Preserving Memory

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Preserving Memory

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The personal photograph is an object of complex emotional and cultural meaning, an artifact used to conjure memory, nostalgia, and contemplation. The photograph of personal value is a talisman, in which the past is often perceived to reside so that it can be reexperienced. It evokes both memory and loss, both a trace of life and the prospect of death. Yet, while the photograph may be perceived as a container for memory, it is not inhabited by memory so much as it produces it; it is a mechanism through which the past can be constructed and situated within the present. Images have the capacity to create, interfere with, and trouble the memories we hold as individuals... They lend shape to personal stories and truth claims, and function as technologies of memory, producing both memory and forgetting. –Marita Sturken

In thinking back on scenes from my childhood, I find sometimes that it is disconcertingly difficult to separate my actual memories of certain events from photographs I have seen of these events or stories my parents have told me about what happened. If I spend enough time running it through my mind, I can distinguish what I saw in a photograph and what I saw with my own eyes, but the amount of effort it takes to differentiate the two is unnerving, and makes me wonder about the role photographs play in the making and sustaining of memories.

For instance, I recently found a photo of a tiny version of me wearing a life vest with Big Bird on it and started reminiscing about it only to catch myself questioning what was memory and what was embellishment from another source. Do I really remember having to put my Big Bird lifejacket on when we summered in Maine? I remember the lifejacket itself, as well as the

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mucky bottom of the lake that necessitated my mandatory sporting of it. But when I think about it, my mother is the one who told me the details of the photo and the story behind it. She used to make me put it on before I even left the house because of the time I catapulted my two-year-old self off the end of the dock. (According to her, I felt secure that one of the four adults surrounding me would help if need be.)

These are things I can distinguish right now, as I think about separating what is my innate memory from my mother’s story, from the image of me in a Big Bird life jacket, (which I could have sworn was all yellow but in fact, according to the photo, had a range of reds, blues and greens mixed in with the main yellow bird.) However, in a different context - were I flipping through the album in which this photograph is placed, for example - I would not necessarily make the distinction between what was my memory, my mother’s memory and subsequent story, and the photograph itself. To whomever I was talking about the photo, it would seem that all of this information was simply memory spurred by the photograph - and for some images it may well be.

Were the image of me as a two-year-old in a yellow life vest not there, would I be telling this story at all? Would I even have thought of that lifejacket or the memories tied to it again? As much as I loved that garment as a kid, I’m not sure I would remember it now if it weren’t for the presence of a photograph that “kept” the memory for me. Therein lies the importance of the photograph.

Since the invention of photography in the late nineteenth century, and especially with the advent of the snapshot, photographs and memories have been very closely related, dare I say intertwined, so much so that even now there is still debate as to whether photographs are
beneficial or detrimental to how memory functions. Martha Langford says this perfectly in her book *Suspended Conversations*:

As long as photography has existed, claims for its usefulness as a repository of memory have been countered by arguments that echo the ancient distrust of writing, the fear that reliance on any system of recording ultimately leads to mental degeneration, to a condition of mnemonic atrophy. ²

The argument is that because photography is present in recording aspects of our lives, whether it is the everyday or a significant occasion, we, culturally, might lose the ability to remember anything at all simply because of the prevalence of photographs. The answer to this debate relies on evidence that lies far from my field of expertise, but the notion that it is still debated, and the nature of the debate, piques my interest both as a photographer and as a product of the modern era rife with photographic images.

Photographs are distinct from other forms of memorabilia because of the nature of photography; a scientific “documentation” of an event, recorded with a mechanical object and properties of chemicals and light that rendered them at the time of invention, and even today, images of “truth” or “proof”. I use quotes on these words because as we oft seem to forget, photographs can be manipulated by a range of means making them no more documentary or truthful than a painting or a sculpture but that is another essay entirely. The important thing is that, for the most part, we still culturally treat photographs as documentary images that display authentic, un-doctored events, people, or objects. As disparate from other types of mementos, ²

photographs are - or can be - veritable depictions of the people and places in which our memories were made. A photograph is a much more clear and distinct reminder of a memory because it shows the face or faces that participated in the making of said memory. It is not just an allusion to the event like a ticket stub or a pressed flower, but an exact pictorial representation of what happened at a distinct instant on a particular occasion, of who was present, or a combination of the two. In this way, photographs can be arguably more dangerous to our retention of “pure” memory than other forms of memorabilia because they lend themselves more easily to be mistaken for the actual memories formed by our minds. As Barbara F. Lefcowitz discusses in her essay “Memory and Photography,” it is almost too easy to assemble memories from memories themselves mixed with photographs, “Voilà! I realize that I have ‘stolen’ the face in the photo and…edited the memory. Such editing is doubtless the case of all representations of a remembered moment.” 3 That is to say that everyone does it; it is almost impossible not to fuse photographs of events with memories of the same events because we do so unconsciously, and rarely realize that it has happened.

Long before researching and reading about this, I felt something like it while looking through my maternal grandmother’s family albums, and yet in a completely different way. I was turning the yellowing pages of a scrapbook my great grandmother had put together, and Grandma was telling me to pause at certain points, explaining who certain people were, where they were, and then sometimes at certain pictures, delving into stories - memories - about the occasion or people pictured. At one point, she had me linger on a page that was full of obvious vacation images and pointed to an image of her at about 4 years old, wearing a white bathing cap
and a dark-colored life vest. Adjacent to it was an almost identical image of her wearing the same thing, but her older sister was next to her wearing only her swimsuit - sans life vest - which sparked a memory and subsequent story that seemed all too familiar: her mother had made her put a life vest on every day before leaving their vacation house, because she was a jumper - her sister was not. The memory she was telling me was not my own, and yet while looking at the photograph with her giving descriptions of the details, I could picture myself there, I could see what she saw even though the moment she described was long before my own mother was born.

This got me thinking about the power of imagination; even if she were not sitting beside me on the couch telling me the actual accounts depicted in the photographs, I would have probably imagined similar stories taking place. Furthering that thought on the power of imagination, this occasion also made me ponder about how much of these stories she actually remembered and how much was prompted by the photograph itself. Especially in looking through albums, it seems that many memories are directly tied to the photographs held in the album’s pages - memories that possibly would not ever resurface without the physical reminder of the day. Regardless of whether the story was her true memory or whether it had been embellished by stories from her parents or her own imagination creating what she thought the story was, the story was directly connected to the presence of the image - without it there would have been no such story. Moreover, regardless of how great my own imagination is, I never would have known how similar the two of us are without my grandma’s story induced by this particular photograph - the combination of the photograph and her presence served as a way to make an invaluable connection to someone who is a part of both my family’s past and present. It was then that I realized that family albums are incredibly important to family history and collective memory because they are storehouses of memories that may otherwise have been
completely forgotten, lost to ones that take up more space or prevalence in the scrapbooks of our brains.

As Annette Kuhn says in “Photography and Cultural Memory: a Methodological Exploration,” “…family photographs have considerable…significance, both as repositories of memory and as occasions for performances of memory.” \(^4\) Performances of memory being scenes exactly as I described above, stories told about particular occasions that were elicited by a photograph. In this way, albums become a family history of sorts, tracking the lives of its members pictorially. This seems like a rather obvious statement, however the importance of the family album comes not just from the pictures, but also from the format they take and the memories they evoke.

Not only do photographs operate as props and prompts in verbal performances of memory, but the collection of photographs that makes up a family album itself also follows an ‘oral structure’: ‘An album is a classic example of a horizontal narrative shot through with lines of both epic and anecdotal dimension.’ \(^5\)

Basically, a family album appears to be a set of images that usually follows a loose chronology of sorts - one that can be followed by anyone who picks up the book - but underlying this topical arrangement is one that is known to only those of a select group - family members. In essence, the family album is not much without someone to tell the stories; it is the collection of note cards with bullet points, not the word-for-word speech. But, what happens when the last person to


\(^5\) Kuhn 285
know the speech is no longer there to make sense of the bullet points? This is the question that spurred my work.

The work itself consists of 27 glass jars of different sizes, each containing an individual photograph from my family albums, spanning from the early 1900s until almost present day. The photographs include those of family members on my maternal grandmother’s side whom she can identify but I have never met and never will (since they are no longer alive), up to photographs of myself with my mom and dad. In this way, the images chosen are a representative sample of my family history, including bullet points of a story that I might be able to tell, some that my mother or father would know, as well as some of a story that only my grandmother knows.

The photographs in the jars are not the original photographs, but were scanned, made into digital negatives, and then reprinted using the Van Dyke brown process on cotton paper. An important aspect of this work is materiality; I wanted this piece to be as timeless as possible, and though I used modern technology (in the form of inkjet printers for digital negatives) to produce these images for lack of original negatives, I wanted to use materials that could have been used in my grandmother’s era, or even that of my great grandmother, to make images that were not necessarily temporally identifiable, at least at first glance. The brown of the reprinted photographs allude to memory and to the passage of time; the sepia tones of turn-of-the-century photographs, the browning of old paper. All of the photos are in brown tones because they all represent memories - they are moments that were captured in the past and now serve as prompts for stories of my history and that of my family.

I placed these individual photographs in jars as a visual allusion to preservation; these are literally “canned” memories, put in jars as photographs are put in traditional albums in order to
preserve them for future generations. These jars are then displayed in a cabinet, both functioning as a place where normal preserves would be kept, but in this case also alluding to cabinets of curiosities; the precursor to photographic albums. Like a traditional family album, my piece is meant to be interacted with; though rather than turning pages, the viewer is physically reaching into a cabinet and pulling out a jar to look at the photograph within it. The state of the images within jars impedes exact temporal identification, like the materiality does, but the “canning” of the images serves yet another function: it further distances the viewer from close connection to the images. This may seem rather odd at first, but the canning of the images, the added distance is intended to remind the viewer that these photographs are out of context - they are not in an album, not in an identifiable order, and slightly more difficult to identify- just as they would be without the presence of someone who knows what is going on in the photographs. The singularity of the images within their separate jars also suggests the notion of these photographs as bullet points; their order can only be known by someone acquainted with the story they tell, again telling the viewer that someone else is needed to tell this “preserved” family history.

There is yet another element to my preservation of these images and the memories attached to them: the photographs in these jars are suspended in a fixative solution, to further fix or preserve these images and memories. However, the role of the fixer is twofold; while at first it fixes the images within the jars, it is also the fixative that will eventually destroy the images. Their suspension within the fixer will ultimately cause the images to deteriorate, as they would anyway - both the photographs themselves and the memories they prompt. The fixer thus simultaneously serves as a metaphor for the human desire to preserve history - our making of the albums - and the passage of time that ultimately renders the preservation futile.
The desire to preserve our history is in direct connection with the passage of time, a struggle against it actually, but the passage of time is inevitable and no matter how hard we try to preserve images and memories, there will be a time when there is no one to decipher these images as they were intended to be deciphered; they will simply become markers of another time without greater meaning.

The last notion is represented by the actual passage of time and its role in this work; the images were “canned” at different times, the oldest images first, followed by ones from the more recent past, chronologically up to the present, representing the actual chronology of the images in order of when they were captured. However a few photographs from each “period,” if you will, were partially covered in wax (front only) in order to allow for the chance of some images surviving longer than others. The fixative is still fixing – and thus inevitably destroying - the images, but some of them may be preserved longer. The wax is applied because of the uncertainty of death: the point of this work is that the photographs serve as metaphors for memories, and when someone who can share their memories - their histories - dies, the photographs that prompt those stories lose much of their importance.

This is where the wax comes in. Because I could die before either my mother or my grandmother, and the photographs that elicit the stories that only I know become meaningless, get erased; or, my mother could die first, et cetera. The wax then serves as a buffer to the passage of time (the fixer) because of the unknown factor of what the future will hold (whose memories will be lost first). Regardless of the wax, all of the images will eventually be destroyed by the fixative; the passage of time will erase all of our memories and only small traces of them will be left.
This is exactly what my work intends to explore - what happens when our oral traditions, our memories, our family histories cease to exist, when all that is left is the outline of the story? I would argue that the images become futile in regard to their intended function. For all intents and purposes, this collection of photos in jars is a version of my family album, which is only really special while those who possess memories tied to the photographs are alive and able to tell their stories, stories which arguably might be lost if not for the presence of photographs. As Langford says, “'[t]he family album… certainly satisfies the immense need for a *story*…which for lack of written documents…haunts each family.’”  6 Again, the family album is equivalent to the family history, but it is only the illustrations. The story relies on the voice that tells it, on the family member who puts words to the images, names to the faces. In this way, each element cannot exist fully without the other; the images preserved hold the key to unlocking the memories of the storyteller, without which the teller would have nothing on which to base the story. At the same time though, without the teller, the image tells much less of a story, regardless of how well it was preserved. Langford puts it perfectly when she says, “Voices must be heard for memories to be preserved, for the album to fulfill its function. Ironically, the very act of preservation…suspends its sustaining conversation, stripping the album of its social function and meaning.” 7 Ergo, the album and the images have a much lesser significance in the absence of the storyteller, arguably a nominal one.

Since a family album’s oral history applies to such a small group, its greatest significance is to members within that group, its importance relying on familial context. Once that context is lost, i.e., once the images are no longer tied to memories or stories accessible to the viewer, the

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6 Langford 5.
7 Langford 5.
importance of the album dwindles. As Marianne Hirsch puts it, “They [family photographs] carry meaning within the family’s own narrative and are emptied of that meaning outside that narrow circle.”

Emptyed of its intended meaning, a family photograph may serve as a pictorial reference to an era, showing examples of fashion and architecture in a certain time and place. In certain circumstances a family photo could become a greater part of historical narrative if you happened to capture an image of an amazing building that got torn down, if a family member became a war hero or famous, but then the photograph is infused with a life and significance very distinct from its original one. Once a family photograph is taken out of its original context it is no longer has the same meaning, it is not indispensable, no longer precious - there are likely hundreds of thousands more photographs like it from similar families in the same region that can be used to identify the same sorts of things. To an eye or ear not privy to the underlying story of someone else’s family album, there would be no difference.

In a way, this entire work is about sentimentality and nostalgia, but then again, so is personal photography. Photographs are intrinsically elements of the past, for even an instant Polaroid photo, once it exits the camera, has captured a moment that is now gone forever. However, “photographs bring visions of the past into the present,” acting as a way of accessing worlds and people long since dead. The importance of photographs is that they never will be of the present - they are designed to be reminders of the past, to store and evoke memories of people who are dead or who eventually will die. More than just nostalgic, a photograph is intrinsically a memento mori;

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Above all, the photograph is widely held to be a record, a piece of evidence that something happened at some time, somewhere - in the time and place in front of the camera….the photograph holds that recorded moment in stillness, capturing and offering up for contemplation a trace of something lost, lending it a ghostly quality. In this sense, the photograph confronts us with the fleeting nature of our world and reminds us of our mortality.\(^\text{10}\)

To be reminded of our mortality in a familial setting adds another element to the mix that makes the issue of death even more pressing; most people are averse to reminders of their own mortality, let alone to reminders of the mortality of their loved ones. The potential loss of people we care about is what spurs our desire to capture and preserve moments of their lives and our own intermingling, so that we might have a reminder of them when they are no longer physically present. My point in making this work is not that family photographs and albums of them are pointless because they will ultimately end up defunct, but that there is more to them than photographic images - there are stories and memories that exist only within and because of the bounds of the album itself. There is a narrative quality to family albums that lends itself to a more significant, verbal narrative when the album is in the hands of someone who knows the stories, someone who “… provides visibility to memories and…experiences that the photos hide.”\(^\text{11}\)


In this way, my work highlights the importance of the family album as a family history, but moreover the importance of the family album in relation to a family member who can decode the photographs, providing a further link between the past and present, both in giving life to the memories that are evoked by the photo, as well as in supplying a way to connect past and future generations. As in the example I gave, of the photograph of my grandmother in a lifejacket, the presence of the photograph alone would have possibly shown a weak connection between us, since there is a similar photograph of me in a life vest. But the story behind the picture - the memory that the photo does not show - is what made an impression. Without my grandmother there to tell the story, I would never have realized how similar we are (more than I would like to admit, actually.) This link is incredibly important because it ties me to a part of my family that will not be around for much longer, solidifying my connections with both my family members and my family history.

Essentially, my work is about trying to preserve that which we know will inevitably be lost- about struggling to fight the passage of time and ultimately mortality. The piece is designed to highlight the importance and interdependence of both family photographs and family members to family histories, and does so by showing the lack of narrative quality my alternative “album” has when there is no one there to explain what the images depict, when the chronology is unknown, when the viewer is removed from the normal context of a family album. This is my version of a family album that points to what anyone’s family album will be in the future, once the last person to know the family history dies; a jumble of images of unknown faces and places that may as well be bleached out and non-existent for the loss of the meaning they once had and will never regain for lack of context or through recontextualization.
While my work alludes to preservation and tries to preserve, it ultimately succumbs to its inevitable fate of loss, the images -memories, histories- degrading with the passage of time. Martha Langford notes the odd emotional mix present when looking at someone else’s family album without them there, without being able to discern the story or history from the photographs, “…one is struck by the irony of a direct equivalence between intimacy and loss. So familiar at one time were these faces, places and dates that there was little need for the compiler to write them down. Now they are lost forever…” 12 My work tries to convey this connection of intimacy and loss. There is an intimacy in reaching into a cabinet (or opening a photographic album) and picking up (picking out) a photograph of someone or something that was obviously cherished by someone else, but in recognizing this notion as a viewer - that this photograph was cherished - there is an immediate sense of loss. A loss the viewer sympathizes with on the part of the original owner of the photograph - this cherished item is no longer in their possession; as well as a loss actually felt by the viewer - as to understanding who or what the photograph depicts, or exactly how valuable the image was.

There is also a connection between intimacy and loss in family albums even when they are still within familial context because of the function of a photograph as a memento mori; the intimacy of connections with family members depicted within the album with the loss one feels if/when that family member is only present within those photographs and the memories tied to them.

The advent of digital photography and digital media have extended the possibilities of sharing family photos and albums with family members who do not have easy access to the physical album, allowing family members who may live across the globe to view family photos.

Sites like ancestry.com have also aided in accessing photographs and information of family members you might not have ever known, furthering still the possibilities of learning family history and making visual connections with family. However, I would argue that the easy access of these photographs through their digitization is another form of recontextualizing the images. While the familial group is still the same technically, most people tend to access their computers alone—regardless of if they are viewing photographs of their families, and while there is a possibility of someone writing a caption of photographs within an online album, the format of that album is very distinct from the original and does not allow for the performance of oral history the way that the original does. True, there are times when one will look through a physical album alone, but it is much less frequently than we spend time looking through online albums alone.

There is an element of human interaction intrinsic to looking at physical photo albums, an element that screams to be shared that is unlike anything in the digital realm, regardless of the types of photographs being viewed. The tactility of a physical album and the intimacy that comes from engaging with it and being let on to a secret that it contains (one of a memory that would not otherwise be shared) is a part of the passing down of a family oral history— a part that is going all but extinct with online photo albums. While it may be interesting to view a photograph of your paternal great-grandfather that you found on ancestry.com, there is a lack of intimacy in finding that image because there is no one there to tell you about the photograph— the memories and histories it holds. It, like a photograph from someone else’s photo album, has no context other than that you were told that they are related to you— there is a lack of intimacy that does not allow you to gain anything from that experience except for the photograph itself.
As Albert Chong has put aptly, “Most of us alive today are aware of who we are by virtue of family snapshots…of photos that record or document important rites of passage or ceremonies that mark our journey through life…” 13 However, I would argue that we are aware of who we are not only because of photographs that mark our own journeys through life, but also by virtue of photos that document our family’s journeys as well. It is very hard to know who you are without knowing where you come from, and because of how family albums function, they are the perfect format for making connections to your past that then allow you to shape your future. Regardless of how long into the future a family album might last at its existing importance and original meaning, it is an essential tool in bringing the past into the present so that we can try to carry those memories and histories into the future. But it is much harder to do that without the format of the physical family album.

My work is a distinct reminder that physicality and physical interaction are essential to meaningful human connection, especially when it comes to your own history. Essentially, my work is intended to emphasize the importance that physical family albums and family members elaborating on the photographs within those albums have in establishing family histories. For us to know anything about the world around us, to create larger social and global histories, we have to know where we as individuals come from, and it is much more personal and resonant when it is not accessed through a website.

To sum up, my work is intended to evoke different thoughts and emotions that encompass the past, present and future of family albums. The brown tones of the prints

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themselves evoke a nostalgic feeling of photographs from the past, coupled with the cabinet in which they are displayed they nod to photography’s past, as well as my family’s past within the images themselves.

The jars in which they are displayed remind the viewer of what happens when personal photographs are taken out of context – the distortions made by the liquid fixative within the jar as well as the jar itself make the images much more difficult to identify, nodding to the need of someone familiar with the photographs to make sense of the story they tell. This element of singular photos separated from specific associations with others is important as well, signifying the need for someone privy to the memories they store to sort their order and tell their history. The liquid fixative within the jars, while distorting the image also serves as an intimation of both our human desire to preserve the images and memories of the ones we love, as well as imply the passage of time- while the liquid “fixes” the images to be permanent at first, as the photographs stay submerged in it, the chemicals begin to degrade the images until they no longer exist, just as time erases the memories the images evoke.

This nod to the erasing of memories and passage of time also makes the work a *memento mori*, highlighting the ephemerality of memories, photographs, and ultimately the lives of the people within the photographs or sharing the memories from those images. My work reminds the viewer that no matter how hard we struggle to preserve that which we believe to be precious, the passage of time will ultimately interrupt or erode any attempts we make trying to preserve our images and memories. However, this is not to say that the effort is completely futile, because in making physical albums we have a better chance at passing on family histories as an oral tradition than if we try to digitize them completely. In this way, the nostalgia and physicality of my work is designed to remind the viewer that there is a need for human
interaction with the photographs in order for the passing on of a family history— the image may be more accessible, but the performance of the story is not, and the story is where the connections between family past and present are made. In these ways, my work evokes the nostalgia and desire to prevent loss that circumscribes family photographs, while reminding that the human element is absolutely necessary to the passing down of family history. As Chong says, “Without the evidence of pictures many of us would have very little proof that we ever existed”\textsuperscript{14} but without family there to elaborate upon the stories within and attached to those pictures, all we have is an image without context – how do we learn from that?

\textsuperscript{14} Chong, 128.
Bibliography


