

## Artist Statement

### *Erma and Milly (2019-Present)*

Erma and Milly examines the lives of two sisters, women from my family who came of age a century ago in the early 1900s. They spent their adult years together in a large two-story home in the rural railroad town of North Bend, Pennsylvania.

*Erma and Milly defied the norms of the era and never married or had children.*

From the Victorian era and into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was common practice for women to participate in the collection and curation of images. Erma and Milly cultivated any ephemera that fancied them—from magazine clippings to photographs, letters, cards, pressed flowers, or locks of hair. They were also very creative, spending their time painting watercolors, sewing doll clothing, or making scrapbooks. Their assemblages were often included in elaborate albums, many which were passed down to my family.

Erma and Milly's collections are evidence of their Victorian sensibilities, including their interest in romance. Boxes of handwritten letters, including some from gentleman callers are included in their belongings.

In researching, photographing, and contemplating Erma and Milly's archives I reflect on similar life choices I've made over a century later. The conditions for women have improved drastically since the Victorian era, but women are still fighting for many basic human rights, such as inclusion in the U.S. Constitution.

*"But this freedom is only a beginning; the room is your own, but it is still bare."*

--Professions for Women, from *Killing the Angel in the House* (1931), Virginia Woolf

*Noelle McCleaf*