Erasures and Inventions: Re-Forming our Memories

Thesis

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Abstract

In my thesis work, I investigate the way memory functions, defining memory loosely to include events that we do not experience firsthand and people who we have never met but who are familiar to us. My work coalesces around photographic source imagery found in my family’s old photo albums which catalogue happy occasions—birthdays, weddings, vacations. The images I use speak of a past era through hairstyles and clothing. Viewers, however, can glean precious little about the people pictured and the complexity of the relationships represented. I am interested in the way nostalgia may encourage us to forget that the past included tragedy and struggle in addition to joy, and I raise questions about how we see, remember, and imagine. I am interested in the way portraits, which are intended to give insight, often render their subjects more anonymous and generic by idealizing them.

Through fragmentation, erasure, and redrawing I am considering what remains when people are absent. In some works I focus on the tangible elements and physical spaces that withstand time, as people cannot. In others I examine the ways memories emerge. I insert myself into photographs taken before I was born by reworking, recreating and altering the images I find in pages of albums. I strive to make visible an image that is truer than the one I found.
Formally, I experiment with thick and thin, rough and smooth, solidity and fragility. Using ceramics, photographs and computer technology, I produce images vacillate between clarity and blurriness. I encourage the viewer to ask questions that can never be answered definitively.
Dedication

Dedicated to Frimmit and Chemya for keeping such lovely photo albums and sharing their pictures with me
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Chapter 1

The Photo Album: Sources and Snapshots

A family activity that I loved up until my great-uncle Chemya’s death five years ago and his wife Frimmit’s two years after that was visiting them in their Brooklyn apartment and looking at their photo albums. This was always a group activity that would lead to group storytelling with people talking over each other, disagreeing, and modifying each other’s memories. This memory re-making process was a way we related to each other and molded our history. This ritual provided a way of connecting to the person telling the anecdote and to the other subjects of the pictures and stories. I always loved the changeability of the stories and the invention that happened in the telling. It was never intentional but it was unavoidable, as memory is not fixed.

The photographs, as cherished objects, were safely kept in albums which probably never left the living room of Frimmit and Chemya’s apartment, except for the times I asked to borrow them, one by one, to scan them. Later, I inherited one of the albums upon the deaths of Frimmit and Chemya. The photographs contained in this one album compiled before I was born have held my interest my entire life and have been the basis of almost all of the artwork I created as an MFA student.
Introduction

In my thesis work, I investigate the way memory functions, defining memory loosely to include events that we do not experience firsthand and people who we have never met but who are familiar to us. My work coalesces around photographic source imagery found in my family’s old photo albums which catalogue happy occasions—birthdays, weddings, vacations. The images I use speak of a past era through hairstyles and clothing. Viewers, however, can glean precious little about the people pictured and the complexity of the relationships represented. I am interested in the way nostalgia may encourage us to forget that the past included tragedy and struggle in addition to joy, and I raise questions about how we see, remember, and imagine. As Maurice Stevens asserts, both the following statements are true: “To remember is to misremember,” and “as memories emerge there can be no misremembering.” My subjects are anonymous to the viewer and engaged in mundane activities, but as the focus of artwork the subject appears important. I am interested in the way portraits, which are intended to give insight, often render their subjects more anonymous and generic by idealizing them.

Through fragmentation and erasure I am considering what remains when people are absent. In some works I focus on the tangible elements and physical spaces that withstand time, as people cannot. In others I examine the ways memories emerge. I insert myself into photographs taken before I was born by reworking, recreating, and
altering the images I find in the pages of albums. I strive to make visible an image that reveals a different truth than the one I found.

Formally, I experiment with thick and thin, rough and smooth, solidity and fragility. The images I produce vacillate between clarity and blurriness. Through fragmentation and erasure I encourage the viewer to ask questions that can never be answered definitively.

I ask questions about how history intrudes on the present. My theoretical frameworks for thinking about my work come from sociology, trauma studies, memory and cultural studies, psychoanalysis, visual culture, and sexuality studies. In addition, I enter this conversation by responding to artistic traditions and theories related to materials, specifically ceramics, photography, drawing and painting.
Chapter 2
My Grandma was Perfect

My grandmother is/was perfect. She was young and gorgeous and warm and energetic. She was always smiling and happy. She was so sweet. Everyone loved her and hugged her. She was always surrounded by family and friends.

She was a New Yorker. When she was outside, she was strolling on the streets, sitting on benches, pausing by fences. She played on crowded beaches. She was inside modest apartments with wallpapered walls. She sat on couches in living rooms, stood by front doors, gathered with family around kitchen tables.

She never missed a birthday or holiday. She loved reunions and vacations with family. She knew how to have a good time.

She was perfect. I’ve never seen her frown. She never raised her voice. She never even gets sick. The sickest she got is that she started wearing glasses, cut her hair and stopped wearing red lipstick. And that’s her worst offense. She died in 1963.

Grandma Perfect doesn’t demand my attention like my living grandmother. I never disappoint her. And she never disappoints me.
All the pictures I have of my Grandma. Doesn’t she look nice?

“Every photograph is a lie, for in fact time does not stand still.” Weston Naef quoting Michael Blasgen in Close to Home: An American Album

I created a piece titled All the pictures I have of my Grandma. Doesn’t she look nice? In my thesis exhibition, it was a grid of twelve ceramic rectangles each depicting images based on photographs of my grandmother from the photo album I inherited. (In actuality, there are twenty photos of her in the album. I made sixteen of them, but was not able to include all of them in the thesis because of space. Perhaps I will complete all twenty and display them in a different location).

I created the twelve component pieces using different techniques and materials. The palette is the most varied I have ever worked with, including a range of white and cream colors, blacks, blues, purples, straw yellows, and irony reddish-browns and reddish-purples. The images appear on rectangular blocks of a range of clay bodies that are about an inch thick. The sizes vary a bit (as a result of the shrinkage rate of the clay bodies used and the temperatures to which I fired them). Some have sculptural elements; however, most remain fairly flat on the surface of the clay. The grid becomes a quilt of sorts telling a non-linear, somewhat generic narrative.

Technique and material become a significant way of understanding the people represented. To make this piece I utilized my famous cone 04 marshmallow clay body
with its shiny, blisterly white surface contrasting with black underglaze. I used, with a high loss rate, a cone 6 casting body, and with more success a cone 04 plastic body. I learned to dramatically underfire a cone 6 grolleg body. I drew and painted with underglazes and layered my surfaces with different temperature glazes and then with iron and commercial decals. I painted and airbrushed china paint. As time grew short before the exhibition and my loss rate climbed, I quickly learned about non-ceramic materials and “room temperature glazing” solutions. I used ink and watercolor, glass etch and flocking.

What did the use this variety of materials and techniques to re-imagine a collection of photographs yield? First, by redrawing, remaking and laboring over the images, I insert myself into them. I show my hand in the representations of people at events I did not experience, giving myself a presence in the memory and claiming it for myself. Drawn images show reverence through the element of time and careful observation. Recreating an image through a time consuming process is an assertion that the subject is important. It is also a statement that the original format did not do them justice or did not show them as they really were. In recreating the image, I have a chance to show them in a way that might be truer to the way I imagine them. My addition of color and pattern and the slow lines I make blur the line between what is imagined and what really happened. It is unclear what is memory and what is fantasy.
Taken as a whole, the collection speaks to the generic nature of images in photo albums. All happy occasions, all birthdays and weddings, all fun and games. Susan Sontag writes in *On Photography* that photography is deceptive because it shows us not how things are/were, but what they *looked like*. My grandma does *look* nice. Doesn’t everyone in every snapshot?

Image 1. *All the pictures I have of my Grandma. Doesn’t she look nice?*
Image 2. All the pictures I have of my Grandma. Doesn’t she look nice? (detail)
Chapter 3

Meeting the Dead

If I had met my Grandma

I created an image of me kissing my grandmother by combining pictures of the two of us digitally. Unlike many of my other works that show people smiling and posing, this image is an “action shot” of an alternate reality where linear time is disrupted. The imaginary moment it captures finds me with eyes closed in profile kissing the cheek of my grandmother, who is six or seven years younger than me now. My grandmother’s eyes are turned downward, maybe closed also. The image is cropped close around our faces and we are surrounded by darkness, our dark hair fading into the dark background around us.

The piece is comprised of two distinct elements that present the same image twice in different materials. Viewers see it once as a black and white inkjet print on paper framed with wide matting and a dark frame. The second time it floats out from the wall on a paper-thin piece of porcelain. The image on the lithophane is visible only through the addition of light. This second image is a ghost, a faint memory, a whisper.

Standing in exactly the right spot, the images line up with one another, the more ephemeral porcelain piece eclipsing the paper and falling into its frame. As the viewer moves around the piece the way that the porcelain eclipses the paper alters the images the
two pieces make together. From some perspectives my image appears twice and my grandmother only once. From other vantage points her face is visible twice and mine only once.

By titling the work as I did, I intended to make the viewer aware that the images they are looking at are fabricated and that it is a work of fantasy. The narratives we know about the lives and deaths of loved ones are altered.

In this fabricated fantasy my grandmother and I are almost contemporaries. The original photographs I used to create the image were taken over 60 years apart and I combined them smoothly, but resisted disguising the difference in the quality of the images or the technology with which they were taken.

In this fantasy (or is it a wish?) my grandmother and I have a close relationship and an intimate bond. I am known to her and she accepts me exactly as I am. Likewise, I know and accept her too. She is the happy recipient of my love. I create a picture of a simple relationship. It is all love with no complications. The closed unseeing eyes suggest a blind unconditional love. All truths, known and unknown, are accepted. Forgiven even.
The initial work I made that brought me and my grandmother into the same picture is titled *Grandma and Me: Our First Portrait Together*. It was part of a collaboration with photography professor Ardine Nelson. With a grant she won from Coca-Cola, she photographed female art students and printed large photographs of us, which she then gave us to use as the basis for an artwork.
I was eager to use my own image as a way of exploring contemporary imagery and investigating what can happen when I eliminate nostalgia from my work. I created a “snapshot” to serve as a remembrance of an imaginary meeting with my grandmother. I did this by making a drawing of her and a drawing of the wallpaper in her mother’s apartment, photographing these drawn elements with the photograph of me and making alterations digitally. The final piece is a hand painted digital print of these photos.

In this first attempt to demonstrate our bond, I show it through physical likeness. I gave myself her hair and I gave her my eyes. The stripes of the wallpaper subtly run onto our clothing; the flowers do so more boldly. We are centered and joined at the shoulder. It is sepia and soft with the darkness of the hair framing the faces. Both faces look out at the viewer and smile frozen in this pose. In the later piece for the MFA exhibition, I show our closeness through our interaction rather than by making a conjoined hybrid.
Image 4. *Grandma and Me: Our First Portrait Together*
Chapter 4

Material Choices

My attraction to photography is not limited to images of my own family. I spent the better part of my twenties working as a community organizer, a position that brought me into thousands of living rooms throughout Oakland and New York City. I enjoyed looking at personal photographs on display in the homes I visited. Like my family album, the framed photos I encountered indicated happy occasions, family cohesion and moments of pride like graduations and weddings.

During my graduate studies the significance of photography in my practice has become apparent. Because of my sources, the work I create references the conventions of photography. Increasingly, I am interested in photographs as the finished artwork and I use them to capture any step of my art-making processes.

My practice is rooted in drawing photographic images into clay. It is one part sculpture, one part drawing, one part collage and one part painting. Ceramics is my primary material and drawing and painting are my primary processes. When I began working in clay I was drawn to it for several reasons. I saw it as a democratic medium because it has been used by all cultures across time and space. Both women and men create with it. Its rooting in the field of “craft” and its commonplace nature carried a reference to familiarity and domesticity that resonate with me.
When I began carving imagery into ceramic surfaces, I was interested in taking an image from a snapshot, a fleeting moment captured, and transcribing it into ceramics, firing it to stone. Ceramic objects can withstand time in a way that few other materials can. And at the same time, they are so fragile. Much of my work speaks to ideas of fragmentation, fragility and loss both in concept and material. My thin ceramic pieces are themselves fragile, prone to breaking. I have a very high loss rate with my work. (Much higher than I would like!)

I gravitated to porcelain for its whiteness, smoothness, and perceived preciousness. The inlay “mishama” technique I favor for drawing, works infinitely better with a smooth clay body than a groggy one. And a white surface allows for a greater range of tones than a greyer body could offer. However, since I took Mary Jo Bole’s Clay and Glaze Formulation course I began working with a wider variety of clay bodies. With the information I learned through testing in that course I feel freer than ever before to use an array of ceramic materials and make material choices that are specific to the project at hand.

Since arriving at graduate school I have been working on paper with increasing frequency. For the most part, I find I am able to achieve a richer surface with clay because of the back and forth between the abstract phenomenon of the material and the imagery I create. However, my work does not always demand ceramics. There are advantages to working on paper. It requires less equipment and less expense than clay
and is easy to work with outside of the well-equipped studio to which I currently have access. I like working on paper for the immediacy of the results and the security that a work will not blow up or break. I also like that my viewers and I can take the flat rectangle of the paper for granted. My biggest challenge in clay is finding the right form for my images. Paper alleviates that challenge effortlessly as we are accustomed to its parameters.

Using Adobe Photoshop as a tool to combine my drawings and my original source photographs allows me to accomplish an image that seamlessly blends photographic details with hand rendering. I have discovered a process of making a drawing on paper, photographing it digitally, bringing in elements from the source photograph in Photoshop, printing the image and then continuing to work on the image that I’ve printed on paper. This process feels similar to the way that I work on clay, with multiple firings and the ability to collage and continually alter an image until it arrives at a point of completion.

As I work on paper more, a dialogue is emerging between my works on paper and works in clay. The qualities that I like in my images on clay serve as inspiration for my works on paper. In the near future I would like to make photographs of drawings I make on unfired clay to use as the basis for a digital photo-drawing combo.
Often I create images that have a clear division between foreground and background. I place the figures in front of a solid ground of color or bare clay. In other works I present an illusionary space and perspective that the figures inhabit that is similar to what I see in photographs. We view my subjects as we would if we were fairly close to them. At times I crop the images to focus on a face or to include only certain people.
Chapter 5

Memory, Hindsight, and the Collapsing of Time

You wouldn’t die from that today

The title You wouldn’t die from that today originated from something my mother said, probably when we were looking at pictures together. There is a collapsing of time that happens when looking at snapshots. We see a photo of a person taken at a particular moment and sometimes, rather than serving to jar a memory of the experience that was captured, it acts as an indicator of the person. For example, “This is Grandma Ettie.” And then we can talk about her whole life and, of course, her death. So looking at a photo with this kind of hindsight, my mom might say, “There’s Grandma Ettie. She was so young. Her hair was just the same color as yours. Those reddish highlights.”

And I might ask, “who is she with?”

And Mom might answer, “I have no idea. This was before she got sick. Probably before I was born.”

Me: “When did she get sick?”

Mom: “Not long after I was born. Hodgkins. You wouldn’t die from that today. Now it could be treated much sooner.”
The morbid title, probably oft repeated when referring to that generation, is shorthand for that conversation and a nod to the breakdown of linear time that photographs can produce. How strange that a viewer can look at photograph and know things about the subject that s/he didn’t yet know at that moment (like their cause of death). In a photograph of a person taken at any given time, a viewer can envision their childhood, their prime, their death. And maybe for the pictured person, there was a time the picture was just a specific reminder of the time they walked over the bridge to Brooklyn with Frida and Chunie.

My “go to” source image

There is one source image I have used more than any other over approximately the last four years since I started making work based on family photographs. I am captivated by a posed group shot. In it, four women are captured a moment before they expected with their arms around one another, standing still, getting ready to smile for posterity. But the photographer was eager and captured something else. My grandmother’s mouth is open in speech. One of her companions is also talking, lips pinched together. The funny faces they make give the image some humor. The women stand with their arms around each other’s shoulders, a kind of touching reserved for posing for a picture. That moment when people stand closer than they normally would, and stop moving in preparation of
begin captured in a still picture. This picture shows a moment of unselfconscious candid action. I do not think I have witnessed my grandmother in such a way outside of this image.

I am also drawn to the sense of place in the photo. There is a chain link fence behind them and strong sunlight on their faces. My grandmother was born, raised, and lived her whole life in New York City. I presume she never left the city except for family trips to the Catskills. I like imagining where this image might have been captured. The place feels important as a site that can be visited purposefully or by chance.

In 2008 I made a diptych of cups while on a residency in Hungary onto which I drew this image in positive and negative. During graduate school I used the image for the paper and brick versions of *You wouldn’t die from that today* which show my grandmother and a few of her friends. I made a lithophane based on a small section of the paper work. I also drew the image in porcelain for *All the pictures I have of my grandma. Doesn’t she look nice?*. In addition, I made pieces based on fragments from this source photo. I created a series of ceramic bows based on a detail of the dress of one of the young women pictured. Additionally, I made my foray into sculpture when I made a life-size sculpture interpreting the dress my grandmother wears. I made a series of sketches in clay of the background of the image, too, including several pieces referencing the fence behind the subjects. I also made several versions of a piece representing a bit of leaves on trees that were captured in the corner of the photo, framing the ladies.
All of the patterns in the source photograph provide a framework to organize the images I create. The mesh of the fence and the floral print, buttons, and creases in the dresses are details that I turn into design.

You wouldn’t die from that today: Paper version

I made the paper piece using a process I discovered during graduate school that I call “drawing/photo combo.” I have made several such works and this one is my favorite. The process for making this piece had many stages. First, I made a very large drawing with the figures larger than life size based on a teeny photograph. I used cheap white role paper and an assortment of drawing materials. I used ink and wash, conti crayon, charcoal pastels and graphite powder. I worked additively and reductively. I worked on this large drawing over the course of a month or so, making some kind of change almost everyday. Then I photographed the drawing digitally. I worked on the digital file, bringing in some parts of the photograph I used as my source. I also stripped the color out, making the digital image in tones of grey. Then I printed it on Reeves BFK warm creamy yellowish paper. I went back in with watercolors and added very subtle blue tones in the sky.

I worked within the rectangle of this format. The piece has minimal color. Tones of grey from the inkjet print on cream paper with subtle touches of blue. Parts of the image are
very clear, descriptive and photographic in the amount of detail and tonal range. Other parts are blurry. They look erased. Some passages clearly show brushwork or drips. Areas appear quite flat in contrast to others, giving the elution of depth. Like the experience of memory emerging, this piece has moments of great clarity, crispness and precision and simultaneously moments that are out of focus. Parts have a solid weightiness and others have an airiness in which the image all but floats away.

Image 5. You wouldn’t die from that today
You wouldn’t die from that today: Brick version

Mary Jo Bole organized a residency for the graduate students to work in the factory of Belden Brick Company for several days. During the time I was there I created a piece with imagery based on the paper piece I described above. The significant difference is the mass that the brick piece has. I carved into the bricks to achieve an undulating movement that is unlike most brick architecture. The piece has a feel that is archeological, ritualistic, and seems a part of the environment.

The piece is on red bricks with black and white drawing so the color of the brick acts as a middle value. It also makes the piece brighter than many of my other works. The figures are about ¾ life size. The bricks create a grid that serves as another pattern.

Image 6. You wouldn’t die from that today (brick)
Chapter 6

Secrets, Deletions and Erasures: The Unseen and The Unsaid

Billy Tipton, born female, lived as a male jazz musician. After he died his wife and three sons were apparently shocked to learn the secret of Billy’s sex. The media was fascinated by how his wife could possibly claim to be unaware of this secret. I can believe that she could be telling her truth; however, I am much more interested in other questions. When did his femaleness transition from a fact to a secret? Billy was bold in making the decision to live as a man. Why did such a bold person keep such a big secret from those closest to him?

Thinking about the unknown, the unsaid, the unrecorded, I think about secrets and the information that gets left out. Do I think about this because I have a secret? My secret is that I have been involved in romantic relationships with women for years. I keep this information exclusively from my extended family although I am completely out in the rest of my life. I think my extended family would not understand, and I worry that our relationships would be destroyed. It is a funny idea to choose to be unknown for the sake of a relationship. What kind of relationship does it allow?

I know one other family secret. When my Mom’s uncle Phil married his wife Dita, he did not tell his parents. They met her only as a colleague and they met their grandchildren but not as such. He knew that if he told his parents that he had married a
non-Jew, a *shiksa*, they would disown him. In order to maintain a relationship with them, he kept this giant secret.

Does everyone have secrets like these? Secrets that are not rooted in shame. They are more complex than that. They stem from the simultaneous desire to be known and a fear of rejection.

“I am drawn to snapshots because an unknown past, the living present of the picture itself, and an unknown future that occurred after the picture was made compel me to silently speculate on the unknowns.” Jacqueline Woods quoted by Weston Naef in *Close to Home: An American Album*
I was raised with a keen sense of the importance of commemoration. To forget was a sin. My early work was explicitly commemorative, referencing the history of embellished ceramic plates and cups. It commemorated events in my family history using words and pictures. I was motivated by questions about who and what are worthy of commemoration. I continue to be interested in commemorating the mundane and elevating the simple, the un-extraordinary and the usual. I use materials that enhance by creating a “phenomena” aspect to do so. For example, I use ceramic material science and the translucency of the lithophane to achieve this.

I also continue to be concerned about how tragedies are commemorated in public works and spontaneous displays. I am interested in how I might commemorate them. I have attempted projects focusing on individuals lost in tragic events. Some questions I find compelling about both the mundane and the tragic are: What don’t we know about the people who are “sainted” through their deaths? How has the story about this person been simplified and falsified? In the commemoration of the spectacular event much is lost for the gain of broad representation.

I was under the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 when the first plane hit the building. I count myself as a survivor of the attack and I worked in disaster assistance for
almost a year following the tragedy. I have experienced a vast gap between my experience and the many lived experiences of the event and what I see in the sensationalized political and public discourse about the event. I find it impossible to reconcile my experience with the massive fallout that followed in the form of wars, death, politicking and commercialism.

I am immensely bothered by what I see as disingenuous public displays of grief, which are aimed at political and commercial gain. At times these expressions may be genuine, yet expressed through the corporate or political public venue, they leave an impression of opportunism or crassness. I wonder what are “We,” individuals in the United States, mourning? What are We “never forgetting?” Who is the “We” I am grouped with and at what cost does membership come? What loss did those who were untouched suffer? How are the stories of the dead being told? What is highlighted about them and what is left out or “forgotten?” These last two questions motivate much of my work. These ideas enter my work as I make connections to people and times that have passed with a focus on their stories.

9/11 Portraits of Greif

I started, and later abandoned, a series that was to be portraits of women who died on September 11, 2001 in the terrorist attacks. I was going to make a portrait of each
woman whose death was documented who, when she died, was between my age at the time I survived the attack and my current age.

Several ideas in this abandoned project seem relevant to my other artistic interests. I am fascinated by our distance from people by virtue of the passage of time. I puzzle about the ways absence impacts life. I am fascinated by factors that unite groups of people together. There was something democratic about these deaths in that the victims were united in their physical location and their unluckiness. In spite of all that the individual women did in life, this group is remembered and tied together because they died in an extraordinary way. They were not featured in newspapers and books for their worldly accomplishments, but for the way in which their lives ended prematurely.

I had trouble finding what felt like an appropriate form for this project. I also had a hard time emotionally working on it. It was draining and challenging. I imagine I will return to it in some way in the future. I made other 9/11 related work prior to my time at Ohio State. With Bin Laden’s recent murder and the ten-year anniversary looming, the subject seems timely again and I feel moved to approach this subject again. To complete this project, I am looking at using the multiple and creating the images in a uniform method.
Historic Photo: Cousin Naomi

One day my mom told me that she had found a cousin with whom she had lost touch in her childhood, Naomi. Naomi wrote a book titled *Hide* about her experience surviving the Holocaust. The book opens with the scene of her sister getting shot right next to her while they are running from the Nazis and ends with Naomi in New York City teaching my great-grandmother how to read. When my mom got the book, she contacted the publisher and asked them to give Naomi her contact information so they could get back in touch.

Soon after they had a reunion, my mom sent me an email titled “historic photo” of a group of relatives posing for a picture on bench in the City. There was my mom as a small child wedged between her grandparents and a young cousin, Sima, the “boarder” who the family took care of, my great-uncle Chemya and lovely Naomi. This beautiful smiling young woman does not look like she could have possibly spent three years of her childhood hiding in the fetal position under the floor boards of a barn in Europe. She does not look like a person who had been unable to walk upright because the muscles in her legs grew bent from never being able to extend them, doctors predicting that she would always have to crawl. She does not look like someone who witnessed her family being murdered in front of her.
Chapter 8
Heirlooms, Remnants, and Clues

Heirlooms (that I may or may not have inherited) is a grouping of seven low relief ceramic objects and seven framed altered snapshot images. The objects are based on elements found in the photographic pictures hung around them. In the photos some of the objects remain visible and others are removed, substituted with a silhouette of the object. These objects are a shoe, a cake, a bow, a hat, a purse, a bottle, and an illegible note. They are muted tones of pink, green and yellow with an iron reddish-brown half tone dot pattern giving the illusion of depth. In actuality the objects are fairly flat with minimal carved detail. Several of the objects have an edge that extends beyond the contour of the object, a shadow covered with black china painted ben gay (halftone) dots. These objects are curious, because they are dimensional objects in contrast to the images on paper that surround them. However, they lack the dimensionality of the “real” object that would have existed when the photograph was taken. They exist neither as the real nor as the photographed representation.

The photographs are black and white and all have some element of removal or erasure. In most the people are all removed. In some the figures remain but the objects are removed. There is a displacement.
In this piece I explore the question of what remains when people are gone. I am looking at what physically survives the passing of time and the passing of people. We are left with a space they once inhabited. An article of clothing. A favorite possession. We can hold onto souvenirs, relics or heirlooms in an attempt to maintain a physical connection to the past, an event, or a person. My mother said about the unreadable ceramic note, you cannot read what she wrote and it makes you realize how much more she would have said that she never got the chance to.

Photography theorist Roland Barthe writes in *Camera Lucida* about the relationship between the clear symbolic meaning of a photograph, which he calls the “studium” and the thing in the photo that “pierces the viewer”, which he calls the punctum. The punctum is a detail that has nothing to do with the meaning of a photo that attracts a viewer to the photo. It can be very peculiar and highly individual. Although I did not create *Heirlooms* with this in mind, the work can be seen as an illustration of this concept. The photographic components acting as the studium, the ceramic objects highlighting the punctum.

Barthe also writes about photographs’ ability to assert, “She was there.” They demonstrate “what was” and provide evidence of “what has ceased to be.” Portraits and snapshots of people, rather than making reality constant, remind viewers of the constant change we experience. Thus, Barthes writes about the recurrent feeling of loss he experiences whenever he looks at a picture of his deceased mother. *Heirlooms* presents
this perspective as well. The part of the photographs we most want to see, the people, we cannot.

Image 8. Heirlooms (that I may or may not have inherited)

Image 9. Heirlooms (that I may or may not have inherited) detail
**Why that vacant lot? (Silhouette series)**

Another closely related work on paper is titled *Why that vacant lot?*. This piece is simple and graphic. I made a group of images in which I digitally removed the people from photographs. I wanted to shift attention from the figures and their clothing in order to create a less specific moment in time. I hoped to shift the focus to the location in which the figures lived thereby pointing to the setting of their existence.

In earnestness I wonder, why the young couple who were to become my grandparents would pose for a photograph in an ugly vacant lot? Their silhouettes reveal my grandmother wearing heels and a nice dress and my grandfather also dressed up. In this “silhouette series” I am able to call attention to people’s postures, the way people stand together and the places they found themselves. All of these things are “clues” about the lives they led.

I have a group of pictures taken last year at a friend’s birthday party. One of my friends had just broken up with her boyfriend of ten years. She was a mess and spent much of the party crying but we thought it was better for her to be out crying with people who cared about her than at home alone. Looking at the pictures shot that night, how much of this story could an unknowing viewer glean? The devastated friend smiles with the rest
of us, arms around her, and hers around us. All you could really tell is that we were all together in this location.

With my “Silhouette Series” I add myself to a list of artists and graphic designers who use silhouettes as a visual strategy including John Baldessari. My work departs from what I have seen because the figures I “erase” come from my own family albums rather than found photos of anonymous people. They are specific individuals who’s lives, both imagined and lived, have great meaning for me. When I alter an image to show my aunt as a child with the shadow of her mother behind her, I am suggesting the loss she will experience shortly after the photo was snapped. While I share artistic concerns with Christian Boltanski, Marlene Dumas, Hans-Peter Feldmann, and Sophie Calle (to name just a few of the artists with whom my work is in dialogue) the subject mater in my hands is less sardonic. My primary interest is not cataloguing. My focus is on the individual rather than the masses. The formal elegance in my work is rooted in my materials and is a product of what I leave in and take away from my images. My interest is always in the human first and formal second.
Image 10. *Why that vacant lot?*
References


