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Places of Personal Past: Recollecting Memories Through a Landscape

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COLLEGE OF FINE ART

PLACES OF PERSONAL PAST:
RECOLLECTING MEMORIES THROUGH A LANDSCAPE

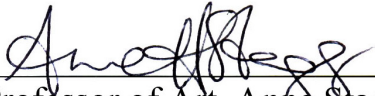
By

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The members of the Defense Committee approve the thesis that Karina Raquel Mago defended on April, 26, 2017



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Memory is an ever-changing variable within the individual experience. It allows one to travel back in time and can serve as a tool to explore, analyze, and grow from past events. However, memories are also uncertain, and fleeting. Influenced by pre-conceived notions, and subjective perceptions, not only are memories inherently biased but also revised each time they are recalled. Because of this, we are constantly melding our notions on how an event transpired with how we wish it had transpired. I believe that, in order to better grasp one's sense of the present self, one must first reflect back, and come to terms with recollections of the past.

For my Honors project, I created a series of paintings that seek to depict the scene of some of my most pivotal memories in a way that maintains both the location of the landscape, and the events that occurred within that landscape, vague and undisclosed. I distill the elements of each landscape, abstracting it into an assortment of basic forms and colors. The objective is to depict an unknown yet familiar space, a scene that can transport any individual into introspective analysis. I believe that by painting these vacant spaces, I created a platform onto which a viewer could project their own experiences and recollections. Within this paper I aim to situate my paintings within a contemporary framework, while referencing theoretical psychological academic writings and historical references. Through a formal analysis, I will explain how elements such as color, perspective, surface, and materiality play a role within the conceptual idea of the work. I place my paintings within an academic context by examining some of the psychological literature that address autobiographical memory, memory creation, recollection, and inherent bias of memory. Last, I will explain how the work is in dialogue with other artists and how their work influenced this series. I believe that by understanding the way in which memory has been examined so far through an academic lens, I can better illustrate memories and

how they work. I hope to create a series of landscapes that catapult the viewer into an introspective journey.

Formal Analysis

The series consists of six, oil painted, 3'x3' wood panels. Each individual panel showcases an otherworldly, fragmented landscape that is based off different personal experiences. The locations are stylized depictions of collective memories I associate with those places. Although shown in sequence, the paintings purposefully lack a narrative. The shape of the panels, a square, removes the imposed reading direction from the paintings, and some elements within all of the spaces depicted were purposefully painted so that they could be read from multiple perspectives. This presentation of seemingly uncategorized, disjointed events was conceived around the need to provide a varied representation of different locations and to mimic loosely connected recollections. By proposing a range of differing spaces, I believe that the series becomes more generalized and universal, allowing a wider audience a greater chance of inspiring a connection to their own memories within each painting.

The vibrancy of the oil paint and its glossy finish sharply contrasts against the matte finish of the background surface. This collision of surfaces helps to flatten the space, leaving only the forms themselves to provide a sense of perspective. By leaving areas of the wood panel unpainted, I activate the negative space surrounding the depicted scapes, and draw them further away from a realistic space. The background, which remains untreated to show the natural color of the wood, provides a unifying void for these otherwise unconnected settings to float within. The land forms meld, twist, and grow within their own isolated spaces, and although disconnected from each other, they co-exist within the same wooden void. By having each of the

landmasses represent distinct memories, the emptiness they are found within can serve to represent the consciousness of the viewer. The grain of the wood also aids as a mild level of visual noise, providing substance to an otherwise empty background. The commonality of wood lends itself to relatability. By establishing the wood grain pattern as a shared component throughout the series, I reinforce viewer's familiarity with the material.

The highly saturated color used throughout the landscapes places them within an alternate reality. As mentioned before, the work was created using oil paints, a medium that lends itself to vibrancy and shine. Within each panel, I wanted to use loud, bright colors because I feel that a brighter color is more likely to leave an impression in one's memories. However, it should be noted that our perception of color is just as biased as memories themselves. In Barbara L. Miller's *"He" had me at Blue: Color Theory and Visual Art*, she explains how color is perceived by the human eye, and the many personal and environmental factors that might affect how we see it. For example, she begins by describing how photons are a form of energy that, when they encounter objects, will split within the spectrum of light and become either absorbed or reflected. The color we perceive is the electromagnetic energy that was reflected off the object.¹ These reflected energy particles are then absorbed by an individual's retina, and the received sensory information is transferred to the visual cortex.² These aspects make color practically impossible to be the same from one person to another, since the assortment of cells within the retina vary from one individual to another. Like memories, perceived colors are ultimately unique to each

¹ Barbara L. Miller. "'He' Had Me at Blue: Color Theory and Visual Art." *Leonardo* 47 (2014): 461-465. <https://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed April 23, 2017).

² Miller, "'He' Had Me at Blue" n/a

individual. For this reason, the colors of my paintings become less about representation, and more about creating an emotional reaction in the viewer.

Although devoid of human inhabitation, the landscapes are brimming with unnatural light. The forms within each space are highlighted by a undisclosed source, a light that exists just outside the frame of the paintings themselves. I believe that, by maintaining a degree of separation between the source of atmospheric tension and the viewer, the vagueness of the space is reaffirmed. I also utilize the highlights as a tool for introducing the emotions I have associated with the memories of these places. For example, in the second painting of the series, Figure 1, the soothing tones of moss green give way to a soiled yellow ochre; acidic green light defines the outline of disassembling bricks, which in turn shatter crimson tinted windows. Alone, these colors may not create tension but by combining them, and a precarious composition, I sought to achieve a sense of unease and discomfort. The inspiration for depicting an uncomfortable scene comes from the need to illustrate both positive and negative memories within this series. Just because the emotions depicted are unpleasant to me, doesn't lessen their importance within my experience. Instead, by exploring the cause of the negative emotion, and the effects it has had in my life, I have grown from the experience. In turn, by maintaining the subject of negativity unknown to the viewer, they themselves might be inclined to have a negative memory from which they can learn and grow.

Theoretical Analysis

Memories are fickle. To try to depict a memory one has to take into consideration the fact that all memory is innately skewed and subject to change. This aspect of memory is explained by the idea that all past recollections are filtered through the influence of our present knowledge, beliefs, and feelings.³ Furthermore, these biases are also what makes one's recollections so uniquely personal, because our perceptions and experiences of a moment are what tint and change its recollection. As stated by Ollivier Dyens' *The Sadness of the Machine*, "the [mind] not only reads the surrounding world (leaving traces of itself in it), it also bestows meaning on it and this meaning originates from memories". Dyens proposes that, since the mind is both receiving the information (an event, a feeling, a color), and interpreting it, it will also assign our own preconceived notions to its transcription into our memory. This makes the world created by the mind one whose meaning and depth comes solely from those subjective memories.⁴ The accumulation of those subjective memories becomes the foundation for one's perceived reality. This is also what makes the study of memory so important. Without memories, one could argue that there is no self, since it is those memories affecting one's current view on a situation, and how one might remember it.

I chose landscapes because I felt that scenery is more relatable than an actual event, and because landscapes are what we often associate with the memory of a place. For a place to have meaning, as defined by Panita Karamanea, it must not only consist of natural and constructed elements. Karamanea explains that "places" require also the history and associations attached by those who relate to it. This makes a place important to an individual because our sense of identity

³ Ollivier Dyens, "The Sadness of the Machine," in *Memory: Documents of Contemporary Art*, edited by Ian Farr, 75-79

⁴ Schacter, "The Seven Sins of Memory" 76

may be tied to that space.⁵ In the series, the landscapes are generalized to try to circumvent this requirement for place. My goal was to depict a scape that is impartial, a scene in which the viewer has no tie to what it is supposed to depict, only what it could depict. The landscapes are representations of my prejudiced recollections, tinted by my view of the world. However, I distilled most aspects of these memories down to stylized impressions so that they could be detached from my personal bias. An example can be seen in the fourth painting on the series, depicted in Figure 2. In this painting, two bands of color dissect the composition, lined by trees that extend beyond the field of vision. The candy-colored structures arranged along one of bands become a suggestion for distance, but also allude to a small street, vendors in a line, a receding neighborhood. The forms are relatable enough to place them within our accepted reality, but sufficiently ambiguous, allowing the viewer to make their own assumptions.

To study memory is to come to terms with the events that have happened in the past and to understand how that might affect one's outlook of the present. The study of the benefits in recollecting negative memories (or any memory) has been a source of controversial theoretical discourse. In the article *Remembering the Historical Roots of Remembering the Personal Past*, Susan Bluck explains some of the pioneers in Psychological theory regarding the personal past. She defines the term *personal past* as the study of why and how individuals reflect and recall their own personal experiences.⁶ According to Bluck, the tide is constantly shifting between the notion that delving too deep into the personal past is a great method for self-betterment and acceptance, or that it is only a source for possible ruinous, escapist obsessions with the past. I

⁵ Panita Karamanea, "Landscape, memory and contemporary design," *Craft + design enquiry* 7 (2015): 114-134.

⁶ Susan Bluck, "Remembering the Historical Roots of Remembering the Personal Past," *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 28 (2014): 290-300.

agree with the former. I believe that not only is it necessary to study one's past, but also one needs to come to term with those memories and utilize them as an opportunity for personal growth. Amongst the researchers noted within Bluck's article, James Birren is most influential to my line of research. In his work, Birren provided evidence that "the content of one's personal past could be actively remembered, reviewed, and re-evaluated, leading to beneficial psychological outcomes and self- integration."⁷ By acknowledging the potential of positive learning, and accepting the possibility of a painful recollection, he was able to focus more on the subjective interpretation (and its subsequent meaning) of an individual's past.

Art Historical Analysis

In art history, memory is a widely accepted as a subject matter for work. However, in this section, I will be analyzing the work of art historical and contemporary artists that inspired the series and its concept. By looking at other artists working within a similar vein of thought, I am able to borrow which aspects of their work I find most successful, digest them, and implement the result within my series.

The first artist I really related to was German painter Neo Rauch. Rauch's work attempts to showcase a collapsing economy, and the rebuilding of the landscape, during an era filled with inner-state unrest.⁸ His work utilizes layers of imagery that are imbedded with subtle symbolism, all existing within a timeless moment. He utilizes jarring perspectives and disconnected

⁷ Bluck, "Remembering the Historical Roots of Remembering the Personal Past" 293-294

⁸ Hans-Werner Schmidt, foreword to *Neo Rauch: Paintings*, edited by Hans-Werner Schmidt (Munich: Hatje Cantz, 2010), 4-5.

compositions to place the paintings within a dream-like reality. According to Hans Schmidt, “the site of [Rauch’s] canvas becomes a crystallization point for all those images that circulate in the pictorial memory without boundary or restraint [...]”⁹ Rauch’s odd, puzzling scenes leave the viewer with little referential information to work with, purposefully pushing the viewer into the uncomfortable unknown. He depicts mundane objects in a generic way, often omitting labeling and packaging of any sort. However, he will sometimes include snippets of text, or even the title of the piece itself, within the pictorial plane. These fragments of text often serve as a clue for decoding the rest of the symbolism of the piece. In this regard, my work drastically differs. In Rauch’s work, the inclusion of text is a valuable tool for both embedding and decoding meaning within the piece. However, I don’t wish the viewer to have any hints as to what the landscape depicted might stand for. Lastly, I appreciate Rauch’s limited yet vibrant color palette, since it serves to emphasize the meaning and necessity of each color. Similarly, in my work, I found myself limiting my color palette to contrasting dual tones, so that I could drive the sense of conflicting emotions throughout the work. An example of this technique being utilized by Rauch can be observed in his piece titled *Reiter*. As demonstrated through Figure 3, in this painting, the sickly yellow ochre becomes the main hue of the entire piece, but it is the hot pink coats that draw your eye in first. Further, Rauch turns the expectation of the hot pink color on its head by making it the source of tranquility within the piece. The figures clothed in satin fuchsia are blissfully unaware of the potential danger lurking behind them. Likewise, in my paintings I try to

⁹ Hans-Werner Schmidt, “The Power of the Untimely- Neo Rauch: Painter of the Present” in *Neo Rauch: Paintings*, edited by Hans-Werner Schmidt, 9

utilize combinations of non-representative colors to generate the tension that Rauch achieves in *Reiter*.

Unlike Rauch, American painter Edward Hopper was not painting fragmented spaces, nor was he caught within a tumultuous, segregated Cold War Germany. Instead Hopper, born in 1882, was a realist painter that created quiet, contemplative scenes out of a budding “Jazz Age” New York City.¹⁰ His paintings depicted impenetrable rooms and empty streets, inhabited by somber figures lost within their own selves. I find this quiet stillness and emptiness instigates a more fervent line of pondering. To me, Hopper’s paintings achieve the perfect balance between inaction and reaction that I desire within my own series. Another interesting aspect to Hopper’s paintings is his removal of architectural details. As Carol Troyen states in her essay “*The Sacredness of Every Fact*”: *Hopper’s Pictures of the city*, “The painting[s] [are] a digest of urban architecture”. By calling the a “digestion”, Troyen explain that these paintings are not just a representation of how the landscape was, but also an interpretation of how Hopper perceived the places to be. As seen in Figure 4, he utilized diminishing of detail to lessen the importance of the elements within the landscape that he found disconcerting. When referring to his 1927 work titled *The City*, Troyen explains that the most ornate building in the picture was completely aggrandized, “an ornate and massive architectural style very much out of fashion in the streamlined 1920’s”.¹¹ To me, the diminishing of details also generalizes the place, and allows it be much more accessible. As he paints brightly lit laundromats, shops on a warm afternoon and

¹⁰ Carol Troyen “The Sacredness of Everyday Fact: Hopper’s Pictures of the City” in *Edward Hopper*, edited by Sarah McGaughey Tremblay and Mark Polizzotti, 111-143.

¹¹ Troyen, “Pictures of the City” 111

glimpses into neighboring windows, the viewer is able to project themselves within the space because it is familiar to some, but relatable to all. Similarly, in my paintings, I want the space to be foreign enough to invite curiosity, while being referential enough to still be an applicable reality.

To conclude, memories are that which gives meaning to the self. Although subject to bias, recollections of past events are what gives meaning to current events, and shape one's perception of future events. However, because of their ever-changing nature, these memories are incredibly personal, and only available to each individual. In my paintings, colorful landmasses depict vague scenes of my personal past. By creating uninhabited memory landscapes, I hope to provide a platform onto which the viewer will be as inspired as I was to revisit memories long forgotten.

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Fig. 1, Mago, Karina, *Untitled*, Fall 2016, oil on panel, 3'x3'



Fig 2. Mago, Karina, *Untitled*, Fall 2016, oil on panel, 3'x3'



Fig. 3, Rauch, Neo, *Reiter*, 2010, oil on canvas, 118 1/8"x82 5/8"



Fig.4, Hopper, Edward, *The City*, 1927, oil on canvas, 27 1/2"x 37", Housed in the University of Arizona Museum of Art.