Evocation of memory and place

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Evocation of Memory and Place

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JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

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Painting

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For my mother. Rest in peace.
Acknowledgments

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Abstract

My work investigates the inseparability of memory and emotion. Guided by what remain of my mother’s tattered memoirs, I have investigated a place from her past that suggests an intense search which filters through her writings and in tandem with my own visual remembrance. Through the manipulation of materials, technique and space, my work reveals a simple yet complex connectedness to memory and place.
Something happens, but by the time we notice, it has begun without us. Thus our access to the beginning is necessarily incomplete, fragmentary.¹

- Peggy Phelan

I remember my mother being admitted to the former Western Lunatic Asylum twice during the early part of the 1960s. A diagnosis of depression and tantrums seemed apt during that time. It was not until her death in March of 2008, however, did I come to realize how unstable memories can be. She passed on to me many intangible gifts, but the thing most dear remains a nicotine-stained manila folder stuffed with a personal history about which I never knew. Her fragmented letters and poems reveal to me that she was an intense thinker whose writings captured the essence of introspection. Throughout the past three years, I have revisited the former asylum to investigate my mother’s fragile past and to experience my own. My aim is to explore my mother’s past experiences and in doing so, to suggest how our memories and emotions shape our individual worlds.

**Memory**

Memory is the conscious recall of facts and events, or the process of retaining knowledge over time.² As an artist, I experience memory through the process of deconstruction and rebuilding of past events in light of present circumstances. My work bears witness to the intensity of introspection and the mystery of remembrance. I

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² Peter Osborne and Matthew Charles, "Walter Benjamin", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2011 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.): 1, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2011/entries/benjamin (accessed February 12, 2012), “Memory seems to be a source of knowledge. We remember experiences and events which are not happening now, so memory differs from perception. We remember events which really happened, so memory is unlike pure imagination. Yet, in practice, there can be close interactions between remembering, perceiving and imagining.”
compile traces of my mother’s memory in an attempt to externalize an intangible and private realm that was her experience in the asylum, an experience that shaped her identity. Building from a complex and shattered history, my work emerges as an image or object of progressive thought and discovery.

Memory becomes distorted over time. It alters concepts and influences who we become. Similarly, the artist experiences great difficulty in finding a singular image, form or technique that will embody the essence of memory as perceptions of the past change with the emotional dimension of reminiscence. My works, mirroring the permeable borders of aesthetics and perception, shift in light of physical, emotional and experiential change. They have become, over time, diverse in form and structure as they have evolved from photographs to paintings to sculpture and installation. By combining various materials, I reveal the complexity of memory through form, color, surface treatment, light and sound. All of these factors aim to trigger emotional responses in viewers.

**Drawing**

In an early series of life-sized hybrid portraits titled *The Undefined Hero* (figs. 1-3), I contemplate the depth of memory from a psychological vista via a quasi reenactment of psychotherapy. This work combines images from the Thematic Apperception Test (utilized primarily by psychiatrists in the 1930s through 50s) with Polaroids of my mother.

This work explores aspects of the classic human condition and our search for the “true” self. Imagery in this work is figurative, depicting internal and external conflicts in the realm of depression, hysteria and isolation--hereditary conditions I discovered

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3 Rob Barnara, “Mystery & the Art Experience”, *Ceramics: Art and Perception* 62 (2005): 30. “It, (mystery), points to what is not known, and causes us to reflect on that ultimate mystery of what it means to be human.”
while probing personal memory and family history. Thematic content is emotionally driven, as illustrated in the dark, bold lines and heavily worked layers of gesso, ink and charcoal. The sketchiness of the drawings and textured surface are intuitive, expressive and emotive exposing the sensitivity of the subject matter (fig. 4).

I am reminded of the emotive quality of paintings by French modernist Jean Dubuffet, in which the surface treatment promotes powerful visual stimulations. Works in his series *Theater of Memory* (fig. 5), reveal a personal history through the manipulation of images, overlapping of materials and combined techniques. The constant crossover and repetition of line coincide with what German theorist Walter Benjamin referred to as the “inside” event. The chaotic scratch signifies an intense search, as each mark becomes evidence of an unsettled thought or emotion. The inside event, as I see it, appears in the abstract form--agitated surfaces and morphed figures.

Norwegian Symbolist Edvard Munch in his most famous prints (fig. 6), conveyed an amazing experience that mirrors my own sensibility. Munch’s uncanny talent for manipulation of line and color invoked familiar themes of life experiences such as anxiety, love, loss, fear and alienation. These emotions come to light each time I read my mother’s memoirs. It is those powerful feelings that go to the heart of my work. Both Dubuffet and Munch further developed the idea that emotion and memory are inescapably entwined.

Although my intent for the *Hero* series was to evoke an emotional response through gesture and surface treatment, the work fell short of my expectations. The figures in the paintings seem secondary in comparison to the prominent black box frames that held them. In the end, the boxes became metaphors representing doorways, which are

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common in my dreams. Intuitively, these dreams were representations of the doors and halls in the asylum, through which I needed to pass in order to further investigate the content of my work. Here my medium and technique transitioned from drawing to photography.

**Photography**

Walter Benjamin wrote in his *Thesis V*:

*The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again...For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concern threatens to disappear irretrievably.*

Photography, like my mother’s memoirs, provided another form of documentation of remembrance. It has become an integral part of my creative process. Thousands of images exist of abandoned sites of confinement such as sanitariums, prisons and centers of detention. It would seem, however, that these photographs exist as mere documents of historic architecture and preservation, as many of the sites have become national or state landmarks. Within the context of memory, my photographs relate to more than just the physical nature of the buildings because the “nature” of the asylum cannot be reduced to simply bricks and mortar. I recall a passage from my mother’s story:

*It’s difficult you know that convergence of chaos and calm. The stigma of mental illness seeps out and you are crippled for life.*

Compelled by her memories and with great apprehension and anticipation, I obtained permission to explore the place of my mother’s confinement, as portrayed in her

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7 Taken from the “preface” of my mother’s memoirs, I discovered this beginning as the last page.
writings. I remember thinking about how memory, especially personal memory, is frequently drawn from trauma, as in this case, the trauma was her diagnosis of mental illness and her interment in the Western Lunatic Asylum. My work does not try to represent fully the events of my mother’s past. That would be impossible. Rather, my work shows how memory pierces the boundaries of what we know.⁸

Over the past few years, I have cataloged over 1000 images of the asylum, its buildings and grounds. I prefer black and white photography as it became more effective as it referenced a period from my mother’s past and triggered emotional content and responses from viewers. Black and white imagery was also used in the Hero series, specifically in the psychological test cards and in the old photographs. My objective was not only to document a place of my mother’s past, but also to recapture and reconfigure that past as I continually encounter it in the present.

Images of darkened halls, precarious stairways, abandoned chambers and deteriorating facades are shot from an awkward position that presented viewers with an ominous yet enticing perspective (fig. 7). Natural light is digitally manipulated, pushing the depth of the shadows and created a mysterious figurative realm. The presentation of the dilapidated architecture of the asylum transcends the viewers’ sense of place.⁹ The stark absence of the human figure is purposeful in that viewers, through their own emotional rationalizations, may recall experiences in their own lives relating to feelings of abandonment, despair and fear of death (fig 8).

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⁸ Claudia Malacrida, “Contested memories: efforts of the powerful to silence former inmates’ histories of life in an institution for ‘mental defectives’,” Disability & Society 21 (2006): 400, “The power of narrative to reclaim and refashion knowledge by making one’s memories public this offers individuals an opportunity to bear witness to their experience, to affirm personal perspectives.”

⁹ Andreas Schonle, “Between the Iconic and the Symbolic: The Ruin Photographs of Boris Smirnov and the Aesthetics of Trauma,” Germanic Review (2011): 286, “Barthes describes successful photography as a record of being, of existence, rather than of vision, the opening of a gap, whether productive or not, between experience and representation.”
Over time my mother’s memoirs have become a burden, as I am constantly trying to “fill in the blanks,” in order to comprehend experiences that are not my own. My interpretation of her past is in actuality an assumption about her past that is based on my own experiences, knowledge and imagination. My work connects to her experiences, and so doing, invites viewers to recall their own life stories.

**Memory in Contemporary Art**

Story telling, emotion and memory are intertwined. The work of modern and contemporary artists such as Christian Boltanski and Louise Bourgeois, who also addresses memory, provide important reference points in my own processes. Christian Boltanski uses photography as a formal expression of consciousness and remembering. Reconstructions of the past, according to Boltanski, “become an important reminder of the present and it is only through investigation can we begin to understand who we are and where we came from.” Modest clues of my mother’s emotional trauma during the time of her incarceration, as revealed in her letters, are seen in my photographs of cracked walls, peeling paint, broken windows, fallen plaster and hollow spaces.

Memory is predicated on the concept of abandonment in Boltanski’s work. For example, in his intimate installations *Relequaries* (fig. 9), Boltanski combined found photographs, discarded personal objects and electric lights to evoke themes relating to memory, identity, loss and death. The notion of abandonment also persists in Boltanski’s larger installations such as *Personnes* (fig.10). This work was displayed as part of the *Monumenta* exhibition in Paris in 2010, where he used discarded items of clothing to build monumental, lifeless mounds which at once evoke feelings of absence and

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10 (Gibbons 2007, 2-3)
connectedness. The huge empty space where this work was installed echoes the vacant halls in the asylum.

The work of Surrealist sculptor Louise Bourgeois further represents concepts relating to personal memory and emotion. Throughout her long career, Bourgeois utilized many techniques and materials, suggesting that memory and emotion present phenomena that cannot be limited to one mode of expression. In her series of constructed environments that she deemed Cells (fig. 11), Bourgeois recalls emotional events from her childhood. According to Bourgeois “[t]he Cells represent different types of pain: physical, emotional and psychological, mental and intellectual… Each Cell deals with a fear. Fear is pain… Each Cell deals with the pleasure of the voyeur, the thrill of looking and being looked at.” 12 I am reminded of the thick wooden doors of the cells in the asylum each with only a small six inch square opening, which allowed patients to stare out, and physicians, orderlies and asylum visitors to peer in. Thus doors and windows (as found in the work of Bourgeois and others) are a primary source of inspiration in my photographs, as well as in my paintings and installation pieces.

Memories, like the actions of the camera’s shutter are fleeting gestures. Memory appears in an instant in each of my photographs—an extraction from the “continuous unfolding of history,” a moment in time. 13 Each photograph is individually meaningful, but also linked to one another, just as my mother’s autobiography is unique to her, but is also linked to my own. My photographs confirm the existence of a past life and support an autobiographical narrative that inspired my series of mixed media paintings.

13 (Schonle 2011, 277)
Paintings

In my paintings, I express memory though the manipulation of materials. Conventional methods of painting on canvas have been abandoned and replaced with clear glass or acrylic panels. A single glass pane is rigid, yet fragile, signifying the exterior of the self (as we exist in relative autonomy) and the delicate nature of remembrance. The painted glass panels bring the depth of solitude and contemplation into tangible form by combining techniques and materials that signify the constant entanglement of memory and place.

Using the asylum photographs as references, my paintings transform the same subject with the use of wax, oil, dry pigment and nylon netting. Compositions are asymmetrical and semi-abstract. Beeswax is my preferred medium because of its aged-looking hue, which is similar to that of the old pages of my mother’s letters, and for its binding qualities, which emerge when infused with oil and powdered pigments. The wax, as it heats, allows pigments to be pushed and pulled, as colors and forms caress and overlap one another. The interplay of material and color is like an intricate dance; a unique performance illustrating the memory process as an intersection of the past and present.

In my series of paintings titled Testimonials No. 1-6 (figs. 12-17), I abandon the constructedness of the photographic image insofar as the framed edges disappear. The strict angles and geometric forms, as seen in the architecture of the asylum, are enhanced by the agitated lines. A tension exists between the restless gestures of the marks, which lie beneath the softened surface of melted wax. Harsh lines collapse on the surface, suggesting an emotional freedom. The invisible edge and transparency of the glass panel
reveal new spatial configurations in the merging of foreground and background and cast shadows. The vertical, rectangular shape of the glass panel is deliberate. It occupies the viewers’ “head space,” or the relative space directly in the viewers’ line of sight, which motivates a personal connection. This direct contact with the work invites a contemplative reaction, as viewers begin to search through the layers of materials.

Images of staircases are first sketched on the surface of the acrylic or glass. Sketching reinforces my personal connection to the subject matter. Sketching to me constitutes a forward motion; I sketch the halls and stairways, as I rediscover the experience of walking through the asylum. Sketching is rhythmic and emotive—a kind of visual thinking that speaks to the way memory can connect mind and body. Traces of doorways, corners of windows, posts and stair rails invoke the notion of partial remembrance. Lines and forms appear and disappear under multiple layers of materials.

My encounters in the asylum have been difficult. My search to understand an emotionally wrenching period in my mother’s life became distorted, as I relied only on fragments of text and fading photographs—incomplete pieces of the past. This distortion is revealed in the awkward perspective of the stairways in the paintings and in the foggy atmosphere created by the layers of wax and pigment. Muted colors and organic forms highlight the negative space of the composition, lending emotional impact to the image of the asylum interior.

The concepts of ascension and “descension” suggest in general the physical self moving through space and in particular my interaction with the asylum buildings and grounds. Images of stairways are bent, resembling my awkward motion as I climbed the crooked and dilapidated flights of stairs. I was constantly looking behind as I moved
forward so I would remember where to step and not fall on the way back down. Lacking any clearly visual beginning or end, the stairways in my paintings create an uneasy sense of place.

Nylon netting, which I find randomly along the roadside, underlies and crisscrosses the surface of each painting. The netting, encased with wax, melts and tears under the stress of the heat gun; in this way, it evokes the emotional breakdown revealed in my mother’s letters and my response to them. The embedded grid is also a stark reminder of the asylum space with its caged windows set amidst imposing brick facades.

**Space and Materials**

When installing my photographs and paintings in the Sawhill gallery, I was compelled (again) to recall the experience in the asylum. The pristine white cube of the gallery presented a different kind of isolation not found in the desolate asylum. But, I none the less ventured, with the use subdued lighting and even relative darkness to create a meditative atmosphere and illuminate an emotional quality of the work. This reinforced an intimate if not provocative relationship between the viewers and the work.

My color palette is simple, which adds a sense of mystery to the work. Black and white photographs, as I suggested earlier, underscore and emotional feeling of remembrance. Shades of blue used in my paintings encourage a somber, melancholy interaction with the work. Blue evokes an empty yet profound feeling. Emptiness coincides with the psychological underpinnings of my art, as blue seems to surpass the surface of my images, absorbing thoughts of time and space. Blue activates the memorial quality of the work especially when the latter is viewed in diffused lighting. Blue can incite the anxiety of remembering.
My mother’s life experiences as told in her memoirs have inspired my work. But, the tangible things, her actual letters, notes and poems, have been a burden. Over and over again, I tried physically to incorporate these objects into my photographs, paintings and sculptures, but I was not convinced of their aesthetic value. Inevitably, I needed to find a way to keep the memories that are embodied in the objects, while freeing myself from their stifling presence. This is when my work shifted to installation.

**Installation**

For this new work, I began to formally and conceptually bury my mother’s letters. I have arduously stripped down the work discovering a model of representation that is more suggestive and evocative rather than direct and literal. In small sculptures and a video installation, I presented only traces of my mother’s memoirs and my experience in the asylum. This new approach invited viewers to mediate the past and the present.

*Self Portrait* is a sound sculpture (fig. 18). The simple white frame with the attached shelf reminds me of my family living room, where portraits of our ancestors, our children and our children’s children line the mantel above the fireplace. On the shelf is a metronome, dating to the 1950s or ‘60s. The subtle motion and banal ticking of the metronome is a constant reminder of the passing of time. We never know what will trigger a memory or emotion. While I was installing *Self Portrait*, and setting the pendulum in motion, I in fact remembered that day was the anniversary of my mother’s death. At that moment the title of the work became obvious.

In a second piece titled *Escape Plan* (fig. 19), I used, rather reused, copper wire boxes from a previous work, painted them with flat black paint and linked them together to simulate the escape ladder, which today remains bolted to the floor in the asylum.
Looking out of the window above where the ladder is secured, I thought that the ladder could not possibly reach the ground, which meant that any attempted escape would be unsuccessful and perhaps fatal. I crafted each link individually connecting them one by one and thereby maintaining a personal connection to the subject matter. The boxes resemble, in shape and form, the portrait frame and the mantel shelf—objects that hold our memories. The box forms further resemble the interior and exterior architecture of the asylum, especially its doors, windows, patterned floors and cemetery headstones.

*Escape Plan* is attached to the wall just below what would be the bottom of a window sill. A mirror rests on the floor. The ladder falls almost to the floor then folds, and finally ascends towards the ceiling. Several more links were added before the ladder was attached to the wall just below the ceiling. Another mirror replaced the ceiling tile above. From a distance, the subtle light revealed pencil-like drawings on the wall and a vertical beam of light reflected from the floor up the wall. There was a visual heaviness to the work, as it falls from the wall, which seemed quite appropriate given the subject matter. A closer look into the mirrors revealed no clear beginning or end, suggesting that we cannot abandon our past or our memories.

In another work titled *un-abandoned II* I took my expression a step further by bringing memory and emotion together in a video installation. I revisited previous work and presented it in new ways, marking yet another path of discovery. I prepared for more visits to the asylum, armed with my camera for shooting still images. This time I also took a video camera that I housed in a backpack. The end result was a one and one-half hour video, rendered in black and white, which once again stirred thoughts of my mother’s past.
The video is fragmented and incomplete, as it showed bent corners of rooms, halls, floors and stairways. It was projected from above across a darkened room and into the corner of the gallery (figs. 20-23). Multiple viewing surfaces were created with the placement of large and small boxes, further breaking up the images creating a dizzying perspective and underscoring how memories can never be fully grasp. The sound of my footsteps in the video seemed awkward and disconnected to the actual site, as viewers heard my footsteps moving forward and only saw where I had been. With the sound of a heartbeat in the background, the video aimed to incite personal experiences for those who took the time to engage with it.

Conclusion

In an instant our footprints disappear leaving behind only a gesture of where we have been. In this series of paintings, photographs and installations I have explored the crossover between the past and the future evoking the notion that individual histories are inevitably intertwined. Novelist Anne Rice spoke to this when she wrote:

No matter how long we exist, we have our memories. Points in time which time itself cannot erase. Suffering may distort my backward glances, but even to suffering, some memories will yield nothing of their beauty or their splendor. Rather they remain as hard as gems.\textsuperscript{14}

My mother’s fragmented autobiography has guided my art, reminding me that I work, and will always work, through an inherited past. My work reflects on my mother's institutionalization, but even more, it speaks to the role that memory played in her reflections of her incarceration. Using a multiplicity of techniques and materials, my incomplete constructions and fragmented imagery invite viewers to enter my work/world and to remember their own encounters with the power of memory.

Figure 1
Colleen Pendry
*The Undefined Hero*, 2010
Mixed media on paper
Figure 2
Colleen Pendry
*The Undefined Hero.*, 2010
Mixed media on paper
Figure 3
Colleen Pendry
*The Undefined Hero*, 2010
Mixed media on paper
Figure 4
Colleen Pendry
*The Undefined Hero (detail)*, 2010
Mixed media on paper
Figure 5
Jean Dubuffett from series *Theater of Memory*
*Vicissitudes* (Les Vicissitudes), 1977
Acrylic on paper and canvas support: 2100 x 3390 mm
http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?workid=4027

Figure 6
Edvard Munch from series *Master Prints*
*Toward the Forest II*, 1915
Color woodcut, from one woodblock sawn into three pieces, in brick red, black, olive green, greenish yellow, and violet on imitation vellum paper
The Epstein Family Collection
http://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/2010/munch/index.shtm#
Figure 7
Colleen Pendry
Chamber 213, 2011
Digital Print – Sony Nex 3
Figure 8
Colleen Pendry
*Non-place*, 2011
Digital Print – Sony Nex 3
Figure 9
Christian Boltanski
*Reliquaires*, 1989
(Le Fête du Pourim)
132 tin boxes, 6 metal drawers with black and white photographs, grids and lamps

Figure 10
Christian Boltanski
*Personnes*, 2010
MONUMENTA 10, Grand Palais, Public Entrance: Avenue Winston Churchill, 75008, Paris
http://www.thisistomorrow.info/default.aspx?webPageId=1&pageNumber=50
Figure 11
Louise Bourgeois
*Cell (Hands and Mirror)*, 1995
Figure 12
Colleen Pendry
*Testimonials No. 1-6*, 2012
Oil, ink, indigo, beeswax and nylon on acrylic panel
24 x 32 inches
Figure 13
Colleen Pendry
*Testimonials No. 1-6*, 2012
Oil, ink, indigo, beeswax and nylon on acrylic panel
24 x 32 inches
Figure 14
Colleen Pendry
*Testimonials No. 1-6*, 2012
Oil, ink, indigo, beeswax and nylon on acrylic panel
24 x 32 inches
Figure 15
Colleen Pendry
*Testimonials No. 1-6*, 2012
Oil, ink, indigo, beeswax and nylon on acrylic panel
24 x 32 inches
Figure 16
Colleen Pendry
*Testimonials No. 1-6*, 2012
Oil, ink, indigo, beeswax and nylon on acrylic panel
24 x 32 inches
Figure 17
Colleen Pendry
*Testimonials No. 1-6*, 2012
Oil, ink, indigo, beeswax and nylon on acrylic panel
24 x 32 inches
Figure 18
Colleen Pendry
*Self Portrait*, 2012
Metronome, wood and house paint
9 x 12 inches
Figure 19
Colleen Pendry
Escape Plan, 2012
Wire, spray paint and mirrors
8 x 3 ½ x 144 inches
Figure 24
Colleen Pendry
*A Room with a View*, 2012
Mixed media painting/sculptures, wood, house paint and ashes
90 x 38 x 3 ½ inches
Figure 25
Colleen Pendry
*If This Wall Could Talk*, 2012
Mixed media painting/sculpture and LED lights
38 x 90 x 3 ½ inches
Figure 26
Colleen Pendry
_Silhouette_, 2012
Paint fragment and ashes
5 x 7 x 2 inches
Bibliography