BETWEEN SPACES, HOLES, AND ABSENCES

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ABSTRACT

In this work, I investigate the fragmentary nature of my family history as perceived through second and third hand experiences. Rather than functioning as an authoritative documentation of the past, the resulting works emphasize the disconnection between direct and imagined experience. In the paper cut pieces and corresponding oil paintings, photographs are excavated from the historical archive and strategically reassembled to create narratives. These partial accounts are accessed through the “memory of a memory”, extruded from a mental collection of stories that have been imparted to me at various times throughout my life. The experiences of my grandfather, great uncles, and father – specifically linked to Polish existence during and after the Second World War – operate as guides while I attempt to visually reconstruct the fragments of an emotionally jarring past.

Although multiple strategies are employed in this body of work, each piece is formally organized by a collective element: the decorative motif. Derived from traditional Polish paper cut designs known as wycinanki, these motifs shape the character of the space, both formally and contextually. They operate as a signifier of culture and location, as well as a visual device that both structures and destabilizes the spatial configuration, simultaneously unveiling and masking specific portions of the photograph. Instead of functioning as ornamental overlay, the motifs create spaces, holes, and absences within the imagery, omitting visual information and alluding to the inaccessibility of the past.

In the paintings, the physical act of painting from the composition of the paper cut pieces points to a participatory or even voyeuristic interaction with photography. By replicating what I see in the photograph, I meditate on the photograph as both image and
object, and essentially, re-engage with the visual representation of my deceased family members. As the artist, my hope is that the work simultaneously brings to life the motionless faces of my ancestors while emphasizing the gap between what is tangibly known and what can only be imagined about the past.
DEDICATION

I dedicate this body of work and written manuscript to my family for their endless love and support. To my parents, Christopher and Janet Kozlowski, for always encouraging me to pursue my dreams, and to my sisters, who inspire me to embrace life in unique ways. And to David, my husband and closest friend, for his love, encouragement, and self-sacrifice throughout this endeavor – words are not sufficient in describing my gratitude.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My artistic growth, demonstrated through this body of work, would not be possible without the efforts and dedication of the art department faculty here at Clemson University. First and foremost, I would like to thank Todd McDonald for never failing to give me solid, critical feedback. His support for my work and artistic development – technically and conceptually – has remained steadfast throughout the last two and a half years, and I have become a more effective artist and critical thinker because of it. I would also like to thank the other two members of my thesis committee, Syd Cross and Anderson Wrangle, for their guidance throughout this process – Syd, for her enthusiasm and expertise throughout my exploration of pattern, and Anderson, for his challenging questions that have helped me better understand my work and my relationship to it. To the rest of the faculty, I am grateful for their impeccable insight and guidance – I have learned so much through our interactions.

I thank the following graduate students for enriching this experience with both intellectually stimulating conversations and sympathetic laughter and tears: Jenny Hutchinson, Michael Marks, Jennifer Miller, Kara Renfro, and David Hill. To the rest of the graduate students who inspire me with their ideas and work ethic, thank you for the unexpected and informal discussions of art and life. These exchanges have become a vital and deeply cherished part of this experience.
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I. INTRODUCTION

Three years before the fall of the Iron Curtain, I was born to a father who experienced life under the Communist regime and whose own father suffered as a POW in a German concentration camp during the Second World War. The psychological impact of these experiences was evident throughout my childhood, although I was incognizant of their source or intensity until later in life. As a result of research and informal conversations with my father, I am more aware of why he possesses the values that he does and how those values have played into my own upbringing and understanding of life. Despite this enlightenment as an adult, however, there continues to be a substantial disconnection, for not only have I never experienced life as my father or grandfather have, but I was also born an American.

This body of work stems from a profound desire to connect with my heritage and family history in order to better understand my own identity as a second generation Polish American. This process of examining the past has enriched my perception of my family and myself, but at the same time, it has proven that many aspects, whether they are experiences or attributes of deceased family members, are incapable of ever being unearthed – they remain buried under an impenetrable accumulation of time and space. Family photographs and stories, as well as academic writings related to this period in history, fail to provide me with an experience similar to those of my father and his family. Rather, I am offered only a glimpse of the physical, emotional, and psychological nature of these experiences – an ambiguous connection at best.
II. EXCAVATING FRAGMENTS

In this body of work, I investigate the fragmentary nature of my family history as perceived through second and third hand experiences. Rather than functioning as an authoritative documentation of the past, the resulting works emphasize the disconnection between direct and imagined experience. In the paper cut pieces and corresponding oil paintings, photographs are excavated from the historical archive and strategically reassembled to create narratives. These partial accounts are accessed through the “memory of a memory”, extruded from a mental collection of stories that have been imparted to me at various times throughout my life. The experiences of my grandfather, great uncles, and father – specifically linked to Polish existence during and after the Second World War – operate as guides while I attempt to visually reconstruct the fragments of an emotionally jarring past.

Due to the limited amount of information regarding the past, archival photographs function as an extension of the stories passed down to me. In sifting through images related to particular experiences, I am given the opportunity to make sense of, organize, and even connect multiple narratives together. These photographs, often combined with the portrait of a particular family member, visually explicate specific, but incomplete chapters of my family history. Through this active process, however, the contradictory nature of the photograph becomes apparent; not only does it possess the potential to disclose information about the past, but it also fails to provide a full understanding of the subjects and situations depicted through its image. On its most basic level, the historical photograph documents the existence of subjects that have been eradicated from present reality either through death or
physical alteration, and in relation to my work, it recreates the experiences of ancestors who play a role in my understanding of personal identity. Because it captures and preserves visual information that would otherwise be obliterated through time, the photograph serves as a vital link to the past.

At the same time, however, the information afforded by the photograph is limited. The image itself is indistinct, lacks detail, and possesses an overt ambiguity. Additionally, it solely documents the physical attributes of its subject; it is incapable of revealing intangible qualities, such as disposition and character, or establishing truths about the historical context in which it exists. The photograph is merely a remnant of that which can no longer be experienced or fully understood, and subsequently, offers an imprecise view of reality. As Roland Barthes describes in *Camera Lucida*, “Photography is a kind of primitive theater, a kind of Tableau Vivant, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead” (32). By interacting with the historical image, I find myself grappling with the past, and because the image itself is ambiguous, the attempt to fully comprehend what it depicts is futile. This inability to grasp the entirety of the image fuels the mystifying quality of the narrative in the work.
III. BETWEEN SPACES, HOLES, AND ABSENCES

Although multiple strategies are employed in this body of work, each piece is formally organized by a collective element: the decorative motif. In the paper cut pieces, repetitive forms are strategically combined with family photographs and historical imagery mined from the public domain. From a distance, the work translates as decorative, but upon closer inspection, it reveals a disconcerting narrative. In Rummaging Through, for example, the motif is composed through the combination of floral forms and an image of a Nazi soldier investigating the contents of a wagon bed covered in hay. At first glance, the composition appears to be a clipping of ornamental wallpaper, but when viewed more closely, the viewer is able to detect more potent subject matter. The decorative motifs used in conjunction with the photograph also “cut into” and crop the photographic imagery in an aggressive and unnerving manner, coinciding with the serious nature of the work.

Derived from traditional Polish paper cut designs known as wycinanki, the motifs shape the character of the space, both formally and contextually. They operate as a signifier of culture and location, as well as a visual device that both structures and destabilizes the spatial configuration, simultaneously unveiling and masking specific portions of the photograph. Instead of functioning as ornamental overlay, the motifs create spaces, holes, and absences within the imagery, omitting visual information and alluding to the inaccessibility of the past.

The visual characteristics of wycinanki designs and their presence in Polish homes of the past and present inform the way in which I subvert the motif in my work. Although the time of its origin has never been accurately established, wycinanki is considered to have
developed by the mid-19th century within the rural communities of Poland (Gacek, 1). Sheep shears were first utilized in cutting intricate shapes out of crude materials; delicate sheets of paper in numerous and highly saturated colors quickly became the standard material for this prominent folk art, which was typically used to decorate freshly white-washed interior walls directly before Easter. Although less prevalent in contemporary homes, these festive paper cutouts continue to decorate walls and ceilings, adding color and complexity to interior spaces and visually perpetuating a component of Polish culture (Drwal, 1-2).

In contrast to the vibrant hues and paper substrate – two aspects that are highly characteristic of wycinanki – I create the forms of these motifs by extracting from the paper on which the photographic image is printed. Instead of constituting the positive image, the decorative motifs are only visible through the negative spaces of the overall image. In this way, they adopt the surface texture and high key value of the canvas behind them, and when viewed closely, are perceived as holes, completely devoid of chromatic nuances. Not only do they lack saturation and a festive nature, but through their deliberate placement within the composition, they also become absences, erasing visual information and disrupting the discernability of the image.

In the paper cut pieces, the ink jet prints are cut and mounted on canvas so that there is space between the paper and the canvas. This strategy creates shadows that dance around the contours of the imagery, both demonstrating its three-dimensionality and emphasizing the “hand cut” quality of the pieces. The canvas, painted with white latex paint, provides a reference to the white-washed walls traditionally adorned with vibrant, multicolored wycinanki, and additionally, signifies the absence of color – the absence of
information. The white of the canvas, perceived through the cut spaces suspended in front of it, intensify the confused figure/ground relationship within the work. As a result, the character, placement, and representation of the motifs visually reinforce the disconnection between what is presently experienced and what can only be imagined about the past.
IV. STRUCTURING SPACE

In the paper cut pieces, I utilize two strategies in structuring space through the repetition of the motif. The first method involves establishing a matrix of repeated wycinanki forms and photographic images and then blatantly disrupting that congruent structure. In this way, the motifs are further subverted from their original function and visual language. Anna Zajac Gacek describes the technique of wycinanki as a “sort of rationalisation, applied with a view to obtaining a decorative composition of an orderly, executed system of rhythmic symmetry, comprising identical motifs” (1). The chaotic, but purposeful disruption within the composition creates a focal point that captures the viewer.

In *Aftermath*, the pattern is comprised of wycinanki forms and a photograph depicting several Nazi soldiers surveying the aftermath of train wreckage that was deliberately orchestrated by Polish partisans of the Home Army. In this composition, for example, the motifs abandon their prescribed format within the space surrounding the face of my great uncle, not only framing the portrait in a chaotic way, but also extracting from the photographic image – the ink jet print is literally cut out in order to create the shape of these anarchic motifs. With emphasis placed on the face in the composition, the work also relates to portraiture, although it deliberately subverts the well-composed and immaculate quality of the traditional portrait. Rather than residing in the center of the composition, the image of my grandfather’s face in *The Long-Awaited* is framed in a constrictive manner against the right side of the canvas and beneath a complex barrage of motifs. The visual tension created through this compositional strategy reflects the nature of my grandfather’s experience as a POW – overwhelming, intense, and crushing, both physically and psychologically.
The second strategy preserves the harmonious nature of pattern, maintaining a heightened sense of order and stability within the composition. Rather than disrupt the rhythm of the motifs, it is the repetition of a single photographic image that is disturbed. In *Carnation Carcass*, the subtle introduction of a new photograph depicting dead bodies scattered on the ground breaks up the repeated image of a Polish farmhouse. The apprehension induced by the repetition of the farmhouse with its stacked structure enveloped by intertwining tendrils is affirmed by its unexpected transformation into a horrifying space – the viewer is forced to detect a pair of lifeless legs sprawled out next to the stagnant face and hand of an anonymous female victim. Also integral to this piece is the mysterious nature of the repeated photograph. Although the description of this public domain image indicates that the men are Polish, the uniform of the man on the porch is strikingly Russian. This fact adds additional ambiguity to the image and ultimately, to the narrative itself.

Unlike the first three paper cut pieces, the motifs in this composition deliberately mask an unsettling scenario by residing within their pre-established, orderly structure, operating more convincingly within the visual language of ornamentation. Initially, and particularly at a distance, the work appears to be merely decorative and undemanding of the viewer’s mental or emotional investment, but once the viewer comes closer and begins to decipher the imagery, the work reads quite differently. It presents the viewer with a cultural and historical context that evokes thoughts and emotions that may have originally been undesired. In this way, the decorative forms both tempt and deceive the viewer. They promise one thing, but provide another.
To reinforce the context of this particular piece, I am compelled to talk about this strategy in a way that relates to the political atmosphere of post-WWII Poland, a period in history experienced first hand by my father. As a child growing up under the occupation of the Soviet regime, my father, along with his family and the entire Polish community, were subjected to a silent, but intense fear. In *Victims of Stalin and Hitler*, Thomas Lane describes the horrors of the Russian occupation, identifying the “regular disappearance of family members, friends and neighbors, without explanation and without warning” as the greatest cause of anxiety (66). The ever-present possibility of arrest and deportation, intentionally carried out by a knock on the door in the middle of the night, was designed to “strike terror in the minds not only of the victims but of the mass of the population not yet directly affected” (82). Most disheartening was the fact that in many cases it was a friend or family member that turned one over to the NKVD, the Soviet version of the Nazi Gestapo:

For many this produced a deep sense of helplessness in the face of overwhelming power. In these extremely trying circumstances people became suspicious of everyone, even neighbours and friends of long standing. Caution and reticence in conversations was the norm, and children were urged not to talk about their families outside the home for fear of revealing information which could be used against their parents. (67)

In the midst of this psychological oppression, the Soviets employed a political strategy that relates to the structuring of space in this piece, where the motifs maintain their harmonious arrangement and thus mask the disturbing imagery in the work. According to Jerzy Lukowski and Hubert Zawadzki in *A Concise History of Poland*, the Communist regime “mobilized [the population] in carefully staged public processions and other artificial expressions of joyful togetherness” (287) in order to project a positive image of itself. More specifically, the Soviets promoted folk art, wycinanki in particular, once they established
control after WWII in order to legitimize themselves in the eyes of the Polish people (Gessner). As a way to mask and disguise their brutality toward the Polish populace, they decorated government buildings with these festive motifs, only pretending to support the traditions and culture of the Polish people. In actuality, the Soviets prohibited the use of the Polish language and textbooks in schools; my own father was forced to learn the Russian language and follow an educational curriculum that reflected Soviet concerns (Lane, 71). In this way, the deceptive nature of the motifs in the work emphasizes the deceit of the government in place at the time, reinforcing the historical context in which the work exists.

Additionally, Carnation Carcass employs a visual strategy that points to a contemporary location and method of accessing the public domain image – the digital terrain of the Internet. Using acrylic and spray paint, I emphasize the posterized areas of the ink jet prints by superimposing them with saturated color relative to the post-digital palette. These geometric blocks of color operate similarly to the wycinanki designs – they overlap, obliterate, and alter the photograph, generating a visual ambiguity that references the ambiguity of the narrative. Additionally, they conceal the unsettling nature of the work through the tantalizing effect of color, just as the motifs do in their approach to structuring space.
V. RE-ENGAGE

The paintings in this body of work complement the paper cut pieces containing the photographic portraits of my great uncles. Although they adopt a cropped version of the original composition, it is important to note that the paintings provide an entirely different experience for the viewer. Not only is the portrait significantly larger in scale, but the handling of paint and employment of more saturated colors alter the photographic image of the face. The act of painting from the composition of the paper cut pieces, comprised of a photograph which has been digitally manipulated, points to a participatory or even voyeuristic interaction with photography. By replicating what I see in the photograph, I meditate on the photograph as both image and object, and essentially, re-engage with the visual representation of my deceased family members.

In creating an illusion of form through paint, I employ aspects of the photographic blur fundamental to the work of contemporary painter Gerhard Richter. In the painting *Blood Lines*, the eyes, in particular, are indistinct and softly blurred, alluding to their photographic source. This strategy allows the facial features, painted smoothly and with subtle transitions between values, to contrast with the hard-edged and textural forms overlapping the face. Through this deliberate application of paint, the organic forms become both an illusionistic and physical barrier to the image of my great uncle – they not only appear to be floating in front of and around the face, but they literally hide the eyes, nose, mouth, and ears through the textural, physical quality of paint. In addition to a substantial portion of the face being obscured by these textural forms, the face in its entirety is awkwardly cropped and seemingly confined within this unidentifiable, tangled environment.
The obvious departure from the original paper cut piece presents the viewer with a more intricate and visually stimulating representation of my great uncle.

The process of recreating the photograph through paint, particularly in the first painting, aligns with the work and priorities of visual artist Vija Celmins. In the 1960s, Celmins created a body of work that utilized World War Two photographs in order to investigate and “relive” her childhood exposure to war. In the paintings and drawings, she meticulously replicated the details of her black and white photographic sources in the attempt to “memorialize the instant” conveyed through the image (Whiting, 54-56). The obsessive nature in which she studies the image and imitates it with precision in her work relates to my own objective in “copying” the photograph. By spending time with the image, I am able to translate it through paint into something both unexpected and personal. Celmins emphasizes this point by describing the process of interacting with the image, as well as its final outcome:

The recognizable image is just one element to consider. The painting seems more a record of my grappling with how to transform that image into a painting and make it alive. I mean, dead and alive, since in the end the paintings (at least lately) have become so restrained and still… The surface is very closed and flat, but the feeling of the paintings (I hope) is full and dense – like a chord of music perhaps. (Godfrey, 100)

Like Celmins, my goal is to create an experience through paint that goes beyond what is offered by the paper cut pieces and their photographic quality. I hope that the process of “grappling” with the image is visible through the work, both in the blurred representation of the portrait and the more textural areas of the paintings.
VI. FABRICATED SPACES

The ambiguity that so intertwined with the nature of the historical photograph allows for a fabricated interpretation at times. In the series *Figments*, I emphasize the contrived nature of this investigation by depicting the interior spaces of a traditional dollhouse, a fictional environment in which objects are habitually relocated and dialogues reimagined. In the same way that a child creates a story and acts out all the parts with the appropriate dolls and dollhouse accessories, the narrative is reimagined and restructured in the way that I perceive it should be. These spaces, symbolizing mental compartments, allude to a romanticized version of reality, a series of events that are shaped exactly as the narrator imagines them to be. Additionally, the dollhouse as an icon evokes memories of girlhood, which in relation to my work, also points to the initial pursuit of identity.

Although these pieces adopt a different format, employ different subject matter, and are much more vibrant in hue when compared to the paper cut pieces and paintings, they stem from my desire to tackle the concept of imagination even further and in a less serious, more playful manner. The spaces depicted are highly saturated and appear to be lit from the outside with theatrical lighting, illuminating the interior with colors relative to the post-digital palette. The manner in which these spaces are unexpectedly cropped and mounted on the gallery wall flattens the space, causing them to fluctuate between the three-dimensional illusion of space and the two-dimensional quality of paper and the wall behind them. The wycinanki motifs in these pieces also work to disrupt the spatial illusion, and by specifically residing on the walls of the dollhouse interior, they subvert the function of traditional
wallpaper – rather than decorate the environment, they create tension and discord. These motifs are chaotic rather than symmetrical and orderly; they break down the structure in which they exist, as though they are living organisms that are attempting to either escape or overtake their habitation. The negative spaces that these motifs create, as well as the cutting out of information inside windows and doors, place the dollhouse interiors within a visual and mental void, alluding to the gaps in our understanding of reality.
VII. CONCLUSION

Through the combination of historical photographs and decorative motifs, the paper cut pieces and paintings function as visual glimpses into a past incapable of being fully understood. The employment of wycinanki not only positions the work within a specific cultural context, but these motifs serve as erasers of information – in the paper cut pieces, the floral forms are created through the actual cutting away of the photograph. The visual information that is allowed to remain between the spaces, holes, and absences of the motifs provide the viewer with both burning questions and ambiguous answers. As the artist, my motivation in creating this work is to not only better understand my ancestors, but to also honor and pay tribute to their tenacity in the face of intense, inhumane circumstances – they are heroes that I seek to memorialize through this work. The act of painting and cutting paper, both meticulous and thoughtful processes, demonstrates the degree of admiration I feel towards my deceased family members. As the artist, my hope is that the work simultaneously brings to life the motionless faces of my ancestors while emphasizing the gap between what is tangibly known and what can only be imagined about the past.
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Rummaging Through
ink jet print, cut & mounted on canvas
13” h x 40” w
2010
detail, *Rummaging Through*
Aftermath
ink jet print, cut & mounted on canvas
28” h x 28” w
2010
detail, *Aftermath*
The Long-Awaited
ink jet print, cut & mounted on canvas
32" h x 14" w
2010
detail, *The Long-Awaited*
*Carnation Carcass*
acrylic & spray paint on ink jet print, cut & mounted on canvas
65.5" h x 18" w
2010
detail, *Carnation Carcass*
Blood Lines
oil on canvas
55" h x 41" w
2010
Great Uncle Saboteur
oil on canvas
36” h x 55” w
2010
Figment I
oil on paper, cut & mounted on gallery wall
8” h x 19” w
2010
Figment II
oil on paper, cut & mounted on gallery wall
20" h x 11" w
2010
Figment III
oil on paper, cut & mounted on gallery wall
12" h x 21" w
2010
the series *Figments*
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