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On Remembrance

Ashley Lee

Washington University in St. Louis

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On Remembrance
Ashley SeoHyung Lee
BFA in Studio Art, BA in Art History

Advisors:
Lisa Bulawsky

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Washington University in St. Louis
Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Art

Abstract:

My works are inspired by autobiographical memories — especially those that are traumatic. However, the works rather discuss the nature of how memories are recalled, stored forgotten, remembered, manipulated, constructed, reconstructed, and destructed. Memory is a pseudo reality, that grounds on past events but is different from the objective truth. Memory is one's own creation, which is formed by the body and mind through time, space, and experience. Then it is stored in the mind, within the infinite void of dimensional space.

In my writing, I'll explore John Sutton's Philosophy and Memory Traces, Roland Barthe's Camera Lucida, Cathy Caruth's Unclaimed Experience, and art works by Alain Resnais, Doris Salcedo and Josiah McElheny.

Introduction: Inner and Outer Relationship of the Mind

The inner mind has its own spatial dimension, laws of physics different from the physical world which the body inhabits. Memory reenacts in the mind which is a larger space of void. Space is the larger whole of which the changing memory is a part. Reconstruction and destruction of memories happen internally and is not visible on the outer shell of the body. My work bridges the mind and the viewer, and invites viewers into my own space. The paper is organized to discuss traumatic memory and interrelations of memory, mind and the body.

For each of my works, it's a process of confronting memory and loss. Grappling with trauma or more specifically the overcoming of trauma is essential to my art. The psychology of the loss experienced in my personal life takes center stage as I create work that deal with the process of forgetting and preserving memory. Mundane moments in life, scents and objects work as the signifiers to reperforming of the history in the constructed frame. Through my sculpture, installation, and films, I invite viewers into the complex inner workings of my mind. Some works attempts to capture and make permanent of the fleeting memory and emotions; capturing the ephemera. Others actively distort and decay the objects that it encases in attempts to disconnect the mind from going back to its memory reserve. And some visualize the experience of being stuck in the stigma of past and present, in the liminal void of emotion and memory in attempts to understanding history. Autobiographical memories are singular experiences that is constantly in motion with the body.

Body abides to the law of the nature, ages and matures through the strict measures of time and experiences it goes through. The mind is not divorced from the body, so the mind and the body changes cohesively. The experiences the body goes through activates the triggers in the mind, eliciting changes. However, time is malleable in the mind. It is not regulated in strict timely manner, time is kept loosely, sometimes the memories are shown fast forwarded, abstracted. sometimes it is slowed down, to the microscopic manner, zooming in on each word, intonation to expression, and so much more. The body thrusts the mind to change however, the damage in the mind is not often visible in the body.

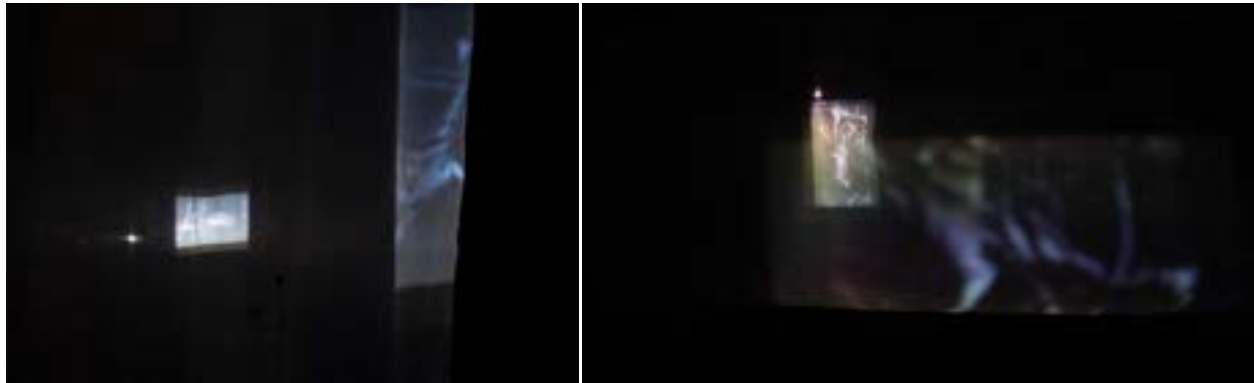
Mind and Memory as Three Dimensional Space

Mind has a complex inner infrastructure. Mind is not a linear stream of consciousness or unconsciousness. It exists as an infinite three-dimensional space, where bits and pieces of

memories are intermingled and scattered in the non-linear timely manner. Also memories operate in such a way an individual does not have control over them. Memories are only retrieved when triggered to be brought fort. Memories are not controlled by the self but it is influenced by the outside force. Traces are in the interrelations between units rather than fixed to individual units, and ongoing processing takes place in the very same (part of a) system as 'storage':

The ways that representational spaces in memory get partitioned are not chosen by a self which transcends them, but neither are they entirely chance, for they are the sediment of a particular past in a specific brain and body. Alien memories, like feelings, can also be our own, and strangeness can lie inside. (Lingis 1994b: 99-103). This is why memory has its sadness: because remembering is reconstructive, it is also destructive. Like anatomy, memory mangles and transforms its materials, tending to obliterate as well as construct. It is not only in repression and the organized forgetting imposed by oppressive regimes that memory is continuous with violence.¹

Very much like the how the physical world operates, action and reaction, creation and destruction occur within our mind. Memories are not just a recorded history, a factual record, instead, past is the ongoing present moments that has a specific time of origin.



Retrospect in Darkness, 2016
Installation space, two-channel video, sound,
rose scent, chiffon fabric in black installation
11 x 8 feet

In *Retrospect in Darkness* is an installation art which the viewers walk into a black room with a video projection, translucent fabrics, sound and scent. The work embraces the idea of the mind as a three dimensional space and examines the formation of memory and how memory becomes abstracted through time and remembering. The consecutive layers of fabric resonates with the idea of how memory, especially mentally distressing memory, is formed and stored in the brain: first the strong yet abstract sensory information, then to more specific, and dimmer ones as it passes through cognitive decisions made by the brain, further fragmenting it to bits and pieces. Regardless of the stage of memory, however, it is impossible to recall exact moment and label it truth, because it is not. Once the memory is stored in the mind, it becomes a never ending projection of past into the present moment.

¹ John Sutton, *Philosophy and Traces*, 1998 p.18



Endlessly Repeating Twentieth Century Modernism, 2005

Josiah McElheny

blown glass, mirror in installation

Josiah McElheny creates finely crafted, handmade glass objects that he combines with photographs, text, and museological displays to evoke notions of meaning and memory. Whether recreating miraculous glass objects pictured in Renaissance paintings or modernized versions of non-extant glassware from documentary photographs, McElheny's work takes as its subject the object, idea, and social nexus of glass:

All of my work is essentially derived from some previous source," says Josiah McElheny. "A lot of times what I'm doing is re-imaging something or transforming it slightly, but it's always very much in connection to its source."²

My works in visualizing memory and the inner mind are in dialogue with Josiah McElheny's work as he creates finely crafted, handmade glass objects that he combines with photographs, text, and museological displays to evoke notions of meaning and memory. In this work he created an infinite three dimensional space, using mirror to make a museological box to infinitely repeat space to represent time.

Forming a memory trace for something- say, an episode or event- begins with the construction of a pattern of activity over the processing units, with the experience itself strongly influencing the pattern. But the existing connections among the units will also influencing the pattern constructed, thereby introducing the possibility of additions, omissions, and distortions. Storage of a trace of the episode or event then occurs through the modification of the strengths of the connections among the units.

Traumatic Memory and the Body

² "Josiah McElheny in Memory." Art21. N.p., 23 Sept. 2005. Web. 05 May 2017.

Trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind.³ Wound of the mind—the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world—is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. Traumatic memories persist, not easily forgettable and exist in the forms that can repeatedly elicit pain even after passage of time. It hides in the deep unconsciousness but appears in the form of implicit memories.

Implicit memory [is] the unconscious influence of past experience when the past, so to speak, leaks into, or contaminates, behavior and ongoing cognition (Schacter 1995: 19).⁴



Hiroshima mon amour, 1959, film stills

The body becomes a site of experience and a memory reserve of pleasures and pains, a mobile microcosm inside the macrocosm of the world I inhabit. Memories are what assigns identity to the body and keeps it connected to its surroundings. In *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth examines Marguerite Duras and Alain Resnais’s film *Hiroshima Mon Amour* to reconfigure history as that which eludes direct experience, inhabited by untold stories and experiences not yet completely grasped.

In the beginning, film shows the footages of nuclear radiation victims. The victims’ bodies are horribly deformed due to genetic mutation and skins of children are severely burned and flakes off like ashes. The physical trauma is mirrored to the bodies of the two protagonists, a French woman and a Japanese man. However, the film suggests physical scars can heal but the psychological scars do not, which is emphasized by the repetition of the phrase “I saw everything.... I’ll never forget.” The film, however, does more than reconfigure history. It situates the body vis-à-vis the physical place as sites in which trauma unfolds: the body as a performative site that reenacts the trauma, and the city as a memory which becomes alive by such reenactments. When people revisit the physical place, the place acts as the trigger to take the mind back to the past, but the trauma and the memory is singularly experienced in the individual’s body, and is not easily understood by other people.

³ Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2016. Print.

⁴ John Sutton, *Philosophy and Traces*, 1998 p.18



Meditation in Black, 2016, film still
Two-channel video, 23' 40"



Retrospect in Black, 2016, Film stills
Two-channel video, 37' 21"

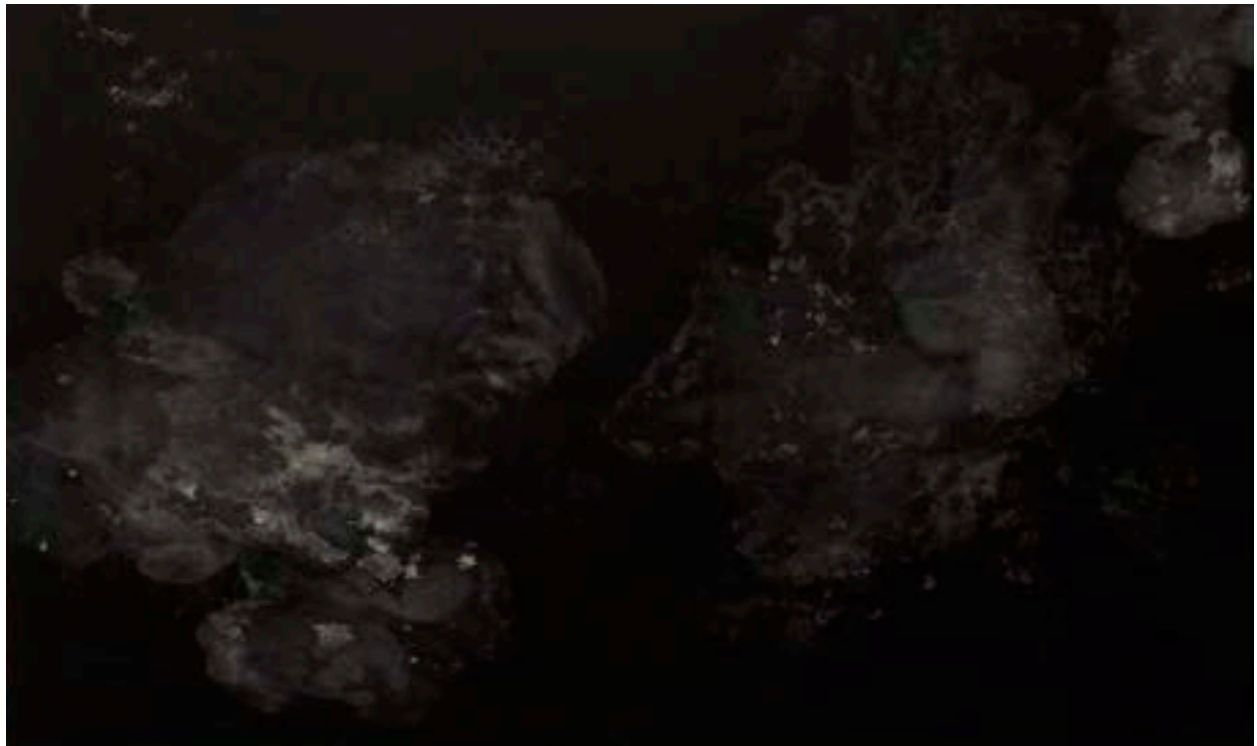
In the works, *Meditation in Black* and *Retrospect in Black*, I visualize traumatic memories on the outer skin of the body. Rose, that was once a flourishing life, is used as a metaphor for pain, violence and destruction, as its dried and ground up powder is rubbed on to the skin. Rose is also representative of the emotion that fades eventually through time. In this case, powder of rose is violently erasing or burying the figure— representing destruction. The murmuring sound is another alteration of the original sound file I had from 2015. By layering multiple audio files on top of each other, it distorts and loses its agency to the original context.

Often, I use various mediums to explore my practice and concept. I use soaps, salt, and rose petals— materials that are not fixed to one form and always lends possibility to modification and transformation through time. Soap, salt and rose ink are sensitive to the surrounding environment and each of which adjusts itself to the given condition. On humid days, water crystals form around the surface of the soap, slowly dissolving and self destructing. These are in some sense individual entities that breathe, and change, changing with the memories which shapes its forms and shape, its purpose was the point of departure, not the point of arrival

— thus it acts like it has its own life, its own will which the mind is constantly trying to grasp and understand.

Fragility, Ephemerality of Memory

The act of remembering is finding meaning within the past history. One can do so in two ways: First, one can assume the meaning has already been assigned. The collective memory as something that does not change, and one's act of remembering is only discovering— memory as something that is permanent, stagnant, free from external influences such as space and time. Thus the past is finite and through remembering new meanings are not assigned. Second, one can approach it as if there is no finality to the past, but rather an ever changing and ongoing the present that is susceptible to transformation and constantly affecting the present. The past does not have a clear divide from the present, but as a linear gradation to the unknown future. The meaning and value of the past is fluid and it reconstructs from one reminiscence to the next,— reevaluated and recreated. As a result, the meaning of memories is not created through the process of discovery but from invention. Thus overcoming of a trauma cannot have a measured time limit, since remembering itself is another post-experience— infinitely, actively constructing and reconstructing. What I'm responding to is the second definition of remembering.



June 27, 2015, 2017
salt on black canvas

Because remembering is a creative and destructive process, memories are fragile and ephemeral. One memory is never remembered the same way second time, and it is in constant

motion, change, and transformation. In the infinite void of darkness, memories are like free flowing fluid or a projection of the past in a fog like display. It has life of its own, that transcends the individual's control. *June 27, 2015* is singularly experienced in an empty room where the painting hangs and the sound plays in the background. Sound carry the viewer forward in time but also its ambient sound helps the mind to engage with the painting as the reflected light shifts, changes and transforms. Salt is used as a metaphor for ephemerality of memory. It is an agent that preserves but also decays. Salt is responsive to the humidity in the air or the conditions of the environment which it is situated in. Thus it will alter and transform, and decay as time passes.



Disremembered IV, 2015
Doris Salcedo
Silk thread and nickel plated steel
35 1/16 x 21 5/8 x 6 5/16 in.

Inspired by her encounters with victim in this case American mothers who lost children to gun violence. The weaving of burial shroud is traditional funeral rite, the act of devotion to loved ones. These ethereal sculptures which seemed to shimmer in endow to visibility, almost like a mirage is created from strands of raw silk and many thousands of burned needles, but their delicate beauty is deceptive. these garments will be torturous to the wearer. Disremember it is a reminder of the suffering of survivors not only from devastating loss but also from society's lack of empathy and response. Salcedo has said she considers her art a form of funereal oration, in that it acknowledges need to mourn but also attempts to restore the dignity and meaning that violence has taken away from its subject. Her works allow the victims' experience to unfold

again in the present. A reality she describes as resounding within the silence of each individual who gazes upon it.



September or Rose, 2017
rose powder, chiffon, wire and light bulb

September or Rose is inspired by the fabric that covers the face of the deceased which is performed during the funeral procedure before the body is placed in the coffin. This thin piece of fabric is the only barrier that is keeping the living from looking at the dead's face. The only obstruction that is preventing the mind from remembering various memories that are associated with the face of the deceased. From the moment the face is no longer accessible, memories will begin to fade. The stains that are made from the rose ink will fade over time, because it is naturally dyed with no binding material. The light bulb will continue to burn until it is exhausted.

"The human mind is more complicated. It has more alley ways, streets, highways than a city. And yet we look at it from a far and we go 'ah! it looks quite nice'... we have no clue" Alain de Botton said in his talk about human psychology. Mind is like a three dimensional space, it has its corners, edges, bright areas and dark ones. "Memory bridges not just past and present, but outside and inside, machine and organism, dreams and reason, invention and sadness, creation and loss."⁵

⁵ John Sutton, *Philosophy and Traces*, 1998 p.4

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