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A SILENT LEGACY: Understanding my Grandmother's Refusal to Testify before HUAC in 1955

To say that my grandmother shaped who I am today, in terms of my values and beliefs, would not be entirely correct, for she never told me outright that I needed to share her radical views. She also never shared her story of struggle and loss that occurred as a result of the political and cultural environment of the Cold War and Red Scare in 1950's America. She never spoke of her pain—only her memories of her large, close-knit immigrant family, her love of Slovak music and food, and the needs of others less fortunate than her. Yet her radical beliefs and past were never completely absent when we were together: it was through less overt means that I began to understand the experiences of a woman I would only know until my fifteenth year. I learned my grandmother's politics through the *United Electrician, Radio, and Machine Workers of America* coat that I buttoned up every fall (unaware of the union's radical political beliefs, but perfectly aware of the coat's warmth), and the issues of *Mother Jones* that served as a tablecloth during our afternoon tea parties. I have absorbed many of my grandmother's radical beliefs simply by sitting next to her as she darned socks, baked Slovak *kolach* from scratch, and cheered wildly while watching Packers' football.

I cherish my childhood memories of my grandmother Darina, but they are sugar-coated. I have no recollection of any conversations about the Communist Party, and coming to terms with this silence forces me to admit that I do not entirely know who my grandmother was. As a child I had no knowledge of her many attempts to organize workers, her struggle to adjust from city to farm life during the Depression, and the pain she experienced with her husband's death. In an effort to gain more knowledge, I must try to understand the historical context of the mid-1950s and listen to the only words of my grandmother that I have left: the transcript of her testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) from 1955. In an effort to further understand her experience, and to reinforce that my life is an extension of hers, I choose to focus on her experience testifying before HUAC to try and answer the question that remains.

Was She a Communist?

From family stories, I understand that she was called to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee, yet beyond this basic knowledge no specific information surfaces. This has always left me with various questions: What was her party affiliation? What exactly was she accused of? And was she innocent? I understand that the Red Scare occurred at a time when the varying political beliefs of my extended family brought on a painful tension between certain relatives. This was very difficult for a close, immi

grant family in Cudahy, Wisconsin who held on to each other for a connection to the old country of Czechoslovakia. The paranoia that was prevalent during the Cold War left many people with a fear of being associated with the "enemy" and thus exclusion by means of the blacklist. At this time, there was no clear line drawn for the public between people who sympathized with Marxist ideology and people who were Soviet spies: "In the minds of many or most Americans, [the Rosenberg and the Fuchs] cases and others indelibly linked the American Communist Party to Soviet espionage"¹. It is with great respect that I ask this delicate question: to what extent was my grandmother involved in the Communist Party? In an effort to better understand my grandmother, I wish to investigate our national history, my family history, and thus myself.

For her entire life, my grandmother was a member of the working class. She was born in East St. Louis, IL in 1913, the eldest daughter of Slovak immigrants John Moravec and Anna Toth. Although they were always pressed for money, my grandmother often spoke of happy childhood memories of food, family gatherings, and music. My great grandparents taught their children the importance of hard work, and to take pride in their ethnic background. Once the family relocated to Cudahy, a suburb of industrialized Milwaukee, my grandmother witnessed her fellow Slovaks hard at work and saw many of her fellow laborers organizing for workers' rights. These observations and lessons stayed with my grandmother; she eventually became one of the founders of both the Wisconsin Slovak Historical Society and of the Labor History Society of Wisconsin.

My Grandmother's Labor Education

My grandmother experienced life as a laborer; when she graduated from Cudahy High School in 1930 she immediately went to work on an assembly line for 16 cents an hour. In 1935, after holding six different jobs, she won a scholarship to the University of Wisconsin School for Workers Summer Session in Madison. There she lived in a dormitory on Lake Mendota and took courses in public speaking, parliamentary law, labor history, labor politics, effective writing, labor drama, worker's poetry and literature.² She received a formal education focusing on labor and felt camaraderie with others who believed in organizing for workers' rights. She went on to several other job posts and tried her hand at organizing workers. Her first attempt was while she was employed as second cook at Lake Tomahawk State Rehabilitation Camp. Her efforts fell short and the workers failed to organize, but

later she had more success. While employed at Chase Bag in Milwaukee, she effectively organized the shop and became the union's chair person.³ She took her position seriously and was respected by people on both sides of the negotiation; she became life-long friends with her supervisor at Chase Bag, even though they were on opposing sides of the labor issue. She was a member of the joint board of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America in Milwaukee, and worked 26 years at the United Electricians Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE). Her background in labor would remain a consistent presence throughout her life.

While she was employed at Lake Tomahawk Rehabilitation Camp, which housed recovering tuberculosis patients, my grandmother met my future grandfather, Carl F. Rasmussen. My grandfather was a recovering patient and a worker in the camp's power plant. One day, when my grandmother was filling plates with food, the sun caught her auburn hair—it was love at first sight for my grandfather. Since affairs between patients and sanitarium staff were forbidden, they courted secretly through notes in his lunchbox.

From City Girl to Farm Wife

My grandparents married and moved to Argonne, Wisconsin where my grandfather owned land and a farm. My grandmother had to adjust quickly to farm life. They raised almost all of their own food, and few modern conveniences. One time, my grandmother delivered a neighbor's baby because they had no telephone and the doctor was miles away. In an article she wrote for the *Wisconsin Labor History Newsletter* in 1988, my grandmother explained that it was during this physically and economically challenging time that she gained appreciation for the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA). This piece of legislation was passed under President Roosevelt's administration during the One Hundred Days in 1933, and included such programs as price supports, subsidies, and soil conservation programs. Although life with my grandfather would involve more struggles and leftward political leaning, it is clear that my grandmother was influenced by ideas often referred to as "socialist" even before she encountered my grandfather.

My grandfather was a man of many talents. He made his living as a farmer, worked as the local lay preacher, and was an avid scholar of politics and philosophy. In addition, he was an active member of the Communist Party. He passed away in the fall of 1951 with no life insurance (TB patients were not eligible for Social Security)

or money. My grandmother moved back to Milwaukee and started working at the UE. Four years later she was called to testify before HUAC.

Significant parts of the puzzle are missing: my grandmother never stated that she was a member of the Communist Party, but the UE was rumored to have the highest concentration of Communists in the CIO, and would eventually be expelled for this reason. Through her job at the UE, my grandmother became acquainted with Michael Ondrejka, Jerry Rose, and John Killian. All of these men were called to testify in Washington and claimed to know my grandmother. Ondrejka named her as a member of a Communist group that met at the Milwaukee UE. As a result, my grandmother was subpoenaed to testify before HUAC.

My ears still ring with my grandmother's silence; I am haunted by the fact that I do not know what really happened to her. Several questions persist: was she a Communist? Did she remain quiet because of the turbulent political context of the fifties? Or was she simply caught in the wrong place at the wrong time, a simple victim of a paranoid, red-baiting society?

The United Electrical, Machine and Radio Workers of America (UE)

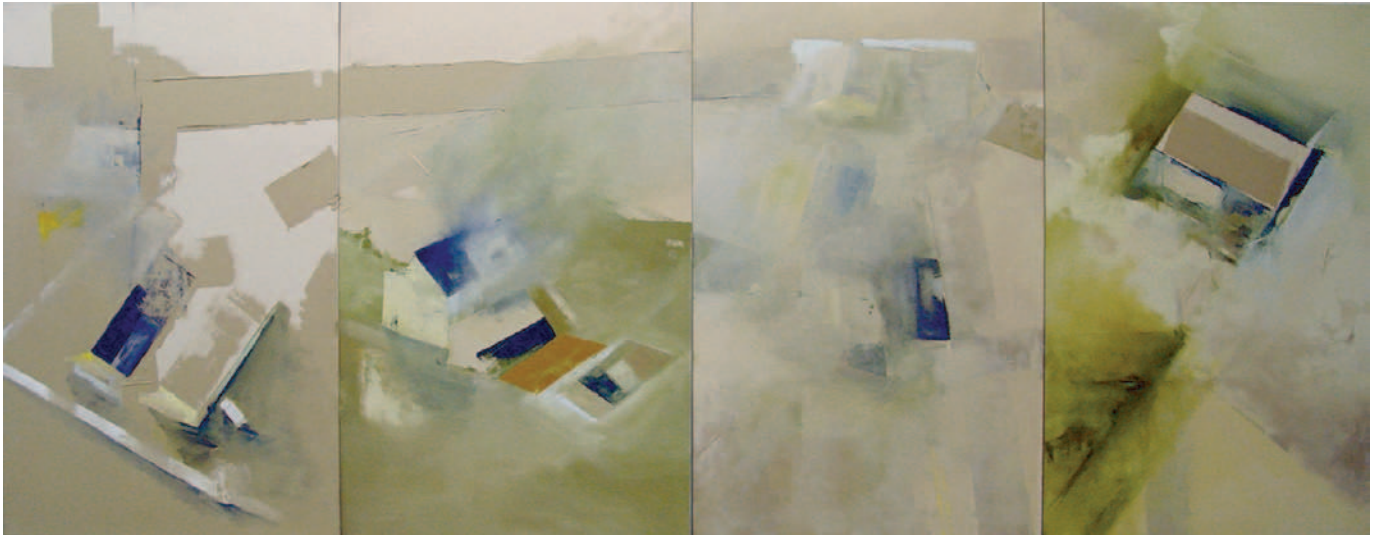
To understand what drew my grandmother to join such a union after the death of my grandfather, I turned to the history of the UE. Before my grandmother began her employment with the UE in Milwaukee, the union had a very radical history. Author John Haynes claims that the UE had the highest rate of Communist infiltration of any of the unions in the CIO. Haynes is careful to point out that unions were often not affiliated with political parties, preferring to promote solidarity and look out for their interests as a union.⁴ According to Haynes, there was not a large Communist presence in labor: "Of the total labor movement, workers in Communist-aligned unions represented less than a sixth of the membership."⁵ The UE was the first and largest member of the CIO. The UE today does not readily mention its Communist-laced past, but members proudly describe themselves as an independent union (it is not affiliated with the AFL-CIO), and a "rank and file" member-run union. The UE's democratic structure and its traditionally progressive politics stem from the union's history. However, to understand what led the UE to expulsion from the CIO and thus to its independence, it is necessary to look back to the union's political history and the historical context.

The UE began in March of 1936 as a coalition of

several autonomous local unions and militant workers' committees based in electrical manufacturing and radio assembly plants. Initially their request for a charter as a union for the unorganized electrical manufacturing industry was rejected by the American Federation of Labor, so they chose to be independent and launched their own national union. The UE became the first union chartered by the CIO, brand new at this time; by the end of World War II, the UE was the third largest CIO union with a membership of 500,000. Philip Murray, head of the CIO before the Taft-Hartley Act, was initially indifferent to Communism. He was aware of its presence in his unions, but did not mind (many of the largest CIO unions had members and officials who were Communist). However, after the Republican senatorial class of 1946 came to power and passed the Taft-Hartley Act, Murray felt that the Republican legislation was endangering labor. The Communist presence in the unions was hurting the CIO by fracturing the Democratic opposition into smaller parties, such as the Radical Progressive Party.⁶ Murray decided he could no longer tolerate Communists in his union and began attacking unions rumored to have the highest Communist infiltration. He started with the UE.

The struggle for radical laborers did not stop there. The Taft-Hartley Act stated that unions would lose their National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) protection if they did not sign the anti-Communist oath. Many union members did not wish to face their employers without the NLRB protections. The desire to have a more unified anti-Republican front, along with the Taft-Hartley Act, drove Murray to give Communists an ultimatum: reform or be expelled from the CIO. He also expelled the UE, creating an alternative called the Union of Electrical Workers. The UE barely survived: they lost more than half of their members to the CIO's new alternative and to other unions. Further, Murray's action brought the UE to HUAC's attention: shop leaders were fired, blacklisted, and sometimes jailed. Many UE members, including my grandmother, were called to testify in Washington.

My grandmother's local labor union was under investigation when HUAC was informed that a Communist cell held meetings in their Milwaukee office. One wonders if the particular interest in the UE stemmed from their radical history. My grandmother spent years of her life working for the UE in Milwaukee as a receptionist and secretary. She was subpoenaed to testify in Washington because of the people she knew and worked with. Haynes argued that the real struggle between Communists and anti-Communists existed within labor unions. However, few union members outwardly declared themselves mem



Andrew Hutchison, *Landscape*, oil, 2004

bers of political parties, especially the Communist Party. According to Haynes, in this tumultuous time for laborers, many were silent when questions arose about their political affiliation—in an effort to protect themselves and to preserve their union. I know that my grandmother had a strong background in labor both from her work experience and from her educational background. She firmly believed in the worker's right to organize and the effectiveness of organizing laborers. Since my grandmother did not answer these questions herself, I can only speculate as to what her motivations were to remain silent: perhaps she wanted to protect her union by maintaining some separation between the union and party affiliation. However, I have no way to confirm this theory and can only speculate that my grandmother took great pride in her labor union.

Judgment Day: The Transcript of My Grandmother's HUAC Testimony

My grandmother, a single working mother, employed at a radical labor union in Milwaukee and widow of an ardent Communist thinker, was subpoenaed in 1955 to testify in Washington before the House Un-American Activities Committee. After taking the time to understand the general attitudes of Americans of this time, it is not altogether surprising that a woman in her situation would be called. Her deceased husband had been open about his affiliation with the Communist Party and she worked at a labor union that had been excluded from the CIO because of the high number of Communists within its membership. However, this does not answer the question: why her? To get a step closer, I looked carefully at the transcript of her testimony.

The main characters in this testimony are Michael Ondrejka, Jerry Rose, and John Killian, all of whom were called to testify before the committee. Ondrejka was connected with the UE through various tax services he conducted for the union. Jerry Rose was not affiliated with the UE, but was present at Communist group meetings held at the Milwaukee office. John Killian was a member and a former steward of the UE local 1111 and was allegedly involved in a Communist cell. Reading the transcript of my grandmother's testimony, it becomes clear that Mr. Tavenner, the prosecutor, is trying to link these three men to my grandmother and convince her that Ondrejka has named her as active within a Communist cell. Although my grandmother does not confirm his statements, Tavenner uses these men and their previous statements to paint a picture of what has occurred at the UE in Milwaukee and what my grandmother had allegedly contributed.

While skimming through the transcript, I immediately noticed how my grandmother repeatedly pleads the Fifth Amendment of the United States Constitution, which allowed her to not testify against herself. I was reminded of the difficult situation she must have been in: pressured not only to incriminate herself, but to name other names as well. Although her repeated refusal to answer the question keeps me from learning exactly what really happened, it causes me to wonder if some answers to my questions could emerge through her silence.

The best example, the first time my grandmother asserts her Fifth Amendment privilege, follows:

Tavenner: Are you acquainted with a person by the name of Jerry Rose?

(Witness conferred with counsel)

Rasmussen: I refuse to answer that; I assert the privilege not to testify against myself.

My grandmother gives the exact same response when asked if she knew Michael Ondrejka. Suddenly, she does not want to talk about the present, or about these acquaintances. Both of these men have already testified. Who is she protecting?

This shift leaves me with a feeling of confusion. She is offering absolutely no information, yet as a result of the very implications of the Fifth Amendment, and the continual flow of questions by the prosecution, she is affiliating herself with the “criminal” or “unpatriotic” behavior that the prosecution wishes to link to her while testifying on the record. Her answers have an almost robotic feeling, which is bizarre to me—this is hardly the woman I knew and loved. A closer reading of the transcript shows that she is, in fact, open about herself and her past, but shuts down the moment other names are involved. She may be protecting herself or refusing to incriminate others.

Tavener continues with his line of questioning, and my grandmother repeats her Fifth Amendment privilege several times. She is not confirming any of what he is saying, but by refusing to comment, she is not contradicting him either. Her refusal to speak shows strength on her part, but it also makes Tavener’s case more convincing.

As Tavener continues his questioning, he begins to include excerpts from the testimonies of other witnesses: Ondrejka, Killian, and Rose. In an effort to incriminate my grandmother and these other men, Tavener uses statements made by others to fill in her silence.

A segment of Ondrejka’s testimony is presented by Tavener to my grandmother, a portion of which follows:

At the end of this meeting [a cell meeting April 15th, 1953] I had told John Killian that I would be glad to sit there the rest of the morning with him, that we might go through a telephone directory and get the names of the stewards that we would have a mailing list to send them to. He [Killian] said, ‘That isn’t necessary because I will go to the union office and get them from one certain individual.’ He said to me, ‘In case you didn’t know it, this individual is the fifth member of our cell,’ and he asked if I was surprised; and the

reason I remember is because he asked that question, and I said ‘No, I suspected it the day Jerry Rose was in the office [Ondrejka claimed that he worked for a time as an FBI informant].

When asked about this information, my grandmother invokes her Fifth Amendment privilege, though she previously stated that she knew John Killian. The references to Ondrejka’s testimony continue:

Tavener: Now, you [Ondrejka] have not mentioned the name of that individual?

Mr. Ondrejka: I do not mention this person’s name because of the fact that I was told by Jerry Rose at the first meeting it was as undisclosed Fifth. I was told by John Killian who the member was, but because of the fact that this member worked on days while we held our meetings at 8 o’clock in the morning, John Killian said that he would take the agenda which was written, plus the discussion notes that resulted from the meeting, and he would go down early in the afternoon before work and brief this individual on it.

Tavener: Under instructions from the committee, Mr. Ondrejka did not publicly identify that individual because of it being hearsay testimony. However, in the executive session before this committee, Mr. Ondrejka did identify that individual as you. Were you a member of the Communist Party of which John Killian was a member?

My grandmother pleads the Fifth.

Here, we finally see the substance of Tavener’s accusation. Ondrejka, a former FBI informant, had implicated my grandmother as the fifth member of a Communist cell that met at the UE office where she worked in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Ondrejka has not said this under oath, but he has implicated my grandmother. Why, if he had been an FBI informant, does he not confirm this information? Why should we believe he is not still working for the government and implicating people he is not entirely sure are members? Though Tavener has a threatening case, no evidence is on record. This returns us to the theme of silence. My grandmother chose to be silent but others did not and she was put in danger by words that were not her own. Her silence suddenly seems entirely justified, even though it leaves me no easy or direct explanation of her actions. Words were weapons, and she chose to be a pacifist and to fight her own war in a strong, silent way.

Though her silence is frustrating, it is not surprising coming from the strong-minded and patient woman I remember-making Slovak pastries by hand and organizing her fellow patients at the retirement home to lobby for better care. In a difficult situation, she was not intimidated by threats of the blacklist and jail time. She did not crumble, but stuck firmly to her values and belief in the protection offered to her by her country's Constitution. Although no facts have emerged, I feel as though her transcript conveys a great deal of answers about my grandmother's character: her toughness, her bravery and her perseverance regardless of her political affiliation.

Coming to Terms with My Legacy

As I sort through the scholarship on the historical period known today as the Cold War, including the Red Scare and McCarthyism, I am left with more questions than I began with. Some pertain to inconsistencies in my sources, my own wrestling match with hindsight versus the power of family loyalty, and the frustration that my work on this project seems to have only skimmed the surface of potential discovery. By looking at the national shift towards conservatism after the Depression and the war, McCarthy's rise and fall, Wisconsin's progressive politics and conservative politicians, and the emergence of HUAC as a household name in the 1950s, as well as some of the history of labor and the anti-labor legislation; I have begun to create a context in which I can approach the questions of why my grandmother was called to testify before HUAC in 1955. I may finally be able to meld this hushed family story with actual historic events, thereby explaining American anti-communist attitudes of the time. History explains how such attitudes evolved and expanded, leaving us a message to be wary of our attitudes in dangerous times and to always protect the constitutional rights of every citizen.

This story has real significance today: we see a parallel in the contemporary security situation in the U.S. after the September 11th World Trade Center attacks. The comparison is commonly made since the passing of the Patriot Act, a virtually unopposed piece of legislation that

some assert infringes on the civil rights and privacy of U.S. citizens. (This time, the only immediate opposition came from a Wisconsin senator.) With the government's introduction of a colorful scale of nondescript terror alerts, Americans are coerced to live in fear of the ever-impending terrorist attack. Racial profiling has caused unnecessary harassment of Arab Americans and Middle Eastern students at American universities. Under the mantle of homeland security, people are imprisoned without due process of law; now the U.S. is more than two years into a war in Iraq, the motivations of which are to "keep the American people safe."

Once again, we are in a dilemma spawned by fear. American people wish to be protected from both terrorists and the government. The Red Scare proved that fear can bring out the worst in people, causing them to persecute others based solely on their political affiliations. From my grandmother's case, we can learn from McCarthyism by revising our closed-minded attitudes, maintaining a free flow of ideas, and protecting the civil liberties of all Americans.



Zak Bruder, *Final March*, work on paper, 2004

Investigating this experience has caused me to consider how my family was affected. In the very last lines of the transcript, my grandmother finally speaks when asked about her children. Although nothing more than their names are stated, it is at this point that she speaks. It becomes apparent that her family would bear the brunt of this experience; even the lives

of her young children would never be the same. As the kids attended high school in inner city Milwaukee during the race riots and college through the Vietnam era and the "War at Home," they would always live with the fear that the government was out to get them. To this day, they believe there are FBI files on them and perhaps on my generation too.

If any part of this incident brought my grandmother pain, it was the fact that her actions would inevitably have an effect on her family and loved ones. Maybe she was also concerned that the incident would bring her family shame. When she was originally called to testify in Washington, she asked her youngest sister if she would accompany her on the trip. The sister, who was dating a prominent young conservative in the community, refused.

My grandmother most likely felt that people were ashamed of her at the time, when an anti-Communist sentiment was common among Americans.

Today, it is widely accepted that red baiting and the anti-Communist movement was allowed to escalate to the point of cruelty. Although my grandmother's experience isn't talked about light-heartedly (if at all) among family members, I do not believe the reason is shame. Instead, this suppression of information is a sign of unhealed wounds and a warning about the terrifying power of government and mass hysteria in times of war.

Although I began this project in an effort to uncover some murky elements of my family history, I also chose to explore my grandmother's background. I have always felt a close, personal connection with her. Although I am not sure how deeply one can read into a union jacket and *Mother Jones* magazines, I feel strongly that she has left a legacy for me. I do not know if I will ever fully understand this legacy, on account of the missing facts in her HUAC case.

After reviewing everything that I have learned, my questions about my grandmother remain unanswered. Was she a Communist? If she was a Communist, was she intrigued by Marx's dialectic, or was she a Soviet sympathizer? Was she the fifth member of the UE cell? I now understand that as a single-mother in 1955, with virtually no support, my grandmother stood strong and resisted the temptation to tell HUAC what they wanted to hear. Whether she was guilty, or simply refused to incriminate fellow workers or her husband, I will never know; her legacy to me is her silence.

Additionally, the legacy is about overcoming lingering feelings of shame and promoting the pride I have for my grandmother's brave actions. Even if she was a

Communist sympathizer, or a member of the Party, I know that she was not un-American and she loved her country. After all, it was the Fifth Amendment of the United States Constitution that protected her against the aggressive House Un-American Activities Committee. Her invocation of this Amendment was a great act of patriotism, allowing her to continue to love this country, even after the ordeal in Washington, D.C. She has taught me how to persevere by converting shame into pride.

Although her HUAC experience was one of few words, she rarely remained silent about causes she believed in: the civil rights movement, the various wars she lived through, or simply feeding people at homeless shelters and sanitariums. I am reminded of a poem by Ralph Chaplin, published as a conclusion to her 1988 article in the Wisconsin Labor History Newsletter:

*Mourn not the dead
But rather mourn the apathetic throng
The cowed-and meek
Who see the world's great anguish
And its wrong
And dare not speak*

I now have a better understanding of the message my grandmother conveyed through her silence. She did not simply refuse to tell her story; she protested the injustice she saw in her society. This action, more than a blue UE jacket, the occasional Progressive or Farmer-Labor party vote, or my appreciation of *Mother Jones* magazine, is the essence of the legacy that my grandmother passed on to me. ❖

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¹ John E Haynes. *Red Scare or Red Menace? American Communism and Anti Communism in the Cold War Era*, 63.

² Rasmussen, Darina. *Testimony...*, 90.

³ Koepp, Jarmila. *Darina Rasmussen: A Tribute to One of the Founders and First Officers of the Wisconsin Slovak Historical Society*, 17.

⁴ Haynes, 110.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 134.



Melissa Steckbauer, *Theirs*, mixed media, 2004



Melissa Steckbauer, *Perfect Pitch*, mixed media, 2004



Melissa Steckbauer, *Tie Me Up, Tie Me Down*, mixed media, 2004