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Melting, Dripping, Becoming:
The Operations of Memory from the Perspective of Wax

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BFA: Studio Art

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Abstract

In my thesis, I explore how different compositional and material techniques are used to re-create a memory. Looking at artists such as Kiki Smith, Guadalupe Maravilla, and Anselm Keifer, I investigate the ways in which they utilize 2D and 3D materials to re-create feelings of memory. I argue that the art object can conserve and portray memory through metaphorical acts of preservation. I will be specifically studying the acts of encasing and layering as a means to simulate the feelings of memory. I argue that these metaphorical actions create an artificial sense of time that imbues these objects with created history. I also explore how illustrative metaphors can be used to incorporate the viewer into these created histories and include them in these narratives.

Memory is mediated materially. We store memory through physical objects, such as photos, quilts, glasses, and old necklaces. These objects from the past are kept to solidify the past, our memories stored within their form. Without external projection, our thoughts, identities, and memories would forever remain in the realm of the abstract with little organization. We rely on objects to tell us what we are, what we were, and what we will be (Csikszentmihalyi, 22).

There are many different techniques artists use to amplify an object's history. Writing, painting, and mark-making over old objects have been practiced for centuries. Physical alteration of the object's form can effectively add to old narratives, or change them completely. Take Ai



Fig.1. Ai WeiWei, Han Jar Overpainted with Coca-Cola Logo, 1995

Weiwei's *Han Jar Overpainted with Coca-Cola Logo*. The Han dynasty jar is a valuable artifact that represents China's rich cultural heritage. By overpainting the jar with the Coca-Cola logo, Ai Weiwei is commenting on the impact of globalization on traditional Chinese culture. Coca-Cola is a symbol of American culture and consumerism, and its logo is instantly recognizable around the world. By juxtaposing

this symbol with a piece of Chinese history, Ai Weiwei is suggesting that traditional cultures are being eroded and replaced by global consumer culture. Furthermore, the red color of the Coca-Cola logo is significant in Chinese culture, as it is traditionally associated with good fortune and happiness. By painting the jar with this color, Ai Weiwei is highlighting the seductive power of consumer culture and its ability to appropriate and transform traditional cultural symbols.

We can see how a simple alteration of an object can have a plethora of meanings, and can also create an extended narrative of time. But, how can we create this sense of time without artifacts from thousands of years ago? How can we create a memory based art-object without material from the past? I argue that the art object can conserve and portray memory through acts and rituals of preservation. I will be specifically studying the acts of burning, layering, and framing, with the use of wax as symbolic material, to simulate the feelings of memory. I argue that these metaphorical actions create an artificial sense of time that imbues these objects with history.

A Short History of Art and Memory

How memory exists and is stored has been the subject of philosophical and scientific debate for hundreds of years. Plato was especially interested in the topic of memory relating to art. He believed that memory and art are related in that both involve a process of recollection or remembering. Plato believed that art is a form of imitation, which is removed from reality and therefore, inferior to reality. He argued that art can never be a true representation of reality, and thus, it can only lead to a further distortion of our understanding of the world. In this way, trying to draw a scene realistically, in order to remember it to the best of the artist's impression, is futile. From what we've gathered from Plato's ideas, a realistic representation of a subject is an ineffective means of collecting a memory. Part of Plato's argument is a critique of the work of his time. Artists represented memory literally, using realism as a tool in order to recreate past events. Portraits and sculptures were used as mnemonic aids for the living. Plato saw the futility in this, thus his argument on the fallibility of art.

If a past event cannot be depicted accurately through realism, what other tools are at our disposal? A philosophical shift occurs in the 18th century. John Locke, an English philosopher, argued that memory is evoked through sensorial stimuli (Locke, 10). This awakened new ideas as to how memory was experienced; critics of Locke suggested that since these sensorial impressions are subjective, then memory is as well. This shift is significant, as we begin to abandon the idea of memory as objective and enter the terrain of subjective experience.

There are abundant sources of art and memory philosophy between Plato and the contemporary era, and I will not comb through each one of them for the sake of clarity; the most important thing to note is the evolution of memory as a clear, infallible experience, to a completely subjective one. We witness this treatment now, as we can observe Contemporary artists treating memory as fluid and elusive. The contemporary artist is aware of the role of interpretation, perception, and personal experience in shaping our memories. Many artists have challenged the idea of a fixed, objective reality, and instead, emphasized the role of memory in shaping our understanding of the world (Salzman, 25).

Metaphor and Memory

Metaphors and allegories become critical tools in the artist's memory tool kit. In her sculpture "Rapture," Kiki Smith uses a bird-like figure as a metaphor for the human body and its fragility. The image of the bird, with its delicate bones and feathers, evokes memories of flight, freedom, and vulnerability, while also addressing themes of mortality and transcendence.

Smith also uses metaphorical imagery to address social and political issues. In her installation "Black Flags," for example, she uses the image of a flag as a metaphor for identity, power, and resistance. The installation features black flags made from silk, which bear images of

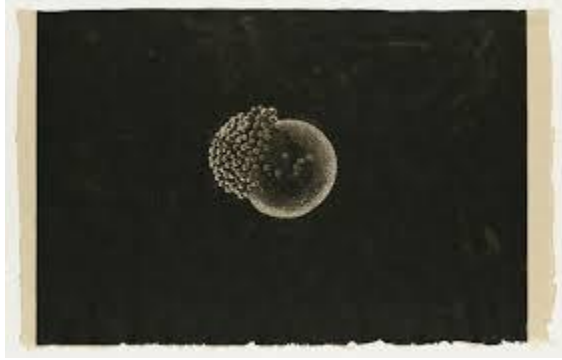


Fig.2. Kiki Smith, *Black Flag*, 1990

skulls, flowers, and other symbols. Through this work, Smith addresses issues of violence, mortality, and political oppression. Throughout her career, Smith has explored the complex relationship between memory, metaphor, and meaning. Her work encourages viewers to reflect on their own

experiences and associations, while also challenging them to consider broader cultural and historical contexts. Through her use of symbolic imagery, Smith creates a powerful dialogue

between personal and collective memories and explores

the ways in which our individual experiences are shaped

by social and cultural forces.

My own work relies heavily on metaphor as a form of communication. I spent years investigating why my attraction was so strong to ancient imagery. I mimicked motifs from ancient cultures and societies, particularly Korean and Christian symbolism. My work was littered with crosses, norigae, tigers, and Madonna-like imagery. These symbols and elements have inherent power over human beings, and I sought to manipulate and re-appropriate them to steal some of that power. This is when my work became based on metaphor. I love metaphors! Being treated like a dog, beat like a dead horse, being an early bird or a night owl. Metaphor populates our vocabulary and lives within our art. Visual metaphors are images that are meant to represent something else. It is up to the viewer to decide what that is.

In my work, *The First Birth*, an apocalyptic scene confronts the viewer. A two-headed deer lies under an arch of white goop, just out of reach of the marauding canines. The two-headed deer is both female and male, with only one sporting a head of antlers. The

hermaphrodite is a symbol of the self, used in certain spiritual practices to integrate the masculine and feminine parts of the self. Deer represent innocence and gentleness, signaling naivete of the self. The white arch represents sex and reproduction, the sinuous bulges and drips are sensual and provocative. The combination of these



Fig.3. Naomi Yu, *The First Birth*, 2023

elements is ultimately used to formulate a creation story, of both the self and the world. It can be interpreted in many different ways. Getting to this point, I believe this is why I love visual symbolism and metaphors. It asks the viewer to be aware of their perspective, to push

themselves onto the work, and to find parts of themselves within it. It demands that we confront our own biases, and reveal our subconsciousness.

Besides illustrative metaphors, I find myself confronting metaphors in material and process. I asked myself, what metaphorical actions can we impose upon these forms in order to imbue them with a sense of time? Besides using symbolism and manipulation of the symbol, what can we do materially to the object to alter its position in time? The first process I will be investigating is that of layering, particularly through the use of wax. I investigate wax as a material, and how its physical transformations enhance a memory-based art object.

Dead things, soup bones, memory: wax as a memory device

Working with wax as a preservation method has been around for thousands of years. In the coffins of the ancient pharaohs, archeologists found wax death masks on top of the deceased.

The wax was poured over the mummy's face, in order to preserve its likeness. Similar methods were used by the ancient Romans, whose death masks would be placed with those of their predecessors, effectively preserving their lineage. Wax death masks have been used to capture the likeness of Beethoven, Sir. Issac Newton, Napoleon Bonaparte, and thousands of others. Overall, death masks have served as a way to preserve the memory of the deceased throughout history. They have been used to immortalize the powerful, mourn the dead, and remember historical figures (Pointon, 2014).

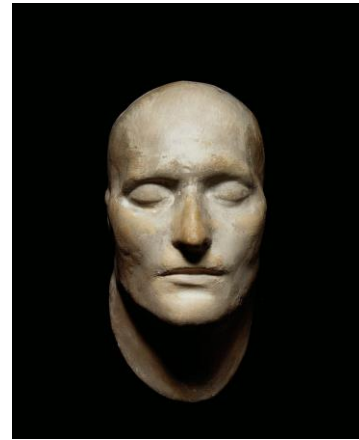


Fig.4. Death Mask of Napoleon Bonaparte

Given its history, wax is a very symbolic material. It is used to preserve, keep, and seal something that would be otherwise lost to time. It has also been used as a metaphor by many of the greatest philosophers to ever live. Wax has been used to explain the contrast between our solid, physical forms and our turbulent inner selves. Aristotle used the metaphor of wax to explain the operations of memory, imagining that experiences and sensations impressed themselves into wax, thus becoming the stuff of memory (Didi-Huberman, 196).

The effigy: burning what you love

I have used wax in two distinct ways. I have treated it as a sculptural material, creating works that are entirely made of wax. My works, *100 days journey* (2022), and *Motherboard* (2023) are sculptures that are made from casting wax in plaster and silicon molds. Both of them are imagined as giant candles, the wicks running through the entirety of the sculpture. They were created with the intention of being completely melted away- their physical forms no longer exist. This method of using wax is distinctly time-based and encourages prolonged viewing. I find this similar to the work of Urs Fischer, a Swiss artist who is famous for his large wax sculptures. They are lit on fire by the viewers in controlled settings, and slowly melt until the forms are unrecognizable. He creates works that are hyper-realistic and surreal - his work *Untitled* (2011) is a recreation of *The Abduction of the Sabine Woman* (1579-82) by Giambologna, made entirely out of wax. As the candle burns, the wax melts and changes the appearance of the sculpture. The heat from the flame causes the wax to drip and pool on the ground, creating new forms and textures. Over time, the sculpture becomes a new work of art, constantly changing and evolving as the candle burns down. *Untitled* (2011) is a commentary on the impermanence of life and the fleeting nature of existence. By using a candle as the central



element of the sculpture, Fischer is referencing the ritual of lighting candles as a symbol of remembrance or hope but also highlighting the fragility of life and how quickly it can disappear.

This method of using wax emphasizes impermanence and loss. We as viewers must confront that the art object no longer exists and has been lost to the ravages of time.

Like skin over bone: wax as layering device

The second way I use wax is layering. In my work, *Untitled* (2023), the viewer witnesses the journey of three dogs through a mountain landscape. They are on a pilgrimage of sorts, journeying to a mountain cave at the end of the road. They seem to be stuck in an infinite loop, never quite reaching their destination, carrying on their Sisyphean task. The work is full of powerful symbolic elements, the mountain traditionally meaning fortitude and strength, dogs



meaning loyalty, guidance, and protection. The work deals with themes of migration, and I drew reference from my father's experience immigrating as a young child with his two sisters. His story is not unique - humans have been displaced and have been forced to migrate since the beginning of time. I wanted to capture this eternity of traveling and did so through an act of preservation. I covered the entire work in layers of paraffin wax, effectively freezing the composition. The dogs have adhered to the mountain through this process, ending all possibility of moving forward.

This is similar to the work of Anselm Kiefer. Although he does not use wax alone, he layers material in a specific way to create a sense of trapped memory. Kiefer's work often explores the relationship between memory and history and the ways in which the past informs

Fig.5. Naomi Yu, *100 Days Journey*, 2022

Fig.6. Urs Fischer, *Untitled* 2023

our understanding of the present. His work, *Let a Thousand Flowers Bloom* (2000), is a large vertical painting of Mao Zedong. The painting is covered in dead flora, including roses and tree branches, so much so that the figure of Mao is almost completely covered. He uses these materials to create textured, layered surfaces that evoke a sense of decay and the passage of time. These materials serve as metaphors for the weight of history and the fragility of memory.



Fig. 7. Anselm Kiefer, *Let a Thousand Flowers Bloom*, 2000

In many of his other works, Kiefer uses materials such as lead, ash, and concrete to create textured, layered surfaces that evoke a sense of decay and the passage of time. These materials serve as metaphors for the weight of history and the fragility of memory and are often combined with imagery such as abandoned buildings, ruins, and landscapes scarred by war.

These techniques of lighting on fire, destroying, and layering create important physical and metaphorical transformations in my work and the work of others. These processes reflect time's touch, even though these works do not feature material directly taken from a historical event.

The Altar: frame what you worship

The next process I want to address is of framing the art object. Frames have been an important historical component of art for thousands of years. Framing gives an artwork a contained visual field, context, focus, and protection. In my work, I give the frame more attention than what it surrounds, turning the frame into the subject of the work. In my work, *Trash Altar* (2022), I created a frame made of paraffin wax that was adorned with the impressions of found objects. It

frames a simple print of a toy figurine, digitally altered so that it has multiple arms. The subject matter of the print is relatively small compared to the frame: the frame is charged with creating significance and meaning. The work itself is meant to replicate an altar, elevating the less interesting, nearly insignificant image to a level of holiness.

An artist who works in a similar way is Guadalupe Maravilla, Maravilla considers his works autobiographical. He paints scenes from his childhood, during his journey to America from El



2022



Salvador. In his *Retablo* series, the artist creates paintings that speak to his experience as a refugee and undocumented immigrant. Maravilla pairs these small paintings with large frames, significantly larger than the paintings themselves. They are made with cotton, glue, paint, and wax. These frames are eerie and decorative, mimicking the frames of Catholic *retablos*. Maravilla calls them his alters, his worship of the past and present combined into one artwork.

\By creating such beautiful and ornate frames, we suggest that the subject is worthy of worship, and deserves attention and care. This strategy is also used in Catholic reliquaries, where body parts and possessions of deceased saints or important religious figures are. These otherwise unimportant objects are surrounded by lavish materials, such as gold silver, and precious jewels. These reliquaries are maximalist to the extreme, crafted and designed by experts. This level of

attention given to these objects helps preserve the memory of the deceased and creates an altar at

which a devout follower can pray. It is preservation in the

extreme.

Fig.9. Guadalupe Maravilla,
I was born on December 12th
Retablo,
2021

Both my work and Maravilla's work with frames operate in

similar ways, hoping to preserve the memories of our pasts

and honor them.

Final Thesis Project

Taking these methods of layering, sculpting, and framing, I present my final thesis project. It is called *Catching the Shadow* and is a multimedia project that consists of ceramic sculpture, oil painting, and of course, wax. The central part of the work features two portraits; the first portrait is of myself, and the second is of a dog. These paintings are rendered realistically, both my face and the face of the dog are angled in the same direction. The portrait of the dog is meant to provide a mirror to the self-portrait as well as act as its shadow. Here, I use metaphor as a device to reflect states of the internal. This is further developed by the surrounding frame, which connects the two paintings and acts as an enclosure. The frame's form mimics bones, recalling the form of a ribcage or antlers. These extrusions cradle the painting, linking them together physically.

In contrast to the dry, clinical realism of the paintings, the frames are dynamic and visually interesting. They demand the viewer's attention. This serves to make the images secondary to the overall structure, creating a shrine/altar. We can see the influence of *retablos* and reliquaries in this design, using accessories and decoration to explain the significance of an

object. The frames also serve to preserve myself in time, worshipping the self at this exact moment.

Connected to the central work is a series of arteries that are attached to ceramic wall hangings. These sculptures are intended to represent my physical experiences. If the paintings and frames are meant to communicate internal states of being, the sculptures speak to my experiences as a physical being. I reference moments of childhood, change, and personal transformation. I include cultural symbols of my Korean heritage, such as the *norigae*. Deer, birds, and flora speak to my childhood and my experiences of growing up in rural Michigan. I connect these sculptures through arteries, which are indicative of the body.

Every part of this work is covered in wax, which serves to slow time and preserve. I relish my past and my present, honoring these experiences and states of being.

This project is a cumulative work of my study in memory. As I wrote this thesis, my draw to these actions of burning, layering, and framing became more obvious; I believe that the act of recall, the act of reminiscing, is close to worship. So, my art is preserved, my actions upon the object complicating its existence in time and demanding to be seen in only this state.

Image List

Fig.1. Ai Weiwei, *Han Jar Overpainted with Coca-Cola Logo*, 1995. *The Metropolitan Museum of Art* <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/78215>

Fig.2. Kiki Smith, *Black Flag*, 1990. *Whitney Museum of American Art* <https://whitney.org/collection/works/29484>

Fig.3. Naomi Yu, *The First Birth*, 2023

Fig.4. *Death Mask of Napoleon Bonaparte*, 1821. <https://rarehistoricalphotos.com/death-mask-napoleon-bonaparte-1821/>

Fig.5. Naomi Yu, *100 Days Journey*, 2022

Fig.6. Urs Fischer, *Untitled*, 2011. *Pinault Collection* [https://www.pinaultcollection.com/en/boursecommerce/urs-fischer#:~:text=Composed%20of%20wax%20sculptures%2C%20Untitled,Women%20\(1579%2D1582\).](https://www.pinaultcollection.com/en/boursecommerce/urs-fischer#:~:text=Composed%20of%20wax%20sculptures%2C%20Untitled,Women%20(1579%2D1582).)

Fig.7. Anselm Kiefer, *Let a Thousand Flowers Bloom*, 2000. Tate
<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/kiefer-let-a-thousand-flowers-bloom-t07841>

Fig.8. Naomi Yu, *Trash Altar*, 2022

Fig.9. Guadalupe Maravilla, *I was born on December 12th Retablo*, 2021
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