

Christian Helser
MFA Candidate: Painting
Final Thesis Paper

Memorandum

Introduction:

In this paper, I will explore the paradigms of memory by defining what memory is, how it works, how it transcends into art and culture, and how memory overtly interlaces itself into my artistic practice of painting.

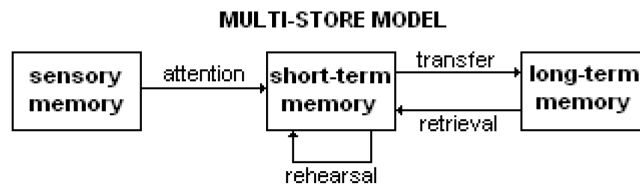
Confronted with contemporary artworks I no longer solely see subject matter. Instead, I see a duality of the subject of the image has as much to do with the memories of the artist as it does the message they are trying to convey in their work. The psychologist William James wrote in *The Principles of Psychology* when addressing the concept of memory:

Why should this God-given faculty retain so much better the events of yesterday than those of last year, and, best of all, those of an hour ago? Why, again, in old age should its grasp of childhood's events seem firmest? Why should repeating an experience strengthen our recollection of it? Why should drugs, fevers, asphyxia, and excitement resuscitate things long since forgotten? ...such peculiarities seem quite fantastic; and might, for aught we can see a priori, be the precise opposites of what they are. Evidently, then, the faculty does not exist absolutely, but works under conditions; and the quest of the conditions becomes the psychologist's most interesting task.

Memory, as James describes, focuses on the principal that memories stem from external stimuli anywhere from first experiences to the mental notation of physical features that allow us to recognize our loved ones. I note that memory is not merely exclusive to an individual, but also communitive to both communal, and historical perspectives (which I will investigate further later in the paper). Nevertheless, it is relevant to my work to define what memory is and how the activity of memory effects an individual before it can be about communal or historical or more to the subject of my artwork: Place.

Defining Memory: How is A Memory Constructed?

Acknowledging that James's description only scratches the surface of what we know as memory, which defined the field of psychology, is the process in which information is encoded, stored, and retrieved. One of the best ways to understand memory is using the Atkinson-Shiffrin Model. In 1968 Richard Shiffrin and his, academic advisor at the time, Richard Atkinson proceeded and completed original multi-store model on the cognitive abilities of human memory and its processes. Typically known as the Process of Memory/ Multi-Store Model, the model proposes a bracketing system for the collection and storage of memory and retrieval of data. The process would start as such:



In this Model, Atkinson's and Shiffrin's system states that the focus a person's conscious registers through their five senses, which if the information is deemed important enough, would then be passed to short-term memory. Now short-term memory (STM) takes the information, be it the experience of eating a new food, or seeing something abject, and cycles of the experience through itself; the encoding of the information is entirely sense specific with an enormous capacity. For a better example of STM, if I go to a gallery to view and judge an of artwork for myself displayed on a wall, or in the round, the external event of what I am perceiving is not solely a visual experience, it is an experience filtered through all five senses: seeing, hearing, touch, taste, and smell. Sensory Memory, being the most shortest-term element of memory acts as a sensory buffer of sorts, has an exceedingly high decay rate of about one-fifth to a half of a second (Mastin, 2015); which is as quick as the human eye blinking 3.5 times. (Krishna &

Amarnath, 2013). So if someone standing in the gallery starts to view an artwork, all the perceived sensations that person mind receives regulated by Sensory Memory. With Sensory Memory helping dissolve information deemed irrelevant from the encoding process, the necessary relevant information would proceed to STM.

Short-term memory (STM) accepts the information that Sensory Memory deemed significant, be it the visual of a painting, the whispers of fellow guests in the gallery, or annoying Kenny G music echoing as a part of the opening gallery reception. Similar Atkinson and Shiffrin's thoughts, short-term memory reflects on the abilities an individual's mind to grasp a restricted amount of information in a very accessible near fluid state. What should be realized is that short-term memory works exclusively with Working Memory (Miller GA, 1960), With the notable differences that "working memory" acts within STM. Furthermore, though working memory has a limited function for immediate conscious perceptual and linguistic processing. It is possible that not every temporarily imprintable memory coming through SM is, or even was, in conscious awareness. Simply put working memory is the ability residing in short-term memory, which focuses on memory-in-action. These subfunctions under STM provide the capacity to remember and use relevant information while in the middle of an activity. Additionally, anyone that is participating in an activity might or might not be conscious of the information attained during that period of mentally ingesting information. (Cowan, 2008) This very ingestion of this information is dependent not just on the structure of memory but the action of consolidation. Consolidation is the rehearsal of the details of the information given to a mind, and how a person's current cataloged memory with the relevant association for storage into long-term memory using semantic cataloging.

These semantic catalogs of long-term memory tend not to have a half-life like short-term memory does. While short-term memory has a tendency to last between fifteen to thirty seconds.

Long term memory will reside permanently in the mind, only faltering in recall when the way to articulate the information present cannot be found due to accidental misfires in the brains synapsis; or due to direct brain trauma. Moreover, while the catalogs of long-term memory have an outstanding permanence. It should be noted that memory as a whole is not a perfect system, and is not a mere form of recall. In his original book *Memory: A Very Short Introduction* Jonathan K. Foster notes the general fact that much of humanity has a tendency to have a poor memory when it comes to recalling facts in detail. This flaw is especially true for the familiar autobiographical information on common objects and information of everyday life such as people, things, or more about my artwork – places.

Autobiographical Memory: Personal Context in My Art

Defining how memories are made, I look to the autobiographical model of memory as developed by Martin A. Conway and Christopher W. Pleydell-Pearce. Their model extrapolates how memory arranges itself both in painting and as identity system in my work. In their paper: *The Construction of Autobiographical Memories in the Self-Memory System*, published in the year 2000, Conway and Pleydell-Pearce argue that memories are temporary constructs, fixed within a self-memory structure. These constructs control the processes that modulate the knowledge foundation and aspirations of the working self, and are not entirely consciously present, but are readily available in the unconscious “retrieval mode” of memory.

When illustrating what is considered an autobiographical or empirical memory like a landscape in one of my paintings, there is always a particular configuration in the recall of personal memory: lifetime periods, everyday events, and event-specific knowledge.

In the achromatic painting *South by Southwest*, the viewer sees my perspective of my family’s farm house from a South by Southwest vantage point. And although the subject matter

of a building is rather commonplace to the viewer, what I see is the history of three generations of my family. I have stood at this vantage point for many times from the outside looking in. And like reminiscing for many, when I do, I am drawn to the little details. At times, I am transported to a period when I was younger doing chores with my father. I am about five years old charged with helping my dad ritually carry cut grass, freshly cut fruit tree limbs, and thorny raspberry bush trimmings wreaking metallic smell of chlorophyll as they landed on the burn pile. I would periodically get distracted from the task at hand to daydream while eating ripe red currents from which is the same stubby bush sits by the front porch window. Just to hear my dad's voice echo off the barns calling my name to hurry up, snapping my attention back to the task, and the feeling of urgency to get back to what I was doing. I remember smelling the smoke from the pile traverse around the northeast of the estate. To this day, I think of that ritual of cutting the fruit tree limbs down and dragging them to the burn pile, and when I do, I always think of this vantage point where we would be trimming the apple trees.

This painting and the subsequent ones share the same effect of Event Specific Knowledge (ESK). Although it does not explicitly show me in an actual capacity, the image itself exhibits the place where that limited memory was formed during lifetime periods or memories that have a beginning and end. Marcel Proust wrote in his book *Swans Way*:

The places we have known do not belong solely to the world of space in which we situate them for our greater convenience. They were only a thin slice among contiguous impressions which formed our life at that time; the memory of a certain image is but regret for a certain moment; and houses, roads, avenues are as fleeting, alas, over the years. (Proust 9).

Proust, although unknowingly, explains the very notion of lifetime periods and the exhibiting of an image to formulate a greater meaning of self. Lifetime periods are not essentially objective memories but the culminated constructed consequences of our semantically cataloged long-term memories; essentially lifetime periods are the segmented memories that have

emotional attachments that make our memories relevant to us. Like many of my landscape painting derived from my digital photography, the pertinent emotional memories affiliated with my subject matter have a direct relationship in forming the attitudes for everyday events in my life.

Although General Events in context to memory have been deemed as more heterogeneous than lifetime periods. It was found by L.W. Barsalou that everyday events are encompassed by both cycled memories like me interpreting imagery in my studio every week, or prior experiences in my life such as studying in Italy (Barsalou, 1988). The memories are who we are, John Robinson as cited by (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000) also claims that many generic proceedings may also represent sets of associated events and by doing so encompass an entire cluster of memories spider webbed together by an underlying theme. (Robinson, 1992)

Place equates to memory, and memory is my topic. But memory and my creation of it stem from the underlining dynamic theme that surrounds and defines me as a person and artist. These places I present to my viewer are just an echo of personal memory that stems from a strong sense of being the progeny and need to validate my own existence in the stream of my family's legacy.

I was brought up with the oral history of how my father's side of the family affected the township of Maybee, Michigan as well as the neighboring cities of Monroe, Dundee, and Ida. I was weaned on stories of my great-grandfather Christian Helser, my namesake, was an influential politician. I was told tales of how the Helser's under the guidance of my grandfather D.F. Helser once had the largest groupings out of the family run farms in our area, constructed the local golf course for my grandmothers ambitious amusement, and how we ate what we grew from our estates. All this was matched with my mother's tales of family genealogy, stories our involvement in the abolitionist movement, immigration from Europe, and history of the Friends

Church; typically known as Quakers. Since I can remember, I have been infused with my heritage and a feeling of pressure to honor my family's legacy that always seemed to be systematically illustrated by my family's photo albums, blueprints, and recollections.

This pressure has always been a source of anxiety in my life. And although it has pressed upon me a certain amount of uneasiness, it has been a driving force for me to try and understand my identity both in and out of my family and to validate my own existence within my work. I have always felt in the gray about my family's reputation proceeding me. Many times I would have rathered my accomplishments set the tone of a conversation or introduction. Yet I cannot help but take pride that I am fortunate enough to know where I came from.

Consolidating information of photos into a catalog of personal experiences as Autobiographical memory. I first started my memory series from oral history, but after an introduction to Hilda & Bernard Becher – as well as and Dotty Atty – I slowly moved from photo albums that acted as the illustrations to many of the oral stories, to than my own digital documentation. Before I ever start working on a painting, I select a picture by going through my personal collection or explicitly attaining an image myself with one cardinal rule: In order for the image to be painted the photo must contain a Place that I have been to with relevance to my life or family legacy. And by using the only memory I truly have access to, my own, to help physically organize the emotional or barred information into a painting I look at what a photograph is. The philosopher Roland Barthes wrote in his Book *Camera Lucida* while reminiscing on the context and content of photography “whatever it grants to vision and whatever its manner, a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see.” (Barthes, 1981).

Working from a photo, or what should be viewed as the personification of my memory, to note external adapt information. Ultimately what Barthes is saying is that the subject matter in photographs, or painting for that matter, transcend the ground in which the image rests upon.

When Barthes reflects on a war photograph in *Camera Lucida*, he notices a philosophical juxtaposition in the medium of photography:

Did this photograph please me? Interest me? Intrigue me? Not even. Simply, it existed (for me) I understood at once that existence (its “adventure”) derived from the co-presence of two discontinuous elements, heterogeneous in that they did not belong to the same world (no need to proceed to the point of contrast): the soldiers and the nuns. (Barthes, 1981)

This quote brought an interest in Barthes what photography means to me. When I look at a photo of my family, friends, or land that my family has owned I have felt a degree of apposition of yearning I was there to meet all the family appointed legends that that have given me such a fortunate lease on life, and a questioning of where I stand inside the legacy in which my family leads. The emotional values that these images and my search for understanding are deemed values coined as the *studium* and *punctum*. The *Studium* indicating the cultural, linguistic, and political interpretation of a photograph or image as Barthes explains:

What I feel about these photographs derives from an *average* affect, almost from a certain training. I did not know a French word which might account for this kind of human interest, but I believe this word exists in Latin: it is *studium*, which doesn’t mean, at least not immediately, “study,” but application to a thing, taste for someone, I kind of general, enthusiastic commitment, of course, but without special acuity. It is by *studium* that I am interested in so many photographs, whether I receive them as political testimony or enjoy them as good historical scenes: for it is culturally (this connotation is present in *studium*) that I participate in the figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings, the actions. (Barthes, 1981)

Later Barthes states that the *stunum* basically a creative act that springs an outcome that allows the spectator to understand the intentionally create capacity for understanding held by the spectator; that the cultural implications of a photo being a present interest to him, as well as shapes my view that a photo I look upon of my family tends to draw me first by the interest or historical subtexts it may hold. Yet the grounding action that keeps Barthes attention, as well as

my own, is the emotional implication of the image brought on by the punctum. Defining the punctum in more detail Barthes states:

“The second element will break (or punctuate) the *studium*. This time it is not I who seek it out (as I invest the field of the *studium* with my sovereign consciousness), it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me. A Latin word exists to designate this wound, this prick, this mark made by a pointed instrument: the word suits me all the better in that it also refers to the notion of punctuation, and because the photographs I am speaking of are in effect punctuated, sometimes even speckled with this sensitive point; precisely, these marks, these wounds are so many *points*. This second element which will disturb the *studium* I shall, therefore, call *punctum*; for *punctum* is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole – and also a cast of the dice. A photograph’s *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me”’. (Barthes, 1981)

To my photos are studiums, and simply classify the real documentation objectively validating my own personal existence. Although I am not physically represented in my paintings by means of the human figure, the absence of myself or other figures is intentional. The removal of others in the image allows me to construct a picture that frames the personal memories I assumingly share with my family past and present. With this in mind every place is its own person, it’s a dialog between my own memory of an individual, and the identity I have constructed with them throughout my life. To me, the construction of each landscape allows me to frame and paint a person: Grandfather, mother, my nephew. All together my body of works subject would construct my own existence as well as catalog my family portrait; which is the perfect epitome of an enduring legacy. Yet, the punctum remains.

When I view my photos, I understand my objective is to create an image of a person I love and affiliate myself with by means of painting a place in which we share. In essence, I am

painting a portrait of that person and I together. Each place is a moment where the emotion needs to be expressed alongside the fluidity of the memory. The punctum needs to be exhibited in order to make the work whole for me, and the best way to express this is by means of painting impasto. Working thickly in paint allows me to sculpt the body, hinder the attempts of photo realism, and express the impression the subject has upon me. Not all images are clear, not all memories are relieved the same, but each bit of information prompts a stab of emotions that alternate my paint handling from thick to thin. I attribute much of my views of emotion in paint versus photography to Luc Tuymans, and how he reflects upon time and memory in the act of painting:

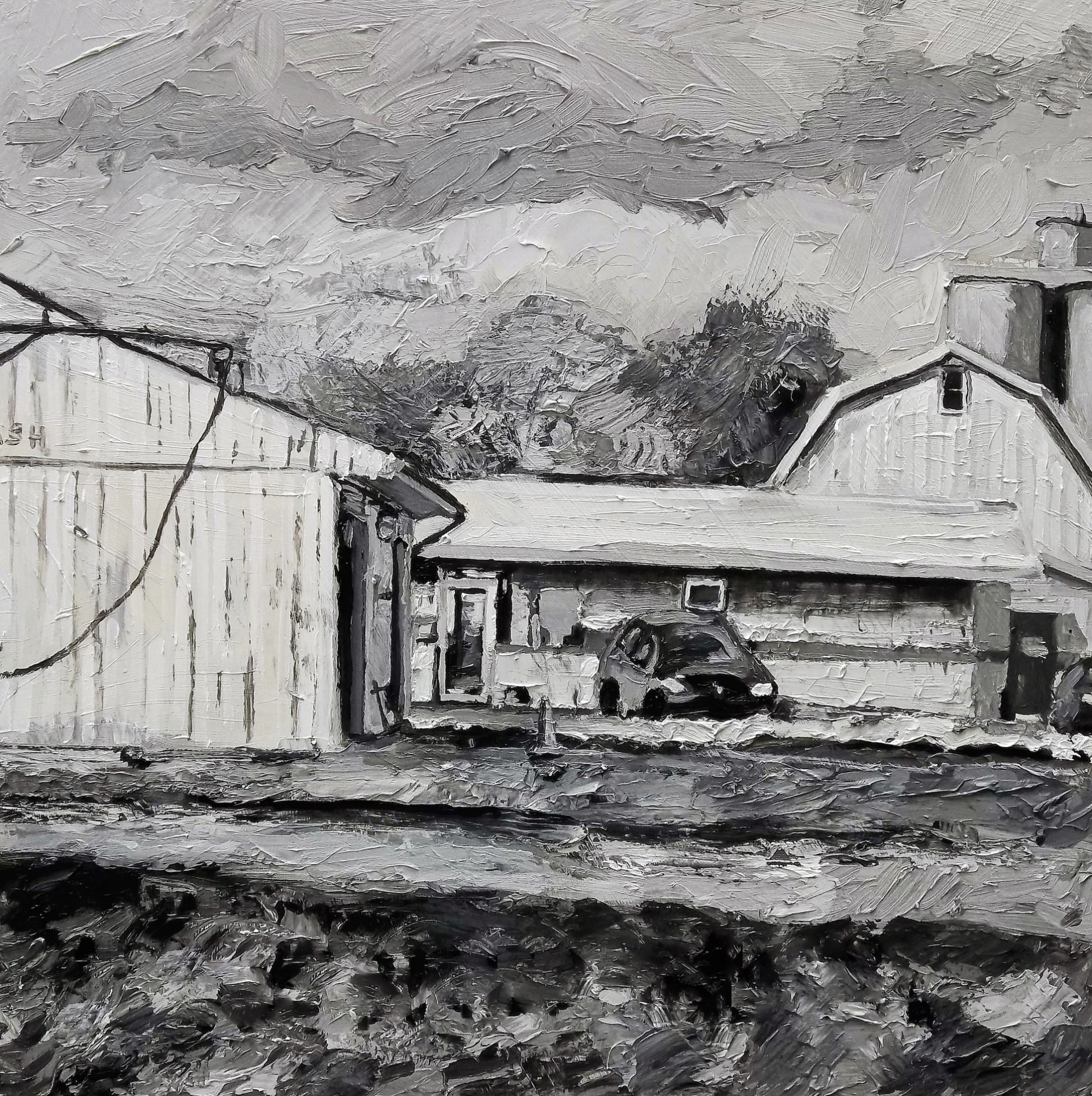
Painted time is like a different zone. This is why I don't believe that painting – although I have been accused of it many times now – can be truly topical. A painting's physicality gives it a different persistence and a different perception. If you ask people to remember a painting and a photograph, their description of the photograph is far more accurate than that of the painting. Strangely enough, there is a physical element intertwined with the painting. It shakes loose an emotional element within the viewer, which is different than with a photograph. (Mooney, 2008)

I determine that a painting memory to catalog my existence, identity, and the legacy of my life's affiliations is much more successful than simply taking a snapshot. The photo by itself has a tendency to rob me of punctum and solely prorogate it as a cold hard fact. The paradigms of my memory, how I create these lifetime moments in painting help me define what and who I am. It helps me translate my heritage into art and culture, but above all, allows me to understand and stay close to the ones I love as I have lived a transient life these past 10 years.

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West By Southwest.







Look My Way,

Please!





They Will Grow Regardless

