



COMER COLLECTION

# MEMORY: MYSTERY MAGIC AND MAKE-BELIEVE

Cig Harvey, *Scout & The Pomegranate Seeds*, 2014, 14x14 inches, photograph on paper

**ART EXHIBITION: UNIVERSITY THEATRE GALLERY**

**FEBRUARY 12TH-MARCH 9TH, 2018**

Memories are unreliable, like dreams and déjà vu. They can be hyper-real and surreal at the same time, creating mysterious visions, imagery, and emotions. The photographs in this exhibition speak to memory and the malleable past while connecting the viewer to the present.

***This exhibition is curated by Anna Fritzel and includes selections from the Comer Collection and work by honored photographer Cig Harvey.***

**FEBRUARY 19<sup>TH</sup>**

**Curator's Gallery Talk: Anna Fritzel\***  
4:30 pm

**FEBRUARY 27<sup>TH</sup>**

**Reception: 6:00-7:00 pm\***  
**Lecture: Cig Harvey\***  
7:00 pm

\*University Theatre Gallery (lobby)



Anna Fritzel

# MEMORY: MYSTERY, MAGIC AND MAKE-BELIEVE

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Memories are unreliable, like dreams and *déjà vu*. They can be hyper real and surreal at the same time, creating mysterious visions, imagery, and emotions. As I get older and am called to my memories for the recollection of my past, I no longer have a grasp on what is real, magic, or make-believe. The images in this collection speak to memory and the malleable past while simultaneously connecting viewers to the mysterious present. Photographers, whether they are documentarians or are those who absorb the world around them in a conceptual manner, are capturing their own individual truths. German cultural critic and film theorist, Siegfried Kracauer, states in his article "Memory Images,"

No matter which scenes an individual remembers, they all mean something relevant to that person, though he or she might not necessarily know what they mean. An individual retains memories because they are personally significant. (Farr 45)

These images are not only personally significant expressions of the artists' lives and memories; they are texts that can lead viewers to re-establish connections with their own memories, or to enter a make-believe world of magic and mystery. Some of these images might leave viewers questioning their sense of reality while others might remind them of significant moments they have forgotten.

The word "punctum," originally defined as "a point," is used by Roland Barthes, French literary theorist, philosopher, and author of the book, *Camera Lucida*, to describe a photographic image, or otherwise, the emotion one might experience when viewing an image. Barthes describes a photograph that depicts his mother when she was a child. The image, for him, has "punctum," which he describes as a "prick" that "bruises me, is poignant to me" (27). After the death of his mother, Barthes searched for the perfect photograph to describe or encapsulate his mother's true essence. This image, *Winter Garden*, represents, for Barthes, this true essence. Because Barthes leaves this image out of his discussion of photography, he causes his readers to imagine rather than view his personal idealized vision of his mother. We can only speculate as to the causes and nature of the punctum he attempts to describe. This absence of the image serves as a sort of metaphor for the somewhat obscure nature of punctum itself.

Why do images "prick" us? Barthes describes this true essence of his mother as a gentle assertion that she

maintained all of her life, something that she achieved all on her own. I too have searched for the perfect image to capture my mother's true essence, for it serves to activate my long-term memories, particularly the ones that remain important to me. For me, this is punctum. These old memories define us, narrate our personal stories, and provide us with a framework for understanding reality. Ultimately, they become a part of our own individual identities. Without these memories we forget who we were then, who we are now, and from whence we came.

Walter Benjamin, the famous German literary critic and philosopher, discusses the origins of photography, and the famous image, *View from the Window at Le Gras*.

This image, termed a "heliograph" by its originator, Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, is considered the first photographic image ever created. Benjamin describes the image as being surrounded by fog, which in turn obscures early history (Smith 2). Many of the photographs in this exhibition were chosen for this same foggy or "dreamy" aesthetic quality. This effect consists of soft focus, which is indicative of one way in which memory or dreams or fantasy have been widely represented in films and other types of visual imagery. Ian Farr, commissioned editor for *Documents of Contemporary Art*, writes about this effect in his introduction to the book *Memory*:

Blurred or out of focus or overexposed, or otherwise 'flawed' in innumerable ways, they evoke those memory-impressions we might at first want to recall as if in the bright focus of the present but learn to cherish more in the fragmentary and fragile way they are offered up to us. (12)



Keith Carter, *Birth of Photography, Study #2 (Lacock Abbey)*, 2004, Digital Pigment Print, 10"X10"

The image by photographer Keith Carter, *Birth of Photography: Study #2 (2004)*, utilizes devices such as shallow depth of field and atmospheric distraction, such as a foggy soft lit day, to achieve a phantasmagoric effect. Today's photographic technology affords photographers the luxury of infinite detail, yet photographers like Keith Carter still choose

work which is almost completely out of focus, possessing a tonal range that is soft as well. The image leaves the viewer unclear and questioning the purpose and origin of the effect. This image also serves to remind us of photography's history by using Lacock Abbey (the home of early photographer and inventor William Henry Fox Talbot) as the backdrop for this unlikely subject, a lone sheep staring directly at the artist. The sheep appears alert, perhaps concerned. Are we some predator about to strike from the receding past? Are we kin, gone and barely remembered as the fog closes in? Many of the works of Keith Carter carry this aesthetic signature and can be found in his book, *A Certain Alchemy*. This title acknowledges Carter's pictorial sensibility about chemistry -- a large part of photography's origins --, magic, or transformation.

In the image, *Sadie and the Birdcage* (2013), Cig Harvey, celebrated artist photographer, envelops her subject in a dark, shadowy frame. The figure is obscured into darkness. We do not see her form, only her face and hands. Her face is hidden behind the prison bars of a birdcage. We see her face but her mouth is completely covered, indicating she is imprisoned and cannot speak. The thin lines of the birdcage cross her eyes, but obviously Sadie engages the viewer. The image of Sadie is monotone except for Harvey's signature use of color, which is utilized sparingly in this case. Sadie's birdcage is brighter pink than her skin, which is a pale, lighter shade of pink. The rest of the photograph, including the sweater sheathing Sadie's arms, is black. There is no sense of danger in this image, but the soft lit, mysterious quality of the photograph leaves the viewer questioning. In Harvey's book, *Running Towards Us*, on the page preceding this image, she describes



Cig Harvey, *Sadie and the Birdcage*, 2013, C-Print, 14"X14"

her discovery that she is pregnant. One interpretation of this image suggests the fear of entrapment that may be present in the expectant mother. Once a child is born, there is no return to safety. Once we are mothers, there follows a sense of joy, previously undiscovered, accompanied with overpowering fear of losing something irreplaceable. Each photograph is taken

by and for the photographer, maybe as a commemoration of a moment, or a documentation of an episode, or merely as a means of processing a feeling or an idea.

Another image by Cig Harvey, *The Screen Door*, Warren, Maine, 2013, uses effects similar to those used in *Sadie and the Birdcage*. Another Harvey signature, the square format, encapsulates the way in which Harvey envisions her composition. In *The Screen Door* the subject is again shrouded in darkness. Only a pale pink hand and the brilliant purple sleeve of the subject are seen clearly. The hand is seen pressing against the portal disguised as a screen door. The texture emitted from the screen makes the viewer aware of the barrier between the viewer and the subject. Harvey is again giving us only a glimpse into the subject's world, which creates mystery for the viewer.

It is possible that one image may evoke a completely different set of memories or meaning in several different people. In the book *The Memory of Time*, Sarah Greenough, a senior curator and the head of the department of photographs at the National Gallery of Art states:

While most photographs seem to depict a singular moment of time, each image contains multiple layers [...] While most photographs seem to encapsulate a particular memory to their makers, or evoke a specific idea through labels and captions, when they are ripped from that original context, denuded of their descriptions, and viewed by others, they assume new, often multiple and unrelated meanings that can allow for a rereading and a rewriting of history. (3)



Cig Harvey, *The Screen Door*, 2013, C-Print, 14"X14"

The documentation process is reminiscent of Roland Barthes's "prick" or Annette Kuhn's recollected memory of herself in her essay, "Remembrance: The child I never was." In this article Kuhn describes a photograph of herself with her pet budgie. On the reverse of the photograph Kuhn's mother has noted

when the photograph was taken. Kuhn is quite distressed about her mother's notation, as she feels that it is a false statement of past events. The photograph pierces Kuhn because her memory of the date and time of the photograph involves her father. Kuhn is attached to the way the photograph makes her feel, as a little girl being regarded by her father. Kuhn calls photographs "evidence," but only in the sense that they: "show not so much that we were once there, as how we once were"(395). Kuhn's own inscription is missing, her mother's fiction. This selective or missing information creates tension for Kuhn and her notion of the information connected to the photograph. Similarly, as the past moves further behind me, I look for "evidence" of who I was within my family, within my life. As my memory is obscured by cognitive fog, as even time sequences lose their certain clarity, these images can be clues to my own identity, my mother's identity, and what our place in the world might have been. For Kuhn, remembering who she was as a child means remembering how she felt with her father.



Scott Campbell, *Her Last Roll of Toilet Paper*, 2005, Pigmented ink on archival paper, 8" x 8"

In Scott Campbell's photograph *Her Last Roll of Toilet Paper* (2005), the "her" he refers to is his mother. This photograph is one document in a series of images about the loss of his mother. This visually striking image communicates quiet desolation. There is a silence in the photograph that is created by the lack of presence of an actual human being, which becomes only a reference to a possible someone. This silence emanates from the ethereal lighting and the subject matter; a roll of toilet paper, usually an item of banality, is transformed into something elevated. The drapes, like some funeral shroud or ghostly tissue over the almost skeletal slats of the blinds, soften the outdoor light, mutating it into a sort of representation of the supernatural, perhaps the eternal hereafter.

In this exhibition, the objects in each photograph have not changed in their composition or meaning, yet viewers' perceptions are changed by the transformative presentation of the artist. The act of photographing becomes a kind of dark,

alchemical magic, altering the perception of past events and periods, changing the context of mundane objects so that they are transformed into treasures, creating a new, mysterious dialogue with each person viewing the image. The mundane can become transformed with the use of "dreamy" lighting, saturated color, soft focus, and ethereal beauty. The human element cannot be underestimated in these images. What each viewer brings to a photograph is equally important in the end.

Photography, since its inception, has carried a kind of imprimatur of proof. Photographs are a tangible method of recording, or at least of creating, an imprint of the past. We have a semiotic relationship to photography because of its ability to produce temporal "signs" that capture our memories as they are happening and to inform our memories long after the evidence is gone. As Pierre Nora, French historian working in the subject of French identity and memory, states in his article, "Realms of Memory," "The less memory is experienced

from within, the greater its need for external props and tangible reminders of that which no longer exists except qua memory" (Farr 62). The moment an event happens our minds begin the process of forgetting. Thus, humans feel the need to document the memories of their lives. At some point in time this photographic proof becomes all that remains of the memories they hold dear. The images of the past become mystery, magic, or make-believe.



Susan Kae Grant, ©*The Bird Collector*, 2012, Archival Inkjet print, 11"X13.75"

## References

- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections On Photography*. Trans. Robert Howard. New York: Hill and Wang. 2010. Print.
- Farr, Ian. *Memory*, Cambridge: The MIT Press. 2012. Print
- Greenough, Sarah, Nelson, Andrea. *The Memory of Time: Contemporary Photographs at the National Gallery of Art*. London: Thames and Hudson. 2015. Print.
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- Smith, Shawn Michelle. *At the Edge of Sight: photography and the unseen*. Durham: Duke, University Press. 2013. Print.

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