

Emotional Valises

Carla Decombes

I hate packing suitcases.

Every time, I spend hours folding my clothes perfectly so that they can all fit inside my valise. My grandmother taught me that if I roll my items up, they do not get wrinkled, and I could fit more of them in the tightly packed space. I am not sure about the wrinkle theory. However, I am definitely able to bring at least one extra pair of shoes and four more dresses that I usually never wear. So, I spend hours folding and rolling, folding and rolling, and folding and rolling.

This grand organization appears in stark contrast with my everyday personality. I am not an especially neat person. Every Sunday, after the weekend's festivities, I always joke that it looks like a tornado went through my room. There is usually a pile of tops that I (or one of my housemates) tried on before going out, another pile of clean laundry that I was too lazy to fold, and another pile of random clothing that fell out of my cupboard because of my frantic weekend outfit changes.

Suitcase-packing also makes me quite unbearable to be around. I used to get in enormous fights with my mother during the process. The biggest one occurred when I left my home in Paris to go to Yale. When she tried to help me fold my pairs of pants my stubbornness made me irrationally angry. For some ridiculous reason, I considered (and still uncontrollably do still believe) that I was (and am) the only one able to realize this craft accurately.

Ultimately, when the packing is over and I manage to zip up the baggage that I thought would never close, I feel an enormous sense of relief. Now, I know that I will only have to roll them around until I reach my destination. The only inconvenience left is the embarrassing noise of the screaming wheels against the pavement and the subsequent annoyed glances of the people walking by.

This may, when I had to pack up my room after four years of undergraduate, I did not feel such an aversion to the process which had caused me many tears in the past. It did take me 6 days. I was exhausted. I was sad when I closed the last box. However, I was not angry.

Maybe because, this time, and for the first time, all these things were leaving a home I had created on my own and were now on the way to enter a new one that I could build for myself? Maybe because, I was not only folding clothing but also putting away tokens filled with memories? Maybe because I did not have to pick and choose but had to fit everything? Maybe because, I crammed cardboard boxes, not rolling bags and therefore knew I would not have to face the individuals with the sensitive eardrums down the street? Maybe because, after 22 years, I had grown accustomed to the activity?

When gathering clothes for my summer holiday cabin bag, my folding obsession reappeared. I still hate packing suitcases.



Zoe Leonard – 1961
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Zoe Leonard was born in 1961 in Liberty, New York. Through her art, she has dealt with the political and social environments surrounding her such as the AIDS crisis of the mid-1980s which scarred the art world. With a practice mostly focused on photography, Leonard has learnt to document the fleeing of time by capturing ephemeral moments in eternal images.

Her conceptual pieces follow a similar wish: honoring memory and treasuring time. Named after the year of her birth, 1961 sculpts a self-portrait of her existence. Each empty vintage suitcase is marked with a year of her life. Each year, she adds a new bag – of a different size, color, and design – allowing for the piece to grow with her but also acknowledging the inevitability of growing old. Inside the bags, the souvenirs of 365 days float within the void of what also vanished during that time. This dynamic artwork, through the symbolism of suitcases, ultimately celebrates the vitality of her adventurous existence whilst reminding herself and her viewers that individuals and emotions were lost along the way.