

**Elizabeth M. Claffey** PORTFOLIO



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## Artist Statement

My creative research visualizes inner lives and cultural contexts for the purpose of in-depth conversations. Through photographic practices, I seek to leverage the power of exhibition, publication, and lecturing to create spaces of dialogue and reflection for people, stories, and expressions that are often marginalized within the public sphere. Photography is a powerful medium for examining and questioning truth, especially normalized societal beliefs and behaviors that often go unchallenged. The camera and the ever-evolving meaning of photographs, which impact almost every facet of life, are my entry into a question or concern – a path of inquiry that engages both intellectual and physical reactions.

The long-standing threads that connect my artwork include identity, kinship, isolation, issues of the body, family history, caregiving, labor, and cultural and institutional practices. I'm inspired by found objects, by folkloric inheritance that often describes physical experiences, and by contemporary dilemmas. My work comments on broader issues of physical intimacy and the meaning of the body in a familial and societal context. Through long-term projects, I aim to bring mundane moments into dialogue with the mythologies and institutions that construct identity.



## Darkness and Nothing More

2019 - ONGOING

*Darkness and Nothing More* explores the nighttime landscape of family life, as well as identity formation and performance. At night, I check on my children over and over, at first because they require it but later because it soothes my own anxieties. After they fall asleep, I get to watch them at a distance – with my body intact, untouched, un-smothered – and see them, still. They seem small again. Their slow breaths fill me with warmth while slight movements challenge my nervous system for fear that I’ve been too brazen, lingered too long in this moment where everyone is here and safe. The familial labor and love that happens at night is incredibly intimate and moving through darkness is a metaphor for parenthood itself. Nighttime is when the heart rate slows, body temperature drops, and our mammalian instincts for physical closeness heighten. The sensory longing for touch, the compression of another body, is what often wakes my children in the night and has us all moving through the dark to find one another.

On our way, I find small clues of their inner lives: rocks carefully placed throughout the hallway, ribbons mark the spaces between their fantasies. I photograph these still lives like they are clues to a larger mystery, evidence or communication of a story nobody will tell. At times, our bodies become the surprise revealed in the night because during these years, we are body on body on body, performing gestures that bring our bodies closer to each other and eventually, closer to ourselves, given the power for those gestures and movements to shape our identities. As this ongoing work develops, I turn my gaze toward my partner because intimacy is a significant part of our bond. These works are a way of reclaiming the experience of desire so often denied women in their postpartum lives despite how much that sensuality can reinforce the rich experience of family life. I also photograph my mother, as her aging and care is intertwined with that of my children.

As our daughters get older, they have become more nervous about nighttime. They too worry that something might go wrong, a mystery that is not their own might be lingering outside our door or in their closet. I tuck them in at night, promising to check on them, and tell them to rest assured. It’s Darkness and Nothing More.



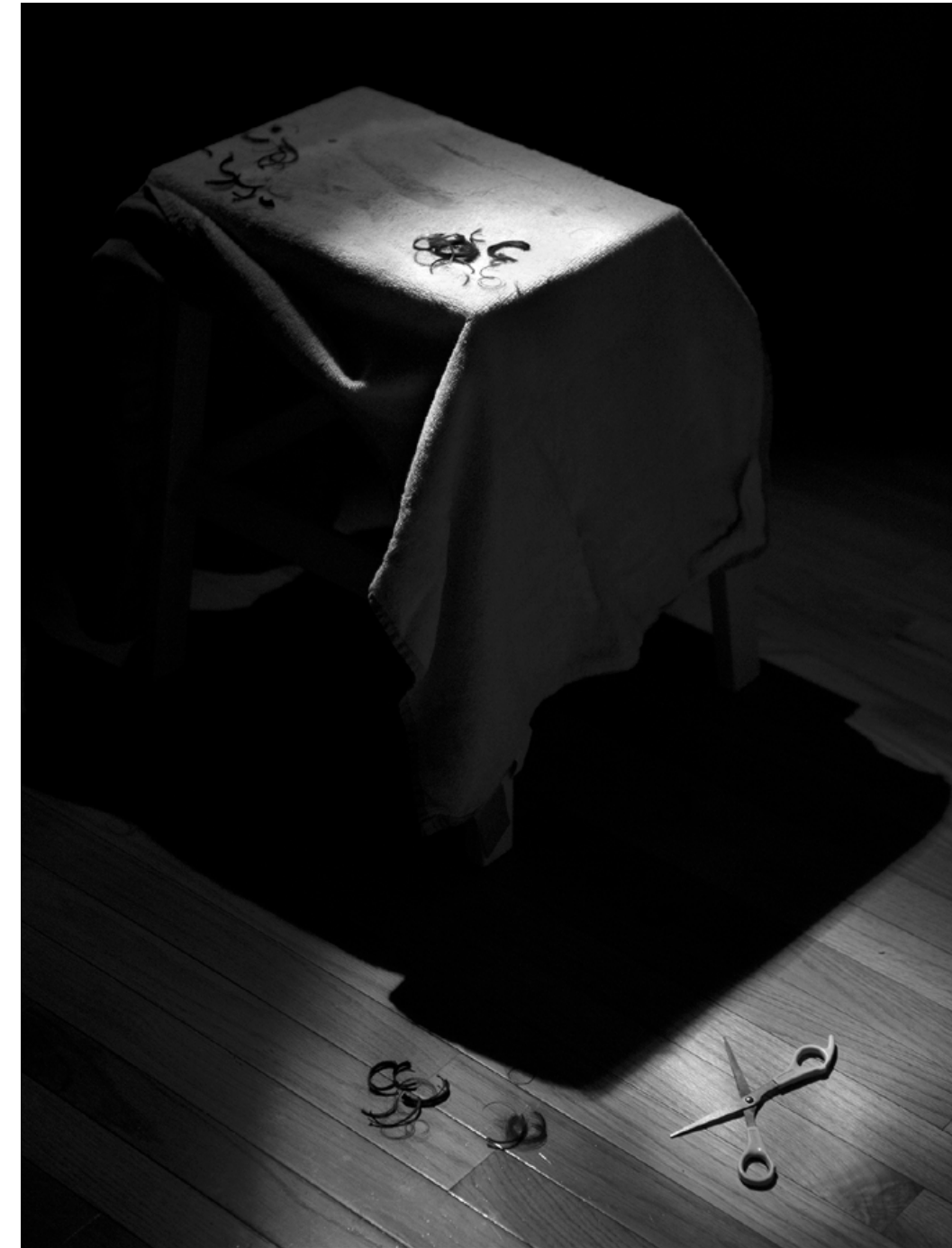
























Opposite page: Installation View at Maxwell Hall Gallery

## The Ordinary & the Domestic

2015 - ONGOING

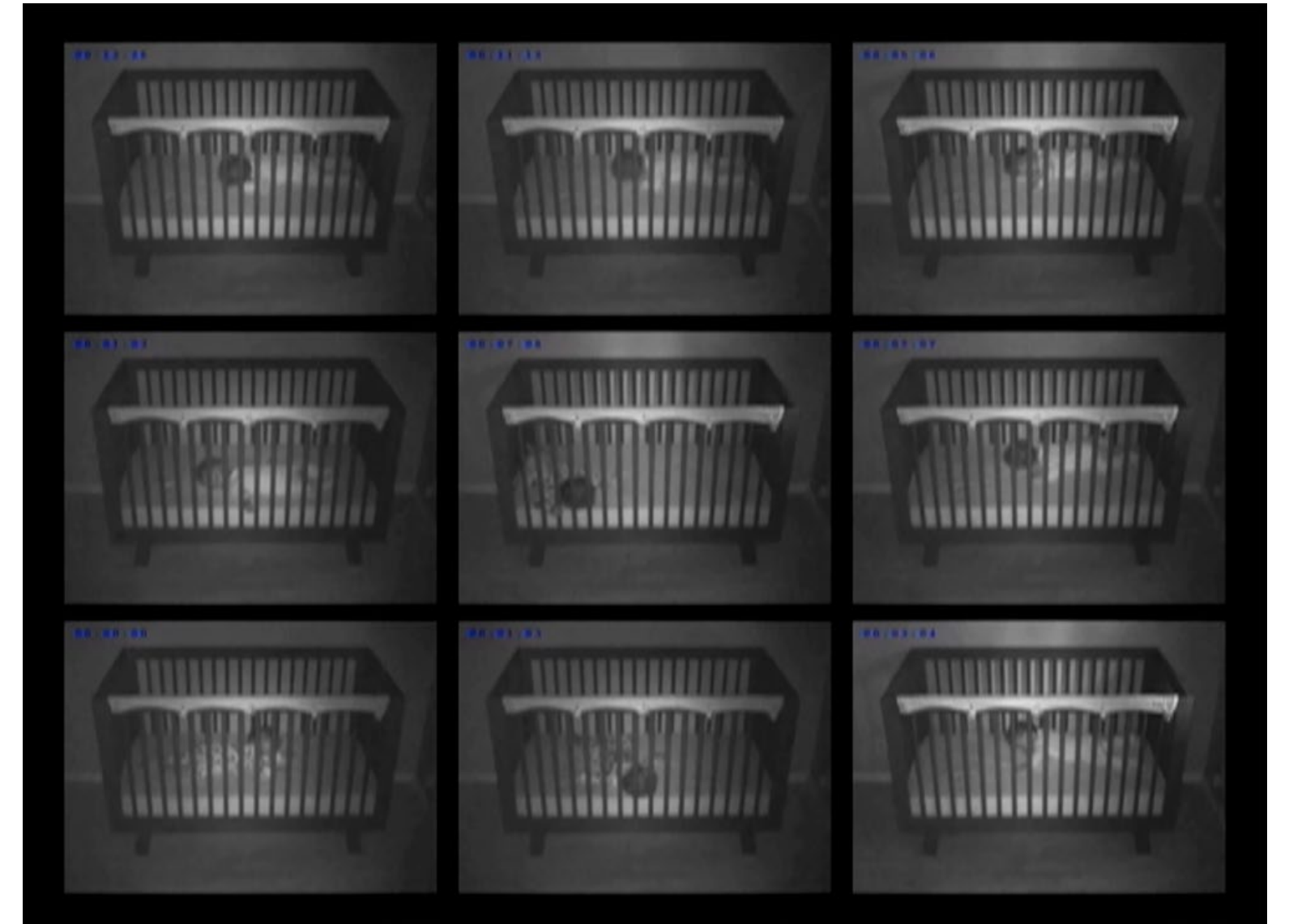
*For all the things the domestic scientists concerned themselves with—the correct ways of cleaning, sorting, scheduling—they were only the stage setting, not the central drama. Now we turn to the human actor for whom the stage was set.*

– Barbara Ehrenreich & Deirdre English

*The Ordinary & the Domestic* explores the intersecting politics of contemporary technology and the home space. This work comments on the fear inducing quality of home surveillance imagery, an invasion of privacy, and the boredom of constantly watching. Also examined is the interruption of a mother's "loving gaze," which is never received by the subject being constantly watched at a distance.









## Invisible Crime

2020

*Invisible Crime* uses the vernacular of crime scene photography to visualize the crime(s) resulting from the 2016 American presidential election. Through fabricated depictions of aftermath, clothing becomes a metaphor for resistance and evidence of invisible, as well as visible abuse.

Clothing represents complex power issues and cultural significance. White clothing has been adopted by many women in the US throughout the 20th and 21st centuries as a symbol of empowerment and autonomy in the face of a government designed to uphold patriarchy. During the 1920's white clothing became a symbol of the women's suffrage movement. In 1968, on the night she became the first Black woman elected to congress, Shirley Chisholm wore white. In 2016, when Hillary Clinton became the first Democratic nominee for president, she wore white, as did many women who cast their votes. On January 4, 2019, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez was sworn into to congress wearing a white suit, stating, "I wore all-white today to honor the women who paved the path before me, and for all the women yet to come."

While many people are clear that the election of our 45th president was unjust, it is difficult to fully appreciate the impact of such an event when the consequences unfold slowly, over time, in a manner that is made abstract to many people. Collectively, and in retrospect, it is clear that the rights, autonomy, and bodies of women, Black, Indigenous, People of the Global Majority, and members of the LGBTQIA community are increasingly under attack. In these images, clothing remains as evidence of a body, a gesture, or a physical event—a surviving symbol of struggle indicating with its mere presence the continuation of whatever fight left it mangled or discarded.







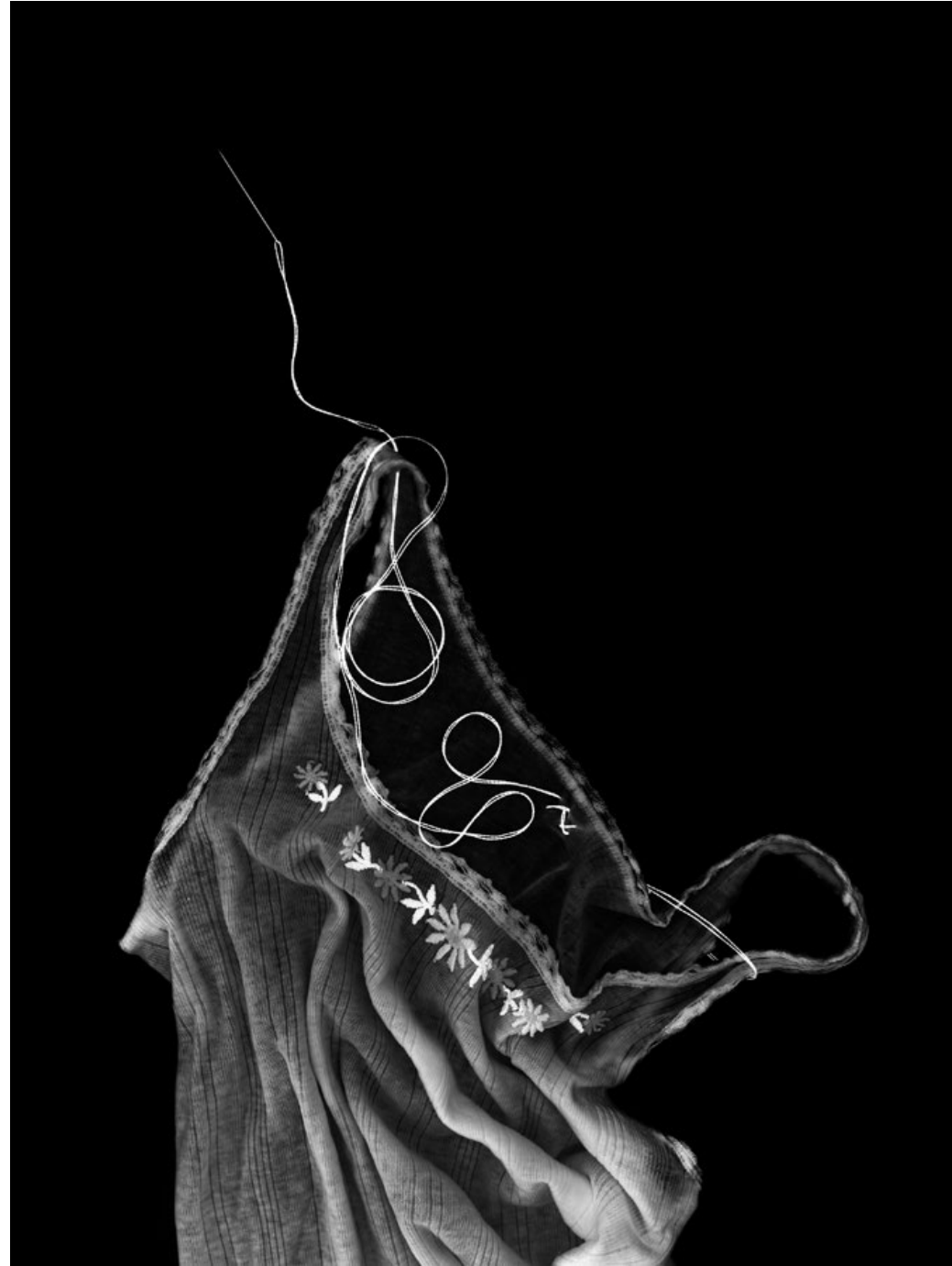
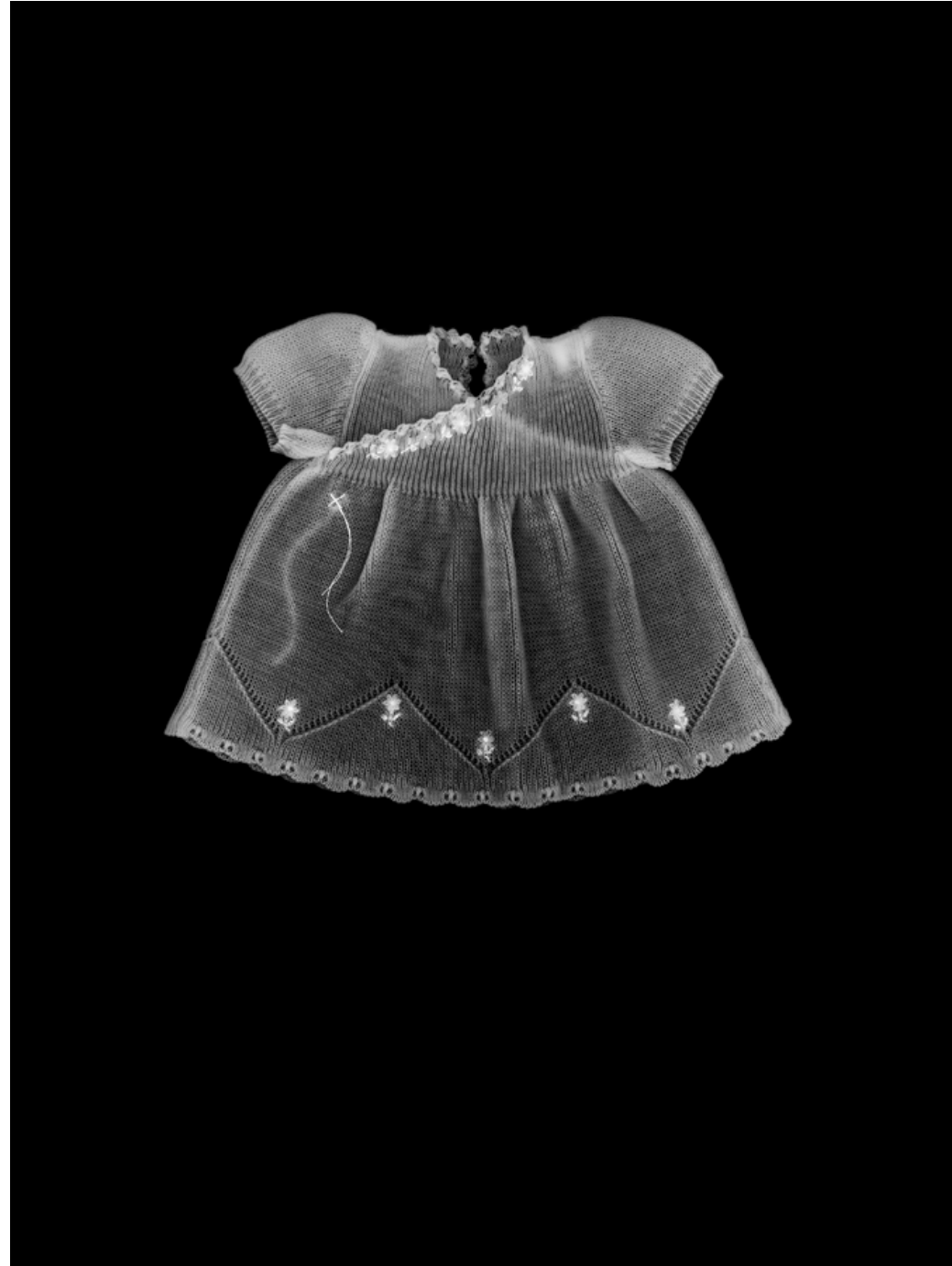
## Matrilinear I

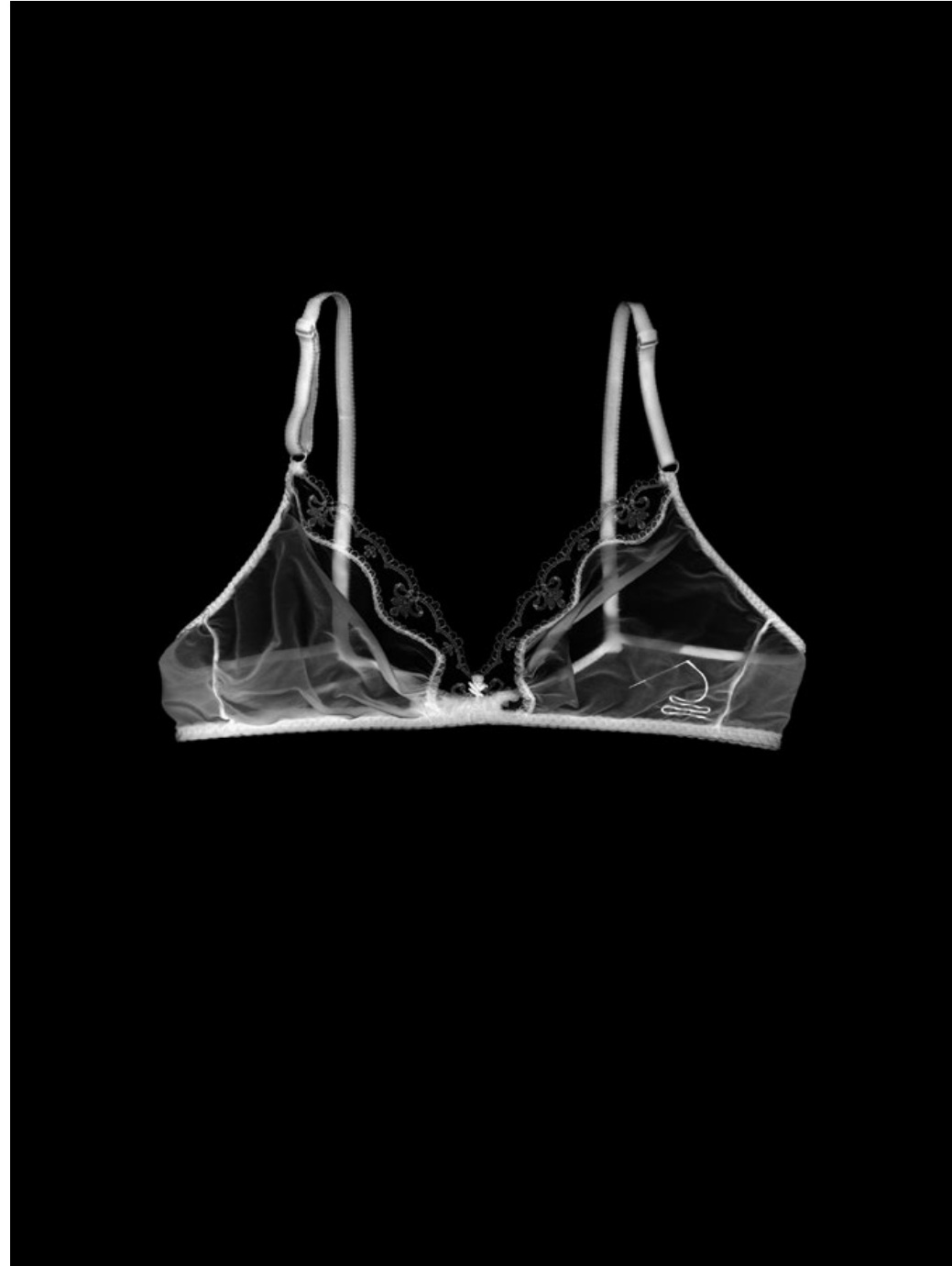
2016-2017

*Matrilinear* is a photographic series that addresses embodied memory and its relationship to personal, familial, and cultural identity. In mainstream Western culture, public forms of power are often passed down through patriarchal lines of heritage, along with dominant historical narratives that can socially condition peoples and shape identities. However, women have often interrupted this power and conditioning through traditions of storytelling and object sharing. These images examine family folklore, ritual, and mnemonic objects passed down through generations of women. The photographs of each object reveal the physical remnants of a body long gone; including stains, tears, and loose thread from clothing that was kept close to the body for comfort and protection. The stitching and/or photographic representations are both a visualization and an expansion of stories shared as family lore. These interruptions also represent the deep influence of one's familial past on personal identity and perceptions of the body.

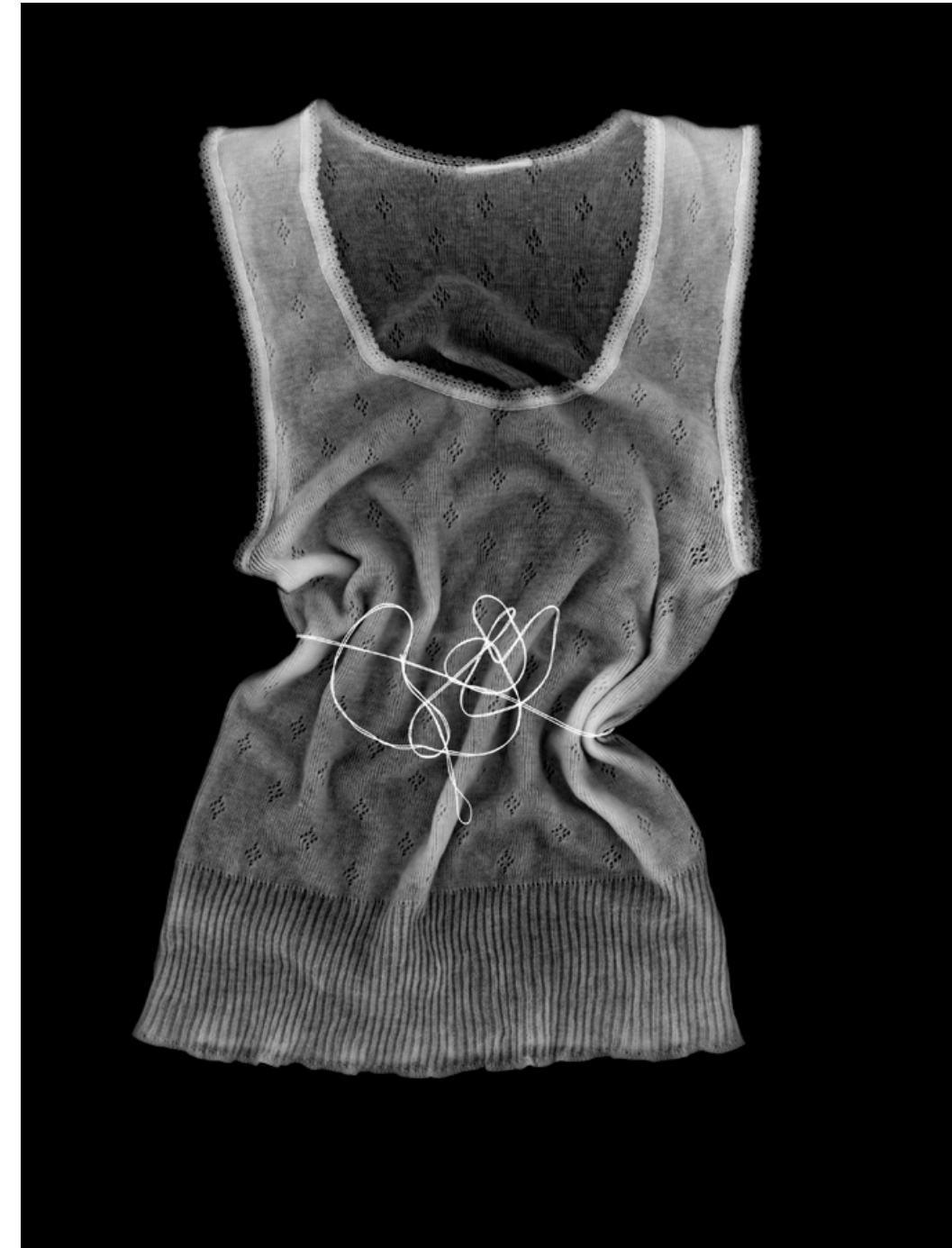
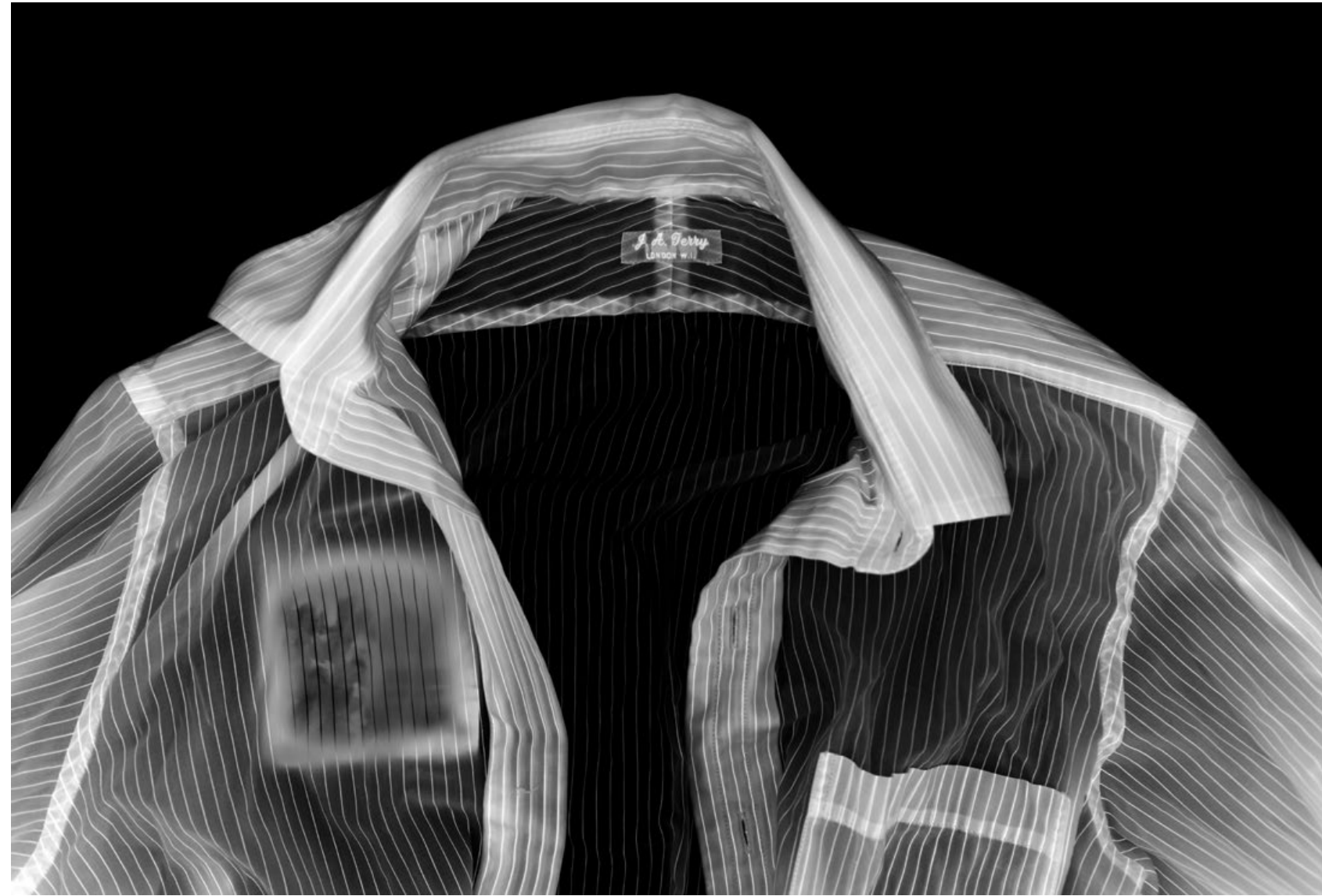
By expressing domestic rituals and objects to explore their meanings within public contexts, this work aims to interrupt and transform normative cultural narratives. Through varying perspectives and translations, the practices and keepsakes that construct familial stories become basic to a more inclusive collective memory and global story of the past. Women play many complex roles within the structures of kinship: daughter, sister, cousin, mother, aunt, grandmother; these roles can be fluid and at times overlap. *Matrilinear* aims to create space for the deep knowledge base that women can develop through interaction with home space and each other. The series also draws upon the vernacular of an archive to imply the critical nature of women's experiences within the greater context of history.

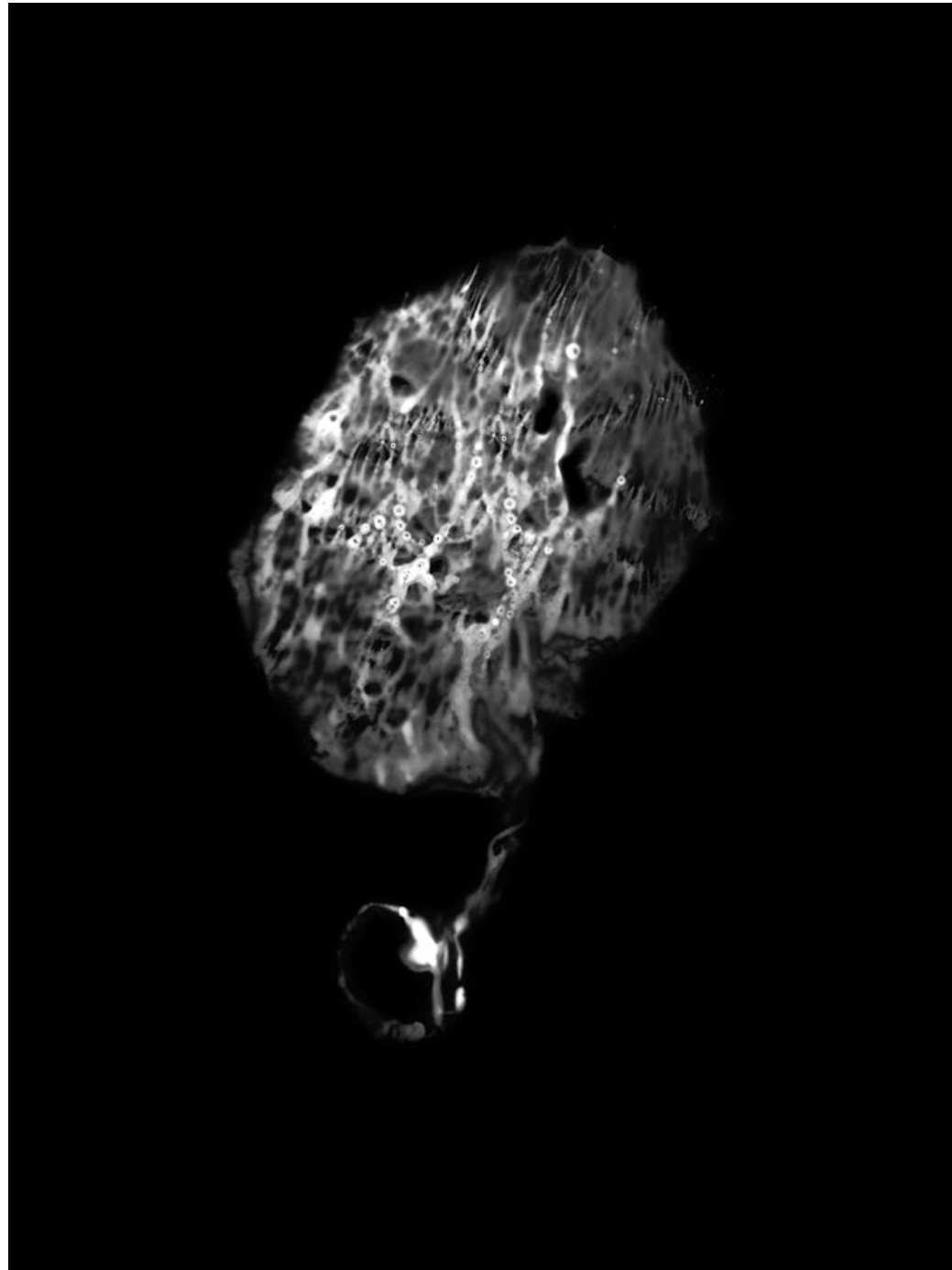


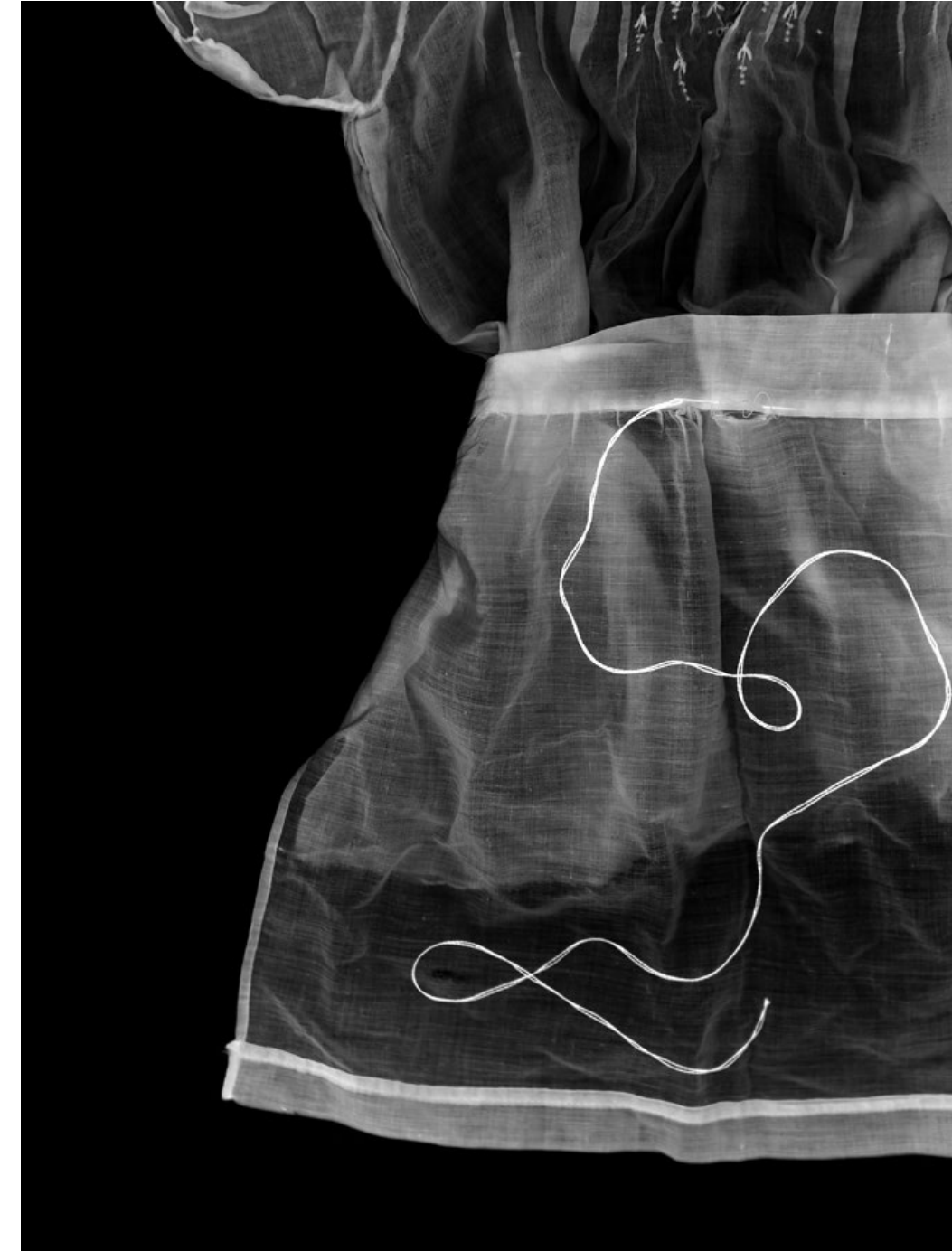
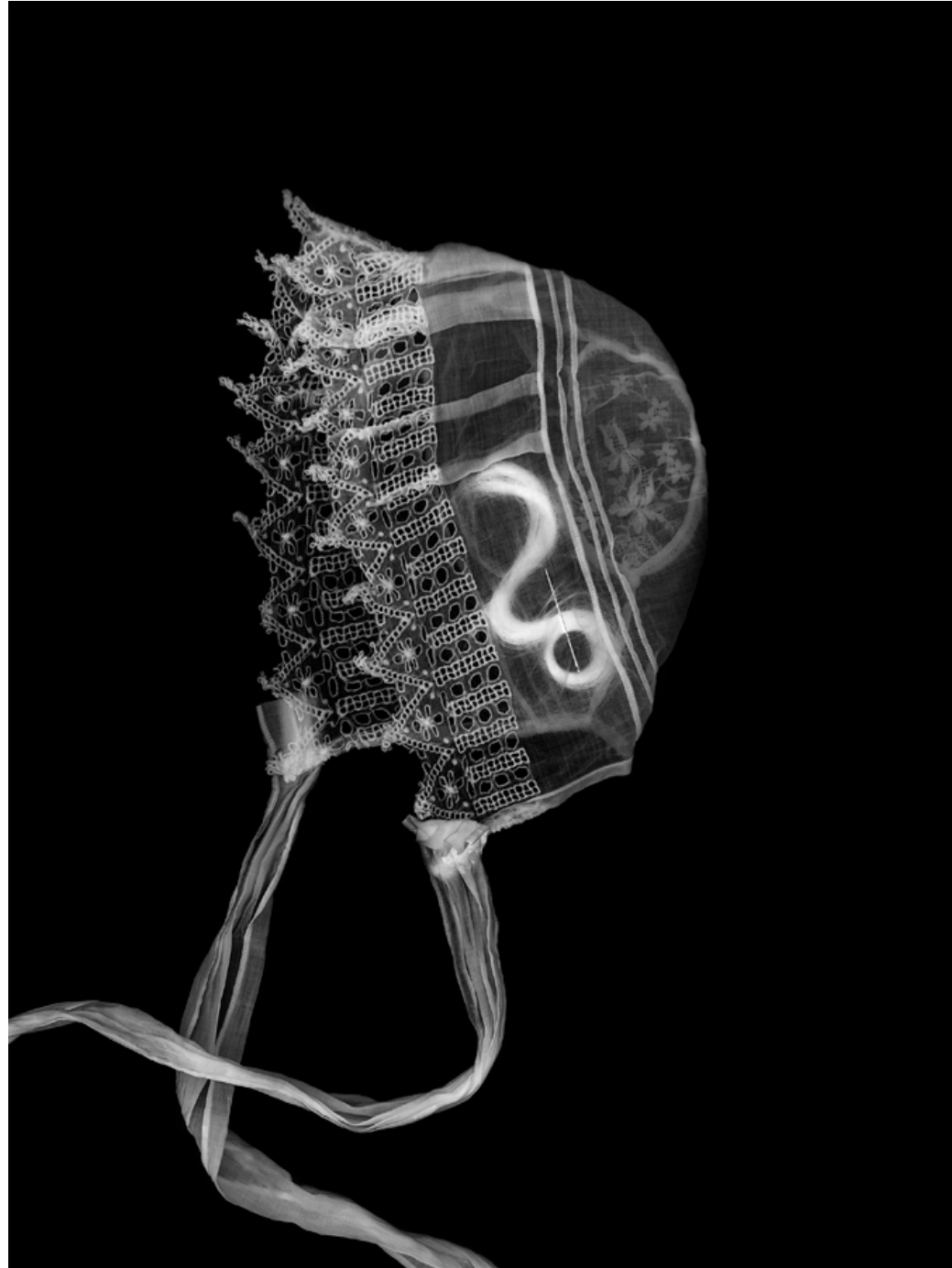


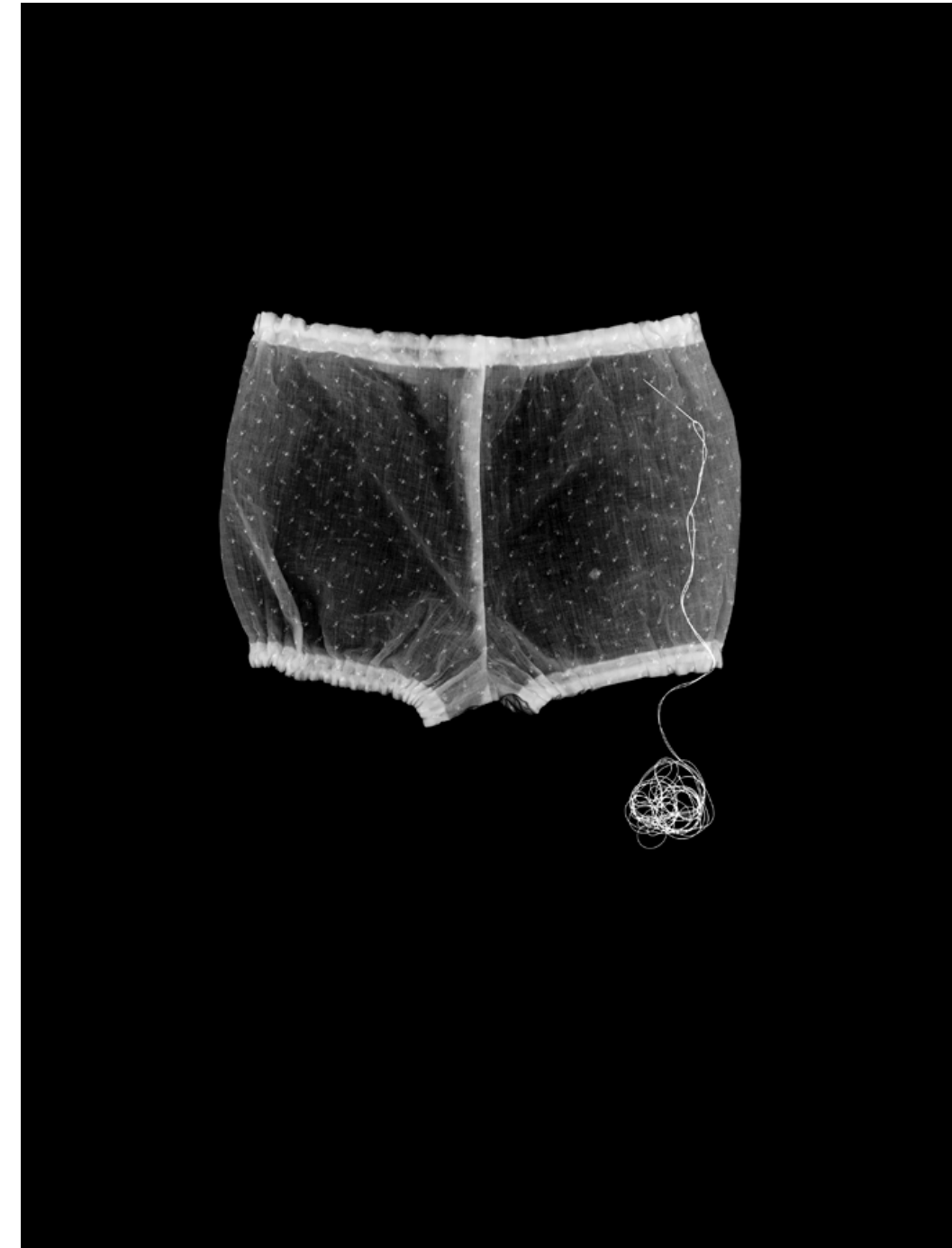
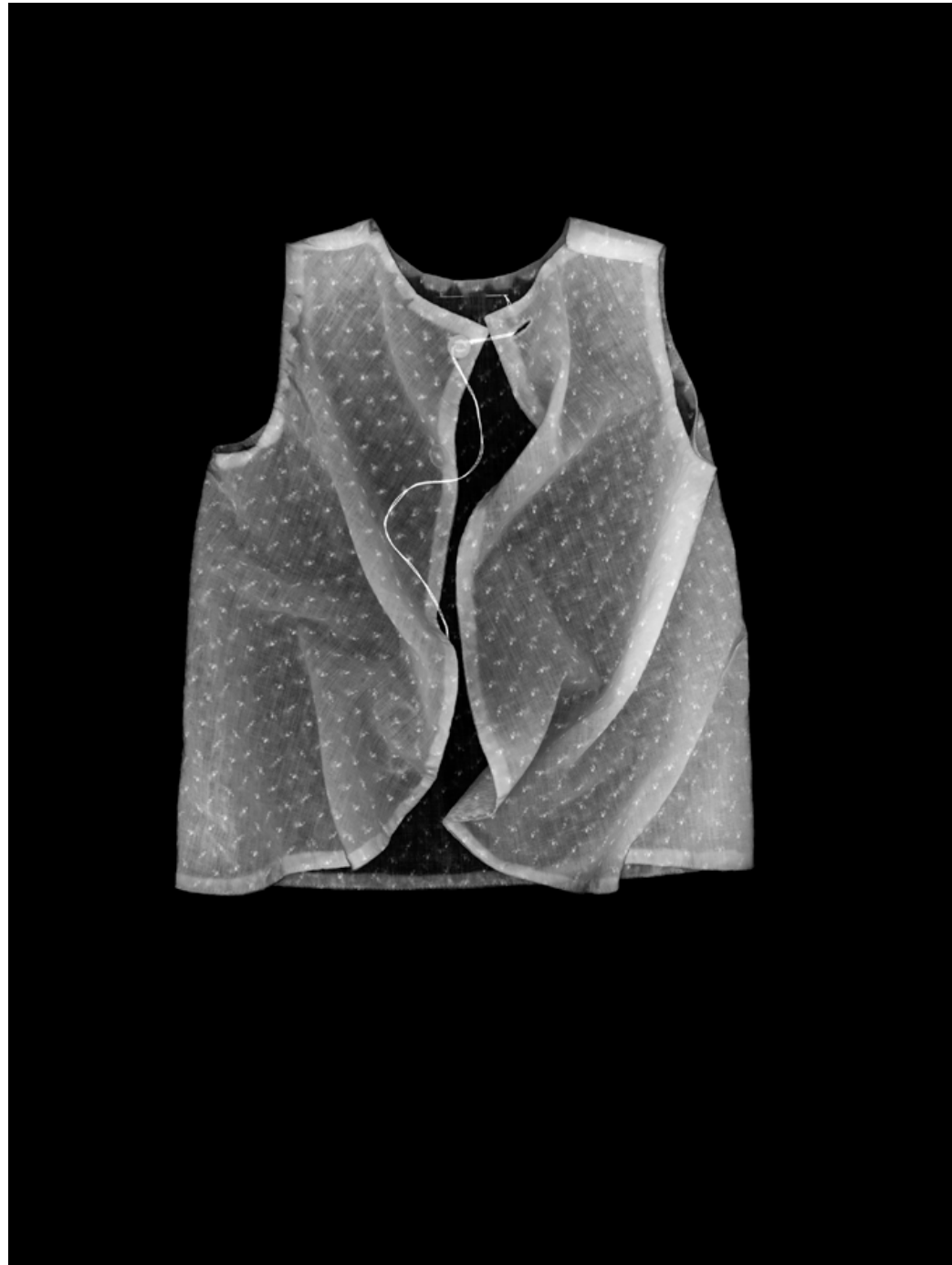


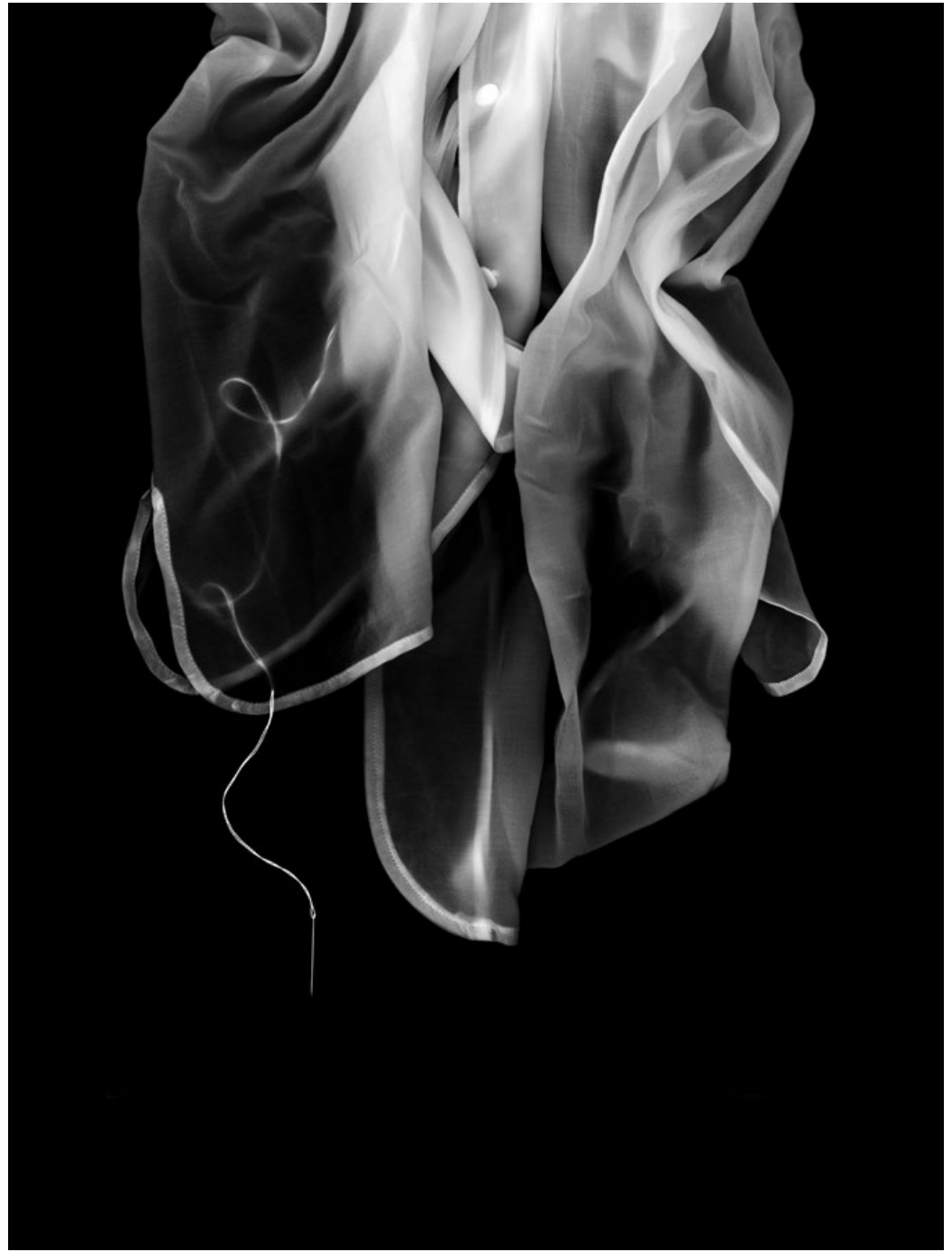














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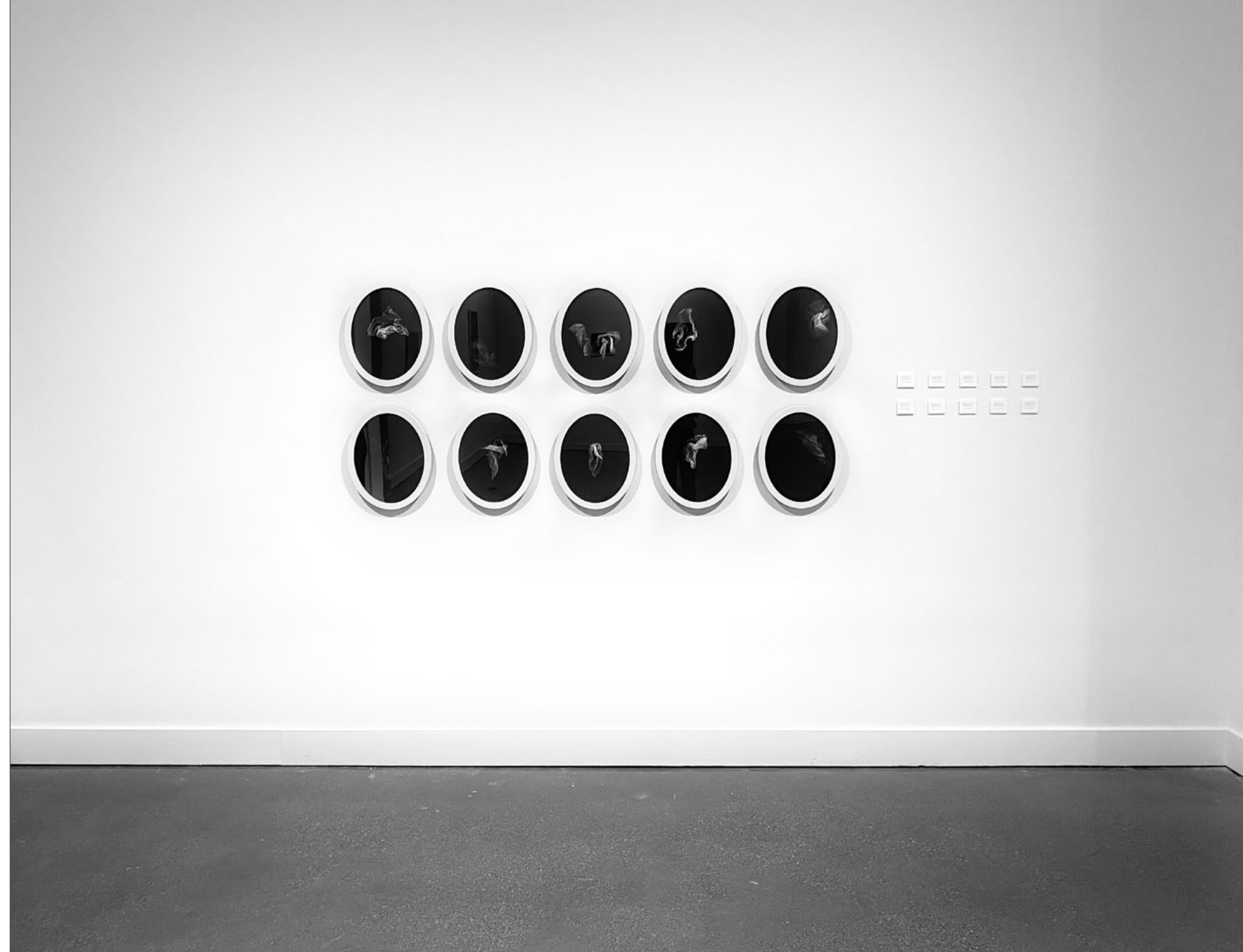
Small text label below the large pants photograph.



Small text label below the final pair of briefs photograph.

## Matrilinear II 2018-2019

The second suite in this series, *Matrilinear II*, expands to include found objects. My exploration of these old garments revealed pockets full of tissues—endless amounts of Kleenex that had been long used and often washed within the clothing. While these pieces of disposable cloth carry no value or specific story, I struggle to let them go as they were once held close to my mother’s body – and the act of finding them embodies a memory, a ritual, and a premonition of my future self.

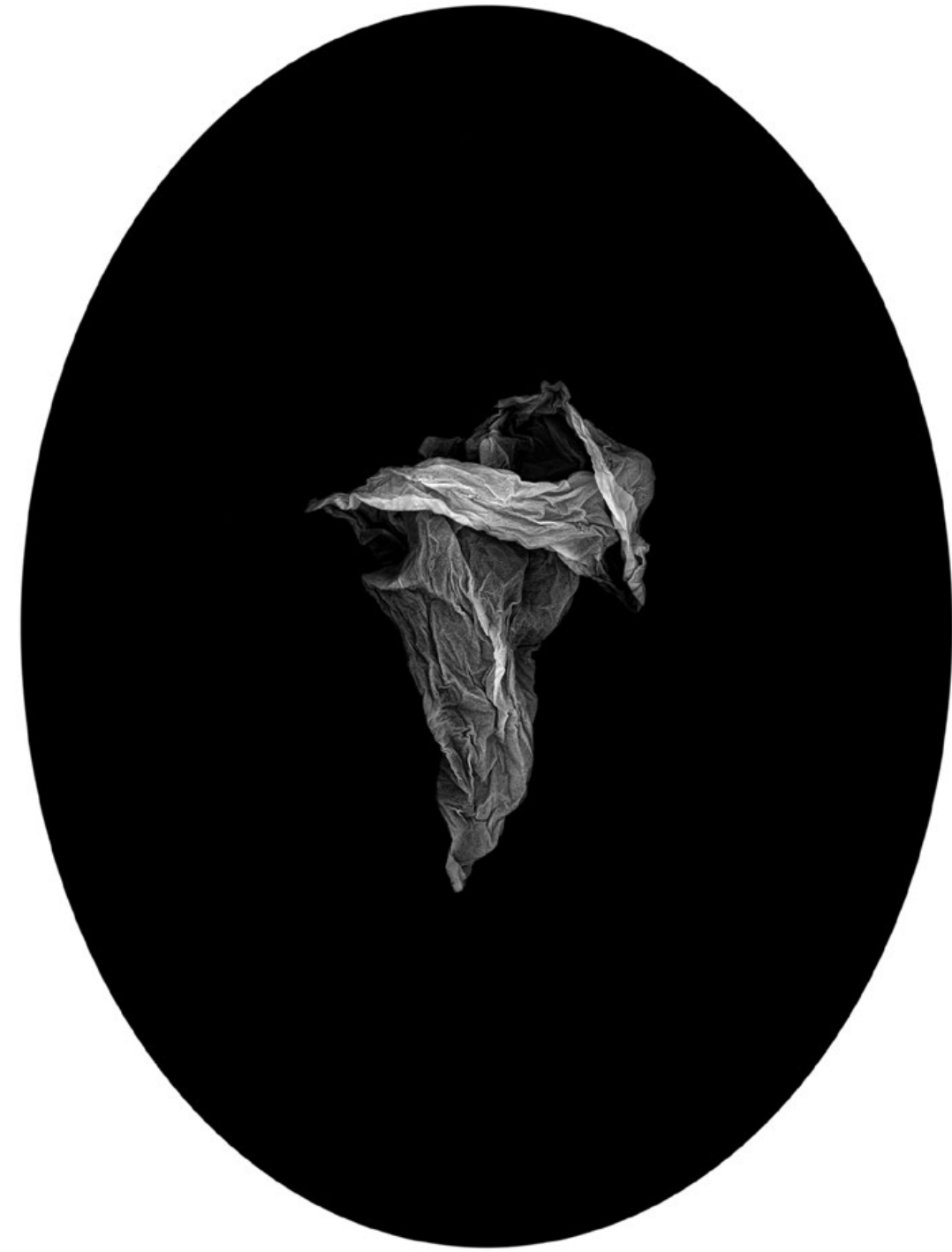














## Biography

Elizabeth M. Claffey is an Assistant Professor of Photography at Indiana University in Bloomington, a 2019-20 Research Fellow at The Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, & Reproduction, and a 2012 William J. Fulbright Fellow. She has an MFA in Studio Art from Texas Woman's University, where she also earned a Graduate Certificate in Women's Studies. Before joining the faculty at IU, she participated in The Eddie Adams Workshop and freelanced for various organizations and publications including *The Dallas Morning News*, NBC Universal Studios, and United Nations Women's Fund. In 2017 her work was selected for a Center Santa Fe Director's Choice Award by Kim Sajet of the National Portrait Gallery in Washington D.C. In 2021, she was awarded an Outstanding Junior Faculty Award and an IU Presidential Award for Research and Creative Activity. Elizabeth's work has been exhibited nationally and internationally and focuses on identity, kinship, isolation, issues of the body, family history, and cultural/institutional practices.

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