

1. Making Meaning from the Fragments

I was never supposed to be an artist.

In school, I was tracked into math and the sciences — what we now call STEM. I had a natural aptitude for tests and could sit quietly in my seat, which seemed enough to determine my path. Ironically, I was dyslexic, had trouble focusing, and daydreamed uncontrollably. But I masked those impairments. Being a “good student” was one of the few reliable ways I could please my parents, and I learned to perform that role with precision.

My home life had trained me for this kind of discipline. I was raised in the American Midwest, in a landscape of long shadows and flat fields — terrain that seemed, in its quiet, to hold a kind of invisible tension. That same tension lived in our house.

Both of my parents struggled with mental illness, and with my stepfather as part of the picture, so too did violence and distance. My mother, often overwhelmed by her own pain, swung between depressive withdrawal and manic intensity. What might have been a refuge became instead a place of instability and fear.

In that chaos, I found something essential: a refuge in imagination. I developed an early ability to detach, observe, and invent other worlds. If the one in front of me felt uninhabitable, I could construct another — one made of images, rhythm, form, and narrative. These inner landscapes didn’t erase what was difficult, but they gave shape to it. They offered the beginnings of coherence.

That instinct — to observe, to reframe, to build meaning from memory — has followed me ever since. But for a long time, I didn’t know that what I was doing was art.

I started college as a biochemistry major: successful, but not happy. My classes were entirely disconnected from anything I felt. I kept performing, until I couldn’t, and then managed to flunk out in one spectacularly disastrous sophomore semester. My parents were shamed and devastated, but I secretly felt freed.

I begged my way back into school as a psychology major, hoping to find something that felt more human. And then one afternoon, purely on a whim, I walked into a camera store and looked through the viewfinder of a 35mm camera. It felt like coming home. From that point forward, I had a new secret: I wanted to be an artist.

I finished my psychology degree — barely — and found a low-level job as a graphic design technician. I was underpaid, but I carried a master key to the darkroom, and I got to orbit the periphery of a creative life. For two years I spent my days working, and my nights and weekends making pictures, slowly building a portfolio.

The only MFA program I applied to was the one I'd dreamed about at the San Francisco Art Institute, where Edward Weston and Minor White had helped define a tradition of art photography as a soulful amalgam of quest and inquiry.

When SFAI's spring admissions process for the coming fall got delayed, I quit my job, flew to San Francisco, took a bus downtown, and stood in a payphone on a city street to call the school. That's how I found out I'd been accepted into their MFA program.

That decision — an instinctual leap into the unknown — changed everything. It wasn't just a shift in direction; it was a declaration. Art was no longer just an internal refuge. It was now my method, my philosophy, and my path forward: a lifelong attempt to give shape to the fragmented texture of experience, to create something that could hold both clarity and contradiction.

2. Art School and the Poetics of Process

Arriving at the San Francisco Art Institute felt less like a continuation of school and more like an escape into possibility. The rules I had learned to follow — about success, discipline, order — suddenly felt irrelevant. Here, the important questions weren't about answers, they were about attention. Intuition. Form. Risk.

At SFAI I began to understand that art was not a product but a tool for exploration. What mattered was vision, how you looked — how you constructed meaning through rhythm, gesture, juxtaposition, composition, image. I began to understand the difference between looking and seeing. I no longer had to justify why I paid attention to things others overlooked. *Paying attention was the work.*

Two mentors were crucial to this shift.

Larry Sultan taught me how to recognize the personal as a site of cultural inquiry. He understood photography not just as a way of seeing, but as a way of thinking — an intersection of memory, ambiguity, and visual metaphor. His work blurred the line between documentary and invention, and in his classroom,

I began to see that the stories we invent to create meaning are shaped as much by omission as by fact.

Reagan Louie revealed the depth and discipline of process. With him I learned to trust what unfolds in repetition, failure, quiet. His way of working — slow, attentive, open — helped me realize that making is not about control, but about calibration. You refine by listening. You discover by returning.

Both men also gave me something I hadn't expected: models of masculinity that felt new and needed. They were strong authoritative teachers, but never domineering. They were quiet, soft-spoken, and deeply present. Larry modeled a strength that made room for tenderness — a masculinity anchored in generosity and emotional intelligence. Reagan made room for the unknown, teaching me that to embrace it fearlessly requires courage and wisdom.

After a childhood shaped by volatility and intimidation, these examples stayed with me. What I learned from each of them didn't arrive all at once, it unfolded over years. I feel as though I'm still learning from them. Their influence continues to echo in my work and my way of being in the world.

At SFAI I found permission to explore and a vocabulary to express what I was discovering. I was no longer orbiting creativity from the outside, I was immersed in it. My days were filled with making, looking, discussing, revising. There was no single formula, no hierarchy of materials or media. There was only the question: What does the work need?

That question — what does the work need? — has guided me ever since. It taught me to work across disciplines, to let the concept dictate the medium, and to embrace complexity over clarity. It also gave me something deeper: a way to translate personal experience into public form without reducing its ambiguity. To honor emotion without flattening it into explanation. To find shape not in resolution, but in rhythm, contrast, and attention.

3. Being an Artist, Becoming a Scholar

When I accepted a teaching position at the University of Illinois, I didn't entirely realize what I was walking into. I had trained in an art school, in an environment defined by critique, intuition, and studio practice. It was a world of makers. The university, by contrast, was a world-class research institution, home to physicists, engineers, computer scientists. It was a place driven by observation, hypothesis, experimentation, and the pursuit of knowledge through analysis, logic, and measurable outcomes.

And yet, it turned out to be exactly where I needed to be.

What the university offered me was not just stability or title, it offered a new lens through which to view my own work. Immersed in a research culture, I began to see my creative practice not as separate from inquiry, but as a *form of inquiry*. Art could be rigorous. Speculative. Iterative. The studio could be a laboratory, not in metaphor, but in method.

This shift reshaped the questions I asked, the technologies I explored, and the conceptual frames I worked within. I continued to produce solo projects, works like *Life With Father*, *Urban Diary*, *the place*, and *Flagrant World* — each driven by my ongoing interest in memory, narrative systems, viewer participation, and the aesthetics of digital fragmentation. These were intensely personal investigations, created independently, outside of collaboration.

At the same time, the university was also a space of rich dialogue, and one of the most meaningful of those dialogues was with **Nan Goggin**. Nan brought to our collaborations a fierce intelligence, deep design sensibility, and a shared commitment to experimentation. Together, we created works such as *Body*, *Space*, *Memory* and *In:side:Out*, exploring intersections of digital media, identity, and embodied experience.

We also co-founded one of the first curated, web-based art spaces: @art Gallery, a platform that foregrounded digital practice at a time when most of the art world still viewed the web as peripheral. Later, we collaborated again in helping launch the literary journal Ninth Letter, where Nan and I shaped both the publication's design ethos and its online presence, weaving together literary and visual cultures in new ways.

These collaborations were never about merging identities. They were about extending practice — testing ideas, building platforms, experimenting with systems. My solo work and our collaborative projects existed in parallel, each enriching the other, each rooted in a belief that digital technologies could serve poetic, critical, and affective ends.

The University of Illinois taught me how to think like a researcher without abandoning what mattered most to me: image, attention, ambiguity, rhythm, and care. It allowed me to inhabit a space that was often invisible in both the art world and academia: the space where emotional resonance and intellectual rigor could coexist, where code could carry narrative weight, where poetic form could emerge from computational structure.

This environment didn't constrain my practice, it expanded it.

4. *the place* and Its Legacy

In the mid-1990s, I began developing what would become one of the first serious works of digital art built for the web. The project was called *the place*, and it emerged at a time when most online content was institutional, commercial, or experimental in a strictly technical sense. My vision was different. I saw the internet as a poetic space, as a medium for memory, reflection, intuition, and nonlinear experience.

the place wasn't a story in the traditional sense. It was a system: a constellation of images, text fragments, and navigational loops that mirrored how memory works – not as a line, but as a drift. Visitors didn't move through plot points but through psychic terrain, assembling meaning by wandering. The interface was minimalist, the pacing deliberate. It was a meditation, not a spectacle.

The first work I published within *the place* was *Life With Father*, a quiet, interior piece that reflected on the emotional texture of childhood and the complexity of paternal presence. It was stark, unresolved, personal. It set the tone for everything that followed: an embrace of fragment over narrative arc, presence over performance.

Over the next few years, I continued building out *the place* — adding works, refining its architecture, letting the system evolve. As the web changed, so did the cultural conversation around digital art. Design code evolved, bandwidth expanded, new tools emerged. But I never treated technology as the point. It was always a vessel for emotional resonance.

A later work published at *the place* was *Urban Diary*, a piece that pushed the original concepts further outward. Where *Life With Father* looked inward, *Urban Diary* looked outward, toward the city, the ambient flow of everyday life, the layered simultaneity of movement and memory. It was composed of multiple modular fragments: photographs, micro-narratives, observations, all designed to recombine and loop in unexpected ways. Like its predecessors, it refused closure. It asked the viewer not to finish, but to return.

the place was always a solo project. It was my studio, my sketchbook, my essay. It allowed me to test ideas that didn't fit neatly into art galleries or academic journals. And it became a model for how digital space could be something more than delivery, a site of quiet, sustained attention.

Looking back, I see *the place* not just as an early experiment in web-based art, but as a conceptual foundation. The themes I explored there – nonlinearity, fragmentary memory, user-driven navigation — would evolve into more expansive forms in works like *Flagrant World*. But the core ideas were already in place. The screen was not a window, it was a landscape; a space to drift, to remember – to assemble, dis-assemble, and re-assemble stories about who we are, where we come from, and how we treat each other.

5. Recognition and New Roles

Over time, the work I was doing — both creative and pedagogical — began to draw recognition from the university itself. At first, I was surprised by that. The University of Illinois is globally known for its science and engineering programs. It's a place where computation, mechanics, and innovation drive funding priorities and cultural prestige. But slowly, the institution began to acknowledge that creative work, too, could be a form of research — rigorous, original, and impactful.

Being named a University Scholar was a moment of affirmation. It signaled that the kind of research I was doing – through images, systems, networks, and narrative — was not marginal to the university's mission, but central to it. A few years later, I was named the inaugural Anthony J. Petullo Professor in Art & Design, an endowed chair created to recognize sustained contributions to creative scholarship and exemplary teaching. These honors weren't just titles, they were a shift in visibility. They validated that art-making could hold its own alongside scientific discovery, that conceptual and aesthetic inquiry belonged in the research conversation.

Equally meaningful was being named a Distinguished Teacher. That recognition underscored another throughline in my career: genuine pride in being a teacher, and the belief that teaching and making are not separate acts. They feed each other. In the classroom, I didn't just transmit knowledge, I tried to model inquiry. I encouraged students to trust complexity, to use their own experiences as raw material, and to recognize that not all questions need to be answered. Some need to be lived.

Over the years, I also served in academic leadership roles — first as program chair, then as an administrator across programs. Eventually I held high-profile positions at the college level and in the provost's office.

My goal in those positions was always the same: to build structures that support risk, experimentation, and cross-disciplinary work. To advocate for art and

design not as ornamental, but as epistemological — as a means of exploring unknown territory, engaging new questions, and acquiring new knowledge and new understanding of the world.

These roles gave me perspective on the larger university system. They also gave me opportunities to create, protect, and expand space for others — students, faculty, collaborators — whose voices and visions didn't always fit neatly within conventional metrics.

I didn't become an artist to win awards or hold titles. But when those honors come from within institutions that weren't built to recognize this kind of work, they matter. Not just for me, but for the generations coming up behind me, for the student in the back row who's quietly making sense of things in her sketchbook. For the ones who see in art not just expression, but investigation. For those who need to know this is possible.

6. Teaching as Making

For me, teaching was never separate from making. It was another form of attention, another space where inquiry unfolded.

In the classroom, as in the studio, I asked: What are we paying attention to? What are we carrying with us? What stories are we avoiding, and which ones are asking to be told?

Teaching was never about giving answers. It was about creating a space where students could ask better questions, ones that were personal, contradictory, unresolved. I encouraged them to see their lives not as obstacles to overcome but as material to explore. Not in a confessional sense, but as a way of understanding what drove them: What are you drawn to? What repels you? What image or phrase keeps returning, unbidden?

What does it all mean? Is there an image vocabulary to express this?

I tried to model vulnerability without performance. I told my students that uncertainty wasn't a flaw in the process, *it was the process*. The goal wasn't to arrive at resolution, but to learn how to stay present with complexity, to trust ambiguity, to work through discomfort instead of around it.

Over the course of my teaching career — at the University of Illinois, the University of Nevada-Reno, and beyond — I watched students transform. Not just in technical skill or confidence, but in their relationship to their own voice. I

saw them discover that attention is a kind of power. That making art isn't just about producing artifacts, it's about reshaping perception, revising memory, challenging language and building new vocabularies. It's about giving shape, form, and presence to the invisible.

When I taught, I didn't want students to mimic my process. I wanted them to discover their own. I wanted them to fail and revise and surprise themselves. I wanted them to leave the room more awake to the world than when they entered.

That was the gift teaching gave me: the chance to witness that kind of unfolding, again and again.

7. Looking Ahead

Although I've stepped away from institutional teaching, I haven't stopped working. If anything, the shift has made room for a quieter kind of focus — a return to the studio, to image-making, to language and sound, and yes even to code. The questions that shaped my earlier work still remain: How do we make meaning from memory? How does technology alter perception? What does it mean to build poetic systems in a world of constant distraction?

In this new phase, I've been revisiting long-held ideas with fresh eyes — returning to archived fragments, abandoned sketches, old text loops and broken image sequences. I'm interested in what endures, in how older work can be reframed, or reactivated, not as nostalgia, but as conversation. Some of what I'm exploring now lives in the space between forms: photography, sound, found footage, ambient systems, programming languages. I'm drawn to structures that resist resolution, that shift each time you return to them.

Without the constraints of deadlines or curricula, I've been able to slow down. To listen more closely to the work itself. To make things that don't need to announce themselves immediately.

What comes next isn't fixed. But I know it will continue the same thread that has always run through my practice: a belief in attention as a creative force. A respect for complexity. And a commitment to shaping spaces — whether material, virtual, visual, or textual — that invite reflection, ambiguity, and feeling.

The work is still unfolding. It always will be.