It Took Me Years To Get Those Souvenirs/ Fragments of a Fiction

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“Well, it Took me Years to Get Those Souvenirs”

Fragments of a Fiction

By

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Bachelor of Fine Arts, Georgia State University – Atlanta, Ga. 2009

Thesis

PROFESSIONAL PAPER

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
In Ceramics

The University of Montana
Missoula, MT
Summer 2012

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Fragments of a Fiction

Thesis Chair: Trey Hill

*Fragments of a Fiction* is an examination of the differences between memory and experience. Through an exploration of both cultural and cognitive shifts I examine how societies, and more specifically, consumers, choose to remember some incidences and forget others. What tools do human beings use to promote some memories and deny others? This inquiry led me to question my own habits of memory, as well as those of others who have shared their stories. In my process, I try to understand the interplay between fact and fiction that memory holds. *Fragments of a Fiction* questions memory and examines the contradictions between experience and a recreated memory, and how even frauds can be interesting.
Image List

1. I’d Like to Take a Look Inside That Head of Yours

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INTRODUCTION

_Fragments of a Fiction_ is an integration of a two-part inquiry. The first part of the process is exploring a story; finding small details within a story or memory that represent a form of identity within the account. It is my belief that those memories, those stories, represent layers of our identity. As stated by Daniel Kahneman in a TED talk Technology, Entertainment, Design: “There is a riddle between experience and memory. We are an experiencing-self; we live in the present. However, we also have a memory self that keeps score and maintains the story of our lives; the memory-self is the story teller.” Our memory is a rewind button, so that we can recall our stories that represent our identities. The rewind button is different than the actual experience. The actual experience is spontaneous; the recollection is a manufactured concept of our identity.

The second part to my inquiry is an exploration of the human need to impart emotion or memories onto an object as a means to remember a past experience. The object then becomes a vehicle or point of reference for a passed moment. The work in my thesis show are products of this process, for example, imagine keeping your grandmother’s pink-pearl colored glasses after her death. It’s an emotional attachment; this object reminds you of your grandmother. Sherry Turkle explains,

In the psychoanalytic tradition, both persons and things are tellingly called objects and suggest that we deal with their loss in similar ways. For Freud, when we lose a beloved person or object, we begin a process that, if

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successful, ends in our finding them again within us.
In my own work I toy with the idea that we do not always deal “successfully” with loss. There is a slight, dark undertone to my work. It is the thing within all of us that refuses to let go.

The notion of loss is too unbearable so I’ll hold on to this object for memory’s sake!

According to Carmen Agra Deedy,¹ “Good storytelling is crafting a story that someone wants to listen to. Great storytelling is the art of letting go.” My childhood was filled with storytellers, mostly relatives on my mother’s side. These stories became a collective memory for the younger generation, a sort of identity. That verbal history became embedded within me, an integral part of my identity, my truth. I am not alone in this experience; our social and physical environments affect us all, but each memory is filtered by our selective perception of those environments.

The following are personal as well as shared stories, which I have used as a basis for my thesis body of work, *Fragments of a Fiction*. Each story is a poetic example of memory. As the artist I have taken liberties to use certain details from each story. These details represent the idea that memory is fragmented. The fragmentations are then made into objects, which are also pictured below.

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I’d like to take a look inside that head of yours, just to gaze into the grayness you call your thoughts. Cut and dry is how you are described in conversation. I suppose you were always so matter of fact and blind at the same time. Do you know what it says when you look up 'cut and dry' in the dictionary? Well, I think its perfectly fitting. Not exceptional in any way, especially in quality or ability. I think you never matured past the age of 12. Maybe it was your parents’ fault or just a functional defect you choose to hide behind. Nevertheless, my only thoughts of you are mostly annoyed ones, and the angry ones. It seems you never think of me at all. I’m not sure why I even let you cross my mind. If we weren’t related, maybe I could dismiss you all together; who knows?
Above my 4 foot 6 inch head there was a shelf. This shelf had many tiny treasures my
grandmother acquired throughout her life. The objects ranged from delicate ceramic animals to
ornamental glass figurines. There were also old photographs of ancestors in little gold frames.
Most of the things were only valuable to her, but at the time, they held such wonderment for
me. My relatives always called grandmother a pack rat, a term I came to love. The shelf was
always a bit of an obsession. I imagined each trinket had a mystical story. I wanted to touch each
one as well as play with some of the smaller ceramic animals; they called to me. From a distance,
I saw the objects, but as I came closer to the shelf, the little treasures disappeared. I was too short
to see anything but the under view of the shelf. Oh, how I remember feeling so frustrated. One
time, I tried to sneak a little stool over to get a closer look, but every time, I felt my
grandmother’s eyes on me. Then her stern voice would call out, "Get down from there, before
you break your neck!" Then all of a sudden, boom! The stool slid right out from under me. I
crushed; all the air was knocked out of me. I cried out to her, out of pain, as
well as humility. That was the point I stopped pushing the limits of the shelf.

*Piece 2. Just Out of Reach.*
Just Out of Reach
We haven't spoken in some time, so maybe that makes it a bit easier to admit this little memory. Two years ago, in March, I washed your notebook, but never told you. This notebook seemed so dear to you; you took it everywhere. A passenger to your back pocket, there in case a writing emergency happened to take place. I believe you were a writer at heart, but in a lazy man’s body. You never had enough of whatever it takes to push through and just go for it full force. I guess that’s why I didn’t feel so bad when one rainy spring day, while doing laundry, I realized your always-present back pocket passenger was terribly injured by the wash. At first I panicked. In some weird way, I reverted back to a 5-year-old child and decided to hide my mistake instead of owning up to my mistake. When you went desperately looking for it, I never spoke up to let you know I was to blame. You had never been so frantic. For a moment, I did feel guilt, but not long enough to be adult about the situation. I do laugh a little bit every time I think about you rummaging through your apartment, cleaning it in your search. You never cleaned your apartment - ever. And all for this little book, a book you probably wouldn’t have used. I stood in the doorway, all the while, knowing you would never find it. I was afraid to throw it away in my apartment, afraid you would find it, so I placed it in a plastic zip-lock bag and hid it in my top drawer. There it lived for two years until I moved to Seattle; I uncovered it amidst my other little treasures in that drawer.
I Washed Your Notebook, but Never Told You
He did not sound too forgiving as he cursed into the wind. He was a child, no more than ten years of age. He was in rags on a cold morning in spring. He was striking because of his stature, small and fragile, but his mouth - mature beyond his appearance. I wasn’t sure whether to laugh or feel some sort of empathy for him. He appeared sickly; I was told his mother took advantage of that. She babied him his entire life, making it hard for him to ever really grow up. “Sunday Morning Coming Down” is the song that always comes to mind when I think of his sandy hair and little blue eyes. He’ll always be the little boy cursing at the can he was kicking. I’m still not sure if he saw me across the street, watching his internal dispute play out on a seemingly private corner in the suburbs of Chicago.
Piece 5. Your Studio Hook.

You had tenderness and grace, and all who knew you couldn't deny it. Out of sadness we do things, selfish things. One sad night after your passing, I went into your studio and saw only remnants in the empty space that had once embodied all that was you. We always worked at night, you and I. It was unnerving to walk by and see that emptiness. Maybe it was because of the emptiness, but I remember walking into the space and crying. I looked around for some small reminder of you. I remembered the little blue sweatshirt you kept in the studio in case it got chilly. You hung it from a little white hook on the wall. That night, the sweater was gone but the hook remained. For whatever reason, I went over to the hook and unscrewed it from the wall. I kept it in my studio, looking at it from time to time for comfort.

Your Studio Hook
“In her words, a kidnapped coat along side a kidnapped kid.” My mother bought the red coat for me before I started sixth grade. I started sixth grade at Oak Grove Elementary, in the class of Mr. Mathis. He was my first male teacher, a tall, older man who called me, by my full name. He was the first person to ever call me by my first and middle name. I was in his class a few weeks before my parents separated, and my brother and I moved to Smyrna with Mama. It was sad leaving the safety of the only school I had ever known and my childhood friends. I was ashamed to tell them that my parents were getting a divorce, and I was unable to speak when they asked me why I was moving. I could only shake my head.

At Smyrna Elementary, I was in Mrs. Paris's sixth grade class. She was a tall woman with olive skin and salt and pepper hair that was cut short. We lived with Aunt Margie and her family in a little two-bedroom apartment across the street from the school because we had nowhere else to go. There were seven of us living in this tiny apartment. Aunt used to make some of the best mashed potatoes and soup beans in the little kitchen. We visited Daddy, at the old house, on the weekends. That house now felt cold, and Daddy always fell asleep in the avocado green chair with his head tilted to one side. When I looked at him, my heart wanted to run a thousand miles away, out of the madness and sadness. My red coat kept me warm as I pulled comfort food out of the Mr. Pretzel box and watched my Daddy sleep. I still have dreams of him sleeping in that chair. He didn't take us back that Sunday night. We didn't know why. We packed our bags to go back to Smyrna, but he took us to his mother’s house whom we called, Ma Ma's house instead. We had questions. He had vague answers. We were sitting at Ma Ma's table on a Sunday morning, eating country ham and biscuits. I heard my mother voice. I headed for the door but someone stopped me from going out. As I looked out the picture window, it was like I was watching a movie. My Mama and Uncle came to get us, but my Daddy would not let us go. Somehow, I escaped to the yard. Daddy was standing by a tree, and he had already grabbed my brother. I tried to run past him, but he snatched me, too. We cried for our mother, but the harder we cried, the tighter his
clutch became. I pulled and pulled with all my might, but he was stronger. I heard my sweater tear. I felt my skin hurt from his grip. Scratches ran across my chest. I cried as he dragged us down the trail to Uncle Donald's house. When Aunt Bea, Donald’s wife, opened the door, I collapsed in the safety of her arms. When I "came to," she was standing over me, wiping my face with a wet washcloth. Daddy took us way into the woods, where he paced for hours. I thought he was going to kill us. But he didn't. The next day I was back in Mr. Mathis' class at Oak Grove. We had a substitute teacher and she didn't call me by my name. I felt like a stranger. I hung my red coat on the back of my desk.

The classroom had old wood floors and a red door with a triangle shaped window leading to the outside breezeway. Sometime, about mid-morning, I just happened to glance toward the door and through the triangle shaped window, I saw my Mama's face. She made a quick gesture with her hand motioning for me to, "Come on." Survival instinct took over. I told the substitute teacher I needed to go to the restroom and headed for the door. When I reached my mother's arms, we hugged in the rain. "I need to go back and get my coat," I said, as I attempted to turn back toward the door. "We have to get out of here now," she said desperately, as she held my hand in hers. "I will buy you another coat." She never did.
A Kidnapped Coat
I collected found objects, specifically as a way to mark a time and place in my life. In my final year of graduate school, a certain awareness of my own habits happened. After this realization of my own collecting, I started incorporating these found objects into my work. Objects like broken bottle caps found by the riverside, rusted pieces of metal that interested me because of their shape and size, even buttons off of old sweaters. I am the curator of each object. I see each object as a reference to a certain time or place in my life; each found piece having its own story that I could recreate or make into a narrative. Mark Dion is an artist that also classifies as curates found, as well as made objects. Dion’s methodology is much like a natural historian. He uses systems and dates to create time lines that give order to his work. In his book The Marvelous Museum: Orphans, Curiosities & Treasures a Mark Dion Project, he references collecting and cataloguing time periods with objects like a museum. Mark Dion’s process of ordering found objects to make a new storyline is borderline obsessive. I relate to some of his ideas like collecting, as well as ordering. His process like mine is used as a means to create another story as well as a time line for objects. My hope with my own work is to move in a direction that connects the verbal stories and the objects I create more directly.

Mark Dion

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Certain materials or found objects make sense to me in the moment. For example in the piece *Process of Accumulation, Cake Pan Memories* each object was placed in wet cement impulsively. As a whole the piece carries a narrative of collection of objects that represent one new story.

My earliest, fondest memories are of being immersed in antique stores with my mother and my grandmother. I could get lost there for hours imagining that each object once belonged to someone of great nobility or came from some far away place. Each object had its own fictitious story, one that I would get lost in for hours as the matriarchs of my family made their way through those dusty mazes of beautiful splendor. Something inside me was, and still is, fascinated by objects that hold memory as well as personal emotion.

There are questions I think about when I reinterpret stories or memories within my work. One question is about inevitability. One day pieces of the puzzle we call our memory will slip through the cracks, and certain parts of what is held as our truth will fail us. It is possible that memory is a constant failure. Memory is an unstable and profoundly unreliable process. We have our recollection of the passed moment but it is a recreation. This recreation can be slightly different every time it is recalled. I question the recreation and want to rebuild my own version of the story, with a tangible object. I extract pieces of the story to make objects that are small glimpses into the original story.

Recently, my work has been influenced by the writings and theories of Matthias Winzen, and his book *Deep Storage*. Winzen notes, "Humans have a need to document or attach personal emotion to objects because of an incapability to deal with the passing of time.”

The notion that one can hold on to an intangible moment by attaching emotion to a tangible object lies at the very core of my work. Embedded within the materials used are objects appropriated to hold the remains of these unknown, misplaced stories for safekeeping. The objects I create are vignettes to

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memories or moments that I want to reinterpret or reference.

My work relies on the unification of found objects, as well as the devices of traditional craft. It is part of my studio practice to use a broad range of materials to achieve abstraction in my work. I incorporate plastics, cement, and textiles, metal, wax, ceramic, wood, cardboard and paper. Each of these materials invokes a unique response based on size, color, texture; all of which lends itself to my aesthetic. For instance, oxidized metal implies the passing of time; it invokes an understanding of age. The coat of rust over metal converts age into a physical material that then becomes a vehicle for the symbol of time in my work. I often use cement to convey finality. I’m drawn to its irrevocable character as well as its lowbrow significance as a material. My practice is also based heavily on experimentation with materials. I want the viewer to see the material first, to be drawn in, and then explore the meaning further.

Part of the process is to re-contextualize ordinary materials like cardboard or cement into more curious abstractions. These abstractions are intended monuments for passed moments; monuments on a scale of thrift store souvenirs. The size of my work is purposeful, intended to create an inviting comfort. There is little threat presented by a small object. People are drawn to collect small souvenirs that illicit emotions from the time the object was acquired.

Phyllidia Barlow is an artist that I look at as an influence. Everyday objects from urban environments inspire her material choice. Barlow’s approach has created an anti-monumental sculpture from inexpensive, low-grade materials such as cardboard, fabric plywood, polystyrene, scrim and cement. Phyllidia Barlow’s material choice can seem random, but the materials re-contextualize the objects, which activates new meaning.
We hold onto objects and place value upon them for security. “As we evoke meanings from the special objects we call art, we become willing subjects. We think with them, in order to think ourselves into coherent subjectivity.” Caroline A. Jones, *Evocative Object*. One goal in this work is to give people an idea of the power of object.  

In the piece, *Process of Accumulation, Cake Pan Memories*, each object in the piece was already in my possession and, for me, it was a process of acquiring as well as letting go. I collected objects over a course of three years that were like little time markers. Each object ranged from

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broken pieces of metal to random pieces of paper that were usually no bigger than my fist. Although, at face value these objects seemed like little pieces of trash, they each held a time and place for me. In a way, the process by which I created these pieces allowed me to let go of them. I can at times be random in material choice in my studio practice. Although it may be a contradiction, part of letting go was allowing each acquired object to be placed within a sort of concrete timeline. Each object became something new, something that was no longer mine.

Fragments of Fiction is an exploration of the recreation memory. As well as how well we deal with the loss of a past experience. Some objects carry significance that becomes a means of remembering their past: a tool for unlocking something to hold on to. I see these as stories built on top of one another, shaping us into who we are. One fragment connects to another. We are each an unfolding narrative, not just verbal stories, but touch, color; smell, as well as tangible objects. Memory is not tangible; objects are tangible. Some hold on to objects for fear of losing the past. I recognize this aspect of the human condition within myself; I desperately want to keep hold of my past. My memories are reduced to fragments, small parts broken and separated from something larger. My thesis works have taken those fragments and given them a physical shape, albeit, a somewhat distorted reflection of the past.
Bibliography


