family with strong family values and a strong interdependency between the members of my family, who have always struggled to accept the changes in my life. The brief story above reveals this struggle.

During the last few years living in Iran, I considered leaving to continue my education abroad. It was not an easy decision, but I knew it was the right one. I applied for a visa and shortly after I was flying to the United States. Everything happened so quickly. My last moments of leaving my family and our home have become memories of their own; I took my time and looked at the corners of the room, the yard, the pictures in the frames, and my parents. With a student visa, I only had permission for a single entry to the United States. Not knowing when or if I would ever return to Iran made my immigration experience that much more difficult.

## **Context of Immigration**

According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2013 Report, international migration continues to increase (232 million people, or 3.2 per cent of the world's population, live abroad worldwide, compared with 175 million in 2000 and 154 million in 1990), and the United States remains the most popular destination.<sup>1</sup> Although people leave their homeland to move to another country for a variety of reasons, most immigration—whether voluntary or involuntary—appears to be the result of political, economic, or natural crises.

Whatever the reason, immigration is not simply a geographic displacement—there are other displacements, or losses, when people emigrate from their own country to another. Immigrants detach themselves from their origins both physically and emotionally. As they attempt to assimilate into a new geographical setting, they must master the complexities of adapting to a new community with its own culture, values, ideals, and language. Immigration can be accompanied by pleasant and promising opportunities, but not all immigrants survive such sociological and psychological upheaval.<sup>2</sup>

Immigrants can be divided into three groups: 1) groups whose minds are always thinking about the place and past they left; 2) groups of immigrants who can reconcile themselves to their new places (finding ways of adapting, living in the present while embracing their past; and 3) groups who remain suspended between past and present, constantly struggling with their transformation.<sup>3</sup> Memory can be an overpowering factor for immigrants—displaced individuals often find it difficult to cope with their longing to return home. Recollections from the past, such as people, places, events, sounds, views,

smells, touch, and tastes recall a lost reality. But past memories often conflict with present experiences.<sup>4</sup>

## **Involuntary Memories**

The sense of loss is a common sentiment among immigrants. It often accompanies remembrances. However, remembering does not necessarily signify physical loss. In many cases, the loss we experience is emotional—that of longing. Neither is memory untouchable or unchangeable. Perception of the past is transitory. It continually evolves with new experiences and knowledge.<sup>5</sup>

Immigrants' remembrances and longings of the past often trigger their unconscious senses, providing a detachment from solitude, alienation, and emptiness—at least for a while. These senses, while involuntarily, are the result of nervous agitation and generally accompany emotional and/or physical reactions. Sensory memories, one of the three forms of memories (the other two being long memories and short memories), resuscitate particular moments of our past. When we re-experience a sensation of a particular moment, we are awakened through visual, auditory, haptic, olfactory, or gustatory stimuli (seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, tasting) that last only for a few seconds. These stimuli arouse our brain and nervous system and then direct our body—and mind—to respond. Sensory experiences trigger involuntary memory.<sup>6</sup>

Involuntary memory refers to individual and instinctive recollections that are beyond our control. Although involuntary memory may develop from psycho/physical contact with others and surrounding objects, it originates from the resulting synaptic impulses that occur once one has accessed it in the present.

While this event may prompt an individual to re-experience and/or re-live sensations of specific moments in the past (a time that defined their identity), it may also allow reconciliation with the present. Involuntary memory transfers an individual from

the present to a moment that was thought to have been lost, although it later can reoccur as a conscious image or thought.<sup>7</sup>

## Displacement

“Desires are already memories. When a man rides a long time through wild regions he feels the desire for a city.”<sup>8</sup> “Memories awaken all at once and surround him. The city appears to him as a whole where no desire is lost and of which he is a part. He enjoys everything and inhabits his desires.”<sup>9</sup>

My Visual Arts thesis project includes my complex experience as an immigrant to the United States and my continuous struggle of adapting to a new place. I compiled my immigration experience, part of which is a flashback to my story of life in the past, into my thesis. The name of my thesis book is called, *Displacement*. The narrative of the book was influenced by, constructs from Marcel Proust’s *A La Recherche Du Temps Perdu*—which define the theme of involuntary memory—and Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*—which is about imagination based on desires. In addition, my cultural background and lifelong interest in Arabesque (Islamic Art) artistic forms and patterns, Persian miniatures, Naskh calligraphic style, Nastaliq, Kufic script, Thuluth script, inscriptions, and illuminated manuscripts have influenced my images. My book’s title, *Displacement*, the images within, and the typographic treatments are representative of my experience of displacement as an immigrant. The combined typographic and organic elements in the word *Displacement*, create an image that may serve as a visual metaphor for my journey—an event that was similar to the uprooting of a plant (see Fig. 1, P. 15). By merging drawings of grass-like leaves, most of whose existences fades as they flow farther from the roman letters of the word itself—I have illustrated a metaphor of removal from my native soil. Conversely, I combined my design with gracefully shaped leaves that underscore the conflict between memories of past and experiences of the present.

Memory plays a central role in my book. The experiences of solitude and alienation arouse my desire to return to my original self. Involuntary memory is particularly crucial, revealing my desire to revisit the past. Various external stimuli enable me to re-experience my original identity. These stimuli evoke obscure, incomplete—and sometimes confusing—images from my past and thus remind me of my abandoned possessions, the loved ones I left, and ultimately, where I truly belong. I've then materialized and streamlined those memories-induced images into iconography representing important people, events and places from my past. They—along with various typographic elements—are the primary vehicle I utilized in my layouts to visually communicate *Displacement's* narrative. Through the experience of capturing my past through memories, I recreated memories and saved them as an art piece. I constructed images through the process of printmaking that evoke a sense of dreaming and dream-like scenarios. Through a monotype technique, which is the product of drawing with water-based ink on glass, I produced images that illustrate this sense of dreaming.

*Displacement* begins with a story that occurs in the present. However, its main narrative relates to my past (see Fig. 5, P. 17). The story recounts my immigration experience and the contradictions between past and present, emphasizing my longing and desire for my homeland, my identity, and my culture. At the beginning of my book I present my alienation in a new place through a black background, symbolizing that which is dark and unfamiliar (see Fig. 3, P. 16). I visually portrayed my instability in this new situation through expressive typography, with words and sentences floating in the air. I chose to utilize the Farsi language in the narrative of my first image in the book because I automatically think in Farsi. Therefore, I instinctively began writing this story in Farsi.

The use of a candle's image shows my wish to adapt to a new country by seeking a light to ease my passage through this darkness. The challenge between adapting to a new community and longing for my homeland activates my memory. My involuntary memory derives from my sensory experiences— experiences that awaken through visual, auditory, olfactory, and haptic stimuli. The sensations that accompany my vision of an object or my smelling a familiar scent were the catalysts for these experiences of *déjà vu*.

The experience of *déjà vu* altered the appearance of my images by means of brighter and more vibrant colors (see Fig. 4, P. 16). The floating words suggest memories that are positioned to portray smoke rising from a fire, creating a smoldering trajectory that informs both the imagery and typography exhibited throughout the remainder of the book. Inside the circular perimeter of an old clock I depict my immersion into the past by concentrically repeating the Farsi sentence, "Time has stopped for me through the frame of that old clock, which was opening a familiar world to my eyes everyday" (see Fig. 6, P. 17). The following pages incorporate memories triggered by my present experiences in the United States with my longing for Iran. Each page is a reflection of my transition between different time periods, my mind's travel between back and forth, past and present.

The texture of my design constantly changed based on the rising and falling of my own emotions. For example, the image of roses in my book originated from the happiness I experienced when I encountered the fragrance of roses on our university campus (see Fig. 7, P. 18). The vibrant red roses may even remind the reader of blood, which in this context, is meant to represent life. By repeating the roses in different sizes on the page I present birth, growing, and life. I emphasized the spirit and happiness that the aroma of



the roses has brought me. However, the next image is decidedly more melancholy. The naked tree branches, combined with the neutralized color palette and overtly unbalanced placement of elements, established an ominous void on the right side of the composition (see Fig. 8, P. 18). This void, combined with the incomplete circles of the hose and obvious absence of water (and life), suggests the emptiness one encounters from loss and death. Seeing a dried tree in the yard of my California house has evoked thoughts of the tree I once planted and watered futilely in the yard of my house in Iran. The scattered Farsi letters on the ground, which are the same letters that I used to create the hose, imply my present state of disorder. My constant switching from Farsi to English/English to Farsi illustrates the awkwardness I experience in my daily conversation.

There are three successive page spreads that form a short three-part journey. The first spread is about the momentary excitement I have felt in hearing a nightingale's song. It is about my excitement for Norouz, the Persian New Year, and the arrival of spring (see Fig. 10, P. 19). The second page spread recalls traditional symbols of the Iranian New Year, such as an apple, symbol of fertility and birth, and a fish that represents life (see Fig. 11, P. 20). In the background, I used a large letter "S", reshaped to depict a detail from the traditional Persian patterns one might see in mosques and historical buildings. I show my struggle between two cultures by mixing Persian patterns and Farsi letters, the black letters spelling the word, "Sin," with the Roman letter "S."<sup>10</sup> I display chaos and my confusion by placing an apple suspended in the air and the dispersal of Farsi letters.<sup>11</sup> In the third page spread I show a lifeless fish that has fallen to the ground, ending my momentary happiness brought by recollections of Norouz and spring (see Fig. 12, P. 20). The letters flowing from the fish's body, which relate to poetry about spring,

birth, life, and happiness, present destruction. The contrasting color palettes between the first two spreads and the last one underscore this feeling of conflict and confusion.

Hence, the vibrant colors that were triggered by the nightingale's sweet song—representative of a new day and new life—conflict with the emptiness of the last page spread and the absence of color and life.

*Displacement's* final pages are more visually tranquil, recalling the memory of my deceased grandmother, whose smooth skin always reminded me of touching a soft silk shawl. I depicted this by assimilating skin tones into an image of floating fabric (see Fig. 13, P. 21). I then combined this image with the de-saturated and diffused hands of my departed grandmother (see Fig. 14, P. 21). In addition to the warm color palette, the timeworn creases on her hands reflect the passage of a lifetime.

The abundance of life I have felt in the moments while traveling through my memories, have soon cut short when I return to the empty reality of my current situation. This emotional displacement is analogous to the displacement I have experienced as an émigré. By combining poetry and design in the form of a book, I have created a personal and sequentially accurate conveyance of my experience.

## **Conclusion**

My immigration continues to offer moments of struggle. New changes in my life consciously or unconsciously deliver me to my point of origin, my home in Iran. As an artist, I deconstructed my memories of home, by forming a visual narrative of my personal history through symbolism; an emotive appropriation of visual elements such as color and texture. This has inspired me to explore my past experiences even more deeply and share these experiences with others.

Clearly, there are many Iranian cultural elements in my book, but there are also elements that may be understood by everyone, and so are not limited to one specific culture or nationality. Similarly, there are certain geographically specific activities that are also broadly human. I believe that while there are truly differences between peoples, countries and cultures, I also believe that we share more similarities than differences. As an artist and as an immigrant, I have attempted share my experience. Hopefully, both immigrants and native-born Americans will discover aspects within my book to which they can identify.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> n.p. *232 million international migrants living abroad worldwide-new UN global migration statistics reveal*. 2011. Web. 23 Feb. 2014.  
<<http://esa.un.org/unmigration/wallchart2013.htm>>.
- <sup>2</sup> Creet, Julia and Kitzmann, Andreas, *Memory and migration: multidisciplinary approaches to memory studies*, Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2011, p. 31.
- <sup>3</sup> Farhadi, Asghar, "Asghar Farhadi on The Past". *DP/30*. Interview by David Poland, 2013. Web. 20 Nov. 2013.
- <sup>4</sup> Creet, Julia and Kitzmann, Andreas, *Memory and migration: multidisciplinary approaches to memory studies*, Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2011, p. 3.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.
- <sup>6</sup> Johnson, Jeffrey, *Creative Development in Marcel Proust's A La Recherche Du Temps Perdu*, New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2012. p. 114.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.
- <sup>8</sup> Calvino, Italo, *Invisible Cities*, United States: Harcourt, Inc. 1974. p. 8.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- <sup>10</sup> A symbolic illustration of Norouz—the traditional Iranian celebration of the arrival of spring—is setting up a decorative table called Haft-Sin. Haft-Sin has a rather complex history and has evolved over time. The table includes seven items starting with the letter "S" or "Sin" in Farsi. The items symbolically correspond to seven creations and holy immortals protecting them. Apple and fish are examples of those symbolic items. Rahni, Davood. *Norouz, the (Iranians) New Year and the Haft-Sin Symbolism*. 2009. Web. 17 Mar. 2014. <<http://www.payvand.com/news/09/mar/1210.html>>.
- <sup>11</sup> Words in Farsi are very often connected to one and other. n.p. *What's the Persian Alphabet Like*. n.d. Web. 2 Apr. 2014.  
<<http://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/other/persian/guide/alphabet.shtml>>.

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- n.p. *232 million international migrants living abroad worldwide-new UN global migration statistics reveal*. 2011. Web. 23 Feb. 2014.  
<<http://esa.un.org/unmigration/wallchart2013.htm> >.
- n.p. *What's the Persian Alphabet Like*. n.d. Web. 2 Apr. 2014.  
<<http://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/other/persian/guide/alphabet.shtml>>.
- Proust, Marcel, *Remembrance of Things Past*, New York: Vintage Books, 1982, c1981.
- Rahni, Davood. *Norouz, the (Iranians) New Year and the Haft-Sin Symbolism*. 2009. Web. 17 Mar. 2014. <<http://www.payvand.com/news/09/mar/1210.html>>.

## Appendix

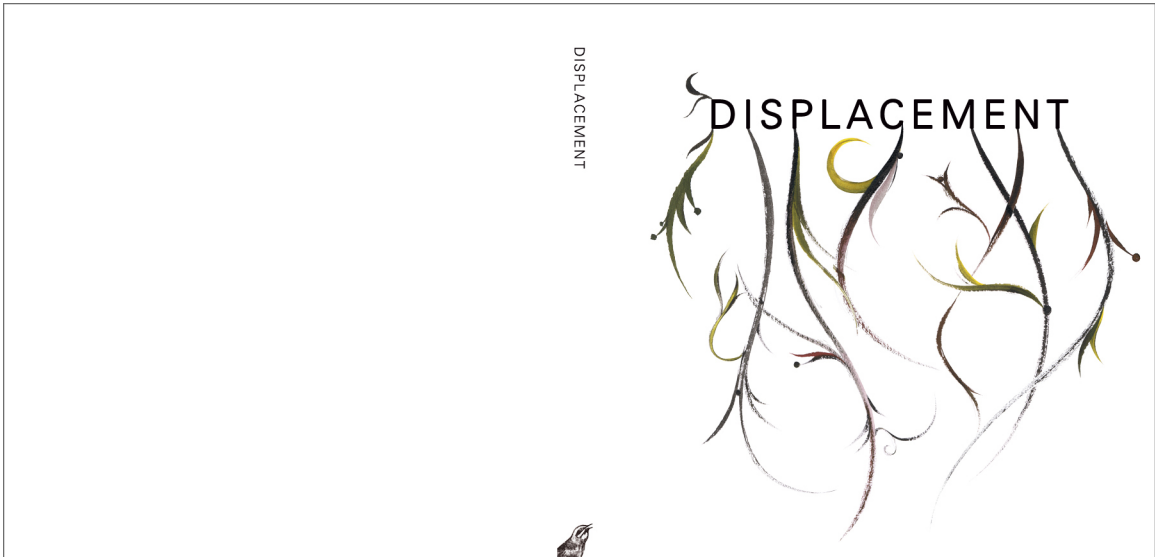


Figure 1: Front and Back Cover, *Displacement*, Limited edition artist book containing archival inkjet prints, 9.125" x 9.125", 2014

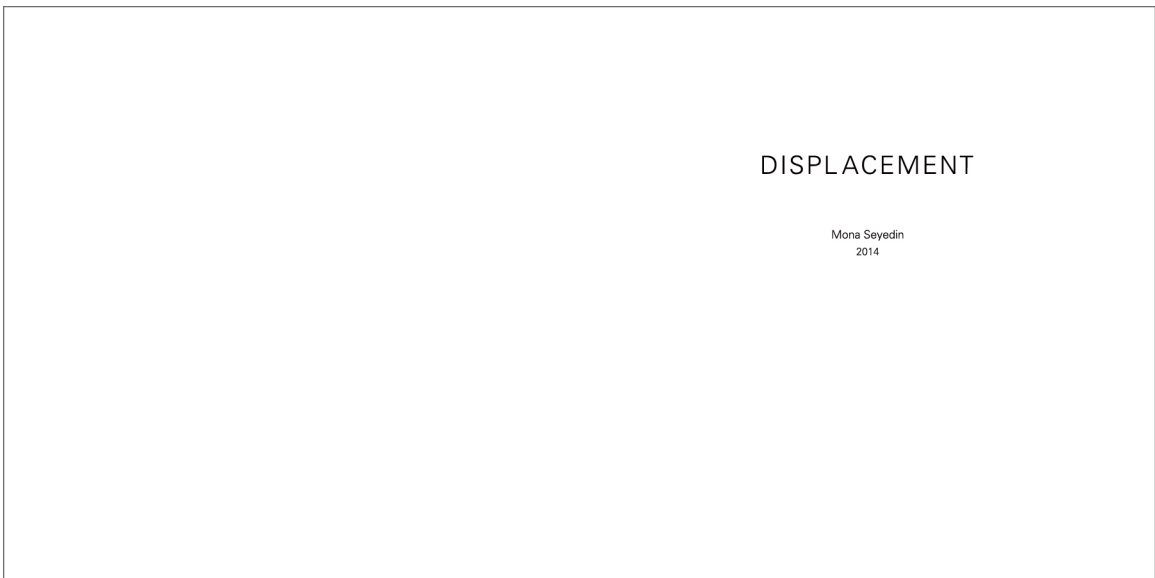


Figure 2: Inside Cover and Title Page, *Displacement*, Limited edition artist book containing archival inkjet prints, 9.125" x 9.125", 2014



Figure 3: Page 2, 3, *Displacement*, Limited edition artist book containing archival inkjet prints 9.125" x 9.125", 2014

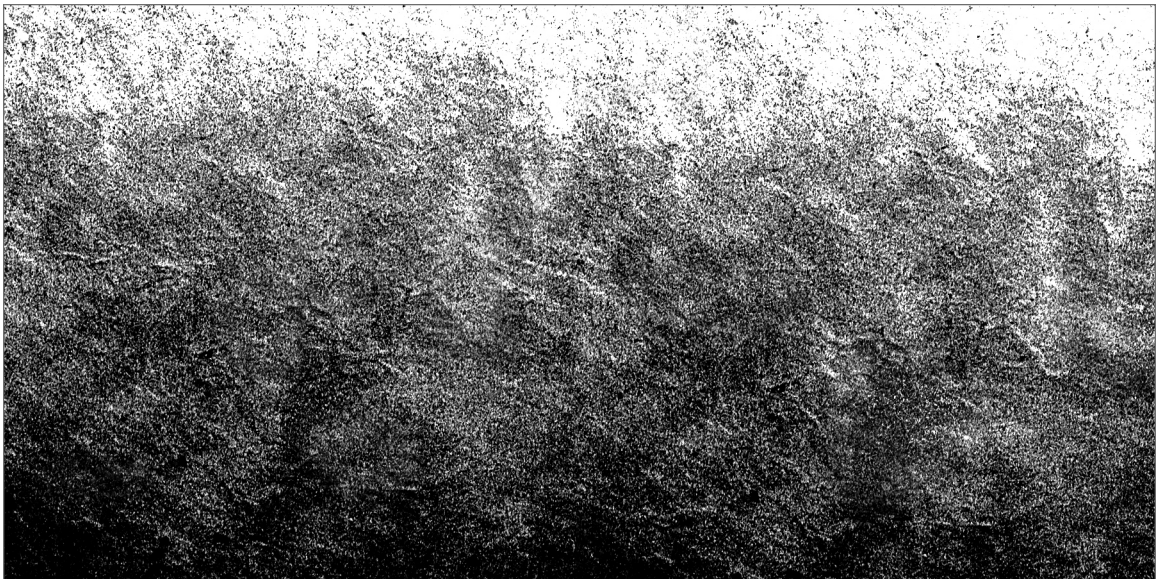


Figure 4: Page 4, 5, *Displacement*, Limited edition artist book containing archival inkjet prints 9.125" x 9.125", 2013

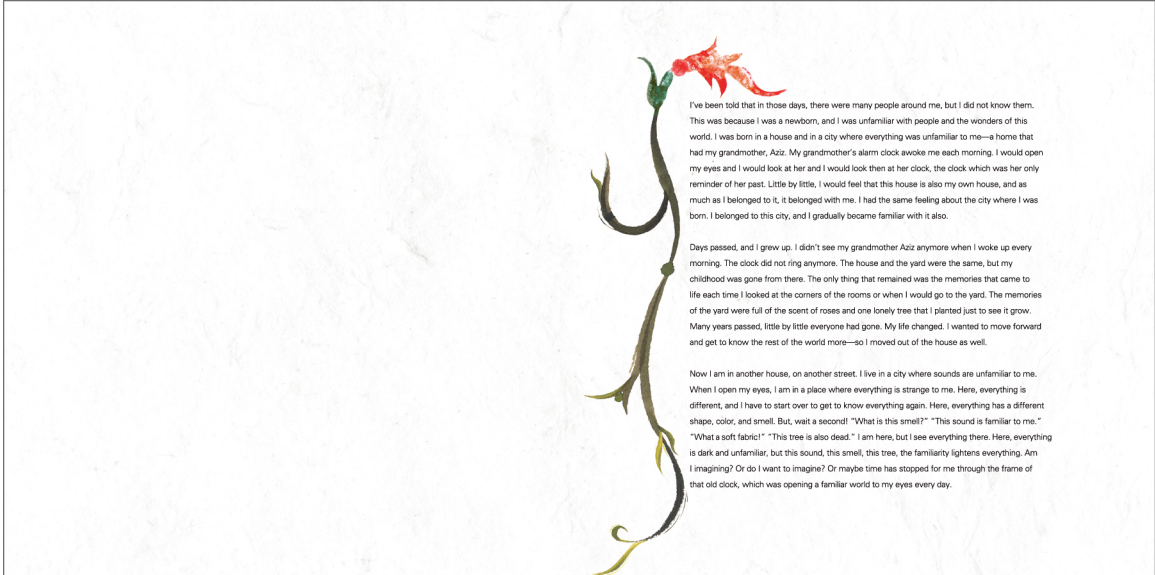


Figure 5: Page6, 7, *Displacement*, Limited edition artist book containing archival inkjet prints 9.125" x 9.125", 2014



Figure 6: Page8, 9, *Displacement*, Limited edition artist book containing archival inkjet prints 9.125" x 9.125", 2013





Figure 7: Page10, 11, *Displacement*, Limited edition artist book containing archival inkjet prints 9.125" x 9.125", 2014



Figure 8: Page12, 13, *Displacement*, Limited edition artist book containing archival inkjet prints 9.125" x 9.125", 2013

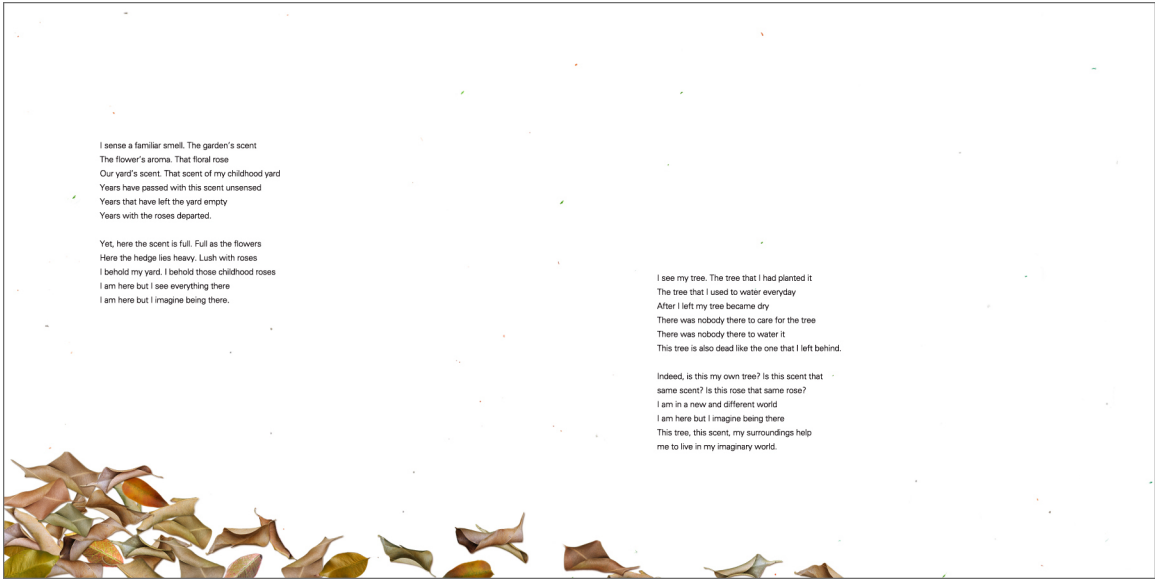


Figure 9: Page 14, 15, *Displacement*, Limited edition artist book containing archival inkjet prints 9.125" x 9.125", 2014



Figure 10: Page 16, 17, *Displacement*, Limited edition artist book containing archival inkjet prints 9.125" x 9.125", 2013



Figure 11: Page18, 19, *Displacement*, Limited edition artist book containing archival inkjet prints 9.125" x 9.125", 2013

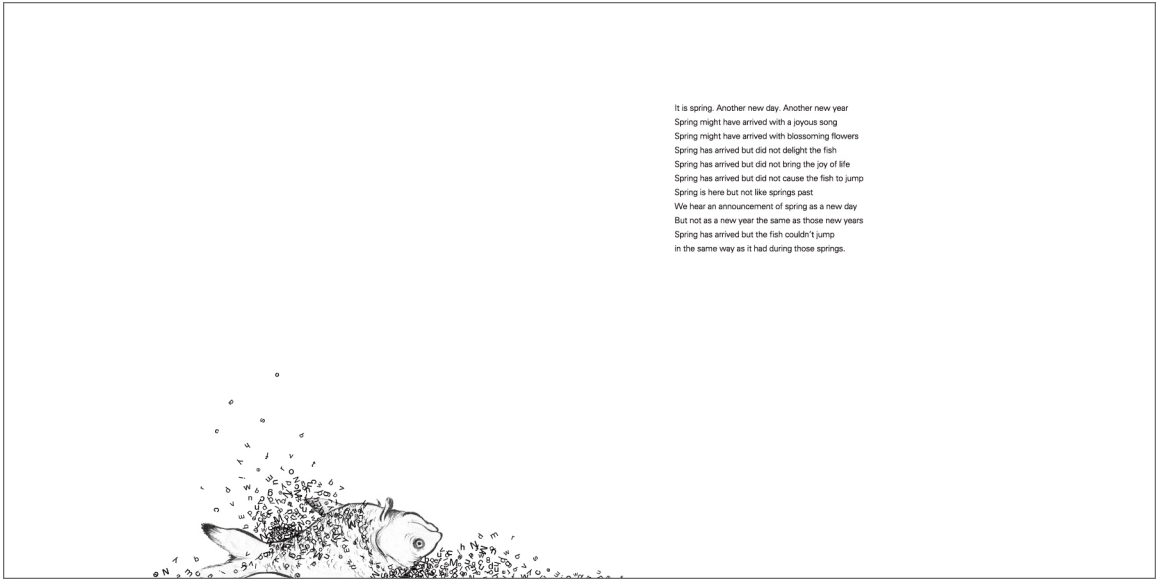


Figure 12: Page20, 21, *Displacement*, Limited edition artist book containing archival inkjet prints 9.125" x 9.125", 2013

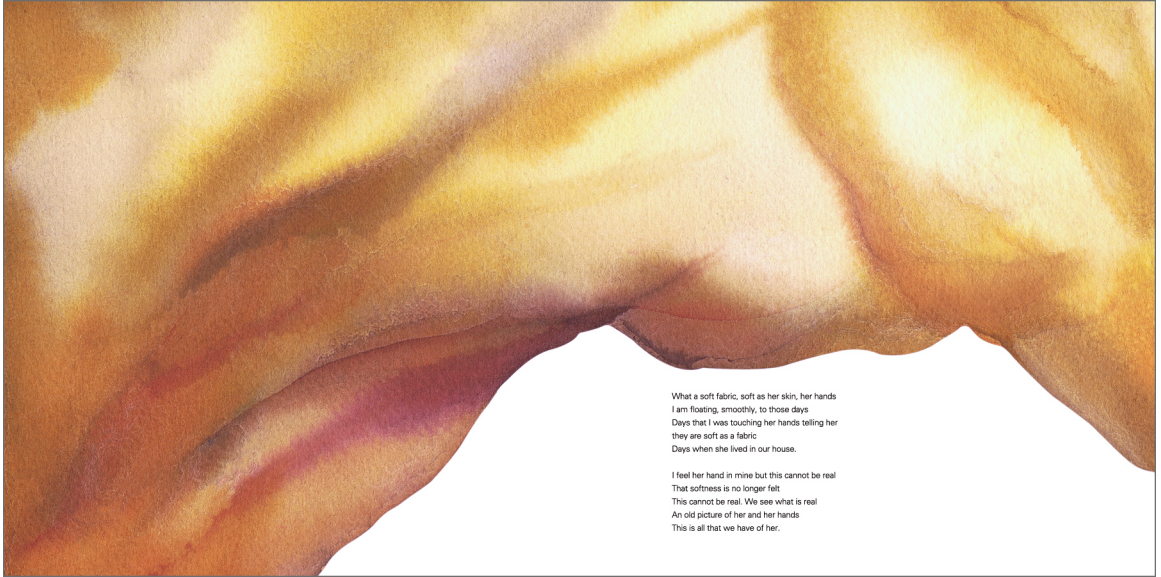


Figure 13: Page22, 23, *Displacement*, Limited edition artist book containing archival inkjet prints 9.125" x 9.125", 2014

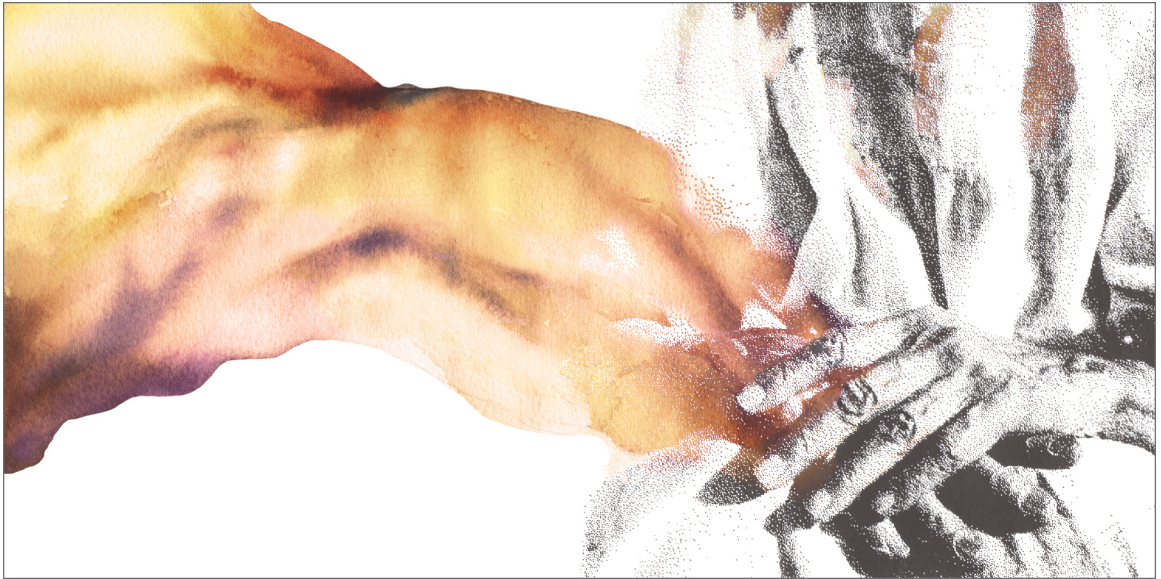


Figure 14: Page24, 25, *Displacement*, Limited edition artist book containing archival inkjet prints 9.125" x 9.125", 2014



Figure 15: Page26, 27, *Displacement*, Limited edition artist book containing archival inkjet prints 9.125" x 9.125", 2014

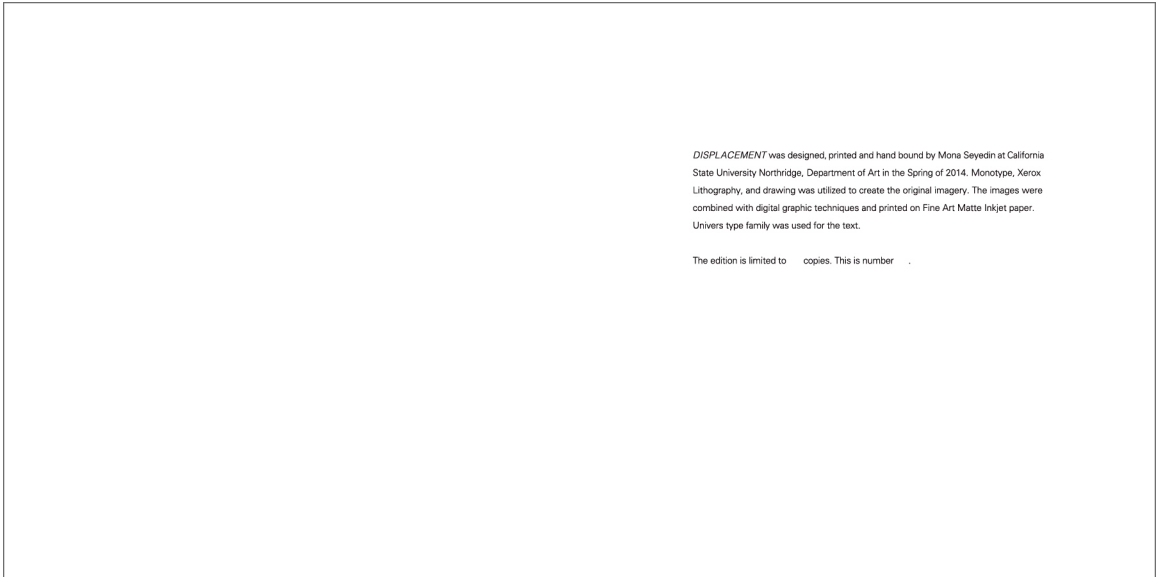


Figure 16: Page28, Colophon, *Displacement*, Limited edition artist book containing archival inkjet prints, 9.125" x 9.125", 2014