The Mothers: An Exploration of Memory and Secondary Knowledge

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THE MOTHERS: AN EXPLORATION
OF MEMORY AND SECONDARY KNOWLEDGE

by

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B.F.A. Savannah College of Art and Design, 2011

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art and the Computer
in the School of Visual Arts and Design
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ABSTRACT

I consider the experiences of past generations of women in my family and my relationship to them. This body of work began with Bessie, a portrait of my father’s mother. I painted it after attending her funeral.

I did not have a meaningful relationship with either of my grandmothers. This led me to consider my right to portray them. My need to admit my incomplete memory and avoid the objectification of my subjects caused me to question my perspective. I wanted to memorialize these women to avoid their erasure. Through the progressive abstraction of these women’s figures, I chase an honest representation of my understanding.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the people who encouraged and inspired me in this process (in no particular order): Christopher Harris, Mark Price, Wanda Raimundi-Ortiz, and Carla Poindexter.

I would also like to thank my cohort (in no particular order): Alesha Hassard and Reina Castellanos Bermudez. Special thanks to my grandmothers, Louise and Bessie, and my parents, David and Aurelia.
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INTRODUCTION: THE MONSTERS

I entered this Master’s program very sure of the work I would be leaving it with. I knew my thesis body of work would be called *Leviathans*. I would illustrate all the family members I remember being close to as a child, as monsters. These monsters performed the odd things I witnessed their adult counterparts doing that as a child I couldn’t understand. The main character in this body of work was a monstrous individual representing me as a child. Devastatingly large and clumsy, this little girl left a never-ending trail of chaos and destruction in her wake as she sought happiness and her place in the world.

Her sharp teeth and claws, wild hair, over-large features, and everyday scenes formed a metaphor for all the things intrinsic to my person that I felt I had to apologize for.

I sought the beauty in the grotesque. Personally, the meaning of the word “grotesque” shifted, to become the term used for things we do not often look at. These monsters are antecedents of the distorted portraits of the women whom I and many others overlooked. The formal differences are immense, but the themes of family, the need to compensate for neglectful actions, and the acceptance of misunderstanding are the same.
PART 1: FAMILY PORTRAITS AND THE SHIRLEY CARD

Bessie

In the summer of 2014, my grandmother passed away, and as a result my work shifted. My monstrous characters were not adequate arbiters for the questions I now needed my studio practice to confront. The themes of neglect and misunderstanding were still present in my mind. I began to consider within my family, the relationships and experiences that were not there. Still dealing with a child’s point of view about love, acceptance, curiosity, and belonging, I focused on a generation and gender of my family that I had neglected to value while they were still alive.

As children, my brother and I spent many summers and long weekends visiting our grandmother Bessie in Cotton Hill with our father. Cotton Hill is a small section of Georgia near Fort Gaines. It is a leisurely forty-minute drive to the nearest shopping center in Eufaula, Alabama. Mile-long cotton fields are scattered along the main roads.

Her home is located on a long stretch of red dirt road on which everyone is some form of a cousin. Her address does not come up on a GPS search or Google Maps. As my brother and I grew older, we began to travel to Bessie’s home by ourselves. The last hour of our long car rides consisted of many phone conversations with my father, who carefully told us how long to travel down the county road and how far to go past the street aptly named “Dirt Trail.”

Bessie was 96 years old when she died. She came into life, lived, and passed away in Cotton Hill, on that single stretch of red dirt road. She is buried on the black side of a segregated church yard. She was born in 1918 and lived in a time in which her marginalization was institutional. When she passed away, I began to wonder how much of herself she could really share. How many people really noticed her? How many actually knew her in her lifetime?
I did not know her very well. Most of the time I spent around her occurred when I was a child. We didn’t speak much; both of us were quiet. I was a flighty child, running wild in the red dirt. She was a woman in her seventies, and by that time dementia had set in. Around this time, I began to paint, trying to ground myself and understand the world around me. I painted landscapes, animals, and, more than anything, portraits of my loved ones. I painted everything I found beautiful. When she passed away, my understanding of her changed. I began to pose the aforementioned questions and developed an overwhelming urge to paint her.

Like many, my memory is not good enough to readily recall facial features and translate them in accurate order on paper. As a teenager, I remember painting a three-foot tall portrait of my mother. I spent nearly every day with her, but the reference photographs were numerous and I turned to them frequently. For my grandmother, a woman I barely spent any meaningful time with, my need to find references was fierce.

Going through album after album of family photos, I found numerous photographs of her grand-children, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Images of Bessie were sparse. Of what I could find, her facial features were largely indecipherable. At the time most of her family photographs were taken, “Skin-color balance” in still photography was calibrated using images of white women, called “norm reference cards” (Roth 112). Bessie’s side of my family is dark skinned. Being significantly darker than the white skin used to calibrate printed photography, my grandmother’s features had no chance of being clearly captured in photographs.
“‘Skin-color balance’ in still photography printing refers historically to a process in which a norm reference card showing a ‘Caucasian’ woman wearing a colorful, high-contrast dress is used as a basis for measuring and calibrating the skin tones on the photograph being printed. The light skin tones of these women—named ‘Shirley’ by male industry users after the name of the first color test-strip-card model—have been the recognized skin ideal standard for most North American analogue photo labs since the early part of the twentieth century and they continue to function as the dominant norm.” (Roth 112)

After 1954, when the federal government forced Kodak to break its monopoly on the color film industry, the company developed the S5 compact printer to cut the cost of printing and
processing for independent photo labs. To insure the that color calibration was always correct, Kodak provided every lab with printed Shirley Cards and the corresponding negatives (Del Barco). Jean-Luc Godard, a French-Swiss director, declined using Kodak’s film while shooting a short movie in Mozambique in 1978, saying the film was “inherently racist” and incapable of showing the “variety, nuance or complexity” of dark skin (Smith). It wasn’t until the 1970s, when Kodak’s two biggest customers, the furniture and chocolate industries, complained that the film couldn’t capture differences in wood grains and chocolate types, that Kodak acknowledged the problem. In 1995, Kodak released a multi-racial norm reference card (Roth 119).

Figure 2: Example of Kodak multi-racial norm reference card. © Kodak
Having only photographs that blacked out Bessie’s features and a limited memory of her, I embraced the shadows and graininess. I accepted the reduction of information and only rendered her clothing and physical form. The brightness of her garments was clear. The colorful flowers in her skirt “popped”, and the set of her shoulders was prominent under the white of her blouse. Her diminutive five-foot tall stature was enlarged by me onto an eight-foot wood panel. A child’s wooden chair was placed at the foot of the painting. Bessie imposingly leaned forward. In this composition, she cannot be overlooked and the viewer can take these elements and begin to decipher her.
The Question of Objectification

“They, too, have pointed out discriminatory practices within society and the media, not only from the perspective of who is present on screens and in texts, but also in the context of how African-Americans have been expected either to fulfill the minstrel stereotype or to appear as close as possible to the White aesthetic of beauty. (Roth 114)”

Just enough information was kept so that my family members could identify Bessie in her painted form, but I was told by strangers they felt they knew her. In many ways she became a cipher, minimal enough for viewers to be compelled to fill in the information gaps, but not detailed enough to control how viewers did this. The absence of her facial features and matting of her skin tone in the painting allowed the audience to project their own preconceptions and experiences onto Bessie.

Figure 4: Kerry James Marshall, “Great America,” 1994, 103 x 114 in (acrylic and collage on canvas). © Kerry James Marshall. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery.
The way in which I blacked out Bessie’s features is similar to that employed in the paintings of Kerry James Marshall. Marshall utilizes the anonymity of his figures to comment on black identity within Western art history and society in America. Bessie unintentionally became a vehicle for me to address these issues. Her individual identity became secondary to the broader experience of black women.

Marshall provides the viewer important context by depicting backgrounds, gestures, interactions, and words that form narratives. None of these elements is present in Bessie. The background is a light blue void, with an ambiguously painted floor. With no change in value, the floor appears flat. Shadows on her body give her form, yet she casts no shadow on the floor. She clasps her purse at her side and stares straight on, above the viewer’s head. The overall effect is ethereal. In this image, Bessie is an entity, but she has no effect on her surroundings and no context within the painting.

My intention, much like that of John Baldessari’s photographic images with colored facial dots, was to deprive the audience of the face as a dominant element and force them to consider other information, such as posture and clothing. According to Baldessari, “if you can’t see their face, you’re going to look at how they’re dressed, maybe their stance, their surroundings…” (Stamberg). The absence of faces in Baldessari’s dot paintings allow the viewer to focus on these secondary details. Bessie functions in a similar fashion. The audience focuses on her clothing choices, posture, and age. However, without the context of a background or other figures for Bessie to interact with, we are left with too much information to fill in and too much freedom to choose.
I found myself uncomfortable presenting an insubstantial image of Bessie to a wide audience. I did not want the viewer to answer questions about Bessie too easily. I began to wonder if I had the right to portray her incompletely. I was asking the audience to trust my knowledge of these women and trust the path along which I was leading them. The audience needed to know that I too was seeking information not provided.

In order to contemplate the individual women in my family, I needed to stray from the figurative. I turned to the work of Wangechi Mutu, an artist who confronts issues such as Western society’s view of the black female figure as exotic and inherently sexual. Mutu’s ability to tackle these issues without objectifying the black female figure is impressive. Mutu deprives the audience of a complete view of the bodies that she is commenting on. She subverts the gaze by taking the individual body parts that are sexualized, exploited, and fascinated over; the butt, lips, reproductive organs, hair, and more – and combines them into repulsive semi-abstractions. I began to experiment with abstraction in my paintings, breaking apart the figures in my mind and reconstructing them in ways evocative of my understanding of these women.
PART 2: ABSTRACTION AND MEMORY

When I was eighteen, Louise, my mother’s mother, passed away unexpectedly. Shortly before she died, my mother and I visited her in the hospital. My mother sat by Louise, talking to her softly and brushing her hair. I sat awkwardly beside my mother – silent. Their conversation was intimate, and I felt out of place. Louise and I did not connect emotionally, and we didn’t have many memories to reminisce over.

I remember my thoughts drifting to the fluorescent lights. Their overwhelming brightness contradicted the dim coloring and somber mood of in the hospital room. My thoughts drifted further, to the bright day of the funeral for Louise’s brother that I had attended some years earlier. I never met him and felt guilty being one of the first in the procession toward the grave site. I felt guiltier sitting in the shade, underneath the tent that shielded the casket as the eulogy was read. I was occupying the space of someone who actually knew him and loved him.

Sitting by Louise’s bed, I had a similar feeling. I imagined myself at mother’s age, brushing my mother’s hair and speaking to her softly. Maybe my daughter would sit quietly beside me. That thought disturbed me. My mother’s heart was aching and I was sad for her, but there was a wealth of emotions I wasn’t feeling. Painting Bessie and confronting my lack of a relationship with her, caused me to consider my lack of relationship with Louise as well. I began to consider what memories of these women I had, and more importantly, what was not there.

The Reconstructive Nature of Memory

My newfound need to admit my incomplete memory and avoid the objectification of my subject caused me to question the role of my memory within my work. Research on the
malleability and deterioration of human memory by American cognitive psychologist Elizabeth Loftus has proven that our memories are not reliable. The moments we hold onto are ever changing and degrading as we ponder them and invite the recollections of others (Loftus 720).

I wondered how one can build a memorial for someone if there are inadequate tools to do so. The earliest description of the reconstructive nature of human memory came from Plato between 388 and 367 BCE. Plato posited that true knowledge cannot be had until one understands the nature of “false knowledge.” He characterized false knowledge as the misconception that perception and memory are the same thing.

Plato likened memory to a wax tablet. Socrates described this metaphor in a conversation with Theaetetus. In lines 191a to 196c, Theaetetus is asked to assume that Memory has given us a wax tablet. The tablet represents the mind. On the wax, all our thoughts and perceptions must be stamped. Some ideas cannot be, and those that can are remembered until they are rubbed away. Then they are forever gone (Chapell).

Each time we recall a moment spent with someone, we are not remembering the original moment, only the latest recollection. New perceptions and perspectives distort the memory. My understanding of these women, which was minimal from the start, will never truly represent anything but my ever-changing perception of them.
Figure 5: Nathaniel Mary Quinn, "Erica Easton," 2015, 25.5 x 25.5in (Black charcoal, gouache, soft pastel, oil paint, oil pastel, paint stick, silver on pastel on Coventry Vellum paper). Image courtesy of the artist and the Rhonda Hoffman Gallery.

The frailty of memory and the loss of family are embodied in the abstract-figurative assemblages of Nathanial Mary Quinn. Quinn deals with the construction of his identity through gaps and visual breaks within his figures. Quinn describes the process of creating his figures as a “highly instinctual and visceral activity, without the guidance of a plan.” The inspiration for each painting is a disjointed memory of his past. With no aim other than the honest portrayal of the moment, he combines sketches from photographs, charcoal drawings, and gouache paintings. In a process of free association, he erases and adds charcoal over large washes of color, pushing and pulling shadows in pursuit of the elusive original memory.
I appropriated the limited color palette from the skirt in *Bessie* and adapted the shapes found in the patterning. As with Quinn’s visual gaps, hollows and spaces between the painted shapes forming my figures show a process of construction. Many elements build these figures, including morphed limps, figurative accessories, innocuous shapes, and negative space. An important aspect in these paintings is what is not present. In *Bessie’s Purse* and *Bessie’s Shoes*, the aforementioned elements combine to indicate woman, black, warmth, and pride; however, missing facial features deny the audience the identity of the woman. The flat, solid color of the background informs the viewer of the general mood of the subject, but avoids grounding the woman in recognizable space or giving her context.
In *Louise’s Shoes*, I combined the same kinds of elements, painted with colors suited to my perception of Louise’s personality. For Louise and Bessie, the items of clothing I chose were similar – low heeled pumps, hats, and shoulder bags – the items most Southern women wear on a Sunday morning or a special occasion.

I chose to install my paintings, *Bessie’s Shoes* and *Louise’s Shoes*, next to each other. Next to each other, *Bessie’s Shoes* and *Louise’s Shoes* appeared to be in opposition. Their colors and shapes are as dissimilar to each other as my perception of the women.

*The Shift*

My transition from the figurative and monumentally-sized installation *Bessie*, to my smaller abstracted paintings on canvas is jarring. This transition is similar to Armenian painter
Arshile Gorky’s leap from figurative portraiture to abstraction in the early twentieth-century. I shifted to abstraction due to a lack of photographs and memories, as did Gorky.

In 1915, at the age of fourteen, Gorky lost his mother to starvation, after his family fled the Armenian genocide. After immigrating to the United States, Gorky rediscovered a photograph of himself at the age of eight, in which he is standing next to his mother. This photo, intended to be a gift to his father who also had passed away, was the only image Gorky had of his deceased mother.

Gorky would use this photograph as reference to paint the *The Artist and His Mother*, a task which would preoccupy him for almost twenty years. According to the Ararat (Arshile Gorky), “with this painting, Gorky had saved his mother from oblivion, snatching her out of a pile of corpses to place her on a pedestal of life.”

*Figure 8: (From left to right) Photograph of Gorky and his mother; Arshile Gorky, "The Artist and His Mother," 1926-1936, 60 x 50in (oil on canvas), © Arshile Gork Foundation.*
While working on this painting, Gorky also experimented with Post-Impressionism and Cubism until the early 1940s, when he was introduced to the Surrealist movement, biomorphic shapes, and automatic drawing. With *The Artist and His Mother*, Gorky exhausted the only visual reference he had. The style of his work changed drastically. He adopted the aforementioned techniques and began painting abstracted landscapes, basing them on his childhood memories in Armenia.

*The Triptychs*

The figurative clothing accessories in the Their Objects series give my audience an entry point into the painting, something familiar. I wondered what would happen if I took those away.
What was the essence of their form, and how could I demonstrate my changing perceptions of them?

I wondered, if Gorky had more photographs of his mother, would he have had the urge to paint her at all? Would the memories held in a multitude of photographs been enough to put Gorky’s longing to rest? Being deeply involved in the Surrealist movement and its tenets, Gorky believed his abstracted works revealed something about his psyche. For Gorky, these abstracted works served as a new and necessary medium to process his memories of Armenia.

Figure 10: By Author, "Blue Triptych (Louise)," 2015, 234 x 48in (acrylic on canvas).

I began a series of triptychs in which the already abstracted shapes became more non-representational. Traditionally the triptych format represents divinity and reverence and facilitates worship. Three is also the smallest number that can encompass a full narrative: the beginning, middle, and end. This can be seen in Joan Miró’s 1961 painted triptych Blue I II and III. Within this triptych Miró utilizes color and line to describe the trajectory of objects in the
composition. Nothing occurs if one painting is viewed by itself. When we see them combined, we can see the objects’ journey through the composition.

I began with an abbreviated and abstracted figure. I painted automatically, spontaneously drawing shapes, allowing them to flow into new shapes, in a process of free-association. I employed the same techniques to paint the next two figures. Shown in order, a natural reduction in size and detail is apparent.

I assigned meaning to each color in my limited palette. In my paintings of Bessie, warm black-brown and cadmium red straight from the tube created skin and internal organs respectively. Mixed yellow-orange and light pink represented warmth and openness.

I continued this process with silkscreen prints. Drawing directly on the silkscreen with screen filler, I created shapes evocative of the women. The process was spontaneous, and any
errors were irreversible. I then printed multiple copies of these shapes. The prints were then drawn on with graphite and chalk pastel. For each print, the drawing changed, either to augment the original shape or to add figurative details. With each new drawing, my perception of the figure changed along with the figure itself.

**Painted Photographs**

Having reduced the figures of these women to the most essential shapes and colors, and rendering them unrecognizable, I decided to look back on the photographs of Louise I had ignored in the work thus far. While Bessie’s facial features are indecipherable in most of the photographs I inherited of her, Louise’s face has always been clear.

Louise was a light-skinned black woman and often passed for white she when was younger. The majority of these images are fairly well lit, and details are crisp. Still wanting to emphasize the lack of a meaningful relationship with her and my changing perception, I decided to abstract the existing figure within the photographs.
I gathered old photographs, in which Louise was posed or professionally shot. I enlarged and then reprinted them to further distort their graininess. On these new prints, I blocked out her face, hands, and feet with peach-toned paint. The viewer’s last entry point into the subject, the painted surface, was then removed symbolically by my act of photographing the painting.

My reasoning for removing Louise’s likeness and the painted surface can be explained by Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave.” In the allegory posits that we are only capable of perceiving an inadequate copy of a greater thing. Plato asks us to imagine a cave in which people are imprisoned from childhood. Tied down, they are forced to stare at a cave wall on which the shadows of objects are cast. The people do not see the fire behind themselves, the wall behind which figures carry objects, or the objects from which the shadows are cast. If the people imprisoned in the cave only see the shadow of an object, how can they truly understand the real object?
I regarded my *Painted Photographs* in a similar fashion. The figure of Louise, herself, is the true form. The photograph is an inadequate copy and truly informs no one. The original painted surface truly informs no one.

*Figure 13: By Author, “In Progress (Louise),” 120 x 18in (archival inkjet print).*

In another iteration of this series, I continued to paint on the photographs’ surfaces. Each time the photograph was painted, I shot another photo, progressively building up the color and density of the paint while the photograph in the background became more blurred. My perceptions literally grew with the layers of paint, as her likeness faded.
My newest works distill the processes that I have described earlier in this paper. The old photographs of generations of women I never could know, the words of the elders I spent time with, and my own imagery come together to manifest my thought process. The essence of my understanding of these women lies in old family photographs and the conversations I have had with the family members who knew them.

Thesis, antithesis, synthesis is a dialectical method traditionally used to organize writing and explain change. Thesis is the proposition or theory. Antithesis negates or reacts to the theory. Synthesis is the reconciliation of the two, or the conclusion. I employ this method to organize – literally – my thought process.
PART 3: CONCLUSION

This work shows the process of finding an honest representation of past generations of women in my family. I tried to reconcile the guilt of both of my grandmothers dying before I could establish a meaningful relationship with either of them. I wanted to memorialize these women to avoid their erasure, even though my own memory of them was limited.

In a broader sense, this body of work shows the struggle of trying to understand someone. In any relationship, we only know what we see and what we are told – memory and secondary knowledge. As in Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, if we only see a shadow, how do we know what that thing is. We are left to wonder, what is the true essence of this thing and does our perception truly represent it?

Though I may never truly understand my grandmothers for who they were, I wished to show my audience the journey of seeking that understanding, through emotionally symbolic colors, shapes, words, body parts, and blank spaces.
APPENDIX: COPYRIGHT PERMISSION LETTERS
MFA Candidate seeking Copyright Permission

Daniel Tsai <daniel@jackshainman.com>  Thu, Mar 31, 2016 at 10:20 AM
To: "taylorbattle@gmail.com"
Cc: Zoe Stal <zoe@jackshainman.com>

Dear Taylor,

Good morning. Yes, please proceed with using (high res image attached):

Kerry James Marshall
Great America, 1994
acrylic and collage on canvas
103 x 114 inches

Best wishes for your thesis and MFA. Please let me know if you have any further questions or requests.

Kind regards,

Daniel Tsai
Jack Shainman Gallery
Archivist
513 West 20th Street  1  524 West 24th Street
New York, NY 10011
T. 212.645.1701
daniel@jackshainman.com
www.jackshainman.com
Hello Taylor,

I approve your use of Erica Easton, please credit the work when publishing or presenting it as "Image courtesy of the artist and Rhona Hoffman Gallery."

Thank you,
Kate

[Quoted text hidden]

--
Kate Pollasch
Gallery Manager/Registrar
RHONA HOFFMAN GALLERY
118 North Peoria Street
Chicago, IL 60607
T: 312-455-1990
F: 312-455-1727
FB @rhoffmangallery
MFA Candidate seeking Copyright Permission

Melissa Kerr <mkerr@arshilegorkyfoundation.org>  
To: Taylor Battle  

Tue, Apr 5, 2016 at 12:36 PM

Dear Taylor,

If the thesis is unpublished (and will essentially be on file at the university), you do not need to go through our formal copyright procedures. Please just add "(c) The Arshile Gorky Foundation" to the credit line for each work.

Could you kindly provide the full citation of your thesis? I will add it to our bibliography.

Many thanks,

Melissa Kerr  
Managing Director  
The Arshile Gorky Foundation  
PO Box 105  
Chaska, MN 55318  
612.356.4695  
mkerr@arshilegorkyfoundation.org

[Quoted text hidden]

Taylor Battle  
To: mkerr@arshilegorkyfoundation.org  

Thu, Mar 31, 2016 at 12:11 PM

Hello,

My name is Taylor Battle. I am an MFA candidate, graduating this spring from the University of Central Florida. I have written a thesis paper, in which I include Arshile Gorky as a reference artist.

I am writing this message to ask your permission to use images of "The Artist and His Mother," 1926-1936 and "Organization," 1933-1936 from your website. Are you able to permit use of these images via email? If not, I will send a formal request to the address below:

The Artists Rights Society  
536 Broadway, 5th Floor  
New York, NY 10012 USA

If a formal request is required, is there any additional information I should provide? Thank you for your consideration and I am looking forward to hearing back from you soon.

Kind Regards,

Taylor Battle
LIST OF REFERENCES


