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## Twisted Truths in Memories

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## Abstract

Memory— fragments of minds that are stored to remember the past and information— plays a huge role in human development. Humans interact with each other based on past experiences. These memories are part of our personalities. Flashbulb memory, a highly detailed snapshot of a moment, can even be life changing, because that memory becomes an essential part of “you.” In *Twisted Truths in Memories*, my body of work aspires to explore the question: what happens to memory when strong emotions are involved? How does that relate to a photograph, especially when photographs are intended to demonstrate the truth? The body of work constantly questions the emotions and memories that have created the sense of truth to me. It questions places, culture, and people. I dealt with my understanding of truth in the process of collaging photographs, which became a way for me to create new memories from past memories. I discuss the power of photography as well as the confusion and distortion that photography can cause in relation to memory. I remember, recreate, and reconsider the memories I have had to build to become who I am today. No matter how accurate or inaccurate these memories are, these memories have become the twisted truth that I have created for myself to cope.

## **I. My introduction to the camera, photography**

Recordings such as photographs and videos were a natural part of my family ever since I was born. Marking a memory and a moment was significant for my maternal grandfather, and he always made sure that we had something to look back on. His previous house was full of old film videos and photo albums filled with printed film photographs. When I turned 16, my grandfather invited me over for a special gift. It was a Nikon DSLR that he used to take portraits of our family. My connection to photography began abruptly but meaningful; he wanted me to take on his job because he was now too tired to do so.

A photograph meant the truth; the thousand words that nothing else can simply describe. Documenting with photographs meant documenting the truth, and I believed that nothing could be distorted or tainted in this process. Photographs also would tell a story—a story that describes



Figure 1, Photograph of my siblings and my grandparents

emotions and human connections. I believed that the lense, being so objective, would always represent nothing but truth. Denying a photograph would mean denying truth. My photographs were about remembering the truth of my culture back in South Korea, the Philippines, and my family that I missed ever since I moved to the United States for undergraduate studies.

The camera, for me, was a way to remember and contain my culture and my family even thousands of miles away. And I held onto these photographs when I moved to America, and

despite being far away, I felt that these old photographs brought me back to my culture, and helped me remember who I was. This paper will explore how I came to realize that memory can distort and deny truths behind a photograph, and how my camera transitioned into a different object. What happens to a photograph after its decisive moment and how can we provide more context through a photograph?

## II. Lessening the distance: remembering my history and family

What does it mean to not have one place that you can truly call home? Being born in the United States, but having grown up in South Korea and the Philippines for the majority of my life, it was always difficult to define where I belong. To South Koreans and Filipinos, I was American, and to Americans, I was another international student. Unable to completely fit into all three cultures, I was left clinging onto my family's photographs, as we shared these experiences. But even so, my family still lives back in Asia, and for them, that is home. I dealt with the confusion of defining what home means to me, and found myself clinging onto old photographs.

*Lingering* deals with memories with my siblings and how the age gap between us reveals different experiences for each of us (Figure 2). The children's table mimics our old social space as kids, and the paper collage on top mimics our drawing table we used to doodle and play with paper. The ripped parts of the collage reveal images of my siblings, showing marks of violence and sadness that remain



Figure 2, Jiyeon Kang, *Lingering*, 2019, Sculpture

due to separation. The long, ripped marks show efforts of holding onto family memories and trying not to get separated. I recognized my reality in being separated from my family. I felt isolated and trapped in past memories of my family.



Figure 3, Jiyeon Kang, *Clarice*, 2019, Tracing paper print

I was identifying myself as the person my family wanted me to be. The collage *Clarice* shows an overlay of prints of stills from *The Silence of the Lambs*, a movie that features the protagonist Clarice Starling, who my father named me after, and photographs of myself (Figure 3). My father watched the movie when he was trying to earn his masters degree in Chicago and was inspired by the bravery and boldness of detective Clarice. The overlay of text and the image shows expectations of what my father may have envisioned, and how his vision reflects my identity now

that I have watched the movie. I was experiencing the overlap of two American and Korean perspectives while creating the pieces, helping me narrow down my emotional distance between myself and home. The piece is my recognition that I am still able to connect back to identities and cultures in which my family believed. The collage experience through this piece allowed me to realize the effect of imageoverlay, and how that affects the content of the photograph and recollection of memories.

### III. His Passing

“In many ways, we are our memories. Without memories, we are nothing.”- Luis Buñuel<sup>1</sup>

Memories form who we are, what we believe in, and what we aspire to become; they are a simple way to define our story and perspectives. Flashbulb memory especially impacts our personalities and memories. Certain memories that involve strong emotions are remembered better, and often define a turning point in people's lives; this may range from surprising, positive memories to trauma. According to Elizabeth Kensinger, memory can be significantly enhanced when affected by strong emotions<sup>2</sup>. This means memory can be easily distorted when strong



Figure 4, Photograph of Grandfather's funeral from my mom

emotions are involved, and perception can be altered in this process. The flashbulb memory is simply like a photograph; it captures the decisive, important moment. We get to decide what we want to remember and record, as well as how to record the moment. The strong emotions involved in these moments can influence how we remember certain stories, and certain moments - even in photographs.

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<sup>1</sup> Buñuel Luis, and Abigail Israel. *My Last Sigh: the Autobiography of Luis Buñuel*. New York: Vintage Books, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Kensinger, Elizabeth A. "Negative Emotion Enhances Memory Accuracy: Behavioral and Neuroimaging Evidence." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 16, no. 4 (2007): 213-18. Accessed February 21, 2020. [www.jstor.org/stable/20183199](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20183199).



Just when I thought I was getting used to living in America all alone for college, the summer of 2018, my grandfather passed away. Unable to grieve in person at the funeral nor with my family, I was left to grieve through past portraits of him and funeral photographs. I could not process his passing. The photographs felt fake. That was a shocking realization; I could not believe what a photograph, which I had previously believed to be the full truth, was telling me. In my mind I was almost thinking that my grandfather had left for a long trip and was not going to return. What does it mean to digest a memory that isn't exactly yours? We always talk about how a photograph describes a thousand words, but can we really live the same thousand words? I searched for ways to cope other than the funeral photograph I received.

Instead of grieving through photographs which I could not process anymore, I decided to paint. *His Presence* is a painting that allowed me to process my grandfather's passing. Painting



Figure 4, Jiyoung Kang, *His Presence*, 2018, Oil on Canvas

his portrait in the work allowed me to grieve (Figure 4). I wanted the flash reflections to mark the flashbulb memory. I painted photographs that I clearly remembered when I thought of my grandfather. Even though I was either too young, or was not born for some of the photos to remember him at that age, it almost felt like I was living fake, imagined memories through the photographs. The collage of different photographs of our family portraits into one painting showed a recollection of

memories that I wanted to remember, which is a weird new flashbulb memory in my mind. I



remember his passing now through this painting rather than the funeral photo I received from my mother.

This painting transitioned into the postcard *Love, Jiyeon*. The postcard is my attempt to deliver a message to my grandfather (Figure 5&6). The back of the card is written in Korean, which translates to “The person who I visited first when I was happiest was the grandfather I loved, and the person who visited me first when I was the saddest was the grandfather that loved



Figure 5 & 6, Jiyeon Kang, *Love, Jiyeon*, 2019, Postcard

me.” Layering and collaging photographs and paintings allowed me to grow closer to my family. The experience also helped me find closure for my grandfather’s passing. The physical act of collage allowed me to recollect, and reimagine my memories and

transition grief into comfort. My grandfather’s death became a turning point for my photography; I started questioning the truth and the context that is needed to read a photograph.

#### IV. The act of collage, and the meaning of a photograph after its place

What happened after I received photographs of my grandfather's funeral? What happened to photographs of him that I had before? In terms of decisive moments in photographs, photographs can show frozen time forever, commemorating a moment. But what happens to a photograph after that frozen moment? The photograph unfolds in time and its historical context,

the singular event that happens in the photograph becomes open to systematic interpretation. The decisive moment was favored because, according to John Roberts, it allowed photography's spontaneous powers of convergence to be fetishized as evidence of the photographer's eyes.<sup>3</sup> There is more meaning that gets added onto a photograph after it is brought up as an archival. In other words, photographs can be interpreted differently based on the time they are being presented beyond its time of capture. The question is now how photographers deal with the photograph not necessarily showing the whole story, since photographs are embedded to their historical contexts. What does this change for a photograph?



Figure 7. Do Ho Suh, *The Perfect Home II*, 2018, Polyester sculpture

Constructed artificial spaces based purely on memory show how emotions involving a certain place can distort and enhance memory. Do Ho Suh, a Korean sculptor, creates sculpted houses in which he used to live within a variety of places. *The Perfect Home II* shows the translucent polyester

highlights the color to emphasize 'invisible memory', showing how the choice of color also reminisces his emotions and memory of the houses (Figure 7). He only selected a few pieces of furniture from the house to recreate. The work shows that certain aspects of his memory of the house were enhanced.

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<sup>3</sup> Roberts, John. "Photography after the Photograph: Event, Archive, and the Non-Symbolic." *Oxford Art Journal* 32, no. 2 (2009): 281-98. Accessed March 22, 2020. [www.jstor.org/stable/25650861](http://www.jstor.org/stable/25650861).

Selection of specific memories is reflected in my paintings of my grandfather's neighborhood and memories of his house. Experimenting with fading photographic memory, I



Figure 8. Jiyeon Kang, *Fading Places*, 2019, Acrylic and Oil on paint

painting became more memory based throughout the process (Figure 8). The painting represents a place that was once there, but now has faded into memories. The physical act of painting over a

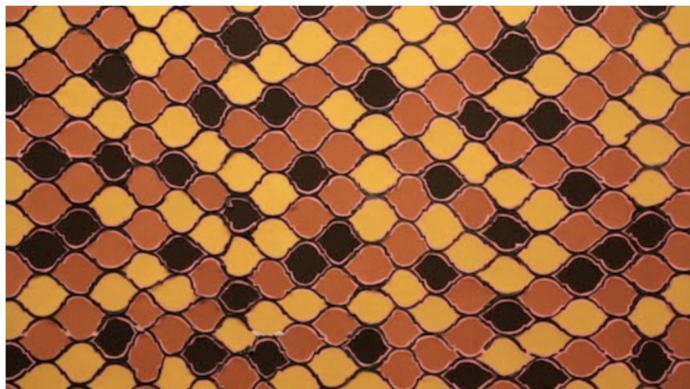


Figure 9, Trenton Doyle Hancock, *The Den*, 2012, Painting

wanted to explore my memory accuracy through a series of paintings. To experiment with memory accuracy with both photography and painting, I projected a faded image of my grandfather's old neighborhood in South Korea onto a canvas. *Fading Places* shows the act of memory fading through painting over a projected photograph. The more I painted on the canvas, the less I could see on the photograph. As a result, photograph demonstrates the influence of memory. The brushstrokes fading and stretching down the canvas show the haziness of the memory of the space. The painting demonstrates sadness and the disappearance of a place that was

once there, but has now diminished into a blurry memory.

Memories can be blurred, but constantly repeat in your mind in patterns, just like Trenton Doyle Hancock's *The Den*, in which the artist painted patterns of his grandmother's bathroom floor (Figure 9). His piece is about how a simple pattern as this could recollect nostalgia and new memories. Following his pattern making, I used repetitive patterns to emphasize my repeating memories. *Traces of* is a diptych painting showing two different color tones of the same wallpaper from my grandfather's old house. The painting was another experiment on memory (Figure 10). I wanted the brush strokes to be similar to *Fading Places*, so that the pieces would



Figure 10, Jiyeon Kang, *Traces Of*, 2019, Acrylic on Canvas

relate back to each other. The paintings show traces of memory through the wallpaper, showing my emotional relation to the house and my grandfather and how I envisioned the place as a vibrant, energetic place despite the house being actually 50 years old.

To conclude the series of paintings, *A Mirage* depicts a room in my grandfather's house, painted purely from my memory (Figure 11). The room had a

huge grand piano in the center that was surrounded by endless clothing racks and a tall window that overshadowed the piano behind where you entered the room. I wanted the canvas size to be five feet tall so it could reflect the overwhelmingness I felt as a six year old when I entered the



room. This room, to my surprise, apparently did not actually exist in my grandfather's house, showing another distortion in my memory.



Figure 11, Jiyoon Kang, *A Mirage*, 2019, Acrylic on Canvas

This is reflected through the fading of the piano and the connection to *Traces of* with the wallpaper color and pattern on the walls. The room feels ominous with the odd placement of objects, such as the clothing racks. Memories being directly and obviously distorted in the piece shows my acceptance of emotions in places that I remember.

Creation of new space and time through both photographs and paintings allowed me to connect back to my home in different ways.

## V. Collage and Added Context

Can photographs provide more context than what it says in the photograph itself? Archival photographs receive new meaning and context through overlay and collage, and this represents my physical practice of creating new narratives of my own through the act of overlay. Emotions and memories being intertwined can result in confusion and distortion, but also recollection and nostalgia. By exploring my distorted flashbulb memories, I reached the conclusion that the photograph, in fact, does not tell the entire truth. Truth can be easily distorted, and viewed with different perspectives. Emotions will always heavily influence our memories, and we will live on thinking that these memories were truthful. But that is

acceptable, as that is one of the many ways we cope. Can overlap of images construct new space and time?

Gregory Crewdson talks about the idea of photography being frozen and mute, asking



Figure 12, Gregory Crewdson, *Twilight*, 2002, Photograph

more questions than answers.<sup>4</sup> His *Twilight* series demonstrates strong narratives through the photography of artificially constructed scenes (Figure 12). He is able to define American culture through the photograph, and construct his own ambiguous narrative. The ambiguous moment in a photograph that does not completely

answer all questions is the aspect I was focusing on when I created *What Remains*. I wanted my piece to deliver a constructed narrative, but not to give away every detail. The narrative aspect

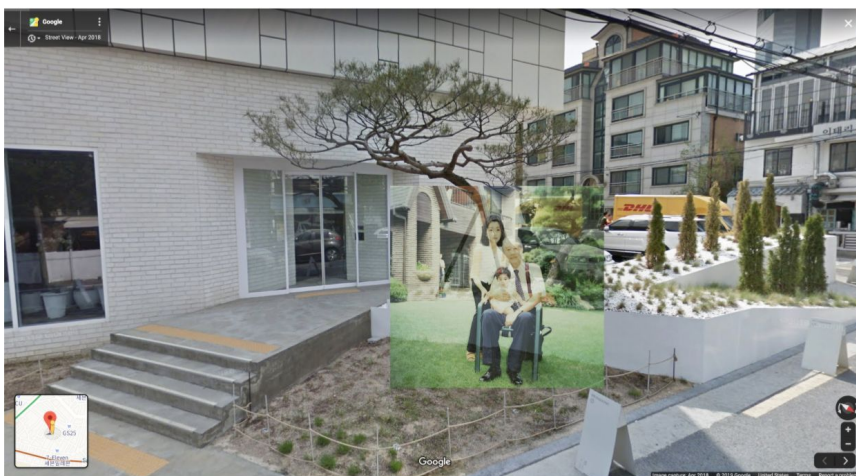


Figure 13, Jiyeon Kang, *What Remains*, 2019, Photograph Collage

that can be emphasized through collage of archival images starts a conversation about lost memories and emotions that are involved in those photographs.

March 21, 2020. [www.jstor.org/stable/40425436](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40425436).  
1 (1997): 38-43. Accessed



*What Remains*, shown in Figure 13, shows a collage piece overlaying a portrait of my family including my mother, grandfather, myself, and a Google image street view capture. The Google Street View is the place where my grandfather's old house used to be. The family picture was also taken at the old house. With only the pine tree remaining at the newly renovated office space, the piece plays with emotion in a photograph. With newly placed context through the archived family portrait, the Google Street View becomes evidence of nostalgia and passage of time. The archived photograph brings new meaning with the overlay of the Google Street View, and can now be interpreted with new perspectives. John Roberts states that photographs being “after-the-event” makes photographs able “to establish a new reportorial role for itself by making a case for the necessary *lateness* of the photograph”<sup>5</sup>. Through the piece I was able to explore the added context of photographs through overlap of images - a single photograph may not give the thousand words, but a collage may be able to.



Figure 14, Jiyeon Kang, *엄마께*, 2020, Photograph Collage

With all of the collaging and experimenting with memory, I wanted the final piece to contain all of these aspects and connect back to my family. I decided to make a piece dedicated to my mother, which created *엄마께*, which

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<sup>5</sup> Roberts, John

translates to *Dear mom*. (Figure 14). The photographs are a series of ten images, that are collages of black and white images overlayed with colored images of my mom's arranged flowers. These transition into colored photographs that are overlaid with black and white photographs of me and my siblings.

The series to show the transition of my mother from being a mother of three to an independent florist, and how she fills her empty nest after her divorce through arranging flowers. I wanted the overlap of color and black white images to imply different times and places, and the borders of the images highlight that aspect as well. The collage is not meant to be natural, but to rather feel artificial and direct in its time difference.

Through coping with grief and separation through collaging, I realize that a single photograph may not be enough to provide context, the same thousand words to the audience - but with collaging, and play with place and time, it may be able to deliver similar nostalgia and emotions that I experienced while creating the pieces. I hope to continue this exploration furthermore, and find my own truth in these twisted photographs.

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