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REMEMBERING AND THE EVERYDAY: THE FLEETING, FRAGMENTED, AND SENSUAL

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REMEMBERING AND THE EVERYDAY: THE FLEETING, FRAGMENTED, AND
SENSUAL

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

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

by
Alyssa Reiser Prince
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Accepted by:
Todd A. McDonald, Committee Chair
Dr. Beth Anne Lauritis
Kathleen Thum

ABSTRACT

Our memories are malleable. There is no identifiable truth; we consistently change them based on our present state of being. Nevertheless, our memories influence us greatly. My paintings engage this topic of the remembering process and display the active, reconstructive nature of how we remember. This idea is approached through making paintings that engage my own involuntary memories that are inevitably impossible to grasp. The resulting paintings explore issues pertaining to the remembering process, partiality, and the inaccuracies of representation. In this thesis, I discuss the importance of the reconstructed, provisional image, the fluctuating nature of our memories, an interaction with the everyday and the senses, and the disappointments in recollection. This is accomplished through paralleling the act of remembering to the painting process. These contexts explore how we make sense of our lived experience through remembered moments, over and through time.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this research to my parents, my husband, family, and my former teachers and professors for giving me the confidence and support when I couldn't find it on my own. Without you all this would have felt like an impossible feat.

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To the Art Department faculty at Clemson University - thank you for providing us with an exemplary platform in which to grow as artists and scholars. I would like to especially thank my advisor, Todd McDonald, for always pushing for the best within me and my work. His criticism, scholarship, perseverance, patience, and friendship made this work and research a possibility. Thank you for helping me find the work I have always wanted to make.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The act of remembering is an imaginative, reconstructive process. Our minds do not function as a filing cabinet, storing away information for safekeeping. Instead, we actively engage, change, distort and recreate our memories in every instance. Sometimes, the more we try and remember, the more distorted our memories become. Yet, they nonetheless influence us. Our memories start to become stories we've told ourselves over and over again, with the narrative changing ever so slightly each time. Through remembering, some things are amplified: a cold touch, a sweet taste, and warmth that envelops us, while other details fall to the wayside. We remember and experience past memories under the lens of our subjective and ever changing present. Simultaneously we occupy past and present through these experiences. Time disappears and forgoes its linear quality. My paintings convey these ideas of remembering and reconstructing by depicting the partial and incomplete, referencing multiple sensations, and alluding to the ever shifting and fragmentary nature of our experience over and through time.

My paintings explore my understanding of memory. By engaging my own everyday, involuntary memories, I create abstracted images that connote the fleeting and ungraspable. The paintings suggest the fragmentary through scale and composition, as well as a sensory experience through the use of color and mark marking. I thus present the viewer with defamiliarized images that are at times, uncanny, quieted, destabilized and fugitive. The viewer then has to contend with an image that is distant, therefore difficult to place.

CHAPTER TWO

THE FLEETING AND UNGRASPABLE

During the recollection process we are faced with the questions of truth and fallacy within our memories, wondering if what we seemed to think as a true memory is thusly so. Our memory may be mutated by stories that have been told to us, or through the subjective nature of our present state of being. In speaking toward truth, “it’s unnerving to realize that our stories, feelings, memories of the past are reconstructed over time, and that we make up history as we go along” (Sabbagh 28).

The process of painting is very much like the remembering and storytelling process, in its' fluctuating, imaginative nature. When we remember, certain aspects come forward while the rest seem to disappear. In painting these moments, the image follows that same pattern. Certain areas are focused, but not fully understood, and exist in a space that cannot be grasped entirely. Through being painted, they are distanced and mutated from the original experience. In the paintings, the memory is stripped down to a color, shape, texture, and pattern to emit an emotional and sensual experience, destabilizing the original narrative. Abstraction becomes a way in which these experiences can be translated through the act of painting. I create a reconstructed experience through starting with initial, involuntary memories and then respond to them, allowing them to shift through the painting process. This reconstructed experience examines the ever-changing nature of how we remember, and the searching for truth and understanding of the world around us. The resulting paintings leave an open-ended experience for the viewer, based on their own actuality, paralleling the subjective and ever changing nature of memories.

In my paintings certain objects, colors, spaces, and textures are amplified, while the rest of the painting is reduced. I do this to convey memory's partial yet highly sensory nature. For example, in the painting titled *Sweet* (Fig. 1), we contend with a solid, saturated pink, and a pale yellow combined with a texture and mark making that describes an object. I've isolated a memory in terms of its sensual experience: sweet tasting, cotton candy pink combined with a direct mark making texture that alludes to the act of building and fleshing out. The box is tactile, while the background is flattened, painted to suggest that which is multivalent. By reducing some areas, and heightening others, we are unable to attach concrete meaning. As viewers we see the title "sweet", yet the language doesn't quite add up to the image. We then have to reflect upon our own experiences to try and make a connection.

Since my painting practice engages working from my own memory, there is little mediation between the initial idea and the construction of the image. Therefore, paint as a medium is ideal for creating these images; it is easily manipulated, fluid, and raw. Acrylic paint is especially fitting, because in its original state it dries very quickly. Its fast drying time does not allow me to labor over a certain area for long. Painting quickly allows me to more directly approach the fleeting experience of remembering, instead of focusing on creating a complete narrative.

Since the paint dries so quickly in my images, every mark remains on the canvas. Each mark is visible, displaying my hand in the act of creation. As viewers we can see every decision, mutation and fluctuation. Some areas appear more labored, while others are just the opposite. These paintings show us the essence of something; they ask to be

spent time with, and to be actively engaged with, in order to slowly reveal themselves to the viewer.

Painter Luc Tuymans works in a similar quick fashion. His work is hauntingly painted, awkward, almost disregarded for, painted quickly from collective memories. Tuymans' thinks of representation as a "lie", reeking of falseness (Searle 1). His paintings are images of the past, and as viewers we can find it difficult to distinguish whether these are "what one knows of oneself and what has been told" (1). Concerning my paintings, I acknowledge Tuymans as one of the quintessential contemporary painters dealing with memory. I appreciate the expedience in the mark making, and his ability to create haunting images with only a few strokes of paint. In his paintings, as well as my own, every mark has an intentionality that describes the overall form, so that "these images, already belonging to the past, might become your memories, my memories, false memories" (1).

In my paintings I depict memories that are not static. There is no identifiable beginning or end to the story, all we are left with is something in the middle - a residue. As viewers, we are forced to put together the pieces. Our perception is constantly shifting, leaving us with a painted world in which we are unsure how to participate. This fugitive quality in my work references the variability of experiences within each of us. This relates back to the continued construction of the self, through recalling and remembering our past experiences. Since the past becomes our present through the process of remembering, we are never firmly planted in one location, and thusly so, the work projects that disrupted journey.

In the 2012 Art in America article, *Provisional Painting Part 2: To Rest Lightly on the Earth*, scholar Francois Cheng quotes Chang Yen-Yuan, a Tang dynasty historian on his thoughts concerning works that reference the incomplete. Yen-Yuan believes that a painter should avoid “. . . a work that is too diligent and too finished in the depiction of forms and the notation of colors or one that makes too great a display of one’s technique . . .” since this deprives “it of mystery and aura” (Rubinstein). The provisional mark making in my paintings deliberately confirms the impossibility to grasp and understand these remembered moments. The lack of refinement further escalates the uncertainty of the image and its' subject. There is an inherent failure in trying to represent a memory. The layers show through, producing vestiges of something searched for -- of something once known. The viewers of my paintings then have to face these provisional marks with the understanding that “the sense of doubt never quite goes away”, just like the unclear nature of remembering process (Rubinstein). The importance of my work is that of a constant questioning for the viewer, for as Yen-Yuan states: “The incomplete does not necessarily mean the unfulfilled” (Rubinstein).

Many of my paintings reference the fleeting in both concept and in mark making. In the painting titled *Soup* (Fig. 2), the mark making appears quick, unmediated, and provisional. A very light saturated purple hangs over the pale background, while the rest of the canvas seems to be embedded with air of lightness. The painting has been painted over and covered; only allowing small glimpses of itself to show through. By using provisional mark making this painting does not strive to be monumental, but instead "rests lightly upon the earth" (Rubinstein).

CHAPTER THREE

THE FRAGMENTED

In my smallest paintings, I explore my own early childhood memories. The compositions are mostly zoomed in and cropped, conveying the nature of early memories. Research states that these early memories are generally, "purely visual --- or occasionally aural, brief, sense based and imaginistic in content", and are an engagement with our egocentric reality (Sabbagh 6). The research behind early memories expresses that these memories are "often a little more than fragmentary snapshots devoid of narrative structure" (4). Through recalling these memories, we begin to insert narrative content to try and make sense of our experiences. For example, my painting titled *Falling* (Fig. 3) is derived from my own interaction with an early memory in which I was suddenly aware of how my body related to its surroundings. This memory was highly fragmentary; I could remember the red ball, the street it fell down into, the enormously tall trees surrounding me. I remembered feeling very small and being aware of my body in relation to space. It felt so critical to my identity, yet through trying to remember, and in turn painting this experience, the narrative shifted. I was no longer able to pin down the experience.

All of my paintings explore involuntary memories that take us by surprise. These involuntary memories have been referred to in memory research as "precious fragments" of our past (Mace 3). When remembered, these fragments are also narratives of our reality that are never complete. Postmodern theory indicates that reality is constructed

through our own individual experiences, rather than a larger true collective reality.

Through exploring these experiences, and in turn my personal memories through creating paintings, I am examining how we create meaning within our subjective and fluctuating reality.

Historically, narrative painting is used as a way to express a grand or heroic story that is consequential to its viewers. It provides structure and logical understanding through its use of identifiable figures, symbols, and places. Through its understandable narrative, and reference to history, narrative painting searches to demonstrate an all-encompassing truth concerning past events. Whether through the imagined places of classical history in Raphael's *School of Athens*, or through the more historic, symbolic portraiture of David's *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*, the narrative is very direct and highly idealized. Unlike these conventions, my paintings participate in a kind of abstraction that interrupts the clear understanding of narrative. Yet, I participate in historical conventions such as perspective and horizon lines to create places and objects within my paintings. By participating in these conventions, my paintings provide the viewer with a point of reference to introduce them to recalled experience that is reconstituted, and a counterpoint to a fully realized narrative.

An example of this is found in my painting titled *Clean* (Fig. 4). A white rectangle hovers in an ethereal blue painted background. At first, this rectangle seems to be following the rules of perspective, but upon closer inspection it is evident that it is invented. The sides and angles aren't in proper perspective. This disruption of classical perspective depicts a search for understanding, or trying to make sense of our past and

experiences. The rectangle starts to function as a symbol for something else, yet there is not a coherent narrative. It is simultaneously dissolving in and being created out of the background. This symbolic representation articulates an exploration of the process of remembering that never fully resolves. By reducing, skewing, and obscuring I create an experience that allows my viewer to actively engage and create meaning.

In one of my newest works, *In Blankets* (Fig. 5), I rely on similar conventions to create space. The perspective is angled upwards as if the viewer is looking from below. Yet by relying on subtle color shifts, and not relying so much on value contrast, the space is perceived as being influenced by the personal and not relating completely to a lived reality. Our focus is drawn to one area, by the use of saturated green color. Space is hinted at, yet we are not sure where this place exists.

By breaking down narrative I reject the historical sense of memory and reality. Relying on devices such as horizon lines and perspective helps suggest a “real” space. Yet, the memory becomes the location in the paintings. It becomes a fictional space through being remembered.

CHAPTER FOUR

REMEMBERING THE EVERYDAY THROUGH THE SENSES

The everyday, the quotidian, what is ordinary and familiar - this is what the bulk of our lives are made of. Similarly, our memories are filled with these moments, and continually engage us. Everyday moments shape us. Our sense of self is continually formed and reformed as we go through the world. These moments are a time of quiet reflection, of an interior space on view. We are alone in our thoughts during these moments, yet the nature of these moments inhabits all who take the time to acknowledge them.

My paintings depict these common spaces and experiences through the lens of our senses. When we remember our experiences, we do not experience them through an image in our mind's eye. Instead, it's through the lived experience in which "our body moves, the gestures it makes, all the everydayness connected . . . with your daily routine, with the exploration of your space" (Sheringham 89). Because of this, my paintings are a reflection of a lived experience. A smell, touch, or taste translates most often into a color. The figure is absent from the paintings because the viewer becomes the figure, standing on the edge of an inhabitable world.

In my painting titled *Tea* (Fig. 6), I engage with an everyday involuntary memory that transports me to another place and time. *Tea* is inspired by the common occurrence of brewing a cup of tea, yet proves to be extraordinary. After brewing myself a cup of tea, and smelling the bitter orange scent, I am transported. Immediately I feel a sense of

knowing I have experienced this exact scent in a certain place before. The memory comes rushing back, but in a way that does not reveal itself completely. Bits of the memory trickle back as I try and put together the pieces. I can sense the space I was in: the cold draft, damp air, the warmth and smell of the orange scented tea. I can almost hear the rain hitting the plastic curtain. But I can't quite grasp everything. As I try to remember, my present state seems to infiltrate and change what I thought was accurate. There is a compulsion in trying to paint this space on the canvas, to recreate the sensual experience that transported me. Yet, as soon as I believe I can capture that moment, it starts to fade. I scramble to put the pieces back together, but all I can remember is the sound of the rain, the suggestion of space, and the orange scent creeping in. Ultimately, the painting displays that sense of the space, and color that emits a sensual response. There is an impossibility in trying to preserve this sensual experience and one that cannot be grasped by me or the viewer of the painting. *Tea*, inevitably is not identifiable, but instead is a reference pointing to the experiences that we all have that ground us in the world, and the constant reconstruction of them.

Our identity is constantly being constructed based off the places we experience, inhabit, and will inhabit. Often, this is through common places and spaces. In my painting, *Untitled (Couch Painting)* (Fig. 7), we engage with a space that seems initially familiar. For most of us, we've inhabited places such as this. In the painting, we see a living room that sets the stage for what seems to be a snapshot photograph. We can't enter the space as viewers. The people, animals, patterns and colors start to bend, merge, and distort creating an image that is unlike our usual relationship with this kind of space. The

space feels imagined almost, as if each pattern is being remembered part by part, from the wallpaper, to the couch, to the tables. This space is a memory of Grandmother's living room, a place that I spent a lot of time in, but that she no longer lives in. Through seeing a wallpaper pattern, I was transported to this place, and to this exact memory of posing for a photo. I ended up finding the exact photo in one of my boxes of pictures. In creating this painting I used the photo, in conjunction with working from my memory, to explore this space that I couldn't physically inhabit. In this painting, color is used to emphasize an emotional space, rather than an objective reality that we can see clearly. The vibrating color and shifting perspective in this painting creates a decentered feeling that is similar to recalling our own memories. Our experiences shift continuously in each instance we remember.

Art Historian Richard Shiff believes that a painting should "drift" (Doig 301). Paintings can often drift from representation to abstraction, sensual to objective, real to dreamlike, banal to extraordinary, commonplace to uncanny. Colors can fade in and out; paint can be sprayed, glazed, and applied thickly. Contemporary painter, Peter Doig, is an inventive painter; often times creating spaces that seem to exist in a dreamlike state. Shiff believes that Doig's work is a bit "discomforting". Doig often works from a photographic source, only to dismantle and obscure it through the process of painting. This is especially similar to the way I worked in the painting *Untitled (Couch Painting)*. Doig states that he loses himself in the painting process, and thus loses the original pictorial order of the photograph, discovering instead a "different order of sensation --- an open beginning that requires no end" (304). In my paintings, as well as Doig's, the immediacy

in which they are painted dismantles the pictorial order we come to understand in representation. We are instead pulled into the paintings due to their "abstracted materiality" that resonates with our emotions and senses (305).

When we experience a space, object, or place that seems unfamiliar but ends up feeling eerily familiar or the opposite (familiar becoming strangely unfamiliar), we are experiencing the sensations of the uncanny. We experience Doig's paintings in this way, straddling the line between strange and ordinary (322). My paintings can affect the viewer in a similar way. In paintings such as *Warmth* (Fig. 8), we are invited into a space that questions our understanding. The warm orange glow, small scale, and tiny pale yellow brushstrokes come to our attention. Initially we are not sure where this place or space exists. Upon further exploration and time spent looking, we inevitably call upon associations of this place. The warm light seems to be filling the room with warmth, whether it is through a door or a window. The unfamiliar becomes familiar based upon our own experiences and memories.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Even though our memories are often times fleeting, fragmented, and sensual, so is our engagement with our everyday world. Often, routine gets in the way, sometimes causing us to never fully experience our everyday, ordinary life. We continually engage in the everyday, yet often times are not entirely grounded in what that is, or how it affects us. Through using methods of abstraction I call to mind these instances in each of us.

When we remember, we believe in an experience that is malleable and possibly false. The amount of time spent engaging with a certain memory can lead to questions of accuracy. Often, what is imagined to be true is extremely difficult to distinguish from a real event. This engagement references that everything we wish to believe about the spaces around us, and of us, are constructions.

We also are aware that what we experience in this moment can never be fully remembered. The paintings reference that same experience, of trying to make sense of our engagement with the world. They explore the difficulties and disappointment in recollections, as Spencer Finch says, “to want to see, but to not be able to” (Anton 124-127). My paintings reference a questioning of the world around us, of our perception, and of a past, present, and future that is never entirely concrete.

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FIGURES



Fig. 1 : *Sweet*

Acrylic on canvas. 13" x 13". 2013

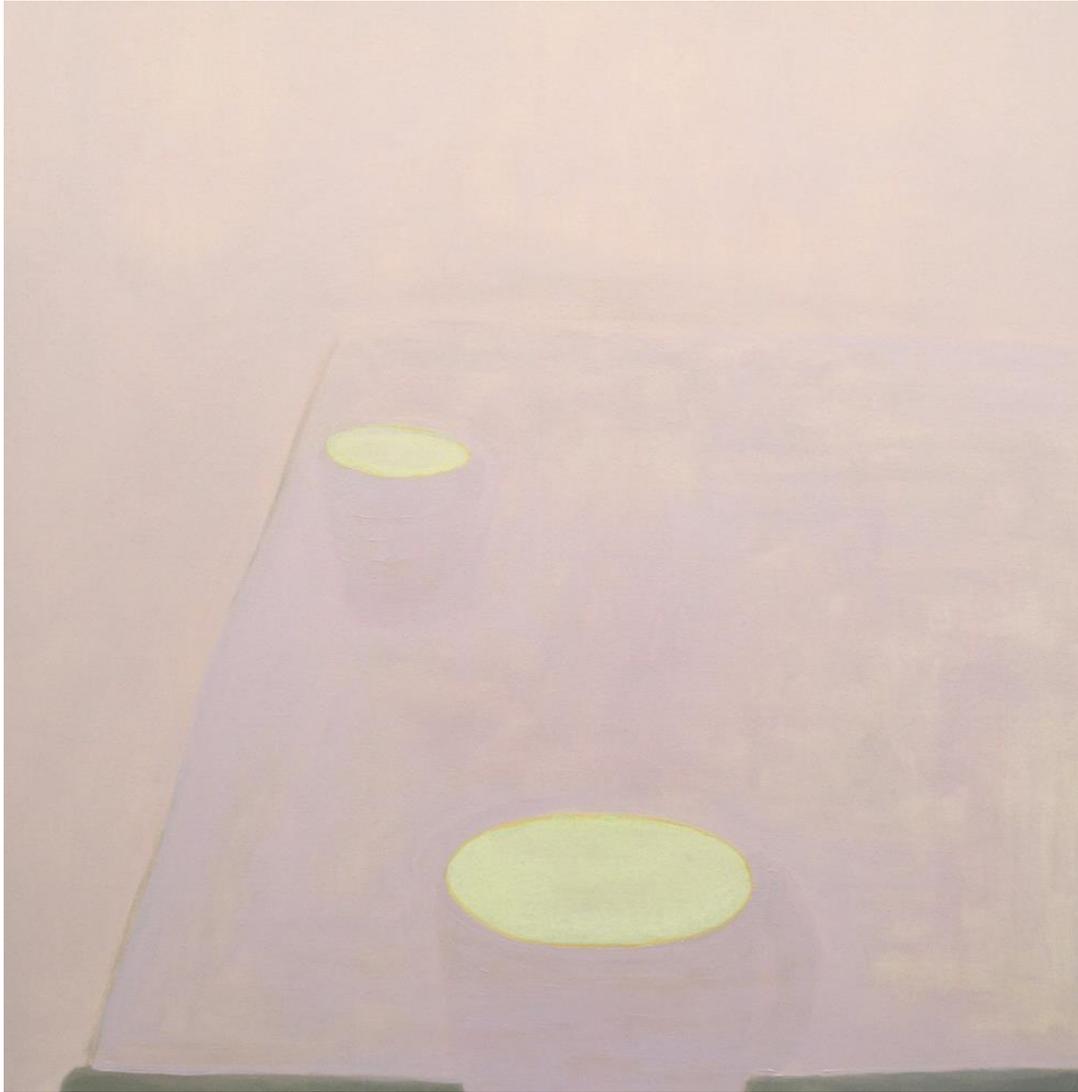


Fig. 2 : *Soup*

Acrylic on canvas. 40" x 40". 2013



Fig. 3 : *Falling*

Acrylic on canvas. 13" x 12". 2013



Fig. 4 : *Clean*

Acrylic and paint pen on canvas. 50" x 50". 2013



Fig. 5 : *In Blankets*

Acrylic on canvas. 33" x 33". 2013



Fig. 6 : *Tea*

Acrylic on canvas. 50" x 50". 2013



Fig. 7 : *Untitled (Couch Painting)*

Acrylic on canvas. 48" x 96". 2013



Fig. 8 : *Warmth*

Acrylic on canvas. 13" x 13". 2013