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Memory: Beauty, fragmentation and image

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Memory: Beauty, fragmentation and image

by

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The artistic and theoretical foundations of my graduate work summarized in this creative component provide supportive narrative for my thesis exhibition, “Memory: Beauty, fragmentation and image.” This written element acts as a synthesis of my research topics, related inspirational artwork and personal artistic techniques and ideation. It also functions as an extension of the exhibition of photographic and integrated media art displayed at the Somerset Gallery in Ames, Iowa from April 1 to April 30, 2011. The artwork presented in this exhibition addresses the common theme of remembrance and memory conveyed in subject selection and through the layering of visual elements and objects.

Reflecting upon my ability – and often inability – to recollect a specific environment or experience and imagining how memory will likely change as I age, I have become more conscious of the fleeting nature of life and, with that, one’s mind. My involvement in photography has allowed me to explore the notion that although time can be frozen in an image, that image is not truly representative of one’s perception or capacity to remember. Thus, I believe the photograph needs to be altered to do so. This body of work has helped me become more comfortable with myself as an ephemeral being and has provided a visual narrative of my own contemplations. Images give voice to my ideas. Borrowing an expression from photographer Lewis Hine, “If I could tell the story in words, I wouldn’t need to lug a camera.”
Artist Statement

It is very important for me to produce art that I feel authentically represents who I am. My aesthetic relates to the visual characteristics found in rural Iowa, where I was raised. I have witnessed dramatic changes, seeing housing developments and warehouses spring up where once was farmland. The once vital barns, farmhouses, and tools have been deserted and laid to rest. After the passing of my grandfather in 2007, which ended the agricultural tradition in part of my family, I visited the farm to photographically document the machinery that was to be auctioned. This process served as a way of saying goodbye.

Since then, I have become preoccupied with showing beauty in the process of aging, and, to an extent, loss. Rundown, abandoned and discarded objects found in small towns, vacant structures and farmsteads are featured in my photographs, which are created using traditional, digital and alternative photographic techniques. I am attracted to the textures – the decomposing nature – of these found objects. I like to think of my artwork as an acknowledgment of their being, even after having been deserted or neglected by their owners.

Remembrance, a catalyst and strong underlying theme in my work, has led me to consider the relationship between photography and memory. I use layering of imagery and media to represent the complexity of this relationship. Some portions are clear and others cloudy or not readily apparent, and I include rusted and worn elements. The decay serves as a reminder of life and death and our journey through one to the other (figures 1-2).
Figure 1

No Posts to Drape Duration On, 2010
rust and appliquéd on digitally printed cotton, cheesecloth, 31” x 33”

Figure 2

Blooming Up from the Ground, 2011
rust, appliquéd, dye and pigment on digitally printed silk and cotton, 23 ½” x 18 ¾”
CHAPTER TWO: AREAS OF INVESTIGATION

As I was growing up, there was never a shortage of photographs in our household. My aunt and uncle were commercial photographers; as such, I had a multitude of portraits taken recording the various age milestones I reached. My mother also took part in this documentation, and looking through family photo albums and sharing memories with the family became an enjoyable pastime for my sisters and me. “No object is more equated with memory than the camera image, in particular the photograph. Memory appears to reside within the photographic image, to tell its story in response to our gaze,” writes scholar Marita Sturken (19). Often, I would not remember being in the particular moment I was viewing – I was much too young – but reflecting on the imagery helped form my personal stories and reinforce my identity.

Photography and Memory

The idea that photography is used to record one’s personal history – documenting births, school plays, basketball games, vacations, deaths – for the purpose of remembering is not an unfamiliar concept to people in today’s world. It seems everyone has a camera, and we tend to believe that generating this photographic record somehow makes an experience more real because of the physical evidence produced. We hold the notion that a photo would more readily revive memories of a specific encounter at a later date.

So can one argue that a photograph is a part of memory itself? Author Catherine Keenan and art critic Susan Sontag have unique points of view on the matter. Keenan
argues: “…The photograph becomes a site of memory because it is a present object that determines how the past is remembered” (63) while Sontag describes photographs as, “…not so much an instrument of memory as an invention of it or a replacement” (165). Regardless, it is clear that photographs have a direct correlation with recollection.

“Just as memory is often thought of as an image, it is also produced by and through images” (Sturken 11). Photographs are often seen as a form of evidence. Thus, one might believe viewing a photograph could influence one’s perception of an individual or event.

A photograph provides evidence of continuity, reassuring in its “proof” that an event took place or a person existed. Though it is commonly understood that photographs can be easily manipulated, this knowledge has had little effect on the conviction that the camera image provides evidence of the real (Sturken 21).

This phenomena is probably most evident in the 2002 study by psychologists Wade, Garry, Read and Lindsay in which subjects were shown three real childhood photos and one doctored photo of an event that never occurred to see if exposing them to a false image would in fact produce a false memory. After a two-week time span where each subject reviewed the photographs on three occasions, 50% had formed some sort of memory about the doctored image. They were often able to describe the experience in detail and were genuinely surprised to find out that the photo was a fake.

Although it is highly improbable anyone would find a photograph in a family photo album depicting themselves in a situation that never occurred, the idea that a personal
photograph can itself become a dominant part of the memory is worth noting. Keenan writes:

…On the one hand, because of its durability, the photograph seems to offer the possibility of creating a permanent memory-image; but on the other, it is this same durability that destines the photographic image to eclipse the original memory. The photograph, unlike the actual memory-image of a past event, can imprint itself on our memories again and again, without any diminution of its vividness. Thus we turn to our collections of photographs in order to re-live the memory of an event, but every time we do so, we further the process whereby these photographic images themselves come to be implanted in memory… (62).

Despite its power to create false memories and alter those that we already hold, the unaltered photograph can provide verification that someone existed or something happened. It can also influence or reflect one’s feelings about an event. Consequently, “If memory is the way people keep telling themselves their stories, then photographs are one of the ways people [can] keep those stories alive” (Garry and Gerrie 323).
Artistic Influences

Photography as an extension of memory is not a new concept in the world of art. Documentary photographers such as Lewis Hine used their images to record human struggles and to prevent them from being ignored or forgotten. Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange and other photographers employed by the Works Progress Administration had similar goals in documenting poverty in rural America. Andy Goldsworthy, an Earthworks artist, uses photography to counteract the impermanence of his ephemeral sculptures and the effects that time has on the natural materials he uses. However, the two photographers I find most influential in my own work are documentary photographer, David Plowden, and Abstract Expressionist photographer, Aaron Siskind.

David Plowden

Aside from the clear visual relationship between David Plowden’s photographs and my own, our shared desire to document rural America’s changing face has facilitated my decision to deem him a kindred spirit (figure 3). Although he grew up in New York City, quite different from my childhood home in rural Iowa, his family owned a 150-acre farm in Vermont that provided exposure to small-town life. Having parents that worked in creative fields – his father an actor and set designer and his mother a pianist – exposed Plowden to the arts from an early age. As a young boy, he explored the country by riding trains and as a teenager, he began bringing a camera along. After traveling, working and photographing in a variety of areas across the U.S., he came to consider Iowa to be his adopted home state (Plowden and Edwards 8-20).
Author Richard Snow admires Plowden’s ability to “…find traces of the American presence on this continent, immense and minuscule alike, and save them for us” (Plowden and Edwards 7). “When describing my work, I have always said that I have been one step ahead of the wrecking ball,” writes Plowden (20). This becomes apparent in his book, *A Handful of Dust*, where years later he revisited and re-photographed many areas he previously photographed. In this book, he wrote:

Each time I set out to photograph, I discovered that something was always different from the way it had been on a previous trip. At first the changes were in slow motion, imperceptible except to the discerning eye: a store on Main Street that had been there the year before was shuttered, another railroad station was abandoned, another farm gone, a factory gone dark (20).
Like Plowden, I seek to document found objects and structures that may soon perish in my own extended community and have continued to revisit locations – my grandparents’ farm in particular. For me, my grandparents’ land – along with the buildings and items situated there – provides a place for my childhood memories to flourish. There is also a distinct separation. My parents are not farmers although both grew up on farms. I grew up near farms but not on one. The intended purpose of the machinery I photograph on my grandparents’ farm is unfamiliar to me. Instead, these valued relics are where I played games with my cousins as a child. I am not sure I could tell you what the building is called, but inside it I helped bottle feed a baby calf. Now when I visit the farm, it feels empty. Much of the equipment and all of the cows have been sold.

The loss of my grandfather prompted much of the farm’s emptiness as well as the photographic process I had of saying goodbye. Plowden dealt with similar feelings. “Loss has been the driving force behind much of Plowden’s work. You can sense it in his stark, spare images of ghost-ridden communities, lonely landscapes and solitary steam engines” (Plowden and Edwards 15). Many of his photographs also exclude individuals to enable the viewer to enter the image and create their own experience (figure 4). This omission is also evident in my choice to exclude human beings, but imply their presence in my images. The absence of individuals enhances a void.
Loss and change eventually drove Plowden to stop taking photographs. While shooting for *A Handful of Dust*, he explained to his wife, “What I find are the relics. What I find are the ruins. What I find are the things that I remember once upon a time. Now they’re just gone – they’re abandoned! I can’t do it anymore. It’s too depressing” (Plowden and Edwards 21). It is apparent that Plowden is saddened about the transformations rural America has undergone. To some extent I agree, but rather than giving up photography, I focus on the beauty evident in the passage of time. Capturing these scenes photographically and then altering them to enhance and dull certain portions through embellishment reinforces this message.
Aaron Siskind

I am inspired by Aaron Siskind’s portrayal of flat surfaces, the otherworldly quality of his photographs and his fascination with the complexity of objects. Born in New York City in 1903, Siskind spent much of his childhood exploring the city. “His devotion to beauty, discovery and expression marked him as an artist from the beginning, although, at first, words were his medium.” After graduating from City College, he began to teach English, develop an interest in photography and became involved with the Film and Photo League (Rhem 6).

Siskind embraces flatness in his photographs of surfaces and forms. His reason for emphasizing textured, flat surfaces from a frontal view is that the subjects “…cannot escape back into the depth of perspective. The four edges of the rectangular [frame] are absolute bounds. There is only the drama of the objects…” (Rhem 11). Nathan Lyons writes, “When he eliminated deep space, he found that the objects began to take on an additional significance” (Siskind, Lyons, Holmes Smith and Hess 6). Eliminating both deep perspective and scale toys with the common idea of reality and begs the question, “What does the environment really look like?”

Photographing on a single plane with close-ups emphasizing texture and other formal elements, much like Siskind, enables me to invite the viewer of my work to be absorbed on a level that is both imaginative and visceral. In addition to the sort of otherworldly quality that attracts me to his work, Siskind’s fascination with the complexities of objects resonates with my personal artistic passions (figure 5). He explains:

In the pictures you have the object…but you have in the object or superimposed on it, a thing I would call the “image” which
contains my idea. And these things are present at one and the same time. And there’s a conflict, a tension. The object is there, and yet it’s not an object. It’s something else. It has meaning, and the meaning is partly the object’s meaning, but mostly my meaning (Rhem 11).

Often photographing two items in a way that results in an implied relationship – what Siskind refers to as “conversation” pictures – enables the type of free association and artistic interplay that I aim for. Meaning is both absent and present.

![Figure 5](Image)

**Figure 5**
Aaron Siskind
*Gloucester 1H, 1944*
silver gelatin print, 14” x 11”

Perhaps related to his interest in the English language, Siskind also photographs fragments of writing on walls. Abstraction is important to Siskind, and he says that it “looks like it means something, but you’ll never know what…” (Rhem 68). Language is familiar but complex at the same time. So much meaning is held within words that when they are
broken down into portions of letters, it becomes somewhat disorienting (figure 6). Inspired by Siskind, I have started photographing signs that do not communicate as intended to further my representation of the intricacies of the human mind – of memory – and its inevitable breakdown.

Siskind writes, “Art has to do with very fundamental things, like how stable you feel or how ephemeral you feel – a sense of destiny – or it opens up the abyss to you, this thing that you’re afraid of, but you can face it when you see this thing” (90). This wisdom has carried me through my work with aging, loss and death.
CHAPTER THREE: ACTUALIZATION OF CONCEPTS

Embracing these anticipated experiences through art and facing them has helped me understand they can become a beautiful part of life. Seeking out neglected locations, but also being sensitive to discoveries I find there, enables me to be both intentional and receptive in developing my art. My process is intuitive but built upon a foundation of knowing who I am. I have always been attracted to the weathered and worn aesthetic present in rural Iowa. Being a photographer has enabled me to catch and hold onto the moments I have experienced and being an artistic, creative creature offers the ability to transform the resulting imagery from real into imagined encounters. The artwork I produced between 2006 and 2011 exemplifies this progression.

Thematic Development

I had my first meaningful photographic experience in the spring of 2006 at an abandoned house down the road from where I grew up. The disjointed dwelling with a “No Vacancy” sign on the front door was in a location that I had passed hundreds of times without much thought. However, I had become more and more visually intrigued as time passed. Motivated by a need to collect images for a printmaking course, I ventured onto the property.

When I got closer to the home itself and peered through the broken windows, many possessions in various stages of decay came into my view (figure 7). Although I was aware my relatives knew the family that once inhabited the space, I did not know their story. I
began to conjure up a narrative about joyful family dinners (figure 8) and birthday parties ceasing because of a terribly unfortunate event that forced an abrupt abandonment of their home. While certainly melodramatic, it was stimulating to create such a tale based solely on the brief observation of a derelict structure and its contents.

![Figure 7](image_url)
*Abandoned, 2006*
pigmented inkjet print, 9” x 6 ¾”

![Figure 8](image_url)
*The Cupboard was Bare, 2006*
pigmented inkjet print, 9” x 6 ¾”

Later, in 2007, I was still enamored by the textures resulting from the decomposition I found. I planned to investigate the neglected chicken coop, corncrib and sheds that housed an assortment of my grandparents’ belongings. I also decided to photograph some of the farm equipment that was to be auctioned at their upcoming farm sale. Sadly, my grandfather passed away the day before this planned photographic exploration. As a result, the experience and resulting photographs became much more significant.

As I walked around their property with my camera, I cherished being among the things my grandfather had touched. I was on a school field trip and unable to make it back to be with him at the hospital when he passed, so this ended up being my time alone with him to say goodbye. I did not have any fanciful stories forming in my head – there was just quiet.
Somber existence. Though he was gone from my life, his tools were there. And when the tools were sold, the photographs were there (figures 9-11). Regardless, if the photographs disappear, the memories will remain.

This series based on my grandfather’s possessions was much more personal than the previous series about the abandoned house. I began to contemplate what was being said by the photographs and where the message could go. As Sontag observes, “…What photography supplies is not only a record of the past but a new way of dealing with the present…” (166). The combination of the two experiences – allowing environments or objects to trigger fictitious yet elaborate stories and being reflective, using the objects to serve as memorials – resulted in my contemplation on the distinctions between one’s personal reality and a shared human experience.

Over the next three years, I became more aware that the thrill of happening upon an uninhabited space – that in spite of having been disregarded still houses traces of human life – is somewhat addicting. When it occurs, I feel like I am entering another world – a sort of
altered reality – and am able to become a character in its story. A mantra I have comes from surrealist photographer Clarence John Laughlin: “The creative photographer sets free human contents of objects; and imparts humanity to the inhuman world around him.” Continuing this exploration, I created a series of small, pigmented inkjet prints on watercolor paper that depict portions of an area where unused machines are parked in a sort of vehicular graveyard (figures 12-13).

In this work, I began to alter the things I often take away with me after visiting such a location – encounters, photographs and physical objects. This process is an attempt to create or recreate a memory. I use various techniques to enhance the implication that although the human mind is a powerful tool, it also has fragility and is malleable. My photographs and their subjects possess a multitude of assigned meanings. I find myself constantly imagining what the inanimate object’s life was like – what it saw, how it was touched and utilized. Because this history can never be truly apparent to me, I push and pull the clarity of the surface and introduce a nostalgic element through the use of the Polaroid transfer aesthetic.
In 2010, my explorations took me to a small courtyard situated between several laboratory buildings on the Iowa State University campus. As I observed this location, I noticed a ground covering that looked like sawdust. Upon further inspection, I came to realize it was a mass of dead moths. The texture created was so beautiful, but the actuality of the visual was disturbing. Heaps of dead bugs were not supposed to be beautiful, but yet they were. Thinking about the studies they were used for and their disposal thereafter led me to think about the discarding of outdated technological equipment. Though the natural life of organic creatures and manmade objects certainly vary, the process of aging, and to an extent, death, is reasonably comparable and forms an interesting juxtaposition (figures 14-15).

![Figure 14](image1.png)

*Figure 14*

*Try So to Live*, 2010

found imagery and acrylic, 6” x 5”

![Figure 15](image2.png)

*Figure 15*

*We Should Remember*, 2010

found imagery and acrylic, 6 ½” x 5”

I began to collect the actual objects I once photographed and integrate them into my art in 2011. Browsing at an antique shop, I came across several postcards that were written by a woman to another during a European excursion in the 1970s. I was drawn to the personal relationship of two people I did not know. Like a photograph, these postcards documented a
personal experience, but not in great detail. Similar to my initial photographs of the abandoned house, I was able to create my own story (figure 16).

The recognition of the fleeting nature of all things, specifically relationships, brought me back to my grandparents’ farm. It was in fact the underpinning of everything. I began to fuse photography created in other settings with these particular personal artifacts. This enabled me to form a unifying narrative while allowing myself the freedom to modify elements to represent loss or a void. My artwork as a whole serves to recycle reality and invites the audience to assign new meanings.
Technical Development

Like many art students, my photographic education began in the darkroom using 35mm film and making silver gelatin prints on resin-coated paper. For me, the ability to slow down and process the image by hand was enjoyable. The smell of the chemicals, the amber glow of the safe lights and the sound of running water allowed me an opportunity to remove myself from the outside world. I am quite fond of the aesthetic quality and rich tonal range of prints created in classic black-and-white photographs. They often impart an emotive quality to the subject matter. For this reason, traditional monochrome photography was my favored medium when I documented subjects with a close personal connection – most notably my grandfather’s farm equipment.

I then began to explore other ways of making photographs. In 2006, I began to learn about the digital process of photography. I was eager to utilize color, though the palette in my photographs remained quite muted, with saturated areas being limited. I liked the immediacy and ease of experimentation. Working digitally enabled me to begin modifying the image by adjusting opacities and layering materials, processes that could have had more limited outcomes using darkroom methods.

In 2009, I began to look for additional printing options that would further enhance the subject matter and concepts I was working with. I found the Polaroid transfer very visually appealing and the framed edge reminded me of the soft borders I was able to print around my images using a filed out negative carrier in the darkroom. However, with a shortage of unexpired Polaroid film (production was stalled in 2008) and a finicky Polaroid camera, I was unable to produce the results I desired. To remedy this, I decided to transfer images –
regardless of the picture quality – somewhat haphazardly to watercolor paper. I transferred them so only parts of the emulsion would adhere, scanned the resulting print and overlaid a digital photograph to achieve the preferred layered aesthetic (figure 17).

![Image of a transfers process](image)

**Figure 17**
Polaroid transfer, digital photograph and combined image

Feeling the need for a more tactile quality to reference the visual textures I loved to photograph, I began to work with collage on paper. Integrating several media and techniques facilitated the depiction of my developing artistic concept of changes through the passage of time. Appreciating the characteristics of the transfer process – specifically taking an image that represents reality and allowing chance to play a role, as only portions of the image would adhere to the new base – I revisited similar methods. Gel medium transfers allowed the same sort of effect. Using a laser print instead of a Polaroid allowed for the inclusion of variety of images, creating multiple layers and developing rich surface textures (figure 18). I continued to push my work by merging collage and photography and also applied these skills to fabric. Appliquéing, rusting, dyeing and printing fabric were among the processes I implemented in this artwork in order to develop visual texture and layers of meaning (figure 19).
After I began collecting physical objects from antique shops and my grandparents’ farm that seemed to hold narratives within themselves, I also began to “collage” more three-
dimensionally by creating assemblages (figure 20). I applied some of the same techniques employed in the fabric pieces. However, I also wished to tie in photographs to continue layering visual experiences, so I started working with liquid photo emulsion. This latest darkroom practice I am exploring involves the printing of photographs on objects that may be combined with other found items.

![Figure 20](image)

To Think You Control It, 2011
personal imagery, gel medium transfer, hayloft door and sewing machine drawer front, 31½” x 24½”

Overall, my artwork ranges in size from smaller collages to medium-sized wall hangings. Detail is important and I am not interested in overwhelming the audience, so I work in a smaller size to entice the viewer by way of an intimate, approachable experience with individual pieces. My art is meant to be inviting and cherished, so I want the audience to have a strong desire to touch the surface. Nothing is placed behind Plexiglas so that those who wish to make physical contact with the work can. I want the viewer to experience it much like I experienced the objects and locations depicted within the images.
CHAPTER FOUR: SYNTHESIS OF DISCOVERIES AND CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have addressed personal remembrance, artists whose work inspires me and personal creative techniques and ideation. I convey these themes in the content and the layering of visual elements and objects. Through manipulating and playing with objects and imagery, I am able to represent my belief that one’s perception or capacity to remember is not truly steadfast, frozen in time or held onto through personal possessions and the use of photography.

Although altered photographs can change a memory one holds or foster new inaccurate memories, the untouched image can also help confirm them. We tend to believe a photograph will aid in our retrieval of memories, but just as memories change, photographs can be read both objectively and subjectively. I enjoy my ability to influence the media and provide a unique narrative that combines “truth” and personal understanding.

Personal experience and recollection are the driving forces and reoccurring thematic elements in my art. My grandfather’s passing in 2007 was my first encounter with profound loss, a sentiment I continue to depict in my photographs and mixed media artwork. Ambiguities and absences are left in my work to represent this notion as well as to reiterate the fact that memories are not always readily available or clear. From this, I found art could unify form and content to convey the complexity of memory.

Reflecting on difficult life experiences brought about another discovery – the process of using symbolism and engaging materials in artwork is healing. Thinking about the universal commonality of aging, I am especially attracted to the texture in the decomposing nature of the environments I choose to encounter and photograph. I am interested in
continuing this investigation by constructing environments that combine multiple sensory experiences for the audience to exist in and explore. I want others to be able to feel as if they are entering an altered reality and becoming characters in the story, echoing the way I feel when I photograph deserted spaces.

Although I am firmly rooted in a rural aesthetic, I agree with an urban explorer: “…we find this decay beautiful because it reminds us that life comes and goes and this deeper truth gives more meaning to our own experiences” (RomanyWG 136). It is my hope that all viewers of this exhibition will share the same sentiment as I continue to develop my concepts and artistic themes.
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