Re/vision: An Artistic Exploration of the Fallacy of Memory

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Re/vision:
An Artistic Exploration of the Fallacy of Memory

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Bridgewater State University

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For Ruth.

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What does life look like? If you had to condense your life into a series of words, what would they say? What about objects; what would they be? What do we keep with us, and why do we keep it? What do we document and catalog throughout our lives?

What does memory look like? How are our memories connected to this documentation, and what happens when we leave a space in which so many of our memories lived?

Re/Vision is a body of work created over the span 10 months that explores the idea of memory, and the fallacy of memory. The work aims to visually represent the ways in which memories fade, fail, change, and remain over the years.

Items and photographs we collect throughout our lives become a record of the life we have lived; tangible evidence of our experiences. In this work, I express the idea of memory a variety of mediums. All of the works are, in some way or another, photographic in nature. I have also utilized typography in a number of pieces as well, in order to illustrate memory, and memory failure. This body of work includes handmade lenticular images, anthotypes, liquid photographic emulsion on ceramic, and digital pigment ink transfer on aluminum. Through a combination of historic family photographs and my own imagery, I tell the story of my great grandmother’s experience, and reflect more broadly on what makes a life, and how we remember our lives.

Over the summer of 2018, my great grandmother decided that the time had finally come for her to move out of her home of 54 years and into an assisted living facility. The house she lived in was built for her and my great grandfather, and she oversaw every detail of the house being built, and it was customized as she saw fit. She wanted larger
closets? She got larger closets. She chose pink tiles for the kitchen, and had recessed bookshelves put in the bedroom. She loved that house dearly. It was her home. She once told me that her house was one of only two things that felt like they were truly hers— the other was the car she bought by herself after my great-grandfather passed, which she crashed in the winter of 2017. The house was the last thing that was just hers. And now, we had to begin the process of helping her leave the house.

I spent much of the summer helping her prepare, both physically and emotionally, for the move. We spent countless hours sitting in her living room, often on Friday afternoons. She went through family photographs and old knickknacks, telling me the stories of each item. Every object housed a story. This serving tray was a gift from my uncle, at Christmas, two decades ago, and she never liked it, but used it every time he visited. This figurine was purchased at a craft fair, because the woman was nice to her. That book - it is the only thing she has left of her father, who died when she was 15. There was even a story for every piece of Tupperware in her cabinets.

As she told the stories, she would often forget a detail; the name of the person who gave her a music box, where a photograph was taken. Not remembering the details bothered her, but she would eventually remember. My great-grandmother is terrified of losing her mind—her memories. She does crossword puzzles every day, plays Scrabble with me every week, all to keep her mind sharp. When she forgets where she left something, she is frantic until she is able to remember.

Ralph, my great-grandfather, passed away 25 years ago, after a short battle with Alzheimer’s. The disease progressed quickly, over the course of two years. In November
of 1993, he became very ill with pneumonia. The doctors told my great-grandmother they could try several different treatments. He had been suffering greatly, and so, Great Gram told them to “let the Good Lord do His work,” and Great Grandpa Ralph passed away a week later. She told me this story as we looked at a picture of him from January 1993, just about 11 months before he passed away. “He looked so healthy there… He faded so quickly.”

Written on the back of that photograph, in my great grandmother’s neat cursive was this: “Ralph, Karin, Steven and the kids. New Years Dinner, January 1, 1993.” Nearly every photograph in her archive has writing on the back, documenting who was in the photograph, when and where it was taken, and, occasionally, other details about the day. Many photographs include a description of the weather, what they had done earlier that day, or what they were about to do.

Her descriptions on the back of the photographs intrigued me then, and they continue to. She carefully recorded every event, as if she knew the day would come that she wouldn’t remember the details; the name of the woman she had her arm around, or if the sky was blue or gray on the day her son turned three.

This body of work began with those photographs. It began with photographs of my great grandfather, and the stories my great grandmother would tell about each one. I used those stories to explore her memories of him, and their time together, and the fragile nature of those memories.

The first piece in this body of work is entitled “All That Remains”. It is a series of six metal plates, all printed with the same photograph using a digital pigment transfer
process. The photograph printed onto each plate is of my great grandmothers dining room wall. Her wall was decorated with a bold, bright purple stripped floral wallpaper. Hanging on the wall is a picture of my great grandfather’s squadron during WWII. This photograph had hung on the wall in that same spot for decades. Each of the six plates, with the exception of the first, is altered, faded, and destroyed in some way. They are arranged in a series, from least to most altered, creating a spectrum of fading. This piece deals with the idea of memory in two parts: a person’s memory failing, and a person’s memory being removed from a place. In one part, this piece is very much about my great grandfathers Alzheimer’s, and the way that his mind decayed and memory failed in the months leading up to his death. I was trying to find a way to visually represent the way my great grandmother described him “fading quickly”. In another way, though, it is very much about the removal of the memory of my great grandparents from the house they built. As we were staging the house for sale, it had to scrubbed of everything that made it theirs, of any suggestion that this had been a home in which their memory lived. That photo had to finally be taken down. The house scrubbed clean, in the same way I scrubbed the metal plates clean.

I experimented with different ways of altering the plates. I let them soak in water for extended periods of time, which dulled and faded the pigment. I tried oxidizing the mental plates both before and after transferring the image, letting the plates soak in acid, burying the plates, and scrubbing them clean with steel wool and household cleaners. The images I found most effective at conveying the aesthetic I was trying to achieve were the plates that I oxidized after printing the image onto the plate.
The next piece in the body of work is entitled “All That We Leave Behind”, and consisted of metal plates printed with images using the same digital pigment transfer process used in “All That Remains”, with the pigment washed off using a kitchen towel and water, displayed next to the towel used to remove the pigment from the plate. What is left on the plate is a ghost-like image, and the towel is covered in the pigment. By displaying the print and towel together, I again explore the idea of removing the memory of my great grandparents from their house by mimicking the way in which we physically washed the house of parts of her. There is still, however, a faint image remaining, much in the same way that memories continue to linger.

“All That We Wash Away” is an interactive piece that again capitalizes off of this same idea. This piece consists of an image printed onto an aluminum plate that is placed into a shallow bath of water with a few drops of dish soap. The viewer is asked to interact with the image, washing it away, smudging it, or otherwise altering the image as they wish. I am very interested in works that demand viewer engagement and interactivity, and I also wanted to find a way to illustrate the fact that every time we tell someone a story, or every time we re-remember a memory, it is forever altered. ¹ By inviting the viewer to partake in the washing away of the image, I aim to cause them to more intimately consider the fragility of their own memories, as well as how by the very nature of my creating this work, and the viewers participation in this work, my

¹ Bridge, Donna J., and Joel L. Voss. 2014. “Active Retrieval Facilitates Across-Episode Binding by Modulating the Content of Memory.” *Neuropsychologia* 63 (October): 154–64.
memories of my great grandmother and of her home will be permanently altered, much in the way they are altering the print.

The next pieces in this body of work are entitled “All That Will Fade Away”, and consists of three triptychs. These triptychs each consist of three anthotypes. Anthotypes are a historic form of photography that has widely been abandoned, as it is a long, laborious process that is non-archival. Anthotypes are made by extracting juices from plants, which is then used as a base to create colored paper. This colored paper fades in sunlight. An image is created by laying a transparent image over the paper and exposing it to sunlight, forcing the paper to fade into a photograph. The entire image, however, will eventually fade when exposed to sunlight, over the course of days, or even weeks or months, depending on the plant and the strength of the sunlight. I took images that my grandmother struggled to remember, or that didn’t have descriptions on the back to help prompt her memory, and reproduced them as anthotypes. They will all fade, as her memory is just beginning to. In each of the triptychs, the anthotypes were created at different times, so they each are at different levels of fading. My goal with this piece was to illustrate the inherent impermanence of memory by creating wholly impermanent photographs.

I have also created a series of lenticular images, entitled “All That We Try To Say”. Lenticular images are two images that are stitched together and constructed in such a way that when you look at the lenticular from one angle you see one image, and at another angle you see another image. In my series of lenticulars, the image on each side contains the same photograph overlaid with text. The text is created by offsetting a
piece of the image, so the text is relatively hidden, and must be actively sought out. One side of the lenticulars, however, are easier to read than the other. Through this work, I sought to illustrate the way that our memories come in and out of clarity, and we have the ability to recall things even after they have faded. The text for these pieces is all drawn from conversations with my great grandmother in which she was trying to recall memories that were eluding her.

The final two pieces in this body of work are entitled “All That We Cannot Hold On To” and “All That Is Leftover”. These pieces are both created by using a liquid silver gelatin emulsion on ceramic dinnerware. The silver gelatin emulsion is designed to adhere to any porous surface, creating a photosensitive surface that can be exposed in a darkroom using the same process as a traditional silver gelatin print. However, because the ceramic is not porous, the emulsion is not able to fully adhere to the plates. Over a short period of time after being created, the emulsion begins to crack and peel off of the surface of the plates. If the emulsion is applied thickly to the plate, it will also begin to discolor as it is unable to be fully fixed during the development process.

“All That We Cannot Hold On To” is a time based piece in which the viewer is able to observe the image as it actively curls, cracks, and lifts until it is no longer an image, but a photographic object, a memory of the photograph it originally was. In this work, a photograph literally fails and distorts, illustrating the way that memory can fail and distort over time.
In contrast, “All That Is Leftover” is a static piece that utilizes the fragments of already fully lifted emulsion placed on plates, creating extremely fragile, fragmented images.

These are both housed on sets of china taken from my great grandmother’s house. By creating a place setting with the images, I seek to create a somewhat intimate environment in which the viewer can engage with the images.

My work was influenced and inspired by a number of artists, chief among them Colombian artist Oscar Muñoz. Oscar Muñoz’s work deals largely with the idea memory, and how a person is remembered. His work explores permanence and impermanence of an image, which I have directly drawn inspiration from for this body of work. *Aliento (Breath, 1995)*, is a piece of Muñoz’s that was highly influential to this body of work. *Aliento* consists of a number small mirrors that are positioned at eye level. The viewer must blow onto the mirror, revealing the image of someone who is deceased. The image then once again fades.² This piece illustrates much of what I sought to emulate from Muñoz. The piece represents the memory of the individual in a delicate, seemingly fleeting, way. Additionally, this piece engages the audience, something I also sought to do. This work of Muñoz’s is also intimate, which creates a closer connection to the audience. I felt that this was an appropriate aesthetic to attempt to emulate given the nature of this work.

Another artist whose work was highly influential to my thesis is William Utermohlen. Utermohlen is one of the most prominent artists to deal with the idea of

Alzheimer’s and dementia. He created a series of self portraits after being diagnosed with Alzheimer’s, cataloging his own mental deterioration. Much of the way I explore dementia from a visual standpoint is influenced largely by Utermohlen’s portraits, and the chaotic deterioration they depict. This work was also informed by the work of Barbra Kruger, Ben Eine, Mark Eshbaugh, and Joan O’Bierne.

Overall, this work seeks to create an intimate exploration of memory, utilizing my great grandmother’s experience as a catalyst to explore memory in a more universal way. I hope this work will cause viewers to consider more closely the fragility of our memories, and the fragility of human nature.

Reference List:


