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Printed Matters

Advice from My 80-Year-Old Self by Susan O'Malley

By Leila Easa

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From artists' monographs to beach reads, "Printed Matters" offers a monthly take by a rotating group of contributors on visual art through the printed word.

For a moment, let's do what will never be possible again. Let's look at Bay Area artist Susan O'Malley's *Advice from My 80-Year-Old Self* (Chronicle Books, 2016) outside of the tragic loss that has become its context.

Let's do this not only to honor the artist but also to honor the work itself.

The work itself consists primarily of eighty-one of what its publisher terms "text-based images" representing the answers of ordinary people to the question, "What advice would your 80-year-old self give to the you of today?" O'Malley theorizes the creation of the answer as a form of time-travel—a chance to bring two non-contiguous versions of the same self into contact—but also highlights the ability of this exercise to cut through noise and focus on the big picture. "She is likely a kinder, more courageous, and sometimes even more practical version of you," O'Malley writes in her introduction.

Inspired by the tradition of that elementary-school-project-turned-internet-meme of imagined correspondence between past or future selves, but also firmly rooted in O'Malley's collaborative social practice, the project as a whole breaks ground more in the expression and transmission of the ideas than in their collection, as if O'Malley wants less to disturb or challenge and more to facilitate. And despite her vivid renderings, part of her practice lies in removing her presence from the conversation except as the medium by which two people can relate, one to advise and one to listen (whether those two people are strangers to each other or different incarnations of the same self).



From *Advice from My 80-Year-Old Self: Real Words of Wisdom from People Ages 7 to 88* by Susan O'Malley, published by Chronicle Books, 2016. Courtesy of Chronicle Books.

The advice itself ranges from the pithy ("YOU'RE OK") to the trite ("BE HERE NOW"), from the hyper-positive ("YOU MADE THE RIGHT CHOICES YOU MADE THE RIGHT MISTAKES") to the witty ("BE BAD AT SOMETHING PERFECTION IS OVERRATED"), and even from the bitter ("DEAL WITH IT") to the plagiarized ("YOUR HEART HAS REASONS YOUR HEAD DOES NOT KNOW"). O'Malley chooses not to include commentary or analysis to frame the answers; all we are told is the first name and age of the respondent. In O'Malley's project, that is the only context that really matters.



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Rendered in block capitals and bereft of punctuation even between two sentences (the effect is breathlessness, inspiration), these eighty-one replies (one for each year of the alter-self, plus one to grow on) are vibrant on the page. O'Malley treats them as poetry and renders line breaks mindfully, sometimes even within a single word ("FORGIVE/YOUR/SELF"). Bright colors and the frequent use of rainbows and color fades express playfulness and whimsy; the occasional stark white-on-black image ("ART BEFORE DISHES," "NOTHING WILL BE WHAT YOU EXPECTED") acts as punctuation, reminding the viewer that these ideas also have heft.



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But of what, exactly, does this heft consist? The project as a whole generates a seemingly impossible object: a book, a physical text—strange merger of poetry, art, and horoscope as it may be—that manifests a project O'Malley's co-conspirator Christina Amini terms "less a product than a moment." In her book, O'Malley has bound a moment. Or rather, many moments. As one of her respondents reminds us, "THIS IS A GOOD MOMENT REMEMBER THIS MOMENT." The book collects these good moments and, in its very existence, memorializes them.



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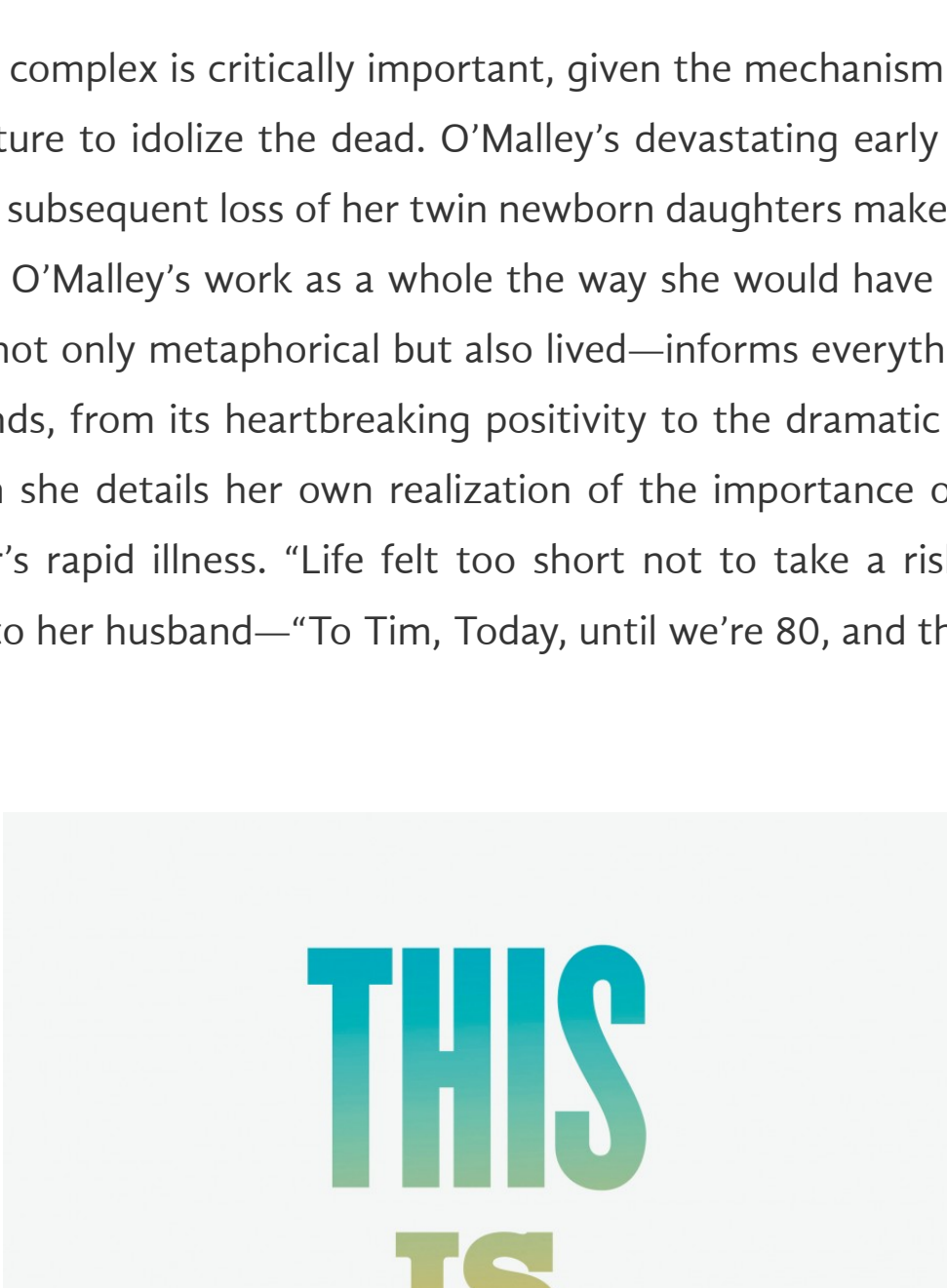
Sequenced together, these good moments have their own momentum. The opening message of the book, bright red text on a bright yellow background, sets the tone, tells us with urgency, "YOU'RE OK." The second transitions to calm with its cool-to-warm green background and teasing invitation: "IT WILL BE BETTER THAN YOU IMAGINED." In the middle there are surprising moments; it's easy to get lost in them, to tell yourself that "DON'T PULL OTHER PEOPLE'S HAIR" (advice from eight-year-old Pascal) is really the only adage we need in life. By the end, two concluding bookend pieces (warm-to-cool green "SIT BACK AND ENJOY THE RIDE" and red-on-white "LOVE IS EVERYWHERE LOOK FOR IT") give us the imperative to take action, to notice and enjoy, to seek. This invitation is an essential feature of O'Malley's work; at the conclusion of her foreword, she suggests that "if you don't find exactly what you need, just take a deep breath and ask your own 80-year-old self." The project is left in your hands to find in it what you personally need.



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O'Malley has typically been celebrated for her positivity and the inspirational quality of her work (past projects have included the interactive *Pep Talk Squad*, formed to provide encouragement in public spaces, one person at a time). In these analyses, one can occasionally detect a touch of critique for what might be perceived as excessive Pollyannaism. Yet while O'Malley's clear intention is to support, inspire and illuminate, the book's very existence requires a recognition of the essential darkness in our daily lives, even if only as a response to it. Additionally, many of the pieces might be seen less as simple aphorisms and more as repositories for buried stories. "IT WAS A GOOD CALL TO BUY THE RV," in its cool blue letters that transition from navy to cerulean, doesn't so much tempt us with its mystery as comfort us. In short, O'Malley's work is more complex than it might initially appear.

Seeing O'Malley as complex is critically important, given the mechanism of tragedy and the impetus in our culture to idolize the dead. O'Malley's devastating early death in late-stage pregnancy and the subsequent loss of her twin newborn daughters make it impossible for us to see the book or O'Malley's work as a whole the way she would have wanted us to. Such loss of potential—not only metaphorical but also lived—informs everything about the book we hold in our hands, from its heartbreaking positivity to the dramatic irony of O'Malley's foreword, in which she details her own realization of the importance of following dreams during her mother's rapid illness. "Life felt too short not to take a risk," she writes. The book's dedication to her husband—"To Tim, Today, until we're 80, and then some" is painful to read.



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Yet O'Malley's awareness of the beauty and importance of moments and her commitment to believing that "it will be better than you imagined" should, to some degree, comfort this loss. We are encountering an artist who lived life passionately and completely as part of her artistic practice. In many senses, it is this way of living that was her art and what she hoped to share with the world. Her lived authenticity and collaborative practice can inspire feelings of closeness between her work and the viewer; in some ways her devastating passing may do the same. We may feel uneasy with this sense of connection, but its creation has been a goal of O'Malley's work all along.

The search for meaning is one of the most essential human impulses. *Advice*, in the way that it chronicles and celebrates this search, testifies to this. So does our need to make sense of the tragic loss of an artist and two infants, all with so much ahead of them. That there is no "today," no "being 80" for the three of them, stands in such harsh contrast to rainbow fades and strong positive invitations that we as viewers have to rest it all—O'Malley, her work, and the book—in the space she calls "and then some" in her dedication. A place beyond time, when the moments of the book so impossibly captured become again timeless, unanchored.

O'Malley's posthumous show, "Susan O'Malley: Do More of What You Love," is currently open at the San Francisco Arts Commission through May 7, 2016. The exhibit offers a selection of O'Malley's career as a whole but will also include a public book launch for Advice on February 10, 2016, from 6 to 7:30 p.m. For more information, see the exhibit page: <http://www.sfartscommission.org/gallery/2015/susan-omalley-do-more-of-what-you-love>. Work from Advice is also currently on display through March 16, 2016, in bus kiosks on Market Street as part of the Art on Market Street project.

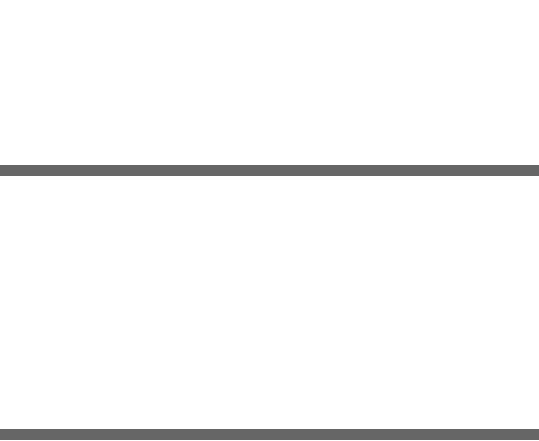
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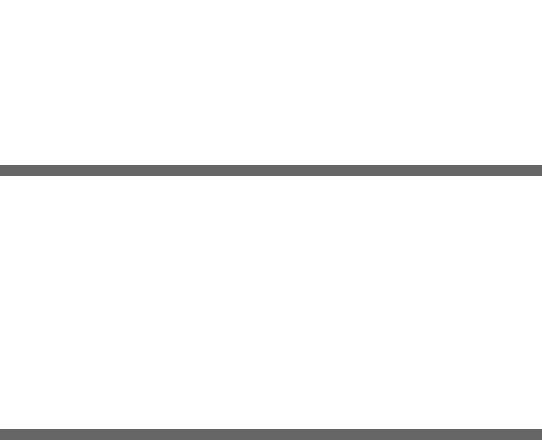
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