In The Kitchen

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IN THE KITCHEN

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
Amber Eckersley
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Accepted by:
Anderson Wrangle, Committee Chair
Beth Lauritis
Todd McDonald
ABSTRACT

This series of work explores the fragmented nature of memory, investigates the dynamism of my grandma’s kitchen, and subverts nostalgia typically associated with the South. Each image in the series represents a particular memory, set of memories, or fragment of memories from my childhood of planting, growing, and picking food with my grandma as well as preserving it and cooking it with her. The ordering and decision making of what fragments go in which image is imprecise. The imprecision is a reflection of how memory operates - fragmented, mutable, and fleeting. The markings on the pots, remnants of food processes, and used kitchen tools, are a metaphor for the fragmented memories from which the photographs are created and function as proof of a life lived. This world represented, this life, is dynamic and has a depth far beyond the quaint nostalgia associated with the South. The tension created by removing these simple, vernacular objects from their context in her home and re-presenting them on a large scale in a formal, flat, and abstract manner not only declares that this specific world is worthy of consideration, but it also forms a space in which viewers can engage with this place in a new way, beyond sentimentally and nostalgia.
DEDICATION

For Grandma.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the Clemson Art Department faculty, specifically my committee members, Anderson Wrangle, Beth Lauritis, and Todd McDonald for their feedback during this process. I would like to extend a special thanks to my advisor and committee chair, Anderson Wrangle, for his unwavering patience and feedback over the last two and a half years.

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

It was a late summer afternoon before I was ten years old. I sat beside my cousin at my grandma's kitchen table, legs crossed in the chair, snapping and shelling green beans that we picked with her the day before. My grandma, toothpick in her mouth and dirt under her nails, pulled beans from grocery bags to cut off the ends and then added the beans to the pile in front of us. I snapped beans and my cousin shelled beans. For three afternoons that week we worked on beans with the South Carolina summer heat seeping into her house, which no number of fans could subdue. A fly buzzed by now and again, landing on the edge of the table and then on a salt shaker before being fanned away by my grandma. After snapping and shelling for some time (and after persistent pleas) grandma would walk to the freezer and pull out a popsicle for both of us. With blue stained hands and sticky mouths, we kept working on beans.

This memory of snapping and shelling green beans with my grandma in her kitchen is much like many of my other memories with her. Instead of green beans, for example, the vegetable we picked might be corn or tomatoes. Some days instead of picking or preparing, we would help her with canning or getting vegetables ready for the freezer. Other times, she would have to make a casserole or a cake to take to church or just needed help preparing a ham or some greens for Sunday dinner. Planting, growing, and picking food with my grandma as well as preserving it and cooking it with her have
shaped almost all of my memories of her and it has formed the foundation for this body of work.
Though my grandma has been much of the inspiration for creating this work, she is not pictured within the series. When I first began thinking about my grandma, her food, and my memories of her, I photographed her often. I photographed her picking green beans, canning tomatoes, slicing peaches, and doing any number of other food related tasks. As the work progressed, I photographed her less. The composition, formal arrangement, and lighting changed significantly as well. The reason for this change was two-fold, with the first being distance. Because I did not always have time to make the five hour drive to her home, I began relying on my memories of her in order to choose what objects to photograph or scan. The objects I chose from those memories also had to be items I could find or purchase nearby. So, I fried fatback for the first time and scanned it on the greasy napkin I laid it on after I took it out of the pan. I was on the phone with my grandma the whole time I fried it, worried I was going to do something wrong. I thought about every time she asked me to start a pot of tea because the pitcher was getting low - five tea bags and five scoops of sugar. I remembered how many sticks of butter it takes to make her pound cake recipe. Whenever I felt like I couldn’t think of another memory, I would call her to talk. If it was two-thirty in the morning and I couldn’t sleep, I would go to Wal-Mart and walk through the empty store looking at vegetables, weird meats, and Ziploc bags, trying to jog memories. This process of working made me think of the leftovers from a meal or from food preparation. My image
about sweet tea became just the tea tags, the frozen blueberries became an empty Ziploc bag with blueberry juice left inside, and the pound cake recipe became just the butter wrappers. When I did find time to drive home, I could only stay for a day or two, so I collected objects - pots, pans, blankets - from her home and brought them back to my studio to photograph. This made me very conscious of formal choices between the object and background. When the background did not respond well with the object, I began thrifting for blankets, fabric, and wrapping papers - flat, large, and patterned home surfaces that reminded me of my grandma’s house. This mode of working relied heavily on my memories of her.

Constructing these images from memories is imprecise because memory is fragmented and mutable. It is simultaneously here and not here. The farther back in my memory I try to reach, the less reliable it becomes. I seem to remember moments that exist at emotional extremes - extreme joy, fear, anger and so on until it strains me to remember the moments in between. It is as though I am grasping for something that is just beyond my reach. Formally, this notion of how memory operates is reflected in the optical illusions created by the photographs of cookware - *Wooden Bowl on Floral Bedspread* (Fig. 1.1), *Pot with Missing Handle on Floral Upholstery Fabric* (Fig. 1.2), *Pie Pan on Lace Tablecloth* (Fig. 1.3), *Muffin Pan on Brown, Orange, and White Afghan* (Fig. 1.4), *Styrofoam Tray on Yellow, Green, and White Afghan* (Fig. 1.5), and *Cookie Sheet on Salmon and White Afghan* (Fig. 1.6) - from her kitchen. By photographing the top and bottom of each object on the same background and pairing them beside one another, it becomes difficult to discern the inside of the object from the bottom of the
object. This “in-and-out” tension represents how memory is “here, but not.” At one moment when looking at the bowl in *Wooden Bowl on Floral Bedspread* (Fig. 1.1), the viewer might think she is looking at the inside of the bowl, only to realize that she has actually been looking at the bottom. This is also true of memory. She might remember a childhood birthday party that happened at the skating rink at lunch, only to eventually remember that it happened at the bowling alley at dinner that year.

As memory is incomplete, the objects in each image are also incomplete. The objects photographed are only pieces and the image never contains the whole of the object. The cookware is always empty, and the food remnants are just that - remnants. The *meat* of the food, the part that would be eaten, is not present. The viewer is left to consider pieces that I have assembled together to form a new *whole* that is not quite whole. *Peach Skins on Peach Upholstery Fabric* (Fig. 1.7), *Cantaloupe Rinds on Cream Upholstery Fabric* (Fig. 1.8), and *Sweet Potato Peels on Orange Upholstery Fabric* (Fig. 1.9) represent pieces of memory that I am attempting to reconstruct, but cannot quite complete. There are gaps between each of the peels and none of them touch one another. *Green Bean Ends on Green Upholstery Fabric* (Fig. 1.10), *Plum Pits on Plum Upholstery Fabric* (Fig. 1.11), and *Corn Cobs on Yellow Upholstery Fabric* (Fig. 1.12) are reflections of my efforts to order and arrange memory linearly. This linearity is in distinction to how I have arranged the photographs of the peels, and their more complicated, puzzle-like structure. Both methods of arrangement, however, ultimately fail to reconstruct objects and memory. The small kitchen items are also pieces. The birthday candles in *Reused Birthday Candles on Floral Dish Towel* (Fig. 1.13) are
without a cake, the popsicles in *Popsicle Sticks on Floral Dish Towel (Fig. 1.14)* have already been eaten, the corn cob holders in *Corn Cob Holders on Tablecloth with Yellow Flowers (Fig. 1.15)* are missing the corn, and the lids in *Lids Without Bottoms on Pink Patterned Wallpaper (Fig. 1.16)* are missing their bottoms. These small kitchen objects serve to reinforce the notion of memory as fragmented and fleeting.
In chapter thirty-seven of *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Roland Barthes writes, “Not only is the photograph, in essence, never a memory...but it actually blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter-memory.”¹ Barthes’ goes on to recount the following interaction: “One day, some friends were talking about their childhood memories; they had any number; but I, who had just been looking at my old photographs, had none left.”² For Barthes, this is an example of the “violence” of the photograph. However, I wonder if this phenomenon is actually a negative consequence of the photograph? Moreover, can the photograph be considered a vessel for memory instead of an actual memory?

On a personal level, at this moment in the evolution of the work, I have begun to consider the images as repositories for my own pieces of memories. Because of the unreliability of memory, I want to place these pieces in a photograph, preserved in something less fleeting than memory. I think the “violence” of the photograph can potentially offer a way to store or preserve fleeting memories. But, the photograph as a vessel for memory can serve another purpose besides storing fragments - it can relieve the pain of memory. For me, by taking these fragments of memory and placing them into a photograph, I am not only preserving what I can of the memory, but I am also relieving

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² Ibid.
myself from the pain (at least some of the pain) of the moment when one flutters across my mind. This is not limited to bad memories. In fact, I find that it is the happiest memories that make me the saddest. They remind me of moments that have been and cannot be again. Removing that from myself and putting it in the photograph as vessel was one of the most significant reasons why I began creating this series of work, even though I did not realize it at the time.

Each image in this series is a repository for a particular memory, set of memories, or fragments of memories. The ordering and decision making of what fragments go in which image is imprecise. The imprecision is a reflection of how memory operates. Organizing and storing all of my memories and pieces of memories of my grandma in relation to her food, her kitchen and her home in photographs is an impossible task. Even when I think I have thought of every memory I have related to this work, all it may take is a smell or a sound and I may remember something else. The fact that it is an impossible task, however, does not make it any less meaningful. The process of attempting to order these memories and objects is cathartic.
As discussed in Chapter One, Part One, the work changed significantly, both formally and conceptually, due to the physical distance between myself and my grandma. But, the second reason for these changes in the work was more intentional. I wanted to represent this place - the South - in a way in which it is not typically represented. Artwork about the South, particularly artwork by contemporary Southern photographers, tends to be steeped in nostalgia and sentimentality. Indeed, the work often relies on those two feelings as a mode of operation. This is particularly true of contemporary Southern women photographers imaging domestic spaces or imaging their own mothers and grandmothers. Specifically, I am referencing Sally Mann’s *Immediate Family*, Susan Virginia Worsham’s *Bittersweet on Bostwick Lane*, and Meg Griffiths’ *Honeymilk* and *Betty Dew*. While their work has been very influential to my practice, I was searching for a different way to represent the South, memory, and my grandma. Nostalgia only allows a very limited way to view or understand a place and it’s people, when, in fact, the place is more than nostalgia and sentiment. It is a place with a history and a people who are living lives that are dynamic and meaningful. Subverting nostalgia is how I might be able to better tell those stories.

The main way I subvert nostalgia and diffuse sentimentality in the work is through formal arrangement. High Modernist formal strategies influenced the compositions of each of the pieces in this series. Space is flattened and compressed. This
is most noticeable in the photographs of cookware, as these objects have the greatest physical depth in this series. *Wooden Bowl on Floral Bedspread* (Fig. 1.1), *Pot with Missing Handle on Floral Upholstery Fabric* (Fig. 1.2), *Pie Pan on Lace Tablecloth* (Fig. 1.3), *Muffin Pan on Brown, Orange, and White Afghan* (Fig. 1.4), and *Styrofoam Tray on Yellow, Green, and White Afghan* (Fig. 1.5) are the images in which the compression of a three-dimensional object into a very flat, two-dimensional plane is the greatest. The sixth cookware photograph in this body of work, *Cookie Sheet on Salmon and White Afghan* (Fig. 1.6), feels less compressed than the other five because the object photographed is already quite flat.

My lighting technique works in conjunction with the formal arrangement to heighten compositional flatness. The even, nearly shadowless lighting in all of the images in this series functions in stark contrast to the use of lighting in works by contemporary Southern photographers. The light in their images is usually soft and dappled; sad and sweet. The lighting in my work does not produce an immediate feeling of sadness and sweetness. Directly inspired by the even, peculiar light from a scanner, the light feels distant and sterile, as though I were photographing these objects for an archive. Indeed, there is an archival gesture in the work due to my use of light and arrangement of the objects as though they had been pinned to a wall for examination. However, this archival impulse falls short of being a true archive of these objects or memories because objects in an archive are typically photographed or scanned on a white background. In an archive, the objects are the focus of attention. Instead of a white background, I have used colorful and dynamic backgrounds that create a tension between the object and the background.
That tension as well as the tension between the archival impulse and the backgrounds forms another possible entry point for the viewer.
CHAPTER FIVE
PROOF, GENDER, AND CLASS

As interested as I am in memory, and its relation to this work, I am also interested in creating photographs which serve as evidence. In the way that memory is fragmented, I have found that evidence is also fragmented and exists in various degrees of completeness. Each of the images in this body of work is evidence, or proof, of the life of my grandma. Proof of a life lived. Proof of the lives of the other people from this place and the histories they have and share. Each of the cookware images show markings made by my grandma from years of use, meals made, and mouths fed. These markings represent a culmination of time, and, eighty-six years may be contained in a single object. They also participate in a formal conversation with the photographs of the food remnants. In Peach Skins on Peach Upholstery Fabric (Fig. 1.7), I use the peach skins as a medium through which to make marks. This is also true for each of the other food remnant photographs. The marks I make with the food remnants communicate formally with the marks made by my grandma on her pots, bowls, and pans over the last several decades. My grandma has made the marks in those objects, but I have made my own kind of mark with the leftover pieces from preparing foods she would typically use.

This proof of life is also proof of a specific person. My grandma, of course, but also other grandmothers from a particular generation in the South. By arranging and photographing these objects in a way in which they are not normally seen, I create a space in which the viewer might consider the objects with a new perspective.
The notion of proof and how I compose it to explore and describe place is important for understanding the role of gender and class within the work. The objects in this body of work are proof of the existence and life of my grandma, but, on a broader scope, the work is proof of the lives of people, specifically women, with a low socioeconomic position from the rural South. Through decisions about object and background, composition, lighting, and scale, I show that these lives are dynamic, perhaps even fantastic, and suggest that those lives that have gone overlooked and previously romanticized, are worthy of consideration.

By removing domestic, vernacular objects from their original context in the home and re-presenting them on a large scale and displaying them for view in a gallery, I elevate the objects and the lives they represent to show that they are significant, despite being so often disregarded because they are representative of the invisible forms of labor associated with women. The backgrounds in each image are domestic materials that are also crucial for elevating the dynamic and fantastical quality of this place and these lives I am describing. The cookware photographs each have a type of domestic fabric material for the background and divide into two groups - afghan backgrounds and floral backgrounds. The three cookware photographs on afghans - *Styrofoam Tray on Yellow, Green, and White Afghan* (Fig. 1.5), *Cookie Sheet on Salmon and White Afghan* (Fig. 1.6), and *Muffin Pan on Brown, Orange, and White Afghan* (Fig. 1.4) - each have rectangular foreground objects that solidify their unity as a group. The afghans are bold and colorful. They seem to almost explode from behind the objects. This explosion is exaggerated by the color complementation between the object and afghan. The afghan
represents a domestic hobby typical of a Southern woman of my grandma’s generation. Much like preparing and cooking food, crocheting an afghan is work that yields a product or object with utilitarian purpose. The afghans used in this series are small and meant to be thrown over a couch or an armchair for decoration until a lap blanket is needed. The color choices and patterns are representative of the decorative choices my grandma makes for her home. The other grouping of cookware photographs with floral backgrounds - *Wooden Bowl on Floral Bedspread (Fig. 1.1)*, *Pot Without Handle on Floral Upholstery Fabric (Fig. 1.2)*, and *Pie Pan on Lace Tablecloth (Fig. 1.3)* - are also representative of the decorative choices my grandma makes for her home. Much like the afghans in the first grouping, the floral backgrounds on common domestic materials explode with color and movement from behind the very still, unmoving objects in the foreground to the extent that those objects almost seem to take on motions of their own in rhythm with the background. The unity of this grouping of images is strengthened by the round shape of each foreground object.

My decision making process for backgrounds in the photographs of the small kitchen items - *Popsicle Sticks on Floral Dish Towel (Fig. 1.14)*, *Reused Birthday Candles on Floral Dish Towel (Fig. 1.13)*, and *Corn Cob Holders on Tablecloth with Yellow Flowers (Fig. 1.15)*, and *Lids Without Bottoms on Pink Patterned Wallpaper (Fig. 1.16)* - was similar to the decision making process I used for the cookware photographs, specifically the grouping with floral backgrounds. The background needed to reflect decorative choices my grandma would make as well as domestic materials that can be found in her home. Color relationships between the object and background had an even
stronger influence on my background choices for those images. My method for choosing backgrounds for the food remnants photographs differed from all of the others. The main reason for that was practical. In each of the food remnants photographs - *Peach Skins on Peach Upholstery Fabric* (Fig. 1.7), *Cantaloupe Rinds on Cream Upholstery Fabric* (Fig. 1.8), *Sweet Potato Peels on Orange Upholstery Fabric* (Fig. 1.9), *Green Bean Ends on Green Upholstery Fabric* (Fig. 1.10), *Plum Pits on Plum Upholstery Fabric* (Fig. 1.11), and *Corn Cobs on Yellow Upholstery Fabric* (Fig. 1.12) - the background needed to be a plain, solid color in order for the small food fragments and patterns to be discernable. Because of this change, the images of the food remnants function differently from the other images in the series because the decorative pattern has moved to the foreground. The food remnant photographs remain in conversation with the other images through an extension of the kind of mark making discussed in the previous chapter as well as through color, lighting, and material choices. Each background in the food remnants photographs is upholstery fabric that might cover furniture in her home.

Decorating the home is a task typically relegated to the matriarch of a family, particularly a matriarch from my grandma’s generation. Art historically, decoration was influential to the Pattern and Decoration movement of the 1970’s, which utilized traditional domestic crafts to, as Joyce Kozloff wrote, “abolish[s] hierarchical distinctions between high and low art.”

Decorating may be regarded as a frivolous task. Yet, this task is a way in which women were able to control the domestic space they were forced to occupy and maintain.

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To dismiss those decorative decisions made by my grandma, and other women like her, is to dismiss an important aspect of their environment. Art historically, the Pattern and Decoration movement of the 1970’s utilized traditional domestic crafts to, as Joyce Kozloff wrote, “abolish[s] hierarchical distinctions between high and low art.”

While the materials are representative of the decorative choices my grandma and other women of her generation from the rural South may have made for their homes, the materials as well as objects are also indicative of a lower-middle class group of people from the rural South. The markings on the cookware from years of use or the pot with the missing handle she still uses for cooking despite its questionable functionality or the reused styrofoam meat tray that would have been immediately tossed out by someone else are reflective of the history of the place, of her, and of people like her. Because she, like so many people from the rural South, have lived with so little for so long, very little is wasted and almost everything is reused. The background materials are also representative of the type of materials these women were able to afford to use to decorate their homes.
CHAPTER SIX

NOTION OF CARE

There is a decided level of care used by my grandma in all of her work. Crocheting an afghan is a process and artform that takes time and patience. Choosing what materials and objects decorate a home is also a process that happens over a lifetime that determines the mood and emotional currents of a space. Planting a garden, harvesting its fruits and vegetables, and then preserving and cooking that food is a cycle that happens each year with specific times for planting and harvesting. This work that has constituted much of her life has been honed and practiced for the last eighty-six years. It is careful and methodical. While I have not yet been making art for eighty-six years, but I do consider my process and care for making this work to reflect her work processes and the care she has put into her work. In each of these images in this series, I have carefully arranged objects to achieve a specific end, much like she might carefully measure ingredients or crochet a knot for an afghan.
CHAPTER SEVEN
CONCLUSION

As both an artist and a woman from the rural South, I have a very specific voice through which to describe the history and people of this place. In this body of work, I have drawn upon my childhood memories and experiences helping my grandma plant her garden and harvest her garden as well as prepare, preserve, and cook the food from it. While my memories are specific to my grandma and me, the experiences from the memories are representative of a specific class and gender of people from the rural South. Through compositional arrangement, lighting, and color I have disrupted the nostalgia often associated with work by Southern artists, particularly contemporary Southern photographers. Nostalgia provides a very narrow understanding and view of a place and requires the viewer to have similar experiences in order to be able to engage with the work. My goal with this work is to form spaces in which a viewer might find a new or different perspective of a very complicated place and people that exists beyond the typical sentimental depiction of the South.
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