

Rochester Institute of Technology

RIT Digital Institutional Repository

Theses

5-12-2023

All Memories Fade

Lynn Bierbaum
lmb3580@rit.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.rit.edu/theses>

Recommended Citation

Bierbaum, Lynn, "All Memories Fade" (2023). Thesis. Rochester Institute of Technology. Accessed from

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the RIT Libraries. For more information, please contact repository@rit.edu.

RIT

All Memories Fade

by

Lynn Bierbaum

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Fine Art in Photography and Related Media

School of Photographic Arts and Sciences

College of Art and Design

Rochester Institute of Technology

Rochester, NY

May 12, 2023

Committee Approval

Ahndraya Parlato

Date

Interim Program Director

Dr. Ronald Francis / Mabel Francis Professor

MFA Photography and Related Media

Willie Osterman

Date

Professor

MFA Photography and Related Media

Carole Woodlock

Date

Professor

MFA Photography and Related Media

Abstract

All Memories Fade is an installation and sculptural exhibition examining familial connection through my developed fear of forgetting. These works comprise many materials, including glass, resin, silk fabric, wet plate collodion images, and chemigrams. This installation uses light and optical variants to communicate the fear of losing one's most cherished memories in life. *All Memories Fade* draws inspiration from my family farm in Minnesota that had been sold when I was young. The encapsulated sculptures and installation produce a distorted perception of home through material memory, utilizing light and shadow to highlight those distortions and abstractions that checker one's past. The work of artists such as Melanie Walker, Bill Viola, and Dan Estabrook inspire and inform many elements of the installation *All Memories Fade* wherein process and sensory engagement with audio and movement communicate the ever-changing nature of memory.

Copyright 2023
By
Lynn Bierbaum
All Rights Reserved

I go through life in a state of anxiety, concocting a mixture of a personal and fictional reality that takes over my thoughts. Spending so much of my day thinking about the times in my upbringing that are lost and nearly forgotten. To respond, my work is a place of comfort. A serenity I return to in order to look again at my past. Through photography, sculpture and installation, I speak to the altered realities we build as a place of comfort, which are also distortions of the past. My work conveys memory through the combination of material objects endowed with meaning, and distortion connects to my past, allowing my audience to look back to their own.

I am an interdisciplinary maker invested in the creative process; my dedication is to artistic expression through the process of making more so than the final work. I am not afraid of the long game and never scared of the legwork that goes into building something of value over time. I gain considerable pleasure from the months of tests that go into my work in order to achieve the desired effect. It is the meticulousness as well as the tedium of my process that give me a sense of control. My love for materiality only grew when I was introduced to glassblowing in 2017, after which I began exploring the expressive potential of a multimedia practice as a way to position my photography as more than just a two-dimensional frame excised from the world. Through my love of materiality and process, I use glass and photography as tools to read and record light into a sculptural form.



Figure 1, *All Memories Fade*, glass, wet plate collodion, Resin, Inkjet on Silk, 2023

My thesis work, *All Memories Fade* is an autobiographic story of my life's recollections, drawing upon memories of my family farm. This work explores a pronounced fear that developed after losing my cherished moments. The work includes two sculptural pieces. The first, a collection of hand-blown glass bell jars with silk images of the aerial view of my family farm encased in resin on a hand-built under-lit pedestal as seen in the right side of figure 1. The light from the pedestal only illuminates the bell jars, highlighting the distortions created by the resin surrounding the silk images. A substrate of silk was chosen for its glassy, semi-transparent quality, matching the clarity of the bells jars. The second piece is a hanging installation of flat glass plates known as rondels, made in the glassblowing studio. The rondels support wet plate collodion images and chemigrams or (staining marks) left behind by the wet plate chemistry. The

installation incorporates a haze of light hanging just above the glass immersing the viewer in a quiet moment, and the stillness provides a place of peace to look back to my altered past and present. With the inclusion of light and shadow, each component of my thesis work is in service to a repository of memories I hold dear.



Figure 2, Sheep barn, 2022

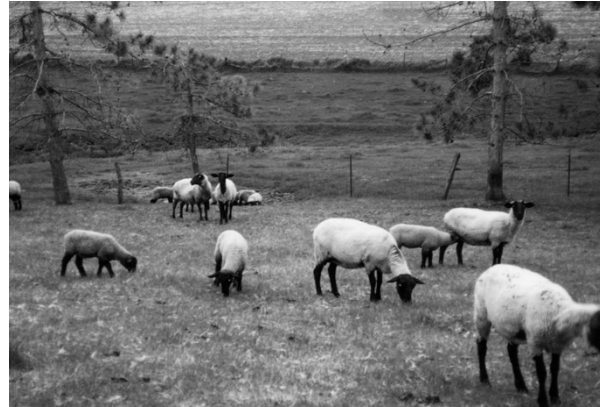


Figure 3, Sheep from the family archive, unknown

In 2021, the farm was sold to new homeowners who welcomed my family to visit, and in September 2022 I was able to return to the once-called “Bierbaum” farm for the first time in twenty-four years. The sheep barn that used to house many of my father’s county fair award-winners was now empty. The silos that stood tall in the back corner became the playhouse for the new owner’s five kids. The fantastical vision of the farm that I had built up in my mind wasn’t real but an altered perception of reality I had constructed over time. Seeing these differences between the current farm and the home I had in my mind inspired my thesis work. Photographs made during my 2022 trip combined with my family’s archive (see figures 2 and 3) create the visual cues hanging above the viewer in my installation. These images involve the audience to take part in my family’s history, past and present.



Figure 4, *Bierbaum Family Farm*, Unknown, 4x5 black and white negative

The photograph I chose to encase inside the bell jars is an aerial view of my family farm, built by my ancestors in Eyota, Minnesota in the 1800s (figure 4). My Family sold the farm when I was only two years old. The new owners were very private, refusing to allow anyone from my family to return to visit. The farm was always a topic of conversation at every one of my family gatherings or events. This place held so many memories throughout my family's lives. But, I had no personal recollection of the farm other than this aerial view photograph that hung inside my grandparent's home. Using this image as a jumping-off point, I reimagined what our family farm may have looked like, and over my lifetime, my mind made up an idealized vision of what only might have been.

For many years I thrived as a workaholic, as someone who was always caught up in trying to think three steps ahead. But as time passed, I never slowed down enough to enjoy some of the best moments of my life. Living with anxiety and chronic migraines caused me to forget

how fast time moves—days turned into months and months turned into years. Looking back, I want to explore those times that escape memory’s grip, times that made me who I am today.



Figure 5 (Left) Melanie Walker, *Nomadic Dreamer Installation*, inkjet on silk, 2017



Figure 6 (Right) Melanie Walker, *Househead Chronicles*, Wet Plate Collodion, 2015

The works of several contemporary photographic and video-based artists inform my approach to memory and materiality. Melanie Walker is a photographer, sculptor, and installation-based artist whose works are derived from dreams she had growing up with double vision. Her artwork has influenced my installation practice, particularly her manipulation of space and proximity to create an immersive experience for the viewer (seen in figure 5). While in conversation with Walker during an interview I conducted with Walker in the spring of 2022, she recounted her first known memory, which was when she woke up in the hospital after eye surgery and saw a chimpanzee in a band uniform playing the trombone while riding a tricycle.¹

¹ Lynn Bierbaum in conversation with Melanie Walker, April 16, 2022.

According to her memory, this figure walked towards her and then disappeared. This fantastical vision of what appeared but was not there inspired many of her immersive environments. Her approach to storytelling and the fabricated, slightly fictionalized realities we experience as a part of remembering compelled me to fantasize about my own world as not so different from our own reality. In *Househead Chronicles* (Figure 6), a viewer may discern that while we may not have houses for heads, the idea that these figures still read a book before bed, and experience time and the everyday makes them relatable. Where is this world? It feels like earth, yet it is an altered version of what we already know to be true.



Figure 7, *Refracted Recollections* Detail, Glass and Wet Plate Collodion, 2023

Like Walker's work, I wanted to achieve immersive and responsive environments in my installation, The hanging rondels in the installation *Refracted Recollections* do not touch each

other, but are just close enough that when a visitor enters the installation, the resulting displacement of air allows the rondels to touch, causing them to chime. This activation of my audience's senses allows them to unwind, clear their mind, and be present inside the installation's space. Overhead, lights illuminate the adjacent walls, floor and the viewer from above. The dispersion of light through the glass optics warp visitors' perception of what surrounds them. The photographic rondels alongside transparent glass propel the viewer to find snippets of a past, creating a portal for them to explore the transience and malleability of childhood memories, including their own.



Figure 8, Image Still from "*The Passing*", Bill Viola, experimental film, 1991

Video-based artist Bill Viola inspired many of the sensory elements employed in my installation, in particular the emphasis on subtle movements and distorted perceptions. In his video piece *The Passing* (Figure 8), Viola juxtaposes images of his mother's death with videos of his son's birth to explore foundational themes of beginnings and endings, the cycle of life, and

the movement of generations.² Viola plays with the viewer's sense of time and space by slowing down his video clips to discomfoting tempos. In one section we see a child lighting a match, which will in turn light candles atop a birthday cake just out of frame. This scene's tempo is slowed to produce an off-kilter reality effect, and its altered pace adds to the unease. Viola wrote "We don't know how to read light and turn it into an image; it's something that is learned."³ My installation aims to "read" light and capture imagery to hopefully evoke a sense of emotion based on memories.

In my practice, I work to find a balance between the materiality of the objects I choose and their connection to memory. Author Christian LExcellent describes how some objects or artifacts are "memory-endowed" meaning, they have the property to "remember" through the thermomechanical treatments that are a part of their production.⁴ One of the materials he speaks to is glass. When a glass artist makes a piece in the hot shop, or glass studio, they work with molten viscous material that cools down as you work; sometimes as quickly as 100 degrees a second. This "cooling down" period results in the optical qualities of the glass retaining all movements and hesitations left behind by the maker during the piece's creation. Glass as a substrate holds this material memory through its variant thicknesses and are conveyed through light by means of optical properties such as diffusion, refraction and reflection, connecting human memory and material memory through light. My work explores the origin of the word photography meaning "painting with light". It is through the remembrance properties of glass I decided that my interest in photography wasn't in using a camera to take images at all, but

² Bill Viola: *The Eye of the Heart*. (Quantum Leap, 2007).

³ Bill, Viola, and Robert Violette. *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House: Writings 1973-1994* (MIT, 1995), 122-134.

⁴ Christian, LExcellent. *Human Memory and Material Memory*. (New York: Springer, 2018), 35-46.

instead in learning how to use optical variants of the material memory to distort and create abstractions that connected to my own personal recollections of time. Finding myself embracing Viola's statement "learning to read light".

In her book *Things Worth Keeping: The Value of Attachment in a Disposable World*, author and communications scholar Christine Harold explores how we as emotional beings connect to material objects, sometimes as close as we relate to other humans. She addresses four main reasons: pleasure, self-expression, group affiliation, and memories. "Special possessions," she writes "such as clothing, are among the cues that evoke autobiographical rehearsal is self-comforting and presents opportunities for self-encouragement or confrontation and resolution of life issues."⁵

An example from my childhood is the purple blanket I went to bed with every night for years. It was nothing fancy, just about a yard of faux fur fabric from a local craft store. Yet, the blanket was my safety, my protection for the long night ahead. I adored my blanket and brought it with me everywhere I went, and, as I aged, so did the purple blanket. Overtime, what used to cover me at night, became smaller than the palm of my hand. And although nothing but a bit of tattered cloth was left, I never built up the will to throw it away. I instead, held on to it because it was a significant part of my past—a memory of me I wanted to hold on to for just another moment longer. My use of mixed media and sculptural form harnesses this fascination I have with the tactile experience in my process, which manifests either in working with a material like glass, or in objects like photographs, which express material relation to the past.

⁵ Christine, Harold. *Things Worth Keeping: The Value of Attachment in a Disposable World*, (University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 143-168



Figure 9, Dan Estabrook and David Harper Clemons, *X and O*, Ambrotype on pink acrylic, bronze encasing, 2019

Like Walker and Viola, photographer Dan Estabrook examines the connection between individuals and the material world. Through found objects, he constructs still lives to represent human emotions. Memory, as well as a feeling of wistfulness, is central to his work. Using iconic images of boats, hands, top hats, and roses, Estabrook brings his audience into a world of symbolic meaning. In the precious brooch *X and O* (figure 9), a bouquet of white flowers with darker petals creates the character “X”, circled in a form that resembles its complement, the letter “O”. In contemporary culture, the floral imagery alongside X and O refers to “hugs and kisses,” making the brooch a sign of love and affection. Provided with further context, the artwork can also symbolize death and loss since the same letters adorned coffins in nineteenth-century America. To expand my practice into other media, I incorporate photographic objects to heighten

the emotional impact of my work on memory, with Estabrook's work in mind as a great example of how an artist can connect historical symbolism and personal memory. In a documentary film on his artistic practice, Estabrook states: "I love these various symbols for their syntax, their language. I've built entire bodies of work around playing with these auras."⁶ Estabrook's examination of how we connect to photographs and objects, as well as to their "auras" of the past, is also how I present a sense of self and longing for the past in my own work.



Figure 10, *Encapsulated Memories Detail*, glass bell jar with inkjet on silk encased in resin, 2023

Another memory-endowed object is the bell jar (Figure 10), which has a long history in art and literature. In ancient Egypt, it was a healing tool⁷. In contrast, author and poet Sylvia

⁶ John, Spellos. *Dan Estabrook*. ed. Keith Strand. (New York: Anthropy Arts, 2007).

⁷ J. F. Nunn, *Ancient Egyptian Medicine*. (University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), 1-4

Plath used it to symbolize mental suffocation and feeling trapped inside her mind⁸. The idea of the bell jar can morph in and out of healing, suffocation, protection, isolation, and new beginnings. For me, the bell jar as a container connects to moments I hold dear, protecting them from the outside world and forever altering how the memory is seen. It is a melancholic form that helps house our memories but acknowledges that they will never be the same. This is seen within my bell jars when I try to precisely retain the enclosed image's clarity. The response of time will inevitably crack, bubble, and peel away from the silk photographs, time interacts with the resin distorting our perceptions of a photograph's reality, and the under-lit glow from the pedestal highlights the now-frozen moment as seen in figures 11 and 12.



Figure 11, *Encapsulated Memories Detail*, glass bell jar with inkjet on silk encased in resin, 2023

Figure 12, *Encapsulated Memories*, glass bell jar with inkjet on silk encased in resin, 2023

⁸ Sylvia, Plath. *The Bell Jar*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2005).

As a conceptual whole and in its material parts, my thesis works entitled *All Memories Fade* gives form to the altered realities we create in our minds through the process of remembering and forgetting. My memories have come to serve as a space of meaning-making, a site for me to remember the family farm of my early childhoods and the lives established there. Through an engagement with process and materiality, I express the scope of my anxiety of losing my personal memory naturally over time, a struggle that prevents so many from living in the moment or enjoying a memory in the making. The goal is for my viewers to walk amongst the shadows of my past, and into their own.

Bibliography

Bate, David. "The Memory of Photography." *Photographies* 3, no. 2 (August 23, 2010): 243–57.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17540763.2010.499609>.

Bierbaum, Lynn. Melanie Walker, April 16, 2022.

Bill Viola: The Eye of the Heart. Quantum Leap, 2007.

Cosman, Teodora. "The Metaphors of Photography and the Metaphors of Memory - Artistic Reflections on an Album of Family Photographs." *Philobiblon; Cluj-Napoca* 17, no. 1 (2012): 268–91.

Draaisma, Douwe. *The Nostalgia Factory: Memory, Time and Ageing*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013.

Harold, Christine. *Things Worth Keeping: The Value of Attachment in a Disposable World*. Minneapolis: the University of Minnesota Press, 2020.

Kirchoff, Michael. Melanie Walker, 2019.
<https://www.catalystinterviews.com/interviews/2019/3/13/melanie-walker>.

Lexcellent, Christian. *Human Memory and Material Memory*. New York, NY: Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2018.

Nunn, J. F. *Ancient Egyptian Medicine*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996.

Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. London: Faber and Faber, 2005.

Spellos, John. *Dan Estabrook*. Edited by Keith Strand. New York: Anthropy Arts, 2007.

Viola, Bill, and Robert Violette. *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House: Writings 1973-1994*. Cambridge, Mass. : London: MIT Press ; Anthony d'Offay Gallery, 1995.