



UNPACKING GRIEF

A FEATURE DOCUMENTARY
DIRECTED BY AMELIA HANIBELSZ
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER GEETA GANDBHIR

Logline

In life, Esther lived in a 6,500-square-foot house so packed with belongings she had to turn sideways to enter the front door. After her death, her daughter, filmmaker Amelia Hanibelsz, re-enters the childhood home she spent decades wanting to burn down and begins unpacking seventeen rescued boxes. As each object becomes a portal to memory, Amelia transforms a source of shame into a landscape of love, discovering new connections with her mother after loss.



My Mother



Esther with her mother, Amelia, my Grandmother, Sri Lanka

Esther was larger than life: irreverent, charismatic, and impeccably put together, always telling jokes and making people laugh.

She filled every room with family treasures, found objects, and everyday things.

Where I saw chaos, she saw beauty, history, and possibility.

Only after she died did I begin to wonder whether the house I had spent years trying to save her from had, in its own way, been saving her.

The Shift



Dancing with my father, Kenneth, Australia

I did not grow up in a hoarded home. After my father died, the open, welcoming house I knew began to close in as objects multiplied.

Seventeen years ago, I filmed Mum guiding me through the house when the accumulation was at its most extreme. Even then, we found humour as we navigated it together.

Months later, in New York, I recorded a session with a psychic, trying to understand the shame I carried.

I did not know it then, but the film had already begun.

The Visual Language



My brother Andrew filming me with his Super 8 camera, Singapore

Unpacking Grief moves between documentary observation and imagination. Intimate vérité and family archives ground the film in lived experience, while miniature worlds, stop-motion animation, choreography, and magical realism give physical form to memory.

Shot on digital, Super 8, and 16mm, the film embraces the contrast between clarity and grain, present and past, reality and dream.

Its visual language allows memory to shift in scale, texture, and form.

The House I Wanted To Burn Down



Our house before Dad died. Before everything changed.

For decades, I wanted to burn my childhood home down.

Not because I hated it, but because I could not bear what it had become.

I imagined its destruction as a kind of release, a way to escape what I could not fix and did not yet understand.

Unpacking



After the house was emptied and sold, seventeen boxes travelled from Australia to my home in The Hague.

Inside them was a lifetime of objects waiting to be remembered.

Each object becomes a portal into a different dream, where love, memory, and identity come to life.

Vintage suitcases from my mother's house, filled with handwritten letters spanning decades.

The Fairy Tale

A hand-carved chess set owned by my parents while living in Tanzania in 1975 becomes the stage for a stop-motion animated fairy tale. Its King and Queen become my mother and father. Their wedding rings become their crowns, and their love story is narrated by our daughters, Nyah (10) and Zaeya (8).

Through our daughters' voices, their grandparents' story is carried into a new generation. As memory moves and objects breathe, family history becomes living folklore.



Dancing With Grief



An audio cassette miraculously recovered from my mother's house holds Mum's voice singing a Portuguese lullaby from our childhood. As it plays, we enter a dream inspired by Kuthu, an energetic Tamil folk dance known for its percussive rhythm, improvisation, and collective energy.

Choreographed by internationally acclaimed choreographer and movement director Usha Jey and driven by live parai drumming, seven dancers, including me, transform a private memory into a communal expression of mourning, resilience, and celebration.

Grief can feel profoundly lonely, yet we all dance with it in our own way.

I Wear My Grief On My Sleeve

Quite literally.

Since losing my parents, I have worn their clothing and jewellery almost every day. Each garment is both armour and embrace, a way of carrying them with me through the world.

In a planned dream sequence, their clothing will come alive, drawing on the visual language of contemporary South Asian fashion and jewellery campaigns. Created in collaboration with a new generation of artists and designers, the sequence will explore how memory and identity are worn, inherited, and transformed.



The Taste Of Grief

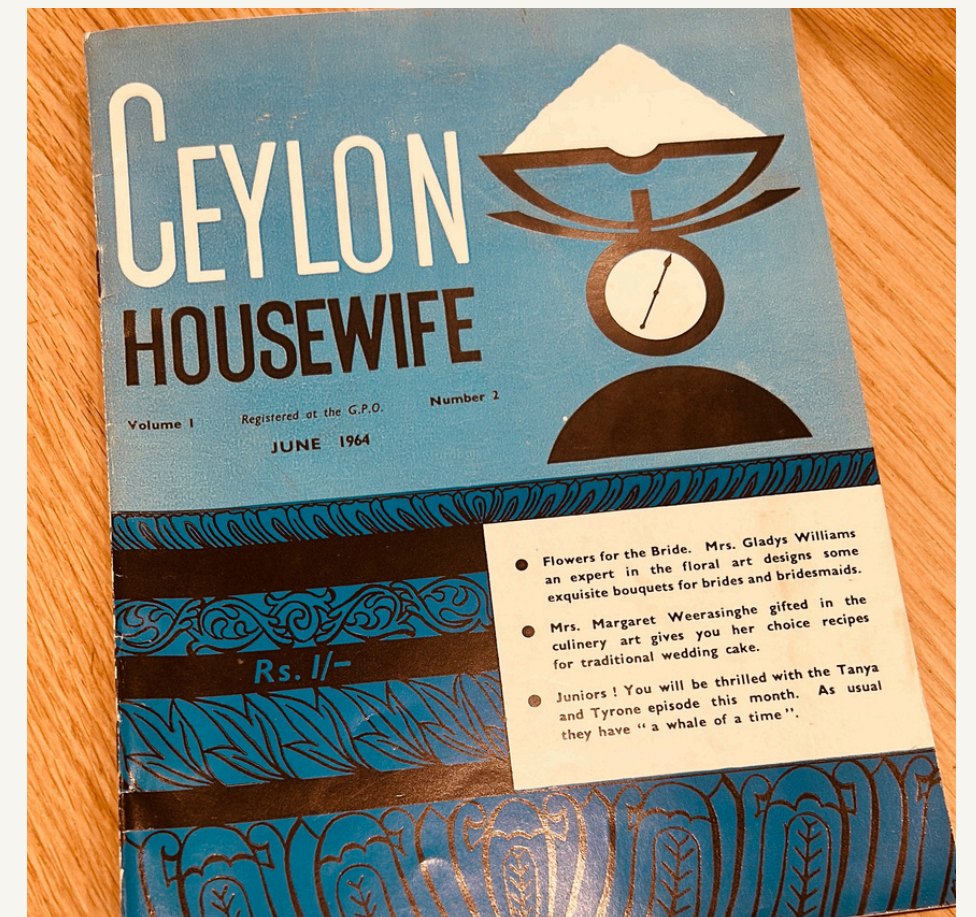
A golden tea set.

Sri Lankan gem-studded teaspoons.

A 1964 copy of Ceylon Housewife, given to my mother by her mother the year my parents married.

My grandmother's handwritten cookbooks.

Together, they will transport us into a playful dream: part magical cooking show, part retro tea commercial. Through food, tea, and family ritual, we are invited to taste, smell, and feel memory.



The House Reimagined



Built to the exact floor plan of my childhood home using salvaged wood, the miniature becomes one of the film's central characters.

More than a replica, it is a cinematic space: a film set, an animation stage, a projection surface, an archive, and eventually an installation artwork.

The house I could not fix becomes a world I can finally enter on my own terms.

Production Stills



The House after Dad passed away



Exploring memories in rediscovered slides

Director's Approach



I have one foot in the mundane and one in the magical. So did my mother and father.

As both filmmaker and daughter, I am not approaching my mother's house as a problem to solve or her belongings as evidence. I am returning to them with curiosity, humour, and tenderness, allowing each discovery to challenge what I believed I knew.

The dream sequences are not escapes from reality. They give form to emotional truths that observation alone cannot hold. Through collaboration with South Asian artists, this intimate family story grows into a broader exploration of culture, inheritance, and diaspora.

My father's tie. My mother's necklace.

Cinematic References

They Dream

Directed by William D. Caballero
Premiered at the Sundance Film Festival



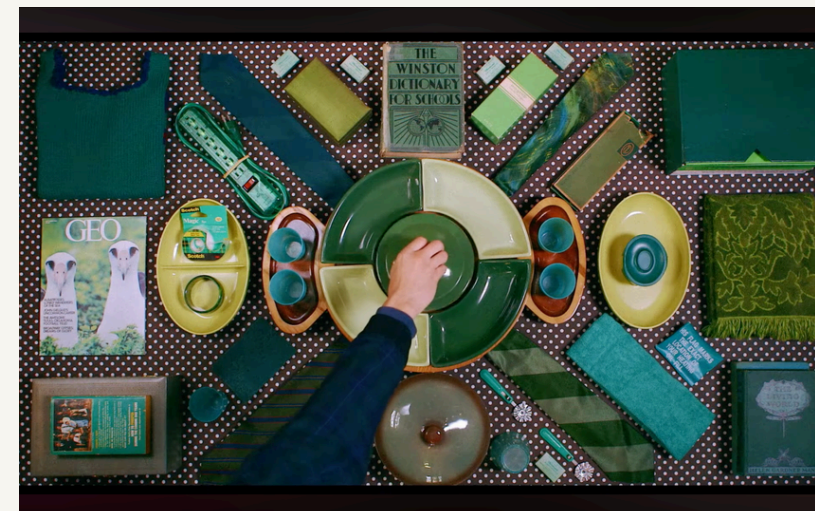
Your Touch Makes Others Invisible

Directed by Rajee Samarasinghe
Independent Spirit Award winner



306 Hollywood

Directed by Elan Bogarín and Jonathan Bogarín
Premiered at the Sundance Film Festival



Current Status

Executive Producer: Academy Award-nominated filmmaker Geeta Gandbhir

- ✓ Five-minute and nine-minute sample reels completed
- ✓ Vérité unpacking sequences filmed
- ✓ Paris Kuthu dream-dance sequence filmed
- ✓ The Fairy Tale stop-motion animation sequence completed
- ✓ House tour filmed and the majority of archives digitised
- ✓ Fiscal sponsorship secured through the Center for Independent Documentary
- Miniature construction, editing, archival restoration, and additional stop-motion animation underway.
- Several dream sequences remain to be filmed, including I Wear My Grief on My Sleeve in Sri Lanka



Found just before I uncovered the family film footage I had been searching for since my father passed.

Dream Team

Geeta Gandbhir - Executive Producer

Geeta Gandbhir is an Academy Award–nominated filmmaker and editor whose work spans documentary, television, and narrative film. In 2026, she made history as the first woman nominated for two Academy Awards in the same year for *The Perfect Neighbor* and *The Devil Is Busy*. Her directing credits include Sundance Directing Award winner *The Perfect Neighbor*, HBO's Emmy-winning *Black and Missing*, and Netflix's *Katrina: Come Hell and High Water*. Her work has earned multiple Emmy Awards, Peabody Awards, and NAACP honors.

Amelia Hanibelsz - Director and Producer

Amelia Hanibelsz is an award-winning and Primetime Emmy–nominated filmmaker with more than two decades of international documentary experience. Her short *The Good Fight: Armen vs. Giuliani* premiered at DOC NYC in 2025. Amelia previously served as Executive Producer at Steven Spielberg's USC Shoah Foundation and Executive Director of Development at ABC News Studios/Disney. She has collaborated with organizations including UNICEF, Sesame Workshop, the Gates Foundation, and FilmAid Kenya. *Unpacking Grief* marks her feature directorial debut.

Simon Sohel TaufiQue - Producer

Simon Sohel TaufiQue is an Emmy-nominated British-Indian producer and film composer whose credits include Sundance award winner *Ricky*, Berlinale Forum Prize winner *She's Lost Control*, Tribeca Grand Prize winner *Land of Gold*, and *The Alchemy of Being Okay*. He has worked across independent and studio projects for Lionsgate, Amazon, and HBO. A Gotham and Transatlantic Partners fellow, Simon teaches producing at NYU and Sundance Collab.

Cheryl Furjanic - Producer

Cheryl Furjanic is an Emmy-nominated filmmaker whose work includes the HBO documentary *Back on Board: Greg Louganis* and the New York Times Op-Doc *Stonewall: The Making of a Monument*. Her films are recognized for their emotional depth, humanity, and humor. She is currently directing the feature documentary *Adventures in Miscarriage* and has taught documentary production at NYU for more than twenty years.

Production and Art

Krishan Jayatunge - Producer and Graphic Designer

Krishan Jayatunge is a Sri Lankan-Canadian multidisciplinary designer, producer, and founder of Kroworks, a creative studio with more than 30 years of experience in design, illustration, animation, branding, and visual storytelling. Having known Amelia Hanibelsz and her late mother, Esther, for more than three decades, Krishan brings both creative expertise and a personal connection to the material.

Drucilla Lawrence Rees - Head of Production

Drucilla Lawrence Rees is a production executive and line producer with more than 25 years of experience across documentary, nonfiction, news, television, and feature film production. Her credits include Netflix's Keep Sweet: Pray and Obey, Peacock's Casey Anthony: Where the Truth Lies, Hulu's Age of Influence, The CW's Crime Nation, and the Oscar-shortlisted documentary short Rovina's Choice.

Glenn Millington - Head of Art Department

Glenn Millington is a multidisciplinary designer and visual artist whose work spans graphic design, illustration, digital art, environmental design, and immersive visual experiences. His experience creating large-scale graphics and imagined environments supports the film's transformation of personal objects and miniature spaces into cinematic worlds.

Adalberto Ortiz - Miniature House Builder and Artist

Adalberto Ortiz is a Puerto Rican artist and sculptor based in The Hague. A graduate of the Royal Academy of Art, his work spans woodworking, sculpture, painting, and installation. Using reclaimed materials, he creates detailed miniature worlds that unite craftsmanship and storytelling.

Tatiana McCabe - Stop-Motion Animation Director and Super 8 Cinematographer

Tatiana McCabe is a filmmaker, animator, and cinematographer whose work blends documentary, animation, and mixed media. Her award-winning film Tides of Life received a Student Academy Award and a Panda Award for Best Short Documentary.

Creative Collaborators

Usha Jey - Choreographer

Usha Jey is an internationally acclaimed Sri Lankan Tamil choreographer and movement director whose work blends Kuthu, Bharatanatyam, hip-hop, and street dance. Her distinctive movement language explores identity, heritage, resilience, and belonging.

Leah Marikkar - Music Consultant

Leah Marikkar is a Sri Lankan creative strategist with more than two decades of experience across media, music, and festivals. Her work spans brand strategy, artist development, cultural programming, and global partnerships. She is the founder of BOOM Artist Management and co-founder of Electric Peacock Festival.

Charlene Lim - Creative Consultant

Charlene Lim is a Paris-based Singaporean cultural producer and founder of Global Arts Link, representing internationally acclaimed artists and creative studios across dance, visual design, and music, including ballet star Friedemann Vogel and award-winning lighting designer Fabiana Piccioli. Formerly Company Manager of Akram Khan Dance Company, Charlene works across borders to connect artists, disciplines, and ideas.

Stewart Till CBE - Advisor

Stewart Till CBE is a veteran film executive, producer, and former Chair of the UK Film Council. His leadership roles include CEO of Sonar Entertainment, President of International at PolyGram, and Chairman and CEO of United International Pictures.

Contact

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Director and Producer

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Confidential Nine-Minute Grant Sample

<https://vimeo.com/1184554390>

Password: UNPACKING2026

Film Website:

tell2cproductions.com/unpackinggrief

Password: UNPACKING2026

Fiscal Sponsor:

Center for Independent Documentary

To Donate:

www.documentaries.org/films/unpacking-grief/

