THE MYSTERY OF MEMORY

by

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ABSTRACT

My body of work comments on the fluidity of memories, and uses water as a metaphor to depict time's distortion of memories. As we age, we begin to lose the ability to recall certain memories- memories that at one time were very important to us. Memories can also sift and change over time, making it hard to find the "truth" in what we remember. My paintings and drawings are a balance between representation and abstraction, reflecting both on things that actually happened in my own past, and on the difficulty I have in remembering these things exactly, given the mental struggles I have undergone the past two and a half years.. Drawing on the works of such artists as Bill Jacobson, Vija Celmins, and Marilyn Minter, I have found successful ways to combine these different approaches into harmonious compositions, through layering, the delineation of details, and the addition of enhanced levels of saturation. These techniques have resulted in bright, mysterious, and even surrealistic paintings. Surrealism means "beyond reality" and my paintings are just this: both real and more than simply "real." My subject matter is based on photographs as a means to capture and represent past memories, but of course an imperfect one. Each source photo consists of family members or friends because it is the people, not the place, that are most important to me. I then use water to distort the photos to suggest how memories would look if we could see into our brains- faces become distorted, individuals appear and disappear, and colors become

more and less vivid as the memory is accessed then forgotten, or they even lose their

intensity altogether, depicting the drastic effects time has on our memories.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever wondered how our brain decides which memories to keep and

which ones to discard? Or why we can remember parts of a specific memory, such as the

location, but forget the faces of the people who were there at the time? If you have,

you're not alone. It turns out that scientists are still treading the unknown waters of

memory, looking for these types of answers as well. In fact, the topic of memories still

has many mysteries waiting to be solved. I am interested in exploring it as the subject

matter in my thesis work, specifically the hidden beauty found in the memories we are

slowly forgetting. However, images of memories themselves do not stand alone in my

process. I use photography and water as tools to help create images that best represent

memory distortion.

The way I apply the materials to the surface of my paintings and drawings also

reflects back to how memories are stored and distorted. I am also drawing inspiration

from artists such as Bill Jacobson, Vija Celmins, and Marilyn Minter. Their subject

matter may not be similar to mine, but their photo-based methods have inspired me to use

similar approaches in my own work, so that I can achieve layered and blurry images.

Each piece in my body of work comments on the fluidity of memories, and uses water as

a tool to depict our brain's distortion of memories as time passes.

My finished paintings or drawings initially operate on surface-level qualities like the application of the materials and the "hidden image" I've left for viewers to decipher. However, what lies below the surface, underneath the gloss of the clear top coat, and under the layers upon layers of acrylic paint, is the many transformations this image underwent before it reached its final appearance. These transformations are for me a metaphor of the process of storing, retrieving, and ultimately losing a memory to time. My work involves the usage of several different media and techniques throughout the entire process. Each painting or drawing begins as a printed-out photo I have chosen that represents a memory that I enjoy looking back on, and one that I am especially afraid to forget. Every memory that I have chosen to recreate as a painting or drawing contains people, although the figures may become unidentifiable during my translation and distortion process. The human figures in my work reflect their importance to my memories. They are more important to me than the place where the memory was captured. Therefore, I leave hints of the human figures in my images, but few references to setting or place.

Photography is an important component to my process. Not only does it serve as my initial source material, it uniquely captures the very moment when the memory was captured. But it also represents the distortion of the memory as well. Photos can be cropped or can age or be subject to distortion just like memories. They are fragile and can be easily changed, misunderstood, or destroyed. To create the look of distortion I am attempting to achieve with my work, I first manipulate the actual photo itself. I place the photograph in a Ziploc bag, and then into a container of water where it is weighted down. I create waves with the water to distort the photograph, and I then re-photograph the

results. This photographing a photograph also reflects the idea of remembering a memory, then remembering the memory of that action of remembering; the layers of memory and remembering are metaphorically captured in this repeated layering of photography for me. I will sometimes shoot hundreds of photos of the submerged photographs until I find just the right one for my source material. With each photo of a photo, the refraction of light in water creates different effects in the subjects initially captured in the original image, creating more or less reflections on the surface. By manipulating the amount of reflections and the speed of the waves, I can also attempt to control the amount of distortion and the aesthetic outcome of the images.

After I have found my desired image of distortion, I then move onto drawings. From preliminary sketches, to the recreation of the developed composition on panel or black paper, drawing, like photography, is another key step in the creation of my work. For my paintings specifically, I use black charcoal to draw out the simple shapes and figures of my source image onto a panel creating a "map" to follow. This mapping process mimics the kind of memory maps that our minds attempt to create in all of their complexities. I then create my paintings by building up thin layers of paint. This slow, tedious process for me is a direct reflection of the innerworkings of our brain while we develop and process memories. Overtime, memories are built up, year by year, layer by layer, until they become hazy, and sometimes unrecognizable, much like the layers in my painting process.

Holding onto memories as tight as I can has always seemed to be a natural thing for me to do and something I struggle to do. I don't let go of most things easily, including my style of painting I adopted for several years. In the past, I have struggled to find

where I want my personal aesthetic to fall on the historical spectrum of art styles. I am usually drawn to photorealistic artists and their ability to fill a painting or drawing with the same amount, or even more details than their source material, as if they are trying to "out do" the camera. Yet, as I continued my search during graduate school, I began to put the pieces together. My previous work focused on naturalism and wildlife, but I quickly began to discover that this style of art did not communicate my true intentions, nor did it get to the layers of ideas and concepts that I was seeking. It was time to try something new, something to which I could add my own flair.

I am still interested in photorealism, and after researching, I found myself drawn to artists such as Bill Jacobson, Vija Celmins, and Marilyn Minter, which then led me to formulate my own strategy for my work. These three artists each use photography in their work either as the completed work of art, or as source material. Jacobson, for instance, is a photographer, while Minter is a photorealist painter, but both use figures as their subject matter, often focusing on blurring, out of focus qualities to stress their concepts in ways that have influenced my thesis process. Celmins, another photorealist painter, makes meticulous renderings of natural imagery, and I have drawn on her mark-making techniques in my work.

Where my work expands beyond these artistic influences is in the way that I deal directly with memory. If we think of our memories as a timeline, laid out linearly, we can see each individual one, but if we could view them as they are actually stored and retrieved in our brains, they become knots of connections, almost like multiple universes, or like an abstraction made up of layers and layers of input. It's interesting to think that the person we are today is a result of the culmination of layers and networks of memories

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over time, shaping our ways of thinking and acting. But what happens when we lose the ability to recall those memories? Or when we mis-remember and create new but less "true" memories. But those become the truth that makes us who we are. I have witnessed family members struggle with this battle of losing themselves and losing their memories, and it makes me fearful of my own future. Even though I have read the statistics and researched the ways to prevent memory loss, I decided not to focus on exploring and even solving this problem metaphorically through my creative practice. I use my paintings and drawings not to reject the process of forgetting, but to explore the beauty in it, in our lack of control. I chose to concentrate on declarative memory, specifically episodic, which logs personal experiences because these are the types of memories I hold onto the most.[1] I use photography to represent the creation of a memory and the capturing of it in visual form. Then through water and paint, I distort my photographs and thus my memories. I present just enough in my paintings and drawings that the place, time and people are not obvious but are still rooted in an experience that I had with the people that have lived. This distortion process mimics the personal loss of our memories, but also makes it possible for someone beyond myself to relate to the idea of making and losing memories. Viewers will not have had my memories, but they will have their own, and I want my distorted imagery to remain open enough to connect to each viewer in some way.

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[1] Richard Jerome, "The Biology of Memory," *TIME,* Special Feature: The Science of Memory, December 21, 2018, 10.

CHAPTER II

PROCESS

The process I use in building my paintings and drawings relates to and becomes symbolic of the processes of memory formation, and the often futile efforts to capture and store memories in photographs. My process begins the moment a memory is first captured in an image through photography. I selected each memory subject matter from a reference photo taken during the last six years, during the early years of my twenties. According to recent studies, this period in my life has particular significance because arguably the memories made during this time of one's young adult life have proven easier for adults to remember. This theory is called the Reminiscence bump.[2] Rapid changes take place during these years, including the exposure to many new people, people who continue to have significant influences on an adult's life. So this six-year window of time was chosen to reflect the density of memory-making in young adult stages of life.

Each photo that I selected to represent a memory-subject has at least one figure. I am interested in humans as memory-anchors. For me, it is the people in my memories that are most vivid, more than the places or experiences. Also, I purposefully only selected photographs that represent good times in my life- these are the memories I least

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[2] Robin Marantz Henig, "The Reminiscence Bump," *Psychology Today*, October 24, 2012, online at: https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/cusp/201210/the-reminiscence-bump.

want to forget. I choose social events and adventures I wish I could go back in time and relive again and again.

After I have chosen a photograph that represents one of these positive memories, I begin my in-depth process of distorting the image. First, I print out the photo in a standard format, such as a 4x6, or 5x7. Next, I fill a clear container with water, about six inches deep, making sure I have a strong light source from above. I have found that this process works best by using a bathtub with recessed lighting in the ceiling above. I place the photo print into a Ziploc bag, making sure it is completely sealed, and place the bag into the water, weighting it down with two 10lb. dumbbells.

The next part of the process involves both photography and the manipulation of light, which both theoretically and physically go hand in hand. Historians of photography describe how the physical properties of light are at the basis of the technique. The name even means "light-writing." According to *A History of Photography*, "Long before the invention of photography, artists utilized the 'camera obscura'…Light entering the a dark box or room through a small hole is reflected on the opposite side as an upside down, backward image of the scene outside. Its orientation is corrected with a mirror."[3] Then in 1839, the daguerreotype was developed by Lois-Jaques-Mande, and the negative/positive process by William Henry Fox Talbot. "Both are based in two fundamental principles of chemistry and physics: the reaction of particular chemical compounds to light and the creation of an image when light passes through an aperture in a dark room or box."[4]

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[3] William Johnson, Mark Rice, and Carla Williams, *A History of Photography from 1839 to the Present: The George Eastman House Collection* (Cologne: Taschen, 2016), 36.

[4] Johnson, et al., 36.

Light is very important to my process. Not only is it vital for the camera to function properly, but it also adds effects to my photos that still baffle my viewers. Even before I begin to distort the photograph in water, refraction is already taking place, which is a kind of visual distortion. Light waves move faster in air than they do in water, so when they hit the boundary between air and water, they distort the object beneath the surface. I take my distortion process a step further and add waves to the water. I create the waves with one hand, and with the other, hold my camera almost directly above the submerged photo. By using a type of burst mode function on my camera, I am able to shoot a multi-shot sequence of images. I prefer this function because the waves I am making are constantly changing the appearance of the photographs, and I want to be able to capture as many frames as possible.

During the process of distorting the photograph, I will sometimes take hundreds of pictures. As I sort through these photos, scrolling rapidly, I am often reminded of the early stop action motion studies, specifically the images captured by Eadweard J. Muybridge. Muybridge conducted studies in human and animal locomotion, (and) in 1887 completed the series of stop-action motion studies which totaled more than 20,000 individual images.[5] Each movement of his subject was methodically recorded with the camera, similar to my camera capturing each wave that passes over the photo. Even though I am not forced to sort through 20,000 photos, the process can still feel a little overwhelming, so I usually go through a mental checklist, in order to stay focused. I look for clarity, an even distribution of highlights across the composition, an overall "softness" to the image, such as smooth gradients and blending of colors, and a level of distortion

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[5] Ibid., 297.

that abstracts my photograph to a point where the viewer will be able to see a face or figure, but be unsure of the identity of the person. It's important for me to choose an image that fits my goals, even though I may tweak it in the painting stage.

Once I select an image, I import it to Photoshop, and make minor adjustments such as cropping, and enhancing the levels of saturation. Then I print off the image onto 8.5" x 11" photo paper that I use to help guide me through the painting process. Next, I take the measurements from my image and increase them using a ratio to determine the dimensions of my painting or drawing, which is often three times larger than the original.

Choosing which ground would best enhance my painting style and technique was fairly easy. In the past, I painted primarily on canvas, but I knew these images of distorted photos needed a smooth surface to reflect the soft, flowing properties of water I had captured. Choosing to paint on panel allows me to recreate those properties due to its smooth surface, and I would be able to render details easier than textured canvas would allow. I decided on ¾" Birch plywood for my paintings. This thickness reduces the amount of warping, while also providing unique sides that show the layers of compressed wood. After cutting the plywood down to my specified size, I begin gessoing the surface, applying 2-3 layers, and sanding between each layer to achieve the smoothest surface possible.

In the next stage of my process, I begin with the drawing, which is the foundation of the painting, which involves a projector and charcoal. I project the distorted photo onto the plywood, and draw in charcoal to create a map that I will follow for the rest of the process. It would take hours and hours to trace every aspect of my photo, so I focus on

the larger shapes and figures of the composition. I'm not worried about the small details at this stage, because I flush them out in the later stages of the painting.

After I have mapped out my composition with the charcoal, I am finally ready to apply paint to the gessoed surface of the plywood. I use acrylic paint, which is known for its quick drying time. This characteristic, I found, does not work in my favor, because I am attempting to recreate smooth gradients that easily blend and flow together throughout the composition. To help combat this nature of acrylic paint, I introduce the addition of a slow-dry medium which I mix into each color of paint individually. The medium prolongs the drying time of acrylic paint, allowing me to spread it out onto the plywood and work with it longer. It also thins the paint and helps me create the thin, translucent layers that my aesthetic requires.

My brushes of choice vary between the layers I am working on at the time. However, I don't rely on brushes alone to achieve my style, I also use my fingers and paper towels often to help soften the hard edges that brush strokes leave behind. Using my fingers to blend the paint additionally creates implied texture, because my fingerprints are usually visible with each layer. While laying out the underpainting, I most often use a 1-inch flat brush and focus on covering every inch of the plywood with color. I'm not worried about matching the colors exactly to my source photo at this stage because I know the colors I am attempting to recreate are a mixture of many layers, and my underpainting is only one or possibly two layers of paint. After the underpainting is complete, I use smaller, round brushes, and simply repeat the process of applying thin layers over and over until my painting has reached a level of depth similar to the source photograph.

According to Jean Robertson and Craig McDaniel in *Painting as a Language*, "Artists in different cultures through history have had various strategies and goals for showing space, ranging from the desire to convey a convincing illusion of depth to a much less naturalistic interest in spatial effects."[6] The articulation of space is a somewhat challenging, but integral process in my paintings and drawings. I have photographed photos, which are flat, two-dimensional objects. However, they are placed under a layer of water. So, as I build up the layers of acrylic paint mixed with slow-dry medium, I keep my values and levels of contrast the same throughout the entire composition. I bend the rules of atmospheric perspective, which instruct me to desaturate the values in the background, and enhance the contrast in the foreground. I use atmospheric distortions not to develop these traditional divisions of space, but various elements of my composition, which have collapsed into one plane.

Although I create my paintings as a single plane, they don't have the effect of feeling completely flat. The multiple thin layers of acrylic paint help create an illusionistic sense of depth, and the final two steps in my process enhance that quality even more. I want my paintings to reflect the feeling of being underwater, so to help mimic this effect, I add two to three coats of pouring medium. This thick medium has a glossy appearance, and the layers of it add actual spatial depth between the image and the surface of the painting, as if it is sitting just below the surface of water. After each layer has completely dried, I begin adding highlights. These highlights are actual representations of the highlights that are present when I am taking photos of the photograph underwater. I describe them as "scribbles", because they are thin white lines

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[6] Jean Robertson and Craig McDaniel, *Painting as a Language* (Belmont: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2000), 106.

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that are organic, curved and irregular. I draw the highlights on the dried layer of pouring medium with a paint pen, which saves me time by providing a steady source of paint instead of constantly having to dip my brush in paint. Although this step does not take long to complete, it becomes the final touch, and allows me to see the piece in its finished state.

After I finish drawing the highlights, I focus on how the piece will be displayed. To stress the importance of depth even more, I float the painting by attaching three 6-10 inch pieces of 1x2s to the back. Two 1x2s are placed vertically in the top half of the painting, each one about 2-3 inches from either side, and D-rings and picture wire is added. The third 1x2 is placed horizontally near the bottom of the painting for balance. The effect not only represents the literal sense of a photo floating in water, but also the metaphorical sense of memories floating through the networks in our brains, waiting for us to revisit them.

The manner in which I create my paintings is in direct relation to the layers of objects I photograph; the painted image relates to the photo, the pouring medium to the water, and the "scribbles" are the highlights and light effects. This formula achieves an effect I would not be able to recreate if any of these steps were out of order, which relates to my desire to distort photographs as a metaphor for memory.

CHAPTER III

HISTORICAL INFLUENCES

My interest in memories stems from my fear of forgetting. Each day as we grow older, our ability to recall the memories we have collected over the years is affected. The fluidity of our memories causes us to misremember the details such as the location, or the faces of the people in our memories. Photos have become my weapon against this fear. I tell myself, if I take enough photos during the "good times," I will be able to recall everything about that specific moment. However, this is not always the case. The photo itself could become the point of distortion for our minds. It could force us believe certain events happened just because we have visual evidence. My paintings and drawings are literal representations of these distortions. Each piece in my body of work has been influenced not only by the process of storing, recalling and distorting memories, but also by the histories and practices of photography and painting.

The history of memory formation is based on a basic need- our ability to survive. According to *TIME* magazine, "We have to remember to physically navigate the world, to reproduce, to interact with other, to recognize kin, to know the truth of a situation. Memory is what allows us to learn, to acquire, to store and retrieve information."[7] The

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[7] Eileen Daspin, "Why We Remember," *TIME,* December 21, 2018, 5.

storing of memories, and the process of forgetting them have influenced my subject matter and process of creating the work in my thesis exhibition.

I have always pictured memories as visual flashes or photographs floating through out brains- hazy, out of focus, and layered like a loose stack of papers- the oldest memories at the bottom of the stack, and the newest ones at the top. However, I've learned the process of memory storage is much more complicated than my mental image. The memory first must undergo a process known as consolidation: "a window of a few hours that is enhanced by sleeping-memories are deemed worthy of retention are stabilized and then associated neurons are transferred to the neocortex, the wrinkly sheet of neural issue that forms the outside surface of the brain."[8] If this memory passes the test and is deemed a long-term memory, it will be stored in the filing cabinet labeled the hippocampus. I have chosen to focus on these long-term memories in my research, specifically the explicit, a "conscious recollection for names, dates, events, people, places and objects" which is broken down into three subcategories- working memory, episodic memory, and sematic memory.[9]

After these memories are stored, the ones that only were formed through a couple pathways in the brain may be overridden by memories that engaged several parts of the brain, and are stored in more than one place. Another major influence on categorizing the importance of a memory is if an emotion is attached to it: "Emotional memory take precedence over any other kind of memory. The brain always gives priority to emotions. When information enters the brain and reaches the thalamus, the amygdala will grab that

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[8] Jerome, "Biology of Memory," 11.
[9] Ibid., 10.

information if it is emotional and go straight to work on it."[10] All of the memories I have

distorted by both painting and drawing, have emotions tied to them, specifically joy.

Because they are emotionally charged, I hope to hang onto them a little longer than other

memories. Also, by turning them into paintings and drawings, I can preserve them and

resist their inherent destruction and entropy.

My fear of forgetting my memories is linked with the fear of forgetting my friends

and family, and them forgetting me. As I try to suppress this fear, I am reminded of the

Disney Pixar movie COCO. After you die, according to traditional Mexican culture,

when the last living person who remembers you, forgets, you die a third death, the death

of the final memory. Although I do not follow Mexican traditions, I do believe there is

truth in this idea. A truth we can try to avoid, but will inevitable happen someday. For

now, I am focused on the process of forgetting, and the changes our memories undergo

overtime.

So what makes those memories start to change and disappear? Of course there is a

scientific explanation for the process, but in short, the phrase "out with the old, and in

with the new" is a simple response. If we are not actively using the memory, or trying to

recall it either verbally or mentally on a daily basis, it will begin to fade, to make room

for the amount of new memories we need to process. In her book on memory, Elizabeth

Loftus lists other common reasons including interference, retrieval failure, motivated

forgetting, and the fact that the memory was never stored in the first place.[11] However,

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[10] Marilee Sprenger, *Learning and Memory* (Alexandria: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1999), 54.
[11] Elizabeth Loftus, *Memory: Surprising New Insights into How We Remember and Why We Forget* (London: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company Inc., 1980), 66.

there is another factor that can contribute to memory loss: the idea of "a memory of a

memory," or in other words memory distortion.

What exactly is a memory distortion? In the words of Margaret Jean Intons-

Peterson and Deborah L. Best, "[memory distortions] may be false memories, memory

errors, perceptual illusions, false beliefs, hallucinations, and confabulations. Moreover,

memory can be fallible, fragile, inaccurate-discouraging and potentially dangerous

attributes for one of our most important abilities."[12] For instance, sometimes our brains

will take bits of photographs, home movies, and stories told to us by relatives or friends

and we will construct an inaccurate memory. The location may be confused, or we might

add in people to the memory who were not there in the first place. These types of

memory distortions inspired the creative process behind my body of work. When

observing one of my paintings or drawings, you might find six faces in the image, when

in reality, there were only four people in the photo. I have distorted my photographs, and

recreated them as works of art to stand as a visual representation of the making and loss

of memories.

Artists long before me also used memories as the basis of their work. Ducos Du

Hauron for instance was experimenting with photo distortion by using his own face in the

late 1880s. "Using a slit diaphragm," William Johnson writes, "the technique distorted

his features like a fun house mirror; the front half of the head is elongated while the back

remains fairly proportionate resulting in a disturbing self-presentation.[13]" His photos have

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[12] Margaret Jean Intons-Peterson and Deborah L. Best, *Memory Distortions and Their Prevention*
(Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 1998), 2.
[13] Johnson, et al., 302.

nearly the same effect as the photographs I placed underwater, but he was mastering this technique nearly 130 years ago.

I have also found myself inspired by another early photo process: gum bichromate. "The technique was invented in the 1850s, but was largely forgotten until the 1890s when it was adopted by many pictoralist photographers "who reveled in their artistic control over the final image, often working the surface of the print with brushes in a painterly fashion."[14] The photos created by this process appear gritty, hazy, and worked over, not sharp and highly detailed, attributes that we think photographers typically which to achieve. I especially admire the gum bichromate prints by Gertrude Käsebier, who began her art career as a painter, but devoted herself to photography in 1893. In one of my favorite prints by Käsebier, *The Heritage of Motherhood*, emotion speaks where the details do not; the lack of hard-edged quality makes us feel as if we are slowly recalling a memory from long ago.[15]

Bill Jacobson, a contemporary photographer, also draws on these similar qualities in his earlier work. His pieces, *Song of Sentient Beings*, (1994-1997), and *Thought Series/History Series* (1996-1999), all encompass one major quality, a quality I strive to employ in my pieces because of its context; each photograph is taken purposely out of focus. Jacobson said it best himself while describing his *Song of Sentient Beings* series, "I believe their faded quality is a reflection of how the mind works- struggling to hold onto memories as they dim."[16] I have tried to hold true to this idea in the way I apply paint or charcoal to the surface, trying to avoid hard edges and using my fingers as tools to

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[14] Ibid., 738.
[15] Ibid., 405.
[16] Ibid., 726.

achieve soft, hazy qualities. It wasn't just Jacobson claiming his photographs had this type of effect, reviews of his photos suggested that his techniques were successful. In a 1999 issue of the *New York Times*, the author writes that Jacobson's "out of focus images suggest the intuitive and mysterious workings of the unconsciousness."[17] I hope my pieces are able to speak for themselves in a similar fashion.

Although she is not a photographer, taking a glancing look at any of Vija Celmins work may have you thinking otherwise. Her photorealist paintings, drawings, and prints are packed with such impressive amounts of detail, so that most of them, although small, take years to complete. Her subject matter is focused on nature, but I have been able to draw information from her process, and the concepts behind the images she creates. I enjoy how she refers to her process as "building" a painting, not making a painting, because when I create any piece, I also feel as if I am building the work from the ground up, starting at the first layer of gesso, and finishing with a varnish of some type. This layering process is very important in Celmins's work, not only by creating a sense of depth, but also by making her pieces take on a vitality that mimics life. A review in the New York Times discusses her current show, *To Fix the Image in Memory*:

> "a different buzz descends when you take a closer look- which the smallness
> invites. Depicted reality dissolves. Prolonged scrutiny brings awareness of the
> artist's hand, the careful textures of her marks and above all the discipline and
> concentration that produced them. They invite and reward reciprocal patience and
> concentration, slowing down perception so thoroughly that the show almost exists
> in its own time zone."[18]

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[17] Charles Hagen, "Bill Jacobson: Julie Saul Gallery 560 Broadway, at Prince Street SoHo, through March 23," *New York Times*, March 8, 1996, online at:
https://login.databases.wtamu.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/109545429?accountid=7143.
[18] Roberta Smith, "Deep Looking, With Vija Celmins," *New York Times*, September 26, 2019, online at:
https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/26/arts/design/vija-celmins-review-met-breuer.html

It is Celmins's careful scrutiny of an image that influences me, and I aspire to achieve her technical prowess.

Marilyn Minter is also in the photo realist category of painters. Although her subject matter is on the other end of the spectrum than Vija Celmins, Minter refers to herself as a "photo replacer," because her paintings don't look as realistic up close. While I'm not very interested in her choice of subject matter, I have been influenced by techniques she uses in the process of creating a painting. She employs enamel paint on aluminum to create large scale paintings of up-close views of the female figure, often covered in makeup, water, and graffiti, commenting on modern day notions of beauty. To achieve the effects of a figure being behind a steamed pane of glass, or smeared, broken pieces of glass, Minter photographs her source material under layers of broken glass, sprinkling water and debris into the mixture. She also manipulates these photos in Photoshop, and after several rounds of editing, starts the painting process. Minter's recent paintings have a soft, out-of-focus appearance that limits the viewers' ability to see the identity of the woman, even though her facial features are present. I am inspired by the way Minter accomplishes this effect, and have used it in my own paintings to soften hard edged areas in the composition. During the very last application of paint, Minter, or an assistant, will use their fingers as paintbrushes. In an interview, when asked about the details of her process Minter states, "They, (the paintings), look really hard, but they're very human because there are fingerprints everywhere. It looks very cold, but it's actually very warm."[19] I can find this same warmth in my own work, as fingerprints begin to

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[19] Sarah Trigg, "SEEN in the Studio: Marilyn Minter," *Vulture*, November 26, 2014, online at: https://www.vulture.com/2014/11/seen-in-the-studio-marilyn-minter.html

appear upon closer inspection. My paintings are no longer simply images of dying memories, but instead show the evidence and presence of life.

Throughout art history, there have been many theories attempting to unravel the mysteries of the innerworkings of an artist's mind. I have learned about and applied a few of these theories to my own work, including Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis of art and Wu Hung's discussion of the "double screen" in Chinese painting. The idea of the double screen is the idea of an image within an image, specifically in paintings. Hung writes, "a screen depicted in a painting is merely a pictorial image within a larger pictorial composition; what it helps construct is not a real place but a pictorial space projected on a two-dimensional picture plane."[20] Although Hung uses traditional painted Chinese screens and paintings that include representations of those screens, I began to see a relationship between my work and this theory. My paintings and drawings are representations of an image within an image, or a screen within a screen. I have clouded the screen of the photograph with distortion, but I have still recreated an image within my work. Now, my painting may not be laid out like a Chinese handscroll, showing the passage of time from left to right, as Hung also mentions, but it contains layered planes, a combination of pictorial depth and illusionistic depth. This layered characteristic is very popular in Chinese art, and introduces the idea of the "metapicture," which is a picture that questions what picture making is. Every image-bearing object that an artist creates is his/her depiction of reality, and their reality can be distorted in any way they see fit. So, will we ever truly be able to discriminate between the "real" and the "virtual," the truth and our memories of it? I believe the only true reality is the life we're living day by day.

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[20] Wu Hung, *The Double Screen: Medium and Representation in Chinese Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 16.

Paintings, drawings, sculptures, and photographs are the worlds we create ourselves, in other words, a double screen of realities blended with our reflections of them. .

It is nearly impossible to carry on a discussion about the innerworkings of the human mind, specifically the realities we each create, without mentioning Freud. He was best known for his theories on dreams and dream analysis. I make my images in ways that appear "dream-like," and I want them to be interpreted as snapshots from dreams, in which the settings and individuals present are a culmination of interactions in our daily lives. However, throughout my process, I have focused more on Freud's statement, "The artist cannot satisfy his or her wishes in the real world, so he or she turns to fantasy- the world of art […] The artist resolves conflicts, confronts anxieties, deals with complexes and purges the psyche."[21] While we struggle through life's problems, artists have a therapeutic way of releasing those frustrations and worries onto canvas, paper, or by creating three-dimensional works of art. We try to focus on solving problems with our art, not worrying about "seeking beauty, form, or disinterestedness,"[22] because we have enough unsolved problems in life already. Unfortunately, I am not able to solve the issues of memory loss, so instead, I have turned to creating images representing the beauty we can find while time begins to slowly strip our memories from us.

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[21] Vernon Hyde Minor, *Art History's History* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2001), 196.
[22] Ibid., 197.

Figure 1 Ducos Du Haron, *Self-Portrait Transformation,*1888-89, Albumen silver print from glass negative, 9 x 14 cm. George Eastman House, International Museum of Photography and Film, Rochester.

Figure 2 Gertrude Käsebier, *Heritage of Motherhood,* 1904, Gum platinum print, 23.5 x 31.4 cm. Museum of Modern Art, gift of Mrs. Hermine M. Turner.

Figure 3 Bill Jacobson, *Song of Sentient Beings #1583*, 1995, Silver gelatin print, 50 x 40 inches.

Figure 4 Vija Celmins, *Untitled (Ocean)*, Graphite on acrylic ground on paper, 36 x 48 cm. Museum of Modern Art, gift of Mrs. Florene M. Schoenhorn Fund.

CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION OF WORKS

Finding beauty in a hopeless situation is not an easy task. However, I have found that by focusing solely on the positive aspects, no matter how small, or how few of them exist, turns the hopeless situation into a manageable one. With each piece in my body of work, I focus on the "good times" and not portray the bad memories that we all unfortunately have. The color palettes I chose for each painting also reflect on happier times. I recognize the fact that we are not able to stop the effects of time on memory, so I use my work to soak up the time I have left to recall and pay homage to each memory. The following is a description of how each piece in my body of work uses water as a metaphor to depict time's distortion of memory, commenting on the fluidity of memories.

Fig. 5 Sage Kinsey, *Sisters,* Acrylic on panel, 22.5 x 16 inches.

Sisters is the earliest completed painting in my body of work, and also the smallest. I chose this memory to recreate for a few reasons. First of all, the memory evokes a mixture of emotions such as happiness, excitement, and uncertainty. The source image was taken of my sister and I, a few days after she had graduated from high school, and I had graduated with my bachelor's degree. We were each about to start completely new chapters of our lives, but because we were both facing change, we knew we had each other to lean on for support. The photo's composition and color palette also interested me. When I distorted the photo of the memory in water, I tried to achieve an impressionistic style, and not completely abstract the photo, to represent the idea that I still have a somewhat clear image of the memory in my mind. As I applied the layers of paint to the panel, I replicated the distorted source photo as closely as possible. The finished painting shows evidence of this in the tight brushstrokes, and all over detail. This control represents the importance of this memory, and my desire to retain it. After the completion of this painting, I began to allow myself to take more control of the composition. My paintings started to feel more like the visual representations of memories I had envisioned, with bigger, and looser brushstrokes, and designated areas of concentrated values.

Fig. 6 Sage Kinsey, *Lake Day*, Acrylic on panel, 39 x 27 inches.

Lake Day is a much larger painting, and presented a new problem for me to solve- how to handle the distortion of a human face. Figures are the subject of my work due to their importance in my memories. However, as an artist who has relied on representation in the past, it has been challenging not to correct the inaccuracy of the distorted human form. Nevertheless, I distorted the faces to a point that their identity is still questionable. I also kept the values in the same range all over the composition to portray the idea of a single plane. I chose this specific memory because that day was the first time the figure in the green shirt and I, who is now my boyfriend of three years, spent time together. This memory is full with a range of emotions, specifically excitement, and the intentional distortion of the painting vibrates to demonstrate the possibilities of this moment.
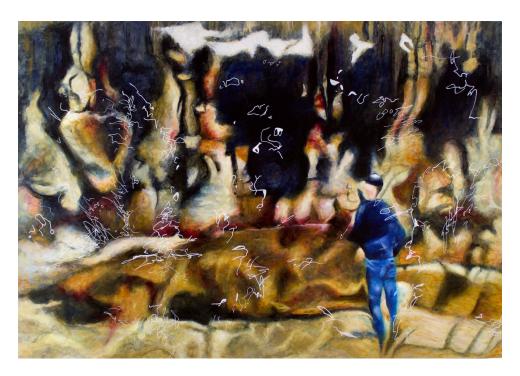
Fig. 7 Sage Kinsey, *Trip to Missouri,* Acrylic on panel, 39 x 27 inches.

Trip to Missouri, and *Lost Lake*, which I will discuss later, are memories that differ slightly than the other memories. Although *Trip to Missouri* contains a figure, it is ambiguous, and blends into the other parts of the composition. The organic landscape of the memory also fills more of the composition than in other pieces, and this lends to a more abstracted quality. The memory that inspired this piece was, as the name implies, taken on a trip my boyfriend, his mother, and I took to Missouri. We visited several scenic spots, and I captured a moment where my boyfriend was standing in front of a river that flowed at the base of a giant, multicolored rock wall. While executing my distorted representation of this memory, I focused on being selective with the areas of contrast. For example, I enhanced the levels of contrast in the figure, radiating out towards the center of the composition, and desaturated the values near the edges of the plane, instead of attempting to include every detail from my distorted source photo.

Fig. 8 Sage Kinsey, *Best Friends*, Acrylic on panel, 33 x 22.5 inches.

Best Friends is a dual portrait, focusing solely on the frontal faces of the two individuals staring directly at the viewer. The memory I distorted took place my junior year in college, the day my best friend and I helped lead groups during new student orientation. After the event, we posed for a photo in our matching blue shirts. The background of the source image was a lighter value, so a challenge I faced in recreating this distorted photo as a painting was keeping the background and foreground in the same plane. To make this believable, I brought the tones from the background into the figures, blending them together, as colors would blend and mix underwater, to form one, collapsed plane. Bubbles are also more visible in this piece than others, and I included them to give the viewer a hint as to how the photo distortion takes place.

Fig. 9 Sage Kinsey, *BFA Family*, Acrylic on panel, 33 x 20 inches.

The figures in *BFA Family* are more representational, and less ambiguous. I was concerned that this might be an issue, but I chose the level of distortion to represent the clarity of this memory in my own mind. Even though this memory took place almost three years ago, the details such as the sounds, smells, and sights of the memory are still clear to me. However, many facial features in the figures are missing, as might could happen in the future when I try to recall the individuals that were present when this memory took place. The people in this memory are fellow classmates, ones who I shared a gallery space with for our BFA show. We spent a lot of time together that semester, prepping for, at the time, the biggest art show of our careers, and through that time, grew to become a family.

Fig. 10 Sage Kinsey, *RZR Riding*, Acrylic on panel, Each 8 x 10 inches.

Each piece in this mini-series, *RZR Riding,* includes an element not found in any other of the pieces in my body of work- a mechanical object. My boyfriend and I enjoy taking his RZR, an ATV, to scenic places to ride. Each painting is a depiction of a different location we have ridden at, the top memory was captured at Red River, New Mexico, the middle at Lake Meredith near Fritch, Texas, and the bottom and the Little Sahara near Waynoka, Oklahoma. Although a figure is not the subject matter of these pieces, there is a figure present in each one, but it is overshadowed by the RZR and the scenic landscape. The scale of the machine and the figure against the landscape work to amplify the importance of these memories, and I plan to explore similar compositions in the future.

I created these paintings in a smaller format, to not only give myself a break from the larger, more time intensive work, but also because I have found that working at a smaller scale provides a level of intimacy much like these memories. Also, I experimented with including the edges of the distorted source photo, instead of completely filling the composition with the photograph. The end result, I believe, helps show the passage of waves over the photograph, and adds an interesting effect.

Fig. 11 Sage Kinsey, *Lost Lake*, Acrylic on panel, 37 x 25 inches.

Lost Lake, like *Trip to Missouri*, continues the theme of landscapes. There is a figure on the left hand side, and it appears to be balanced out by another figure to the right, which is actually a tree stump. The color palette is naturalistic of the colors found in the snapshot of the memory, which was taken at Lost Lake in New Mexico. The figure is my boyfriend, overlooking a hidden lake on the trail to Wheeler Point. The lake was a saturated teal at the time of our visit in the summer of this year, and all the colors of the lake's surroundings were intensified that day. I portrayed this memory with a similar intensity in my painting, because the memory is still so vivid.

Fig. 12 Sage Kinsey, *Everything will Change*, Acrylic on panel, 42 x 25 inches.

The last painting I created in my body of work, *Everything will Change*, is arguably my favorite painting, because the memory it represents is one which I am most worried about forgetting. Although *Sisters* also representins a graduation memory, this painting reflects a separate memory, the actual day that the graduation took place. It was a day full of excitement, fear, worry, anxiousness, and joy, which, I believe even after the distortion process, is portrayed in the painting. The original composition felt overwhelmed with dark values, so I kept those values from meeting the edges, and instead, gradually desaturated them to create a radial composition. By straying from the distorted source material, the image feels less contained, and more free flowing, commenting on memory's fluidity and the impact it has on my life.

Fig. 13 Sage Kinsey, *The First One*, Charcoal on mat board, 26 x 20 inches.

In this body of work, I included five charcoal drawings that represent a joyful memories. The original intent of these drawings were to be value studies for my paintings, but I have found that I enjoy them as much, if not more than, the paintings. The undistorted source images are harder to discern in the drawings, heightening the level of mystery. On the other hand, the overall compositions of the drawings stand out more, due to the use of chiaroscuro, allowing the viewer to get lost in the elusive forms moving in and out of lightness and darkness. The fluidity of these drawings offers an interesting interpretation of the recollection of memories.

The first one is named, appropriately, *The First One*, and it reflects a memory that took place only a year ago, but was a very exciting day for my boyfriend and I. My boyfriend introduced me to hunting a couple years ago. Last year, after many attempts to track down a buck, I harvested my first deer with a rifle. The deer is the most present figure in this drawing, the other two figures, my boyfriend and I, have become a part of the background. Although there are not as many "scribbles" in this drawing, the amount of contrast found in the shapes of the composition make up for their absence.

Fig. 14 Sage Kinsey, *Homecoming*, Charcoal on mat board, 36.5 x 26.5 inches.

Homecoming is by far the largest drawing I have ever completed. I have always enjoyed the presence large drawings have in a gallery space, so I knew I wanted at least one of my pieces to go beyond the limits of my typical dimensions. As I began the drawing, I immediately noticed that drawing seemed to envelope me because of its size. I was immersed in the recreation of this memory, and I hope the end result portrays at least a piece of that feeling to my audience. I chose this specific memory for its composition. I was surrounded by some of the most important people in my life when the photo was taken, and the scale of the drawing highlights their importance. Three of my best friends, and my sister and I, are all pictured, sitting in the stands enjoying my first OPSU football game as an alumni. Even though the faces are not as prominent, the linear presence of their values draws the viewer across the composition, which is intentionally well balanced much like my relationship with these friends.

Fig. 15 Sage Kinsey, *Front Row Friends*, Charcoal on mat board, 26 x 20 inches.

As I finished the first couple of charcoal drawings, I planned for *Homecoming* to be the center of attention on a wall devoted to the drawings. I wanted it to be flanked by two smaller drawings, one of them being *The First One.* This piece needed a companion, so I used the same dimensions for *Front Row Friends*. This drawing reflects of a simple memory that stands out in my mind because of the people I was with. Three of my best friends and I attended a presentation in the OPSU gym, and sat together at the scorers' table. The major aspect of this drawing is its stark composition. I pushed the contrast level more in this drawing than I had in *The First One*. The visual divide between the left hand side of the composition with its lighter values versus the darker values found in the right side creates a sweeping half-moon shape that directs the entire composition. The dynamic effect represents the way I felt about attending the presentation with this special group of people.

Fig. 16 Sage Kinsey, *Cousins*, Charcoal on paper, 5 x7 inches.

I wanted two smaller drawings to hang beside *The First One* and *Front Row Friends*, so I went to the other end of the spectrum to create *Cousins*. The memory, as the name implies, is a photo of my cousins and I on my mother's side. We had decided on that day to get together to take photos as a surprise for our grandparents' upcoming 50th wedding anniversary. The memory took place almost six years ago, which is the oldest memory I have recreated in my body of work, but it still remains as important as the others. Working at such a small scale presented not only its own rewards, but also its own problems. I am able to "get up close and personal" with the drawing, but the fine details are more challenging to execute. The end result visually demonstrates the weight of those small, intimate memories we collect overtime.

Fig. 17 Sage Kinsey, *Margaritas*, Charcoal on paper, 5 x 7 inches.

The last charcoal drawing I completed in my body of work is also the most recent memory I have drawn inspiration from. *Margaritas* is a representation of a photo taken on a grad student night get together, with the addition of a few undergrads as well. The people pictured in this memory are the newest additions to this phase in my life, but they have also made large impacts during my short time with them. The figures in this drawing are more evident than in most of the drawings, and once again, this speaks to the amount of clarity that the memory holds in my mind. Although the areas of lighter value are blockier, their layout emphasizes the middle of the composition, down the distorted table, and into the faces of my friends. The setting of the memory, the amount of figures, and the changes in values all work together to comment on the level of importance that I give to these times of fellowship.

CONCLUSION

As Richard Jerome states, "Life is all memory except for the one present moment that goes by so quickly you hardly catch it going."[23] I found that memories are a difficult thing to hold onto because of their fluidity. Every day the memories stored in our brains are changing, causing us to misremember specific details about the moment, or the entire memory altogether. This process has both terrified and inspired me. I used that inspiration to produce a body of work that brings a visual representation of the act of memory distortion to life by using photography, water and paint. Memory distortion, along with the processes of storing and recalling memories, as well as the practices of photography and painting, have guided me through the formation of my process into a completed body of work. I believe that this project is only a stepping stone for what is yet to come in my career. I would like to continue refining my concept by seeking out new subject matter in hopes of reaching a broader audience and bringing clarity to distortions and visuality to the amorphousness of memory. I'm considering playing with size, creating more tiny images to get at the intimacy and minutia of memories. And I am hoping to experiment with source material beyond just my family photographs, bringing in famous works of art history in reproduction, still lives, landscapes, or other forms of known visual material that become distorted and layered with time.

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[23] Jerome, "The Biology of Memory," 12.

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