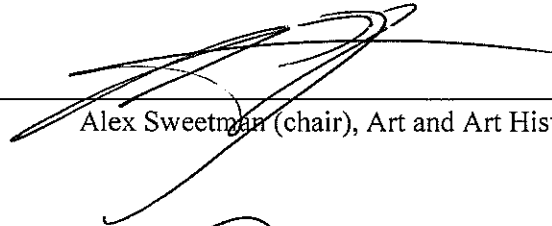


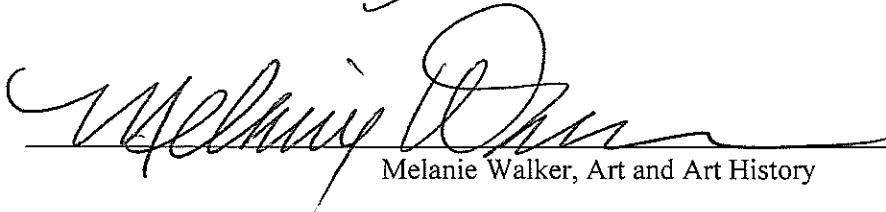
Family Masks
By
Kari Treadwell

A thesis submitted to
the faculty of the Graduate School
of the University of Colorado at Boulder
in partial fulfillment of the requirement for
the degree of Master of Fine arts
Department of Art and Art History
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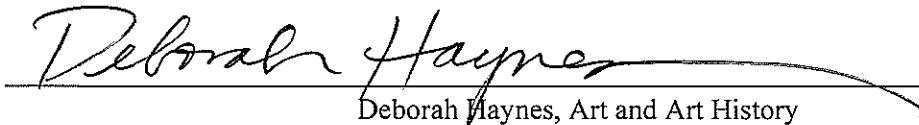
This thesis entitled:
Family Masks
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Abstract

Treadwell, Kari (M.F.A., Media Arts)

Family Masks, 2011

Thesis directed by Professor Alex Sweetman

Before there was theory and doctrine there was story. Stories are an excellent avenue for captivating children of all ages and conveying a message. I grew up listening to stories about my family. As a child, I thought about them as trivial anecdotes. However, today I am more aware of their allegorical significance.

Recently, I have been working with photographs from my grandmother's scrapbook, a photo album my mother and I put together, and my handmade masks. The portraits in these albums come alive when I look at them - I can hear my mother's, father's, and grandmother's voices telling me a story. I can visualize myself in almost every family portrait, the layers of my identity unraveling as I look at these images.

Vernacular photography has been prevalent since the advent of the hand camera. The use of the camera coincides with our desire to record our memories, stories, and traditions; which in turn become our histories.

This process of collective discovery through individual reflection on the past is a form of nostalgia, a longing to return home, a rhetorical home that exists in our minds and heart, one that we do not visit physically but rather mentally and spiritually. Therefore, cultural objects create our home by providing evidence to explain who we are.

Thank You!

Thank you to Kristine and James Treadwell, Grandma Lillian, Katrina and Chris Nicholas, Craig Muderlak, Tina Celis, Cher Bouchard, Stephanie Silberman, Thomas Spradling, Melanie Walker, Alex Sweetman, Deborah Haynes, Garrison Roots, Mildred Burgermeister, C. Maxx Stevens, Mark Amerika; all my graduate student peers and my Yogi Tribe for believing in me and all your love and support. You guys are my muses and I would not be who and where I am without you.

“We really planned them. We made compositions. We dressed up. We posed in front of expensive cars, homes that weren’t ours. We borrowed dogs. All photographs in our family album were built on some kind of lie about who we were, and revealed a truth about who we wanted to be”

- Richard Avedon



Mythologies, Visual Representation and A Lost Heritage

Stories are memories of what we have previously learned and do not want to forget. Our stories become our histories. They become our truth. Prior to written language, stories were recorded pictorially and passed down by oral tradition. Before there was theory and doctrine, there was story. Stories captivate children of all ages and usually convey moral messages. I grew up listening to many stories about my family. At the dinner table, my father and mother would frequently share family stories. Every summer, we would take a road trip to Lubbock, Texas to visit my father's family and always stop in New Mexico to visit my mother's family. Along the way my parents would tell us stories about the people we were going to visit. Most of the stories that my father has told are about hardships followed by triumphs while my mother's are always full of pride. As a child I thought about them as trivial anecdotes. However, today I am more aware of their allegorical significance.

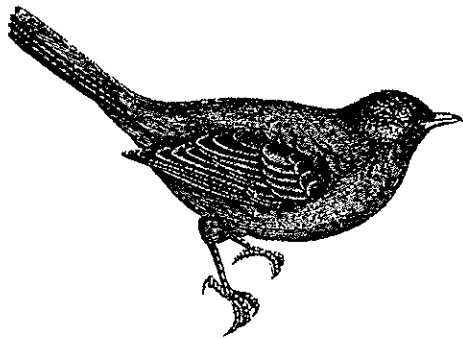


When I was twelve years old my grandmother, my mother's mother, passed away. This was the first time I had lost someone close to me. The funeral took place at this old church in Fairport Harbor, Ohio, the same church where my great Grandmother had her funeral. The image on the left is her Wedding Portrait. This is one of my favorite images of her.

My father and I sat upstairs for most of the funeral because I had a really hard time seeing my grandmother's dead body. My father sat with me and told me stories about his father. As we sat there drinking tea and talking, a blackbird kept coming up to the window. My father told me it was my grandmother watching over us. At the time, I did not know what to make of the concept that a bird could be my grandmother. As I have gotten older I have come to believe that, yes perhaps,

that blackbird was my grandmother. This is not the only time a blackbird has visited me. I have encountered blackbirds several times after different family members have died.

The most convincing experience of this theory was when I was in Budapest, Hungary, at the House of Terror, a memorial for people of the 1956 Revolution. Tons of blackbirds stood guard in front of the building, greeting us as we entered. The site gave me chills. I could feel the souls of all the victims. When I returned home, I told my mother about all the blackbirds. "Your grandmother followed me through Europe, ya know." My mother replied, and went on with a



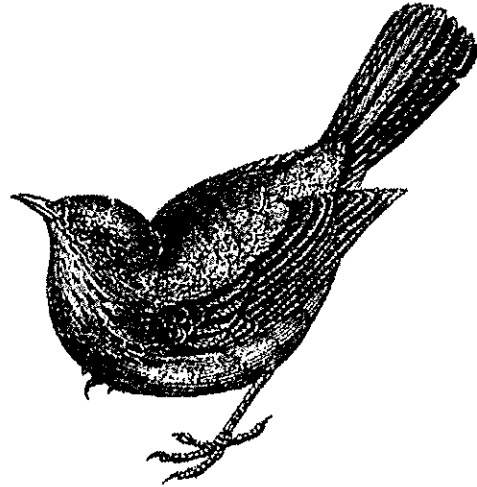
story about when she went backpacking through Hungary in 1968 and she felt that a blackbird was following her throughout the trip. She believes this blackbird was her grandmother, who is from Budapest, Hungary and fled the country before the great

Revolution of 1956.

This was the first time I realized that both my father and mother believed that blackbirds are our ancestors. But I don't know exactly where this belief comes from. My father is part Choctaw Indian and my mother is part Hungarian, but when I ask them why they think that blackbirds are our ancestors, they do not explain why. "They just are," they reply. So I decided to take matters into my own hands and research the mythology of the blackbird. It turns out the blackbird is believed to be a spirit that can visit the physical world, according to several different cultures: Tibetan Buddhism, Native American, Polish and Hungarian folklore. In Beryl Rowlands book, *Birds with Human Souls*, he discusses several cultures that believe humans become birds when they die. The book examines both the cultural ideas of a human soul entering a bird's body after death and tells stories of the different birds from each culture. The idea that a human soul can transcend into a blackbird at death is not a new idea. Several cultures and religions believe this transformation takes place. From Catholics to indigenous people the blackbird symbolizes death, and ominous prophecy, monogamy, knowledge, wisdom and science.

Throughout history and across cultures the blackbird is found in works of art, literature and mythology.

In most of the stories of blackbirds they are not only spirits watching over us but they can also tempt us. The transformation from human to animal can be almost any small black animal. For instance in Tibetan Buddhism a small black cat is a good omen and the raven in Choctaw Indian lore is the creator of the world. The raven stole the sun from man for a few days to punish their actions. Recently, since my uncle passed away, I have encountered a black cat several times. I asked my father if he thought it might be his brother, Gene. He got quiet for a moment and then responded with “yeah, sometimes they change form.” Sometimes I don’t know if my father is making this up or if he really believes in this transformation after death. Even though there are folklores and cultures that believe the blackbird is a human spirit transformed, I feel that my father has unresolved business with these people in his life and this is a way of him having contact with them after their death. The only logical explanation I can think of for him to have this belief is, that it can provide closure for him to believe that they are coming to visit him after they die.



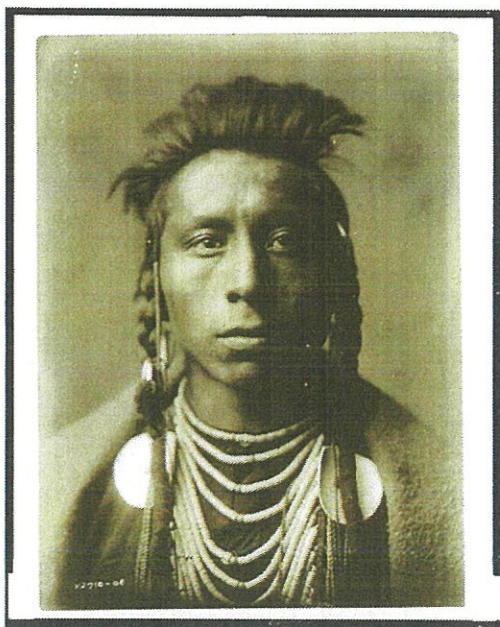


My father grew up in Lubbock Texas and arguably is a typical American. He has several different national backgrounds, such as, German, English, French and Choctaw Indian. Even though he is part Choctaw Indian, as a child growing up he was told not to tell anyone of his heritage because there was a bad stigma associated with being part Native American Indian. His father never talked to him about our Choctaw heritage so it is not as if he was raised to believe that people transform into blackbirds when they die. One time my father told one of his friends he was Choctaw Indian and his friend told his father. This got back to my father's father and my father was punished for telling his friend he was Choctaw Indian.

My father ran away when he was 17, joined the navy and never looked back. It was not until 1972 when his father passed away that he began to question his national background. He was working at a movie theater in Los Angeles, California at the time. He was sitting on the roof of the movie theater drinking a beer when tons of blackbirds swarmed the roof flying east. My father quickly stood up and thought, "Dad?" My father has told me that he always felt different, and that he could not quite explain why but has always felt a little different. Not always fitting in by appearance or the beliefs he has, my father felt casted out most of his life.

My father, his brothers and their mother did not go to his funeral in Tucson, Az. They spoke on the phone on that day. My father had not spoken with them in a while, but death always brings the living closer. During the phone conversation my father asked his mother what tribe his father was from and she did not know. My father has researched his ancestry over the past 39 years and has not been able to find too much information about his father's side.

The only information my father has found out about his father is that he was adopted at the age of nine into a British family, the Treadwells. His name was changed and he was asked never to speak of where he came from. My father told me that his father would occasionally talk about his mother and her long black hair and soft beautiful voice. When my father would ask his father about her his father would get mad and yell at him. So eventually my father stopped asking about her and forgot his native heritage. The first time I asked my father about our heritage I was doing a grade school project on identity. He told me, "This is one of your relatives", as he showed

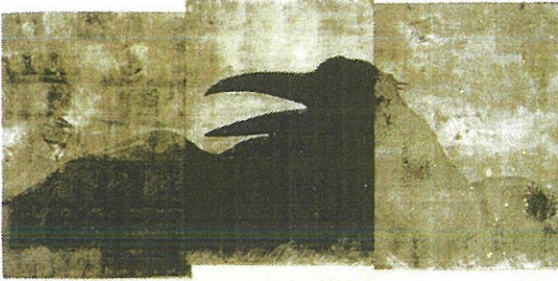


me an Edward S. Curtis photograph, similar to the one on the left (Hopi Man, Edward S. Curtis, 1906) and grinned. As he went on to explain his father's history. I was thinking, "Is this what she looked like? My grandfather's mother". I imagine her to look somewhat like the woman on the right (Hopi Girl, Edward S. Curtis, 1906).



Sometimes I feel that my father's belief in the mythology of the blackbird is a way for him to fill in a void or to have a connection with the people who have died in his family, making them more heroic and mythological. My dad would tell me stories of his younger brother, Larry, going to Vietnam to fight in the war. My uncle had Hep. C, he is a brave man. He is a hero.

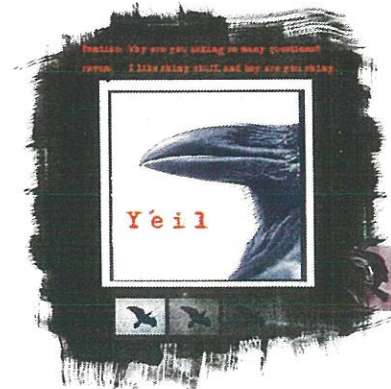
In the chapter, “American Myths and Indigenous Photography” of the book *Visual Currencies: Reflections on Native Photography*, Larry Mc Neil defines mythology as being “all about yearning, and a desire for a history that maybe doesn’t quite measure up to its people’s expectations. We all have to have stories and heroes that we can believe in, identify with, and most critically, aspire to reach and live amongst. This is where mythology emerges and becomes



a prominent part of various countries, especially in America” (111). I believe he is right. Mythology is about yearning and a desire for something that is not fully present in our own lives. Mythology fills in that gap. We all

have stories but do we all have heroes that we can believe in?

Larry Mc Neil uses the blackbird in his work to represent the native mythology of the raven in his culture. For example, in his body of work, *Raven asks Pontiac*, the raven and Pontiac are repeated throughout a series of images. A dialogue is created between the two characters. The raven is represented as a trickster and the Pontiac is more stoic and wise. Furthermore, this body of work not only displays the mythological representation of the raven, but also examines and questions why George Washington became a glorious mythological character and Chief Pontiac of the Ottawa became a hood ornament for an automobile. Mc Neil’s work is a perfect example of how a historical figure can be transformed into a larger- than- life mythological character or more importantly how mythology plays an important role in our history.





Personal Stories Becoming Collective History

The blackbird is a recurring symbol in my work. The idea that a human can transform into an animal after death fascinates me. In addition to the blackbird, I am also fascinated by family images and the use of the scrapbook to record a family's history. I collage and derive



images from my family's scrapbooks to create new compositions. These compositions are considered self-portraits: by collaging and recreating images of my family histories through photographic visual representation, I am telling my story and developing my home.

One of my favorite photographs of a family member is of my Great Aunt Pearl. It is the only image my family has of her. She is in a nice black dress wearing large pearl earrings and has an inviting smile. Everyone called her Big Pearl

because she was a large strong woman, standing at 5' 11". She was a trained masseuse and owned a bar in Fairport Harbor, Ohio, on the lakefront. I never had the chance to meet her, but we would visit her daughter, Little Pearl, almost every summer growing up. One summer Little Pearl told me a story about her mother. The story was about how she had to kick two men out of her bar one night.

The story begins one brisk winter night in Fairport Harbor, Ohio. Big Pearl usually wore overalls with nothing under them, and a cigar hanging out of her mouth. This particular night, the

bar was full, more crowded than usual. Two men sitting at the bar were getting rowdy, giving her a hard time because they wanted more to drink after she cut them off. They started cussing at her, so she asked them to leave, but they didn't because they did not realize she was Big Pearl. She asked them a second time, and one of the men turned to her and, asked, "What are you, the owner?" She walked around the bar and grabbed them by their coat collars and threw them out of the bar, just like a big bouncer. After that the bar got quiet for a second, then everyone cheered and laughed; the two guys never came back and people behaved themselves. She gained the reputation of Big Pearl, the Bouncer. The imagery of this story makes me laugh and is empowering. It sounds almost like a myth.

When I am feeling not very strong my mom will tell me this story and channel Big Pearl. It is stories like this one that help us become who we are. The story of Big Pearl throwing the two hecklers out of the bar makes me feel as strong as she had to have been. In a way this story has been embellished and changed but that is the nature of oral story telling. As stories are passed down from generation to generation they change and most of the time become more embellished and fictional. This is how myths are created; an empowering story that is told over and over will often become mythical, losing some details and gaining other details.

My work is informed by these stories and their myth- like qualities. These stories become a part of our personal history and our collective histories. Our collective histories are a timeline of stories created by individual experiences. The experiences in the stories are passed down verbally and visually represented by snapshots and portraits. By stories being embellished and pieces filled in by our imagination we are filling in the missing pieces of our history. In a way we are making myths.



Artist Dario Robeieto derives and transforms stories and evidence from history to tell and inform people of past and present events. In a way he is making and retelling myths. His work utilizes various media ranging from Victorian paper flowers

to ground up bone and found military boots; extinct sound clips to re-fabricated dresses made from love letters of soldiers to explore loss and nostalgia.

Through these media his work embodies fragile yet strong qualities that evoke almost all of your senses. The fragility of his work is what makes



it
invoking.
Most of



the time you are not sure if you are looking at an artifact or something inspired by one. His work embraces the delicate crafts that have been forgotten

with the age of technology and he retells a history that most of us no longer know.

Robeieto uses pieces missing from all of history. By examining my own history and discovering things about my heritage, I begin to fill in the existing gaps. Even with as rich a scrap-booker as my grandmother and as compulsive a photographer as my mother there are still pieces missing to our history. There are no images of my father's paternal grandmother and only one of my mother's grandmother. I only know what they look like based on my parent's descriptions of them and their descriptions are even based on descriptions as well. In the end, the importance based on these verbal descriptions are part of the collective history of my family. I

have created images based on these descriptions and from my imagination. Most of the images and verbal descriptions are based on memory. They show how the imagination influences our memory.

III Memory and the Imagination

The representation of the past and present recorded by an image is based on our memory and imagination. When we look at an image we think of a story, a story we have either heard



someone tell or a story that we make up based on the person, place in the image and time when the image was made. As Paul Ricoeur states in his book, *Memory,*



History, Forgetting, “We say interchangeably that we represent a past event to ourselves or that we have an

image of it, an image that can be either quasi visual or auditory. Memory is the province of the imagination, the latter having long been treated with suspicion, as we see in Montaigne and Pascal” (5). Our individual memories are collected and represented visually through scrapbooks and photographs, which are accompanied by verbal stories. By questioning my own visual representation of history, I begin to question the collective history and how it is represented throughout the archive.

One of the most common ways we have documented our histories has been with the use of visual representation, snapshots and the photo album. There are a few different types of albums, for example, the scrapbook, which is used by most households to document, photos, letters, cards, and special events. I grew up in one of these households. My mother’s compulsive

family photographing and grandmother's avid scrap booking is influential to me as an artist. I grew up helping my mother organize photographs into photo albums and begged my grandmother to see her scrapbooks every time we would visit. I love looking through our family's scrapbooks and photo albums because of their ability to elicit memories. In a photographic show titled, *Snapshot Chronicles; Inventing the American Photo Album*, the snapshot is celebrated as an artifact and as art. The Director and Chief Curator, Stephanie Snyder, stated, "Album makers created lasting manifestations of both personal and communal memory, enveloping the past within the present, creating a sense of magic, authenticity, and hope for the future" (11). The album makers have indeed created magic and a hope for the future by manifesting both the personal and collective history through visual representation.

The visuals in my family photo albums and grandmother's scrapbooks are partly factual and at the same time imaginative. By better understanding my past I understand my present self better, my

identity. Ricoeur describes common memories, the individual ego and collective history in his book as, "the coeshesion of the states of consciousness of the individual ego or on the other hand the capacity of collective entities to preserve and recall common memories" (22). He further goes on to describe our attempts at deriving these, they "are not [just] a phenomenological derivation of collective memory and sociological derivation of individual memory" (24) but rather a derivation of both and our imagination. The collective memory is fueled by our individual



memories and experiences. We record and recall our memories through visual representation and verbal stories.



My work explores family mythologies, visual photographic representation, and nostalgia through the use of mundane materials and photography. The process of my art is repetitive and therefore becomes meditative, calming my mind, taking me home. Most of my influences have these qualities in their works are I believe that is why I am drawn to their works of art. I am drawn to the vernacular practice of art and the celebration of craft in art works. Curator Snyder relates to this redefined practice of art. She has stated “Studying these albums through the lens of our moment, one in which communities interact with one another, we are struck by the album makers’ universal impulse to record, organize, and preserve their experiences and impressions” (11). Our culture does have an impulse to record and preserve our experiences, we want to make

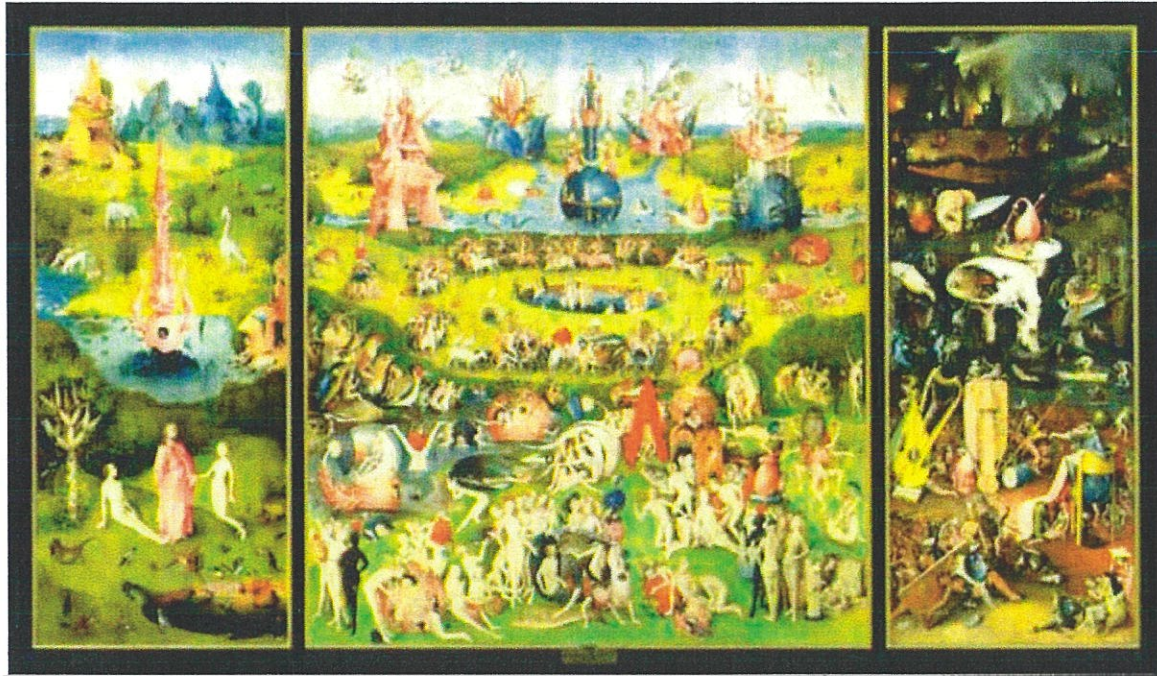
an impression in history in some way or form. Journaling and dissecting the interior of self helps us understand the collective identity.

Journaling and recording experiences is something we have always done. A good example of an avid journalist is Leonardo Di Vinci. His illustration, the *Virutruvian Man*, in one of his journals is an illustration of a human fitting into a circle and square, and depicting the use of the human body as a measuring tool (Smith, 263). This drawing has been referred to as “the measure of all man.” I am intrigued by this drawing because of the concept of the human figure as a tool or some form of measuring device. Our bodies are important tools and in recent years we as a human species have lost our full connection to the use of our bodies because of our dependency on technologies. We see technology as the truth. However, our bodies remember our stories and the experiences that create our identities, traditions and histories.



Our histories make up who we are, and we cannot escape this memory being recorded into our bodies. Everyday something new happens and it is recorded into our past, through our memories, our history and our body. Our experiences are not only recorded into our memory of our bodies and verbal history, but are also recorded visually with photographic technology. The photographic archive, personal and collective, grows as photographic technological advancements take place.

IV. The Awakening



Bosch's painting, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, is one of the most influential works of art. I am both terrified and captivated by the painting's imagery of heaven, earth and hell. I think of each of these panels as a different stage of existence. I remember the first time I saw this painting, it was during my senior year in high school. I was taking an Existential English Literature class as well that year, and we were reading *Metamorphosis* by Kafka. It was at this point that I began to abandon my Lutheran upbringing and started exploring other religions. In my exploration I discovered many similarities among religions and concluded for myself that each individual has their own set of ideals and we do not always fit into one specific religious setting. I am influenced by several different religions iconography and mythology. More

specifically for this body of work I referenced Buddha, Shiva, Ganesh and Lakshmi, Hindu Deities. (see images below)



I think of art as a spiritual practice and a meditative experience. When I am making art I am in a trance, I am home. I realized this while attending the School of Art at the University of Arizona in 2002. Since then I have furthered my practice of art at the University of Colorado in Boulder and I have gained a stronger sense of this ritualistic notion to art making. With my current work, I have explored both the mundane and special rituals of our everyday lives, especially considering the mundane materials I use in the process. In a way, art fulfills my spiritual part of my life.



Digital Era, The Apparatus, The Archive and The Snapshot

As technological advancements take place we have new ways of recording our ideas and memories. Since the advent of photography one of the most common ways we record our memories is by photographing them. The snapshot has evolved from family gatherings to quick portraits made every five minutes at a bar. Being able to see an image of ourselves quickly has made us identify with ourselves differently. Before we had to sit in front of the camera for a few minutes then wait for the film to be developed and the image to be printed. By then the image-making process is far in our memory. Now we can experience the image as we are making the image.



Facebook is just one example of technological and ideological shifts in the act of picture making. Images allow us to reflect on our identity because they are the closest visceral objects to our own existence. We can look in a mirror and have an idea of who we are, we can take a photograph that represents what we are and watch a video of our actions, but we never really have a clear idea of who we are fully. Image making has allowed us to investigate our identities further, but it also can be a misrepresentation of who we are. We can create a persona for ourselves and record it with image making, thus capturing that persona makes it come to life.

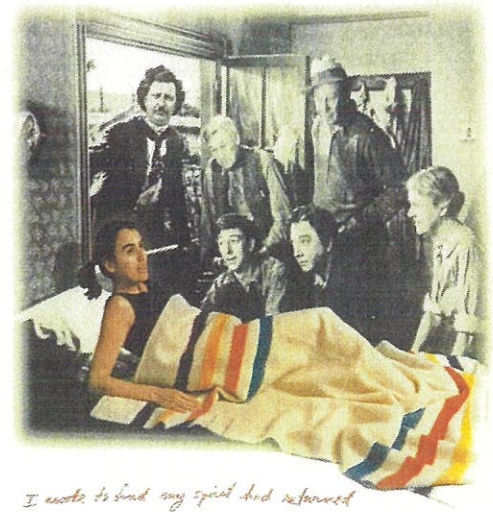
The Internet is an apparatus that is constantly adding to the archive. The apparatus is defined as a tool or an object; in this case the images I use are derived from the apparatus and fed back into the archive in a new form. The archive presents itself as a physical place that shelters the destiny and the trace of history, thus serving as evidence of our past. The archive is a spatial and social place, being a cerebral and an affective trace, and mostly a documentary trace. The

archive is part of the apparatus. In this case, apparatus meaning, “to make ready,” they are ready to make use of or be used as a tool.¹

The images that are used in my work are a part of the apparatus. They have not only been produced by the apparatus, but are now a part of the apparatus by being part of the archive. Thus the images I make from the derived images of the archive are now part of the archive and apparatus. In Vilem Flusser’s book *Towards A Philosophy of Photography* he argues that the *apparatus* means “cultural object.” He states, “No doubt [an] apparatus are produced objects, that is, object conducted out of nature towards where we are. The totality of this type of object may be called culture, apparatus are part of culture, and we recognize culture when viewing them” (8). The images I am deriving are from scrapbooks and photo albums that have been passed down in my family. I look to these cultural objects as self- portraits, revealing my identity.

Snapshots are part of the archive and therefore a cultural object. We recognize our own culture when viewing a snapshot from the archive, and think of that image as a truthful record of a memory of a person, place or moment. A snapshot is a readymade, a cultural object ready to use. Even though snapshots are made by a camera, a mechanical tool, they have also become a tool themselves in the apparatus. Most tools are now called machines but before there were mechanical tools, we used our eyes and hands to pull from the apparatus.

A self-portrait artist, Rosalie Favell is informed by the archive while at the same time adding to the collection of the archive. For example, in one of her self-portraits, *I Awoke to Find my Spirit had Returned*, she



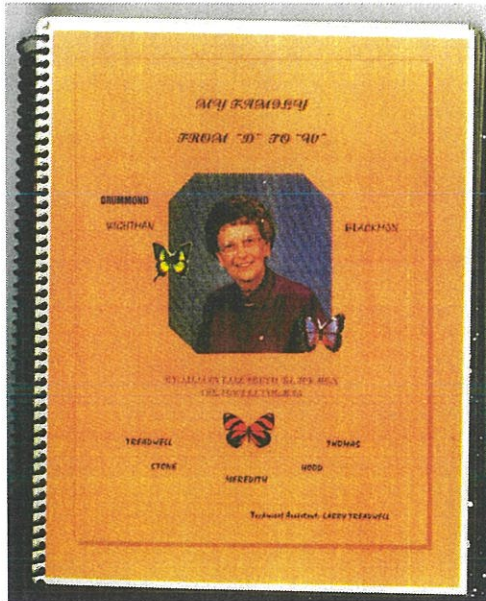
I awoke to find my spirit had returned

Mandatory photo credit: *I awoke to find my spirit had returned*, from the series *Plain(s) Warrior* Artist (1999) Collection of the Winnipeg Art Gallery. Photo courtesy of The Banff Centre.

¹ See Vilem Flusser, *Towards A Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 1983).

has collaged herself into the ending scene from the movie, the *Wizard of Oz*. In this case she has derived an image from the movie but also made a new image with her in place of Dorothy. The image from the *Wizard of Oz* already has meaning that the viewer can relate to and apply to Favell's new image. The image is the ending scene of the *Wizard of Oz* when Dorothy is in her bed. She has just woken up and is surrounded by her family in Kansas. By deriving an image from a familiar movie scene and placing herself into the image, Favell has created a representation and narrative to be applied to the already existing meaning of the image.

VI Representation, Narration and Nostalgia



Narrative representations of photographic reproductions are an example of how the relationship between event and structure are the same as that between the layers of time. When we look at images we not only use our memory and imagination to recall the story behind the image but we also use our knowledge of the event and the time in which it took place. Signifiers such as fashion, cars, and hairstyles inform us of when an image was created. Therefore, our minds create a narrative based around these visual and factual signifiers. In my work, I explore the power of these signifiers by placing myself inside of the snapshots that already have them and by recreating them within my new image.

I have been working with photos from a scrapbook my grandmother put together. The portraits come alive when I am looking at them because I can hear my grandmother's voice telling me a story about them. I can see myself in almost every family portrait in this scrapbook and the layers of my identity unravel as I look at these images. I become nostalgic, longing to return to the home that does not exist. I recreate the moments in my mind and picture myself interacting with the people in the photographs as if I know them.

The images are not singular to me. They all overlap and become movie clips unraveling a story, my story, and reconstructing a home for me to temporarily live in. When I look at a photo of my great grandmother and grandfather I feel as if I am looking at a self-portrait. Through their stories I absorb all their joy, love, mistakes and pain. Svetlana Boym describes nostalgia in her book, *The Future of Nostalgia*, as "a sentimental of loss and displacement, but it is also a

romance with one's own fantasy. Nostalgic love can only survive in a long- distance relationship. A cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images--- of home and abroad, past present, dream and everyday life" (xiv). We all long to belong somewhere, in fact it may be "what we share as human beings, but that does not prevent us from telling very different stories of belonging and nonbelonging" (Boym, 41). Nostalgia is a longing for a home that no longer exists or does not exist yet.

Nostalgia is derived from its Greek origin as, *nostos* to 'return home' and *algos* as 'pain', painfully longing to return home. Reflective and restorative nostalgia are two kinds of nostalgia that have been characterized to make sense of our "homesickness", our longing to return home. Reflective nostalgia focuses on the *algia*, the longing, feeling of loss and the imperfect process of remembrance, while restorative nostalgia "puts emphasis on the *nostos* and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps" (Boym, 41).

Just like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, I long to return home. However in my case, I cannot click my heels three times to return home nor do I even know where it is, but I long to return there. This "home" exists in my dreams and is created by my past, present and future. I daydream about this home and yearn for a different time, a time similar to my childhood when life and dreams had a slower rhythm.

VII. Process, Ritual, Materials; A description of work

I have discovered who I am through the ritual of my art making and my art has revealed what I desire. Theodore W. Jennings wrote about the action of ritual as “a means by which its participants discover who they are in the world and [how it is] with the world” (113). Creating snapshots have become a ritualistic practice in today’s culture. We are constantly recording our memories with the use of the snapshot.

The snapshot is a recurring object in my work. I am obsessed with looking through images of my family and listening to my grandmother, mother and father tell stories about our family and history. The verbal stories told by them and accompanied by the visual image take me on a journey to a different place and time, a place in which I long to exist.

My work becomes tangible through the materials and ritualistic processes I use. The materials I use are mundane representatives of our daily lives. Wax, soap, sugar, and snapshots- each of these materials represent something about our lives and daily rituals. Wax represents a sense of preservation, soap the act of cleansing and sugar what has poisoned us but is overly desired in society. My process begins with a photograph- a snapshot frozen in time. From there I dip it in wax, soap or sugar. This process is very meditative for me, taking me to another place. This process is repetitive and meditative, just as the daily ritual of collecting objects and taking family snapshots.

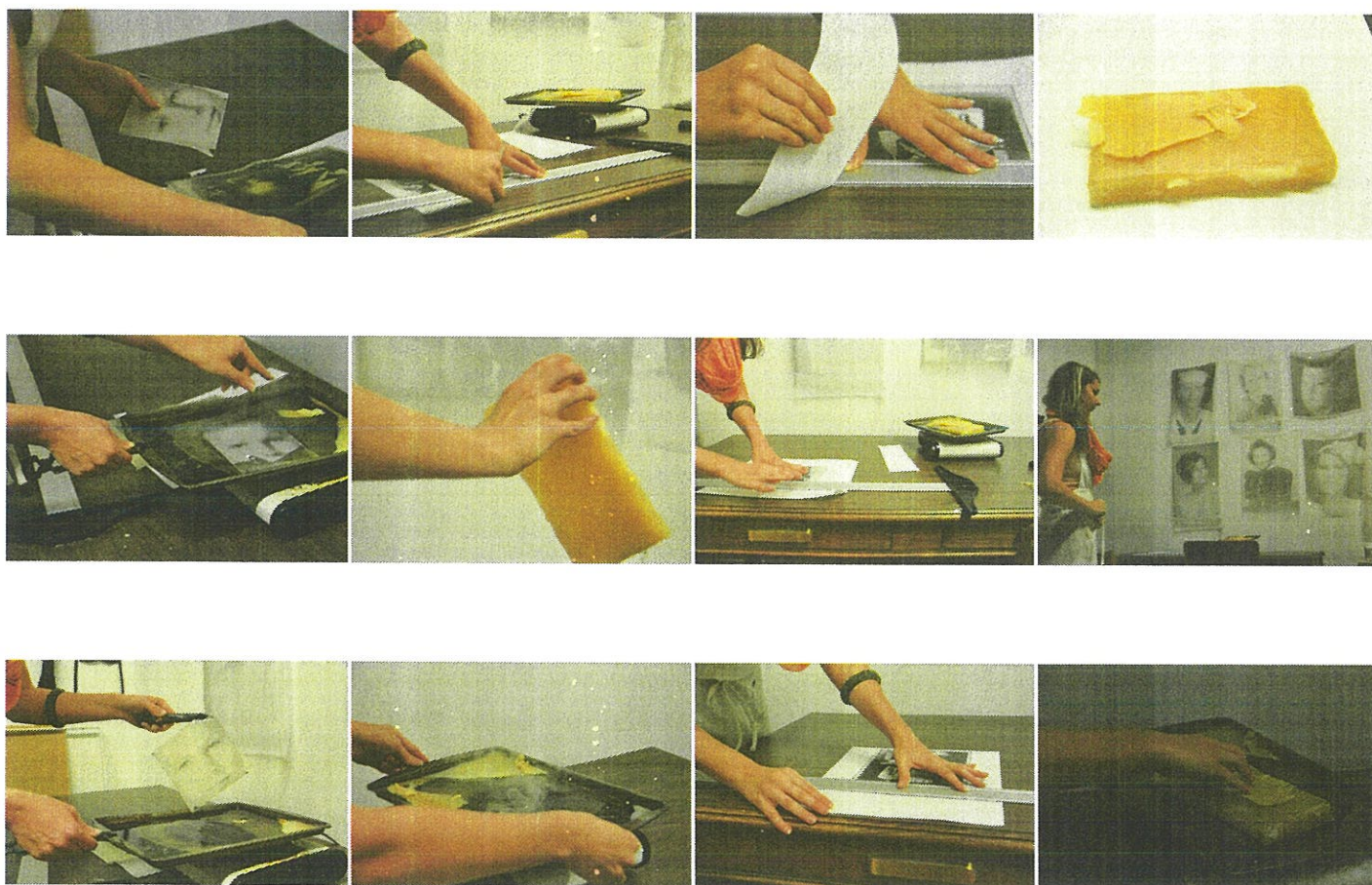
The process of dipping images into wax makes the image transparent and more precious and delicate. I think of wax as preservation and thus preserving the image, moment and memory further. The soap and sugar objects that I am making represent our daily rituals of washing and consuming. The transparent materials that I use such as silk and images dipped in wax, allow for a diaphanous quality that lends itself to the notion of memory and the layering of our identities.



sense.

For this body of work I have placed myself into the snapshot. I become the vernacular photograph by recreating a snapshot scene and placing a transparent snapshot mask over my head. The images I have chosen for my mask diptych are one of my father and one of my mother when they were both 18 years old. It was before they met and before I was born. The image of my mother is her senior high school picture and the image of my father is from his navy album. I choose to use my parents because they are my immediate family. They are me, in a

In addition, I am wearing hand made masks to depict mythological charters and deities. The exposed umbilical cord is a braid referencing my history and womb lineage. Hair represents dead cells and the history and stories we embody. The umbilical cord is tied with a red string because red is an important color on both of my family's lineage. Red represents our bloodline, I am my parents just as they are theirs and so on. We can't help but pick up traits of our parents. They are who raised us and we are a part of them.



Conclusion

Vernacular photography has been around since the advent of the hand camera. The use of the camera coincides with our desire to record our memories, stories, and traditions that all become our histories. Indeed, we are all photographers in some way or form, whether we use a high-end SLR camera or just the camera on our phone, we are visually recording both ourselves and the people surrounding us. By making photographs we are adding to the archive and apparatus. Photographs in the archive represent who we are collectively. By reflecting and gaining an understanding of our individual identity, we can answer the question, "Who are we?" However, we cannot ask this question without asking ourselves, "Who am I?" We ask these questions when looking at cultural objects from the past and present to discover our future.

Cultural objects in such apparatuses as vernacular photography and snapshots foster the notion that art could exist in everyday life and encourage us to consider why snapshots have such a resonance in our culture. How, for example, does looking at snapshots this way inform the field of photography? It relieves the tension between Fine Art vs. craft. Through vernacular practice of art we create an archive that represents our culture and therefore a collective identity. No matter what class, race, creed or gender, snapshots can be made to represent individual identity, thus a collective identity.

This process of collective discovery through individual reflection on the past is a form of nostalgia, a longing to return home. This home is rhetorical: it exists in our minds and hearts. We can visit this home mentally and spiritually, but not physically. Cultural objects, then, create our home by giving us evidence to explain who we are.

Also helping to explain our collective identity are signifiers and symbols in our visual records. For instance, the signifiers and symbols I use to investigate my cultural identity are blackbirds, embroidery and costume, which I find in snapshots, scrapbooks and art and seek to emulate, thus creating my own identity. For photography does represent a form of reality. A

snapshot may not be as truthful as the moment in which it was taken -- and in some cases the opposite of truth -- but we can still learn about who we are, where we have been, and where we are going.

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