

Kieran Johnson
We Are Not Elephants

The art work is, a thing that is made, it says something other than the mere thing itself. The work makes public something other than itself; it manifests something other; it is an allegory. The work therefore is not the reproduction of some particular entity that happens to be present at any given time; it is, on the contrary, the reproduction of the thing's general essence.

- Martin Heidegger, "Origin of the Work of Art"
Being and Time, 1978

We Are Not Elephants is a body of work dealing with the idea of essence and memory. The body of work is comprised of constructed realities of my own memories and associations about people. The act of constructed reality typically implies that an artist is creating a reality other than his or her own. In my constructs I do not intend to create an alternate reality but a reality of remembrance and disclosure. The work is a visual representation of my memories about these people. They are my friends, my family, and also my colleagues. Each person represents an element or an idea that I find important to society and our understanding of each other. People are the dearest and most important memories we have. The act of taking a picture of someone traditionally implies that importance. But in an age of massive amounts of digital point and shoot cameras, Facebook, MySpace, flickr, Twitter and YouTube the act of just taking a picture of someone does not have the same cognitive effect that film and similar processes had in the past. The act of taking a picture has turned to just that, a taking. The act of portraiture has taken on this machine gun process of limited care and precision in exchange for massive amounts of images. I was told once while working at a portrait studio, "Stop trying for the 'A' shot, it takes too long and you will miss something. We need lots of 'B' shots in order to not miss anyone." To just take a picture of these important people is not enough, there needs to be the extra care and the extra step to show my emotive response to these people. The stand-alone

images do not seem to make a statement about these people, so much as they are a piece of them, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire (Sontag, Susan).

The act of construction creates the object, like a monument. The monument acts as the object that says, “This person was here.” Much like other memorials and markers about people of the past, the only way we see and understand these constructs is through the eye of the lens. Many people know what the Washington Monument, The Vietnam Memorial, or even the *Mona Lisa* look like. They may not know these objects by seeing them in person but rather in pictures taken by someone else. Those pictures can be deceiving due to the nature of scale, angle, light or a reaction to how the object struck them. The picture becomes a cognitive object of memory and experience.

The act of how these images are created also relates to how memories are formed and preserved. According to contemporary memory studies the mind does not hold exact information, verbatim memory, in your long-term memory. Rather those exact details are stored in your short-term memory. What we understand as long-term memory is the relationship, through series of experiences, known as gist memory (Reyna, V. F. & Brainerd, C. J.).

These vignettes that I create are a culmination of a series of “snapshots”. Numerous exposures of these people and their surroundings are taken, approximately 100 captures in various formats and mediums. This bracketing of images also relates to philosopher Edmund Husserl’s explanation of the forming of new memories. He says that the knowledge of essence and memory would only be possible by “bracketing” all assumptions about the existence of an external world (Merleau-Ponty, A.: *Phenomenology of Perception*). That play between photographic bracketing, the act of using a variety of exposures to make sure you achieve the correct one, and philosophical bracketing, the act of culminating different experiences to understand one, is an intriguing and driving comparison. The act of using different photographic tools combined with the different

angles and shots allows for the combining of philosophical and photographic bracketing. The objects and environments are transformed from a three-dimensional to a two-dimensional form. The images are scanned or processed, printed out on large contact sheets and then the puzzle process begins; sorting out what are the most important aspects of this person, and what they call home, and most exemplifies who they are. The images are then cut apart and set into a newly created environment usually not resembling how their home environment is literally laid out, but a physiological scape.

The use of the cutout paper figures allows for a visual play with the viewer. When things fit together just so in the images, which is from a distance, the image appears as a straight photograph. With closer viewing you start to see a change and all the construction and the cutout nature of the figures. Space and the understanding of space start to fall apart and the viewer is forced to compare it to how it previously acted, possibly causing the viewer to retreat back into the comfort of a viewing distance where the image reverts back into straight photography. That back and forth happens the same way when we try to remember events. The harder we try to remember, the more difficult it becomes and our minds retreat back into gist memory in order to compensate for the lack of verbatim memory. The person and the place become one entity and form a kind of environmental portrait. This idea that the inanimate and the mentality of the person are connected is deeply rooted in our language and visual history. The inanimate and the un-cognitive other of people has been linked together in cultural artifacts ranging from such stories as *The Yellow Wallpaper* or *Portrait of Dorian Grey*, to cult classics as the *Amityville Horror* or *The Shining*, to phrases such as “read you like a book” or “the eyes are windows to the soul”.

I enjoy the use of archways, doors, cabinets, and mirrors as the entering points and framing devices within the photographs. They create a kind of grotto construction, relating them

to icons and relics of art history. These devices allow for an intimate engagement with the subject. It places the viewer in the environment of the subject allowing for a certain kind of comfort and view as a friend and not a voyeur. The subject for the most part is vulnerable but due to the constructed nature of the image they are aware of the viewer or photographer.

Another device used to disassemble the feeling of voyeurism is the use of the view camera to capture the shots. The focus of the image cuts diagonally through numerous layers and parts of the film, unlike the traditional depth of field in smaller format cameras that is parallel to the film plane. This creates a disjuncture between near and far as certain objects in both planes are in focus but physically cannot be. The idea of a fixed focus in photographic history ranges from the f/64 group with their grand depth of field to such contemporaries as David Levinthal and Adam Baer with their very shallow depth of field. Both these techniques hold the same ideals, the fixed focus to attain the one image. Both techniques conceal and reveal in their own ways. This could be viewed as the use of the view camera to portray what the eye wants to perceive but also is used to show the photographic and constructed nature of the image.

The cut focus of the image allows for a slippage between a perceived “real” photograph and a constructed photograph. It is in this slippage that I feel the voyeuristic side of these images slides away. When the viewer can be comforted by the fact they are not seeing an actual person then they have nothing to feel ashamed about. The subject, because of the photographic and re-photographic process, loses some of their essence and becomes an image. This again allows for the image to become not a strict portrait but an image or monument to this person.

The cut focus also causes a visual vignette, a darkening around certain corners due to lack of coverage caused by the focus being adjusted “too far.” This device acts as that lucid switch between the memory, the awake and the real. Much in the same way, old silent movies used the vignette to show the opening and closing of the eye, it gives the viewer a placement in proximity

to the subject. You are viewing from my eyes towards these people. That odd half-open/half-closed shape shows a weird meeting point between what is real and what is not. The question starts to arise about what is the reality of this image.

The objects captured are the single images projected and exposed on the ground glass. The images exist only through that divorcing from the realistic. The ground glass images exist as a thing onto themselves, much like a memory, specific and distinct to themselves. Ansel Adams says, neither a photograph nor a memory is a mere simulation to the view before us.

All of this boils down to one real question; *why am I doing this?* Since my teens it seems that I hear of at least two people close to me dying each year; not just elderly family members or friends of the family but of my peers and friends who were not older than me. That is a shocking realization and confrontation with mortality. Therefore I wanted to explore these works much like philosopher Roland Barthes wanted to explore photography, I wanted to explore these not as questions but as wounds: I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, I think, and lastly I try to remember (Barthes, Roland). At funerals there is always this need to remember things about the person. The funeral parlor is filled with pictures and objects and friends. These are the things that make up what we remember about a person. But what do we want people to remember about us?

I try considering that when taking time to take the original source pictures and when I start to construct the set. What did the person tell me they want to be remembered for and how would I remember them and where do those two ideas intersect? In the end we are just what people tell someone we were. It is never us who tells someone who we are after we are gone.

I want to create the work in order to remember these people not just as a set of snapshots and arguments whether it was coffee or tea that they spilled in some inane story. It isn't what matters, what matter is the proof of existence and the creation of something that shows them that they are remembered and someone took the time to make something important about them. The

work hopefully shows that a person should not be only raised and praised after they pass but also while they are still with us. What is the point of showing a person how much they meant after they have passed? I want people to know now.

There are two sayings that have stuck with me while making this work, both from my mother. “Mourn the dead, but remember to move on.” and “Don’t leave angry, you don’t know if the other person will get hit by a bus.” Art is usually comprised of a combination of *what we want*, *what we don’t understand* and *what we fear*. Hence, this work is not entirely made about those who have passed, some of which I still *don’t understand* how it happened, or those dying, who I *wanted* to stay around, but those who are still here, who I have a *fear* of passing. This work is the creation of celebratory objects representing people who I never want to take for granted; a grandparent, a mother, father, brother, best friend, significant other, family friend, or a close colleague.

I would hope the viewer could make this kind of comparison to their own friends and family and see that they too have these kinds of people in their own lives that shape who they are.

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