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MFA Thesis Statement

I see the world in color, and to some degree representational art created using color reflects that world back to me. I can gain access to the work through the recognition of color and the sense of familiarity experienced. Color adds an additional layer of meaning to an image: it can enhance the concept or produce a contradiction. It often directs me to the focal point within an image, and this is especially true of works created in a representational style. Color can fashion the mood of an image through a harmonic or discordant arrangement of complements and by signifiers can inform me as to its intended use. These are some of the ways in which color creates an understanding or 'knowing' for me. By 'knowing' works in color I can step back from it and determine its value to me as I would any other object in the tangible world.

Art created using black and white can do some of these things. But I believe drawings absent of color speak a unique language. A black and white drawing removes the layer of 'knowing' for me and opens a new way of perception. I view the form and concepts of a drawing with an unfamiliar eye, and because of this develop a connection to the work on a psychological level.

Black and white creates a kind of surrealism for me that lessens the association with reality experienced when viewing a work in color. Familiarity is replaced with 'not-knowing', which in turn unsettles my confidence in being able to easily interpret a black and white drawing. I desire to physically approach a drawing in an effort to understand it; by doing so the drawing subtly opens a path that offers hints to a fuller realization of its meaning. If I choose to accept, the drawing can share an intimate and fruitful relationship

with me. By experience I have found this relationship to be more fulfilling than one I may have with a work in color.

This knowledge has had a strong impact on my work, presenting a sense of direction that has shaped the content of the drawings. The focus of my work is based on memories: my own and those of my mother. Memories are an integral part of the inner-monologue I carry on with myself every day. They are primarily based on emotion - experiences and situations that have become distorted over time. The good experiences have been overshadowed by an intense focus on the bad ones, creating an imbalance.

A portion of the work presented in this thesis is a reaction to this state of mind, of visually representing this situation and reconciling with myself.

No specific memory informs each individual piece, but rather past events taken as a whole provide the source for the drawings and their content. Recollections of hurtful words spoken in anger, of indiscretions and relationships that ended in discord have become interchangeable with one another. When I try to remember the specifics of any given memory, the inability to do so creates a conundrum. Introspection ends in a hind-sighted reaction to the recollection of sensations and memories. This causes a distortion: by reacting emotionally to the impressions contained by memory, I can never really remember the truth of the occurrence. The mind, in all its imperfections, will splinter past events and piece together only bits of the truth, for good or ill. What remains is a recollection based in part on fragmented reality and an amplification of emotional distortions.

By dwelling on these memories I find myself trapped in a perpetual loop of remembrance and reinforcement known as *mood-congruent memory*.<sup>1</sup> In this state the mind will recall situational memories that reflect 'bad' moods, and the remembrance of 'bad'

times affects the current mood. Many of the images created for this thesis are an attempt to break this repetitive cycle by addressing them through drawing.

The drawings related to my mother are both a reflection and an interpretation of her current memory state. Due to injuries received in an automobile accident several years ago, my mother is experiencing some degree of memory loss. The accident caused damage to both her hippocampi, the limbic organs of the brain that process and consolidates both short-term and long-term memory. As a result she has developed a moderate amount of short-term memory loss and a greater degree of long-term memory loss. Through many intimate conversations I have assisted her with this situation, attempting to retrieve as much as possible about her past: what her childhood experience was like, her feelings about her parents and siblings, her reflection of the era in which she grew up. The drawings based on her recollections and visual descriptions are my translation of how she 'sees' her memories.

The method chosen to depict my emotional recollections mirrors the effort to depict my mother's memories: it is my best attempt to document how my mind 'sees' the past. When attempting to retrieve past events that prompt an emotional response, my mind does not replay the memory in a clear, narrative format. Images emerge from a rectangular darkness, indistinct and fragmented for the most part, and devoid of color. Portions of the memory image stand out in sharp relief, while other areas recede into a blur. Specific details pertaining to events, places and dates (explicit memory) have not been encoded, or the retrieval cue for specific memories has been submerged. The work requires a more intuitive approach to depicting this inner-monologue.

Using myself as the model for the drawings, I express through gesture and body language the embodiment of emotional memory. The pose of the body reflects an instinctual reaction to the painful recollection of the memories, often echoing the desire to withdraw, to shrink and pull away – to hide from the world around me. These drawings are directly influenced by the German socio-political artist Kaethe Kollwitz (1867 – 1945). Scattered throughout her oeuvre are several self-portraits that represent her anguish and turmoil – her weariness with life. These are powerful images ranging from detailed renderings of the youthful student learning her craft to the more matured, assured drawings executed with simple clarity and a masterful understanding of materials. Yet each of the self-portraits (with the exception of the singular ‘laughing’ self-portrait) bears witness to variations of the same emotion – the sadness of a hard life, the weighty fatigue of existence. They touch me, in that these unflinching, honest portrayals mirror my own emotions, invoking an empathetic reaction.

By depicting my own inner monologue, I too endeavor to reach out to the viewer in the hope that a similar experience may be shared. A motif used by Kollwitz in many of her self-portraits is the partial covering of her face with her hand to her brow, obscuring her full features. I have taken this a step further in the work by concealing my features through the use of shrouds, cast shadows from indirect lighting, and the turn of the head away from the viewer. In doing this, I am both detaching myself as recognizable subject and opening the drawing to a more relative interpretation. Eliminating the face removes identification with an individual; the image presented becomes less about recognizing the artist as model and more focused on the conceptual intent of emotional memory.

My mother's memory experiences are similar to my own and are compounded by her condition. She often becomes frustrated with her inability to maintain a comprehensive collection of personal memories. This activates her life-long subconscious feelings of inadequacy. Hence, what memories my mother is able to retrieve are lopsided towards events and situations that reinforce this emotion. The source of her 'bad' feelings stems from our family's shadow.

The concept of the shadow or 'shadow aspect' of the self was first presented by Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung (1875 – 1961). The shadow represents the unconscious and often negative aspects of one's personality. As noted Jungian psychotherapist Connie Zweig states:

As Jung saw it, the shadow operated at several levels. First, there is the part of the mind that is outside of our awareness. He called this the personal unconscious or personal shadow. That is the conditioned part of us that we acquire from our experiences in our childhood when that which is unacceptable, as determined by the adults around us, is cast into shadow. It may be sadness or sexual curiosity. Or it may be our creative dreams and desires. That's personal shadow. ('Illuminating the Shadow: An Interview with Connie Zweig')

The shadow also extends beyond individuals to social groups such as families and the larger culture of a society – the 'archetypal shadow' or 'collective unconsciousness.'

The cultural shadow regulates taboos and behavior determined to be a threat to the established order of things – the order that maintains the unity of a society.

The family shadow is a reflection of the larger archetypal shadow in that the family unit embraces many of its broad, culturally determined morals and ethics.

This creates a fantasy, an impossible set of standards against which families measure a 'normal' way of functioning. When families do not live up to the perceived expectations of society, the negative and dark realities of life make themselves known. Failed aspirations lead to emotional anxiety, inadequacy, projected anger and abuse both



physical and psychological. These emotions are transmitted both overtly and subconsciously by parents to their children, who in turn pass the shadow down through each successive generation.

The group of drawings about my mother contains large areas of organic black shapes that represent the family shadow. My mother, her parents and siblings all have been victims of a generational line of family shadows that caused significant damage to their being. They were wholly consumed by the secrets contained by the shadow, and each drawing manifests this consumption.

Depicting the shadow in drawings without resembling a 'real' cast shadow is an important facet of the work. I envision the shadow as both an internal and external manifestation. Its shape is determined by the internal nature of each individual from whom it emits. In some instances I perceive it as fluid and organic, in others it takes on a hard and artificial appearance. It can be mysterious and translucent as well as densely black and impenetrable. Yet it is also a presence made external through its representation as a design element. The shadow is a visual anchor in each of the drawings; it offsets the more ethereal elements to create balance and a sense of kinetic energy.

Much of the visual character of the shadow is linked to my appreciation of the black and white works of the late modernist painter Franz Kline (1916 – 1962). Kline's black and white 'action paintings' represent to me the synthesis of compositional simplicity and complex execution. His art is a formal art, in that it is the tactile relationship between physical paint application and shapes that create movement.

The black shapes are especially important to my drawings, in that they are often rough and geometrical – in much the same way that my personal shadow takes shape. His

large designs make full use of the picture plane, allowing compositional placement of the shapes to create energetic tension between each other.

What is most striking about a Kline painting is that the areas of black are not flat opaque shapes, but upon closer inspection reveal a layering of chromatic darks. The visual play of chroma within the black shapes generates a depth that draws me into the shapes, to contemplate their significance and their purpose. I have appropriated these layered darks into my own drawings to interpret the elusive manner in which memory reveals itself.

Kline's influence is most apparent in the *Visual Cognition* series (fig.1). These drawings represent the visual sensations I often experience while in a semi-conscious sleep, just before succumbing to a full REM state of rest. My mind will activate memories of interior spaces I have occupied, visited or witnessed through external media such as films or books. These memories are unspecific in nature, taking a patchwork form of all the elements mentioned. Unfixed as to detail or clarity of shape, they are frozen at an early stage of mental visual processing where the forms are suspended in their initial colors and shapes. The interiors are jagged and rough-hewn in their appearance - flattening themselves into coarse two-dimensional patterns of black and white, much like a Kline painting.

The paint stick drawings of minimalist sculptor Richard Serra (1939 -) have been particularly influential in giving my drawings a visual heft. Serra's series of *Promenade* drawings are striking in their ability to convey a sense of a monolithic presence. There is a palatable heaviness about them – when seeing one in person I feel as though the drawing will topple over onto me under its own crushing weight. The exploration of my own memories and personal shadow are experienced in a similar way. The *Boxed In* and *Hiding*

*in Plain Sight* series of drawings are based not only in how I ‘see’ my memories, but also how I feel them. Emotional guilt comes with its own heavy burden, to the point where both the weight of suffocation and constriction are present.

The choice of examining my emotional-based memories and those of my mother through drawing has been a challenge. Unlike explicit memory where specific events, dates and details can be retrieved, my drawings are based on *mood-congruent memory*.

Mood-congruent memory is triggered when a memory or series of memories that are based on a specific emotional state-of-mind are recalled through a conscious re-experiencing of that mood in the present.<sup>2</sup> The manner chosen to depict emotional recollection is my best attempt to document how my mind ‘sees’ the past. As mentioned previously, portions of the memory image stand out in sharp relief, while other areas recede into a blur. Determining what portions of my drawings will reflect this push and pull of imagery is greatly assisted by the writings of French literary theorist and philosopher Roland Barthes (1915 – 1980).

Barthes’ *Camera Lucida* is a thought-provoking reflection on photography. His ruminations stem from a desire to know his recently deceased mother, to find a reflection of her inner nature through some photographic record. During this process Barthes began to formulate his thoughts on the intricate association between a photograph, its intended meaning, and its reception by a viewer.

I initially came to *Camera Lucida* while working with family photographs as a reference to gain some insight to my mother’s memories. What intrigues me about Barthes’ contemplations are his analysis of the elements of a photograph, the reactions to its contents, and how I apply his ideas to drawing. Of particular importance to me are two



concepts that for Barthes encompass the essence of a photograph, and by extension the fundamental practice of art: the *studium* and *punctum*.

The *studium* can be interpreted in various ways, but is founded on the understanding that the formal elements of a photograph relate to cultural, political and historical contexts, which in turn reflects the conceptual intent of the photographer.

By acknowledging the image presented by the photographer, the interpretation and value of the image is left to the viewer.<sup>3</sup> This would appear to be an accurate and rather academic description of the surface content all created images share. But it is the second component of Barthes' concept, the *punctum*, which goes beyond the academic.

The *punctum* can be described as an element within the overall *studium* of an image that creates and maintains the viewer's interest. The *punctum* is not necessarily the focus of an image, nor the subject or the narrative. Rather, it can be anything within an image that stands out to the viewer, maintaining his or her interest. It creates an attraction to the image and often allows each viewer to connect with the image on a more meaningful level.<sup>4</sup>

Understanding the significance of both the *studium* and *punctum* has in turn helped me comprehend and interpret through drawing the substance of personal memories. Because of the elusive and intangible qualities of memory, there is a lack of clarity. This allows me an open interpretation as to the content of my drawings. The *studium* of many drawings is the void, the dark place out of which the figure emerges. It is a fabrication suiting the needs of the concept and the emotion expressed, and represents the indistinct portions of my memory. However, it will occasionally house a setting (usually an interior space) that contains reminders of fragmented recollections from my past. Visual cues such as doors, ornamental fluting and piping decorations all bear some resemblance to places I

have experienced in childhood and as an apartment-dwelling adult. The drawing *Absence of Presence* (fig.2) is an example of this use of *studium*.

The drawing has powerful implications for me, in that this particular setting of an empty apartment in my building evokes memories of my great-grandparents' Victorian home in Pennsylvania. When I first experienced this apartment room, specific visuals such as the heat grate, the running boards and the sliding wooden door triggered memory codes. I received several sensory memories related to the Victorian home: the length and narrowness of the structure, hemmed in on two sides by other homes which blocked out the day light; sunlight filtering in through the front sitting room in the morning and the rear windows of the kitchen during the afternoon; the musty, ancient smell of old wood and wool; twenty foot ceilings and huge staircases that climbed into darkness; several cluttered upstairs rooms that emanated dust and history; an attic bedroom with an old Victor Victrola and an overstuffed down bed. These specific images are unbound to specific events; they instead float in an unfixd space of my mind. They *are* connected to distorted emotional memories of fear, confusion, and unfamiliarity—all experienced as a young child. It is this dualistic nature of memory that fascinates me.

The *punctum* is that segment of my memory in sharp relief, and in some instances is purposefully chosen. It is not an element that is predetermined; instead I approach my drawings-in-progress with an open mind to portions that stand out to me. It is difficult to explain, but I 'feel' the drawing as I work on it. As the work progresses, areas of interest come forward; they reveal themselves to me and become the *punctum* of the drawing. These areas are informed in a semi-conscious fashion by memories; the drawing *Fragments – Cliff* (fig. 3) is a good example. It is an image of my uncle as a child of three

or four. I was immediately taken by the delicate, adult shape of his tiny hands. They became the *punctum* of the image. Those hands triggered a memory of times when my uncle would ask me to stretch his fingers and hands. His paralysis from an accident as a teenager left them simian in shape and usage. I would marvel at their disfigurement, yet was surprised by the soft and supple texture of his skin. It has been related to me that before his accident he was very proud of the delicate shape of his hands, often relating how much they resembled his mother's hands.

Visualizing these concepts into images has challenged me to develop my drawing skills and expand my knowledge of methods and materials. Through experimentation, research, trial and error, I have moved beyond the static level of competent yet uninspired rendering abilities into a more fully realized realm of communication. The introduction of Mylar as a drawing surface into my inventory of tools was the catalyst for a new approach to mark making. Its lightly textured and shallow surface proved to be receptive to a wide range of material application. Combined with Mylar's ease of removing marks, the forgiving nature of the surface expanded my ability to capture an array of ethereal and solid forms.

Having control over drawing materials allowed me to focus not only on the intent behind the drawing, but to also to enjoy the physical act of creating art. The immediacy of putting marks on paper, the incidental smudge or stroke that suddenly takes the image in a new direction, the inner joy experienced by the harmonious connection between mind, hand and material—each drawing offers a new opportunity to experience these sensations. The journey to fully realize conceptual intent has deepened my appreciation of what it means to practice a sincere and committed form of artistic expression.

It has also proven to be a cathartic and liberating experience. Not only have I been able to unburden myself through the act of drawing, but to undertake such a personal endeavor for public viewing has forced me (in a good way) to examine the source of my memories. Probing the depths of my past, opening locked doors of memories best left closed, coming to grips with who I am as a person and how my memories have shaped my being – all have been instrumental in achieving this body of work.

## NOTES

1. See Lewis, "Mood-dependent memory," 431-433.
2. See Watkins, "Unconscious mood-congruent memory bias in depression," 34-41.
3. See Barthes, 25-28.
4. *Ibid.*, 43-60.



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Fig.1 *Visual Cognition IV*, 2011.

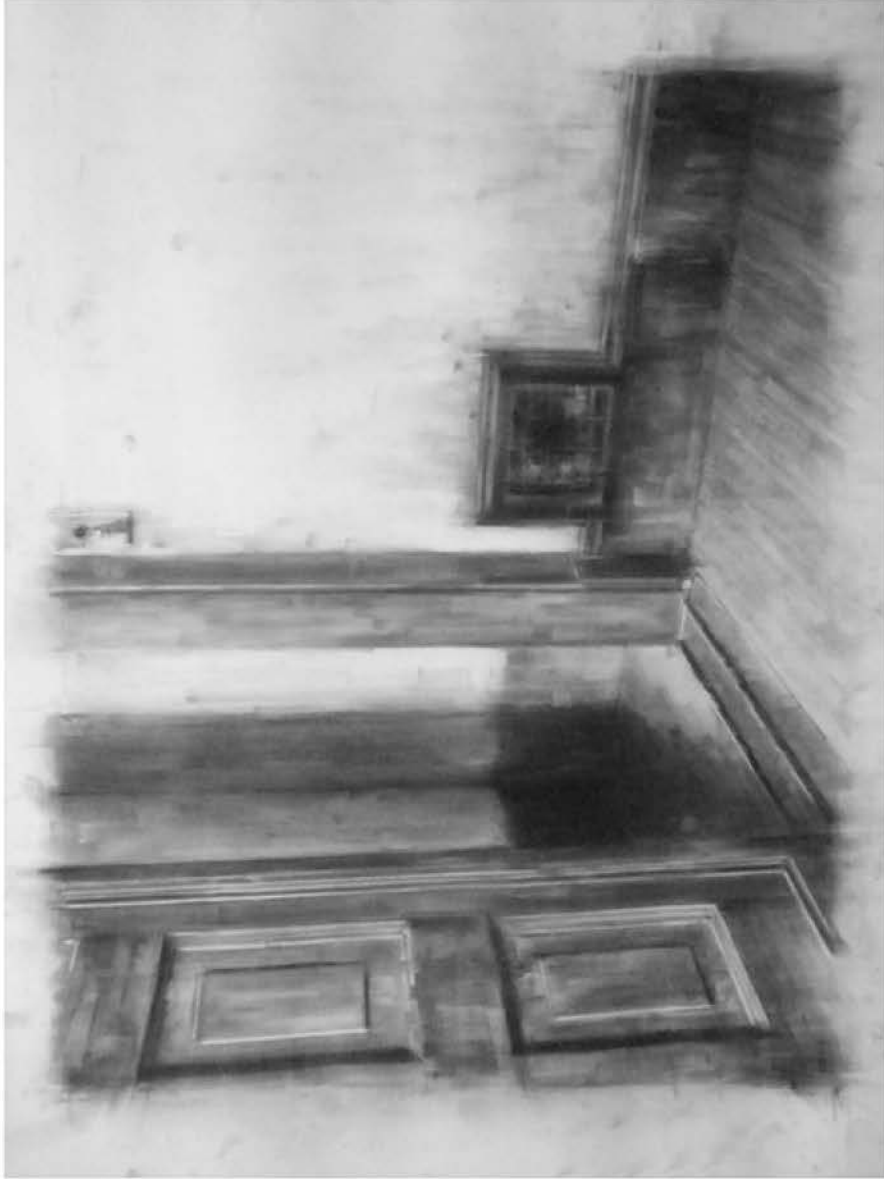


Fig. 2 *Absence of Presence*, 2011.



Fig. 3 *Fragments* - Cliff, 2012



## MFA THESIS SHOW IMAGES

01. *Boxed In I*

32" x 25 3/8"

Charcoal on Mylar

2010

02. *Shroud III*

42" x 30"

Charcoal on Mylar

2010

03. *Visual Cognition IV*

21 1/4" x 26 1/16"

Charcoal and acrylic on gessoed paper

2011

04. *Visual Cognition V*

21 3/8" x 25 3/4"

Charcoal and acrylic on gessoed paper

2011

05. *Boxed In VII – The Wait*

29 1/2" x 21 1/4"

Charcoal on gessoed paper

2011

06. *Boxed In VIII*

28" x 19 3/4"

Charcoal on gessoed paper

2011

07. *Boxed In II – Revisited*

21 3/4" x 29"

Charcoal on gessoed paper

2011

08. *To Share is to Split*

34 3/4" x 42"

Charcoal on Mylar

2012

09. *The Things I do*

36" x 42"

Charcoal, sumi ink, acrylic on Mylar

2012

10. *Fragments IV*

32" x 24"

Charcoal and sumi ink on Mylar

2012

11. *Fragments V*

42" x 28"

Charcoal and sumi ink on Mylar

2012

12. *Fragments VII*

50" x 38"

Charcoal and sumi ink on Mylar

2013

13. *Absence of Presence I*

30" x 44"

Charcoal on gessoed paper

2011

14. *1985*

24" x 18"

Charcoal, sumi ink and acrylic on Mylar

2011

15. *A Product of Our Time IV – The Sadist*

22" x 15"

Monotype

2011

16. *A Product of Our Time V – The Downtrodden*

22" x 15"

Monotype

2011

17. *Fix Me*

24" x 18"

Charcoal, sumi ink and acrylic on Mylar

2012

18. *How Did It Come to This*

24" x 18"

Charcoal, sumi ink and acrylic on Mylar

2012

19. *War All the Time I*  
37 ½" x 28"  
Charcoal and sumi ink on Mylar  
2012

20. *Baba's Borscht*  
22" x 30"  
Charcoal, sumi ink and acrylic on gessoed  
paper  
2013









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London 12





London 18























how did  
it come  
to this







