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Records and States; memory explored through process and narrative

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RECORDS AND STATES
Memory explored through process and narrative

A Thesis
Presented to
The Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
Printmaking

by
Rachael Marie Madeline
December 2007

Accepted by:
Sydney Cross, Committee Chair
Todd McDonald
Mike Vatalaro
ABSTRACT

These series of prints, *Records* and *States*, demonstrate an investigation into memory through process and narrative. Each body of work serves as a documentation of memory, operating through differing visual vocabularies. The content and process relies on remembering and repeating a matrix to express the traces of memory.

*Records* are a body of information based on past events, compiled and preserved to represent the passage of time through the use of text and numerical symbols. This is a literal and metaphorical association; the process is a time consuming and meditative endeavor whose visual results represent the construction and breakdown of time and memory.

*States* are descriptive of the condition of someone or something at a moment in time. The subject is repeated in different scenarios, always with a similar outcome; while separation from the past experience is seemingly the ultimate goal, the figures discover that they still maintain connections to the past.

Both series operate in various modes to express an event, dealing with change and loss, separation and isolation. My conceptual basis arises from past experience, relying on observations and memory. I attempt to describe the disconnect that occurs between people and places over the course of time.
DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to the memory of Mary Lou and Ronald Wheland.
I would like to acknowledge my family, without whose constant support and encouragement I would not be here. I thank Andrea Feeser, whose guidance encouraged my research into the field of art and memory. Thank you to my thesis committee, Syd, Mike and Todd, for helping me to refine the verbal counterpart to the visual, and pushing me to build upon my words and work. I especially want to extend my gratitude to my thesis chair, advisor, and professor Sydney Cross, who has helped me develop as an artist and a teacher.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TITLE PAGE</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF PLATES</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. MINING THE PAST</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. RECORDS</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual basis</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process as Content</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. STATES</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual basis</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative as Content</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. PRINTMAKING</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woodcut</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF PLATES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td><em>Breathing (365 Days)</em>, type, pins, 60” x 8”</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>detail, <em>Breathing (365 Days)</em></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td><em>Expulsion</em>, monotype, ballpoint pen, 54” x 27.5”</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td><em>The Great Escape I</em>, woodcut, 44” x 31”</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td><em>Walking With a Ghost</em>, woodcut, 50” x 26”</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td><em>Those In High Places Keep the Most Secrets</em>, woodcut, 50” x 26”</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER ONE

MINING THE PAST

These series of prints, *Records* and *States*, are an exploration of memory, particularly those associated with separation, distance and isolation. Each body of work serves as a documentation of memory, operating with different visual vocabularies. *Records* are a documentation of physical activity based around the memory of an experience, while *States* are narrative depictions for the audience to experience. Both series operate in various modes to express an event, dealing with presence and absence, decomposition and preservation. The visual information constituting the work is largely divergent, ranging from numbers and text running through space to narrative pictorial scenarios. Memory is the starting point for my conceptual basis; it is how I access the information used to inform the content and subject matter, expressing periods of time through static means. I attempt to describe the disconnect that occurs between people and places over the course of time.
CHAPTER TWO

RECORDS

Conceptual Basis

Records are a body of information based on past events, compiled and preserved to represent the passage of time through the use of text and numerical symbols. This is both a literal and metaphorical association. The process is a time consuming meditative endeavor whose visual results represent the construction and breakdown of time and memory. It is a solitary activity that becomes a method of separation from reality. Agnes Martin work operated for her in a similar vein; creating the work is a way of leaving the present behind for a moment. Through this disconnection I can focus my concentration on the repetitive action of stamping, typing or sewing. These actions document the passage of time, at once facilitating a connection and separation from the past. In this way, like Martin, I produce a material work from an immaterial idea. The result of my efforts is a log of sequential and repetitive symbols representing memory; the visual output represents the recording and subsequent fading of the impression, which in turn references time and how memories become less distinct as it elapses.

The creation of this series serves as a reflection on time spent in relationships. I physically and even ritualistically create a system of mark making to represent and code the experience. These works are stores of coded information that draw connections between the past and present based on separation, distance and loss. Abstracting the subject matter protects information that is private or sensitive. The process and presentation inform the content. These prints displayed in the same manner one might
encounter a specimen, encased in thick shadowboxes, delicately pinned and suspended from the surface. Their appearance invites the audience to closely inspect these pieces and allow them to interpret the content beyond my own experience due to the nature of their abstraction.

The size of the work is roughly sixty inches unframed, a reference to my height. The size and shape of the paper relates to my space and becomes a part of my environment. I interact with the length the entire time, an experience that is turned over to the viewer in presentation. I have connected these pieces to human experience not only through concept (creation of records based on past experience) but also through scale and the apparent handmade feeling each piece holds, though the instrument to create them is mechanical in origin. There are subjective variations in each piece based upon my own influence including the speed at which I type, the relative lightness or heaviness of my hand on the tool and the velocity of my breath.

The imagery and medium, as well as the formal elements, are significant to each work. The format of *Records* serves several purposes; it references the layout of timelines and growth charts, methods of linear measurement for past occurrences. The scroll-like paper also references story telling, an implement apparent, amongst others, in the printed work of Nancy Spero. The viewer is clued in to the fact they are observing a body of information through format and the way in which the data is ordered, left to right, top to bottom. The pattern of type and stamp follow the layout of written records. The visual information used to document the experience is pared down to minimal elements.
Process as Content

Mining the past serves as the basis for a system of counting within *Records*; breaking time into periods which can be documented through mark making systems, giving them physical form. The process of creating the mark records the memory while at the same time recording the time it took to create. The numbers and text in the work are produced from an electric typewriter and automatic self-numbering stamp. The stamping is a symbolic distancing of myself from the memory through a mode of documentation and a literal removal of the hand by mechanical process. The format, process and visual material in each piece support the content.

The typewriter and numerical stamp create pattern and rhythm that is steady; the constancy of the elements begins to reference something else. *Records* are tied to repetitive process, the labor and time of creating the piece becomes another layer of meaning. The seriality of the mark’s pattern begins to reference strata, landscape, and scales, even stitches. Artist Justin Quinn utilizes an E letter stamp in works in a similar conceptual manner; one constant element is repeatedly hammered into a copper plate, the rhythm and sequence of marks act to describe the emotion text provokes through reading (his is based on Melville’s *Moby Dick*). The flow of letters across the finished etching read subjectively, the marks replaces information and acts as a conduit for written information. In my work, the type slightly impresses the paper and slowly fades in and out is a gentle form of flowing repetition, akin to breathing. Each mark separated individually is relatively mundane, symbolic of the seconds and minutes of a day. Once
combined, the overlap becomes significant of how time passes, events happening simultaneously and fading from our memory.

The mechanical method of reproduction that feels automatic in action results in marks more closely linked to human influence; the speed and force used for each imprint is anything but static. Visual interest, movement and depth are created through layering and frequency of the stamped mark, coupled with the amount of ink remaining on the tool’s surface. The stamped zeroes in some pieces appear in varying states of value and regularity creating tone and texture through the overlap and layering of information. The deviating nature of the mark unifies to form a chaotic yet rhythmic read. I relate this flow of information to the way memory is formed and subsequently forgotten.

My studio practice sets limits for each piece based on scale, layout, process and form of mark. This is apparent in *Breathing*, a long scroll containing the word typed over and over through the length of the piece, until the ribbon of the typewriter runs dry. This action mirrors the steady activity for which it is named, repeated until eventually ceasing. The ribbon running dry and text fading into the paper becomes symbolic of the end of life and a return to emptiness. The repetition of the word breathing creates rhythm throughout the length of the piece becoming analogous to the act itself. It is tied to a cyclical and sustaining process, not unlike the passage of time, days and years. The pins running along the edge and suspending the piece are numbered to 365, referencing the amount of days in a year whose cycle of numbering starts over each year.
1. *Breathing (365 Days)*, type, 8” x 60”  

2. detail, *Breathing (365 Days)*
The repetitive nature of each piece for the most part is mechanically constructed. The mark replaces the memory in the present, recording past information on the page while also documenting the time and type of labor it took to create. In *Expulsion*, the media is used to illustrate the activity of breathing. The dots or periods are made using ballpoint pens that are cut open and blown through, projecting ink from the barrel to the surface of the print. It is about silence and the removal, or expelling, of the past. This is symbolized through the exhalation used to propel the ink onto the monotype plate. The surface consists of a series of dots, varying in size depending on the amount of ink remaining in the barrel and the velocity of my breath.

3. *Expulsion*, monotype, ballpoint pen, 27” x 54”
The visual information is organized similarly to *Breathing*, the marks heavier at the top and then breaking down towards the base of the piece. The shape of the dots reference punctuation, periods or commas. They line up left to right, up and down, following the structure of text, however, there are no words, only a continuous field suggesting breaths and pauses. The monotype is made of oil-diluted ink in combination with ballpoint pen ink, both of which stains and sink into the paper, eventually causing surface discoloration and decomposition. I chose this media due to its association to writing; I used to pen’s ink to communicate through symbolic visual organization rather than words, the period symbolizing the end of one thought and beginning of another.

The implemented process for the *Records* series embodies time while attempting to describe it to the viewer, the fading of ink signals the fading of memory. The sequential and repetitive mark making systems developed symbolize linear movement, alluding to written documents in their structure. These works are documents of my experiences, which I actively participate in through studio constructs I create for each piece.
CHAPTER THREE

STATES

Conceptual Basis

States deals with memory and past experience through the narrative structure. This series of work deals with relationships and the attempt to remove and separate from an experience, a struggle between presence and absence. The prints are narrative interpretations of these experiences, the environment and figures operating to manifest feelings towards a place or person, behaving metaphorically and descriptive of an emotional state. The subject matter drawn from domestic objects suggest a level of comfort, familiarity. Their relationships to each other are indicated through similar handling of form and placement. The compositions depict experiences with separation and change through choice or loss. The audience can relate to the imagery through the fact that in most cases there are opposing forces at work, and are asked interpret situation through the contextual clues.

The prints are a result of questioning the past and a way of reflecting these experiences through the creation of imagery descriptive of this experience. Just as Louise Bourgeois uses personal history and memory as a conceptual basis for her art, I reference my own past within the prints; however, the source experience stems from adult rather than childhood. Through using my own memory to inform the pieces, they take on qualities of a narrative. The structure of the works relate in this way to a story-telling or illustrative background. The performative aspects of the figures in arrangement invite the viewer to interpret the story behind the piece based on their own associations.
Narrative as Content

The subjects are repeated in different environments with similar outcomes; while separation from the past experience is the ultimate goal, as described through the forms straining, walking or floating away, the figures in *States* discover they still maintain connections to the past. For example, in *Walking With a Ghost*, the figure is hunched over, walking toward the end of the area visually available to us. It is followed closely by a shadow figure, whose shape echoes that of the subject but has been transformed through the addition of spider legs, appearing distorted and overpowering in comparison. The main figure is attempting to exit or leave but finds it impossible to move from its place due to strings tying it down. This staked bond, though seemingly simple to undo, is symbolic of remaining tied to the past, the lingering shadow an allusion of what haunts our memories.

4. *Walking With a Ghost*, woodcut, 50” x 26”
The forms in *States* are familiar but distorted objects that act out a past experience, illustrating the condition and frame of mind. Through the addition of anthropomorphic qualities and placement in environment, the figure comes to life and is a symbolic replacement of the human form. There is a whimsical character to the figures I draw, they possess an amount of looseness relating to William T. Wiley’s prints; they are closely tied to the narrative construct, and he uses personal iconography to a certain extent as well. His works have a humor and whimsy that I see operating in my prints; there is always a bit of absurdity to the image. The figures and scenarios they appear in are dreamlike and slightly surrealistic; the space seems otherworldly. As a stand in or substitute for the figure the chair is a prop, acting out scenarios in a stage like setting. I refer to these spaces as such due to their flatness and relative emptiness at times. They appear various forms looming at the top of the space while others remain grounded at the bottom. Figures float away while some are anchored; still others are enveloped and hidden. Legs appear spider-like, suggesting mobility but appear unsupportive under the weight of what they carry, hindering the movement and thus confining the subject to its environment.

“The Great Escape I” features two chairs bound to one another, moving in opposite directions but unable to separate. The physical representation of forms is a metaphor for how they see and treat one another, one chair transformed into a spider-like creature, slightly altered in an allusion to fear or danger. The environment is not inviting; water covers the floor in puddles, cobwebs envelop the frame of the space, a symbol of abandonment. The open doors and roof are methods of escape inaccessible to the subject
due to its constraints. This symbolizes a struggle between two people, a frustration and feeling of entrapment arising from their involvement.

5. *The Great Escape I*, woodcut, 44” x 31”
The audience is lured in through the subjective use of color; the subtle shifts in value and the soft, inviting quality pulls the viewer into the image and provides a sense of comfort. This use of color functions in two ways; the soft warmness entices the viewer into the printed space where they discover the unfolding of a non-harmonious situation. The subject matter is not warm and sweet, and there is often a struggle that takes place. The chairs, or figures, attempt to leave their surroundings but are pulled back, tied down or hidden away.

6. *Those in High Places Keep the Most Secrets*, woodcut, 50” x 26”
Color is used to flatten the space. The constructed spaces and scenarios in the works are stage-like; the two-dimensionality of the objects and lack of contrast within the picture plane adds to the shallowness, emphasizing the contrived qualities of the space. Using two or three colors varied between runs with value rather than hue, I can maintain soft transitions between the figure and the ground, linking them together and creating an overall impression of the figures in space. For instance, in the print ‘Those in High Chairs Keep the Most Secrets,’ the color acts as a link between the separate subjects at the top and base of the image. The figures can be visually related through similar handling of shape and value. I chose the color subjectively to reference flesh like qualities, describing form through line.

There is a linear quality pervasive in these works; it can be the edge of a shape, describe the volume of a form, turning into legs, cobwebs and even writing. The scrawl behind the two guarding chairs can be linked to handwriting, but is illegible, reminiscent of words jotted in a journal. The abstraction of the line is an allusion to secrets, flowing in the backdrop behind the figures. The lines also act to connect the linear quality of striped value within the chairs and mound at the bottom of the image. The figures about teeter over the situation precariously on their thinly stretched legs, guarding what is happening below. This is symbolic of how people can try and mask their problems or intentions, concealing their secrets. Upon closer inspection it is discovered they cannot keep their secrets hidden, suggested in the unsteadiness of their legs and the straining of chairs to be released from their confines.
CHAPTER FOUR

PRINTMAKING

Woodcut

For the most part, my printed works are reductive color woodcuts from one block. I work from the same board throughout the length of my edition because I like to see the image built through layers of carving and removal. Working from the same woodblock to achieve color is a challenge, and I like to make decisions on carving as I print the edition. This method of working allows me to react to the information already presented to me on the board and make reductive choices based on how the layers have revealed themselves.

Each panel of birch plywood that I use for my prints is chosen for the quality and pattern of the grain. I let the linear quality of the wood help to inform compositional choices and orientation as I first begin a new piece. When preparing for a new print, I draw directly on the birch, developing my image on the actual material. The linear elements in place, I begin to print, revealing the image in stages through carving, press runs and color.

As the image is progressively developed on paper through the addition and layering of color, the woodblock is affectively reduced through carving and raising the wood grain for texture. I use printmaking because it lends itself to the development of my image and idea, slowly changing and revealing itself to me throughout the process. I also view the chisel as an extension of my hand, and carve the same way I would use a pencil; it is another tool I use to delineate form and describe compositional elements.
Woodcut is also an extremely physical and immediate process; like typing and stamping, there are no barriers between my hand and the paper. I enjoy the direct contact and lack of chemical intervention. The only thing controlling the image is my influence over the carving and reduction of the surface.
CONCLUSION

Embedded within each piece is an expression of the emotional state hinged on separation and isolation. The conceptual basis arises from past experience and exploration of personal history, relying on memory and observations. These ideas are explored through two contrasting bodies of work whose imagery, as well as chosen materials and methods, have become ways of reflecting the meaning. The creation of both series use process and subject matter to preserve memory and give physical form to past experience. States is a narrative interpretation, an aftermath of experience, so to speak. The scenarios communicate the feeling or emotion associated with the event, and the subjects operate metaphorically, expressive of states of being. Records operate as documentation of past events through studio process and are a form of preservation. Repetition and seriality describe expanses of time, the fading of the mark’s physical presence becomes analogous to the passage of time and fading of memory. Records and States operate in various technical, formal and visual modes to express time and memory, specifically focusing on the concept of loss and distance, separation and isolation.
APPENDIX

1. *Nothing Keeps Long (730 Days)*, type, pins, thread, 63” x 17” ............... 19
2. *Breathing (365 Days)*, type, pins, 60” x 8” ........................................ 19
3. *Everything & Nothing*, type, pins, (2) 54” x 13.5” ................................. 20
4. *Expulsion*, monotype, ballpoint pen, 54” x 27.5” .................................. 21
5. *There Were Holes in This Plan*, serigraph, wax, thread, 14” x 11” .......... 22
6. *Ghost*, solarplate, monotype, 11” x 14” ................................................. 23
7. *My Baby Shot Me*, collagraph, serigraph, lace and thread, 11” x 7.5” .... 23
8. *Buried*, wood engraving, 7” x 9.5” ............................................................ 24
10. *The Great Escape I*, woodcut, 44” x 31” .................................................. 25
11. *The Great Escape II*, woodcut, 44” x 30” ............................................... 26
12. *Walking With a Ghost*, woodcut, 50” x 26” ......................................... 27
13. *Ghost Town*, woodcut, 26” x 50” ............................................................ 27
14. *Those In High Places Keep the Most Secrets*, woodcut, 50” x 26” ........ 28
1. Nothing Keeps Long (730 days)
   Type, pins, 63” x 13”

2. Breathing (365 days)
   Type, pins, 60” x 8”
3. *Everything & Nothing*, type, pins, (2) 54” x 13.5”
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8. *Buried*, wood engraving, 7” x 9.5”

10. *The Great Escape I*, woodcut, 44” x 31”
11. *The Great Escape II*, woodcut, 30” x 44”
12. *Walking With a Ghost*, woodcut, 26” x 50”

13. *Ghost Town*, woodcut, 26” x 50”
14. *Those in High Chairs Keep the Most Secrets*, woodcut, 50” x 26”