



*Absent Presence:
A Wedding Dress
and the Drawings
of Sarah Casey*

Front Cover

Sarah Casey. *Absent Presence (Wedding)*, 2018-2019. Drawing, wax on paper (100 x 140 cm). Photo by Mark Bentele.

Acknowledgements

This publication accompanies the exhibition *Absent Presence: A Wedding Dress and The Drawings of Sarah Casey* at MLC Gallery, Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada.

Thanks are given to the O'Reilly family for their generous donation of artifacts to Ryerson University and for permission to celebrate Evelyn Normand Wilkie's life.

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*Absent Presence:
A Wedding Dress and the
Drawings of Sarah Casey*

MLC Gallery, Ryerson University
Toronto, Canada
9 May - 5 July, 2019

Curated by Ingrid M. Mida

Works by:
Sarah Casey
Olivia Da Cruz
Victoria Hopgood



Wilkie Wedding Dress (front). Ryerson Fashion Research Collection, Gift of O'Reilly Family, 2016. Photo by Victoria Hopgood, 2019.

A Wedding Dress and the Drawings of Sarah Casey

Ingrid M. Mida

Wedding dresses are often worn once and then stored away to remember a celebration of love and commitment. As time passes, memories fade and textiles decompose, such that a dress not only loses its luster, but yields to the inevitable processes of decay. And yet, even when a wedding dress has disintegrated beyond repair, there is a tender poignancy that make such objects difficult to discard.

On November 15, 1927, Evelyn Normand Wilkie (1902-1969) of Antigonish, Nova Scotia wore a fashionable calf-length drop-waist white silk taffeta dress and a veil capped with orange blossoms for her wedding to William Douglas Howard at St. James United Church in New Glasgow. This wedding dress was described in the local newspaper as pretty, but in the decades since their union, the silk has yellowed badly, shattered in places, and cannot be safely handled.

This delicate and disintegrating dress was given to the Ryerson Fashion Research Collection by Wilkie's descendants in 2016. In museological terms, the dress is categorised as a dead object, a garment so fragile it cannot be handled or exhibited, and is deemed to have little value to researchers. Instead, the dress has become a provocation for artistic practice and not only serves as an uncanny reminder of Wilkie's absence, but more importantly speaks to the fragility of life itself.

UK-based artist Sarah Casey sees clothing as a metaphor for the ephemerality of human presence. Her life-sized wax drawings depict the haunting absent presence that clings to historic garments. Wilkie's garments are rendered as spectral forms within the surface of the paper, seemingly on the cusp of appearing or disappearing. Casey's process echoes that of the dressmaker, using a sewing needle to inscribe the waxed surface. Made on folded newsprint, her drawings recall the intimate domesticity of folding and unfolding clothing as well as the treasured keepsakes that are inherited from loved ones. The suggestion is that dead objects, even in their demise, have interesting stories to tell about how they were made, worn and stored.

The exhibition *Absent Presence: A Wedding Dress and The Drawings of Sarah Casey* invites the viewer to reflect on the processes of memory, time and disintegration. The fragility of the shattered, yellowed wedding dress has been captured in the drawings by Sarah Casey and in the photographs by Victoria Hopgood, while the reproduction of the dress by Olivia Da Cruz refreshes its beauty. These works, alongside the disintegrating dress as well as other garments, photographs of Wilkie, and related artifacts provoke dialogues about the politics of preservation, namely whose stories are told in our collections and who decides? This exhibition has been developed as part of a wider collaborative project between Mida and Casey called *Exquisite Corpses* that explores the ways that artists and curators might work together to develop new methods of researching historic dress.

Wedding Announcement

Howard - Wilkie

ANTIGONISH, Nova Scotia. November 15, 1927 - A pretty event took place at 6:30 o'clock this evening at St. James United Church, when the Rev. Dr. A. H. Denoon, of Trinity Church, New Glasgow, assisted by the Rev. Mr. Lockhart, pastor of St. James, officiated at the marriage of Evelyn Normand, daughter of Charles N. Wilkie and Mrs. Wilkie, of Antigonish, to William Douglas Howard, son of W.G. Howard, of Moncton.

Present were a large number of friends of the bride and groom. The church was tastefully decorated with chrysanthemums and ferns, and the ceremony was performed under a floral arch. The best man was Gerald Sprague, of Springhill, cousin of the groom, and the ushers were H.K. McCharles, and Alfred Titus.

The bride, who was given away by her father, wore a period gown of white taffeta with touches of silver. The bridal veil was caught in cap fashioned to the head with orange blossoms, and her bouquet was of sweetheart roses. Miss Ruth MacMillan, of Halifax, attended the bride and wore a dainty gown of yellow georgette with large black picture hat and carried a sheaf of orchid chrysanthemums. The little flower girl, Barbara Pineo, was attractively frocked in orchid crepe de chine. She carried a basket of rose bettles which she strewed in the path of the bride. Little Eileen MacKenzie, of Sydney, daintily frocked in white canton, carried the bride's train. The wedding marches were beautifully rendered by Miss Lena Harrington.

Following the ceremony at St. James, Mr. and Mrs. Wilkie received the guests at their residence, where the rooms were most attractively done with orchid and yellow chrysanthemums. Mrs. Wilkie was gowned in black georgette and silver, and wore a corsage bouquet of pink roses.

The bridal pair left later for a honeymoon in Montreal and Quebec, Mrs. Howard in a smartly tailored grey gown, her coat was of midnight blue duvetyne with collar and cuffs of platinum fox, her hat a small felt.

Mr. and Mrs. Howard will reside at 342 Avenue Road, Toronto. Among the out of town guests who attended the wedding were: Mrs. Sophia Fraser and Alfred Fraser, New Glasgow; Mr. and Mrs. W. B. Howard, Moncton; Mrs. H. P. Emerson, Sydney; Hon. A. S. MacMillan and Miss Ruperta Cunningham, Halifax.

This text was sourced from a photocopy of the wedding announcement from an unknown Canadian newspaper.



Reproduction of *Wilkie Wedding Dress* by Olivia Da Cruz, 2019.
Ryerson Fashion Research
Collection, 2019. Photo by
Victoria Hopgood, 2019.

Drawn from Life: The Absent Presence of Drawing

Sarah Casey

Nineteenth-century social critic Thomas Carlyle believed clothing reflected a person's soul.¹ Even in our supposedly rational twenty-first century western cultures, we often perceive an uncanny sense of a wearer's presence in a garment long after they have departed. It seems fitting to mention here that the English word "superstition" comes from the Latin for that which remains - superstition is what is left when reason is lost.² Memories attached to the garments of loved ones are emotional rather than rational. In the garments of Evelyn Wilkie, we are poignantly aware of that which is lost - the faded colours and the shattering silk signal an object on the cusp of slipping away. How might drawing, as an act of careful, patient looking, record and communicate this haunting sense of *Absent Presence*?

Clothing has been described as an envelope of the body with its clues of wear like road signs to the past.³ Patiently tracing my pencil over the page as I drew from direct observation over days at the Ryerson Fashion Research Collection, I was aware of tracing the contours of a garment that once enfolded Evelyn Wilkie. Like these garments, drawing has spectral presence; it brings something into being, creating an image from a blank page. Drawing is a medium in the interstices between being and not being, a limbo between absence and presence. As I draw, this interplay between these two poles unfolds on my page. Back in the studio, I chose to transcribe these drawings onto newsprint, thinking of the garments that many of us may have inherited in our own families and stored folded up, packed safely away. I coated the newsprint with wax, thinking of it as a medium for preservation, for sealing up specimens. I then draw into this delicate wax surface by inscribing the surface with a dressmaker's pin to leave a ghostly white mark. Wax is vulnerable to heat and if not protected, the marks inscribed upon it will melt away, as ephemeral as breath or a memory. Just as the garments age, the acids in the newsprint will discolour it to deep yellow, giving it the patina of age.

As I viewed the garments belonging to Wilkie laid flat in their storage boxes, I was reminded of fairy tale princesses, a Sleeping Beauty, lying in repose. I found it uncanny to learn that garments in this poor state of repair are called dead objects, a sad phrase that suggests their story has come to an end. However, even in their demise the garments tell of their construction, wear and chemical disintegration. Drawing can awaken our consciousness to these subtle details that would otherwise go unnoticed. As Philip Rawson writes, through drawing, "we are able to retake possession of those areas of our own real experience which normally lie unused and forgotten, and so see the forms of realities that nothing else can show us."⁴

1 Anuradha Chatterjee, "Wearing the Soul." In *Ruskin's Good Looking*, ed. Sarah Casey (Coniston: Brantwood Museum, 2019), 17.

2 Marina Wallace, "Installations by Contemporary Artists." In *Spellbound: Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft* (Oxford: Ashmolean, 2018), 166.

3 Louise Bourgeois qtd. in Marie Laure Bernadac, *Louise Bourgeois* (Paris: Flammarion, 2006), 155.

4 Philip Rawson, *Seeing Through Drawing* (London: BBC, 1979), 27.



Sarah Casey. *Absent Presence*
(*Yolande*), 2018-2019. Drawing,
wax on paper (70 x 99 cm). Photo
by Mark Bentele.



Sarah Casey. *Absent Presence*
(*Satin*), 2018-2019. Drawing, wax
on paper (99 x 136.5 cm). Photo
by Mark Bentele.

Back Cover

Wilkie Wedding Dress (back).
Ryerson Fashion Research Collection,
Gift of O'Reilly Family, 2016. Photo by
Victoria Hopgood, 2019.

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