Behind The Mask Of Time: Memory And Loss As Evolutionary Forces Upon Memory

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BEHIND THE MASK OF TIME: MEMORY AND LOSS AS EVOLUTIONARY FORCES UPON IDENTITY

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2008

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the School of Visual Arts and Design at the University of Central Florida Orlando, Florida

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ABSTRACT

For the past decade, I’ve been developing a body of work based on the concept of time, in all of its various forms. My medium varies, but my work maintains its steady, overarching philosophies and core aesthetics. The ideas of entropy, growth, decay, evolution, arrested development, fragmented memories, and fugue states; all are considered through a personal filter that borders upon the dark and macabre.
I would like to dedicate this thesis and the time I have spent working towards it to my father, who I miss very much.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CHAPTER ONE: BACKGROUND

When I was a child, I would play alone a lot. There were many empty places that I would explore. My father worked on machines, so there was a junkyard, a big graveyard of derelict vehicles and engines, behind our house. The junkyard tapered off and blended into a wooded area that I never once saw a live animal in, save for a large, black dog that met me on a path late one night. The junk and derelicts would become overgrown with creepers and strangler figs, and over time the man-made and the organic would fuse. My favorite place to explore was a huge earth-mover, deep in the woods, that a strangler had half-pulled down into the ground as it grew up through it.

Now I’m grown and I miss those places very badly. I left home, thinking that I was lonely and I needed people and I needed new places and that I needed to get away from my father, because I thought I hated him. But when I left I carried those old machines and that empty forest around with me, and they brought me a great deal of comfort. The new places and the new people never brought me happiness like playing alone out there in the dark, and I missed my father very badly, though I still wouldn’t admit that.

Whenever I make art, whether it’s a sculpture or a drawing or anything at all, that blending of the organic and the artificial is always present. I always made art but loved science, and as I grew up I learned about concepts like futurism and Transhumanism, which is the idea that people have stopped their own evolution but have made a world that constantly evolves, and to cope with this we have to evolve artificially to better fit into our new and protean environment. We already live
in a world where people carry pacemakers in their chests, and wire buttons to their brains to calm migraines, but someday we will have gone much farther. The air we’re breathing is almost always contaminated, our water has strange chemicals pumped into it for no good reason, and much of our food isn’t made of anything we can actually digest. Someday, we will have to do something to help us cope with all of that. People are afraid of genetic tampering, but they’ll shoot lasers into their eyes to see better, or staple their stomachs, or get breast implants. Little by little, we’re becoming more okay with being less human. Someday, we’ll be okay with not being human at all. I try to make what that will look like.
CHAPTER TWO: HISTORY

When I first entered the MFA program at the University of Central Florida, I wasn’t even quite out of undergrad. I’d begun a relationship with a digital artist and she had gotten me immersed in the low-brow art scene, so we were making a lot of graffiti and vinyl toys, like those seen in Figure 1.

![Figure 1: Lil' Nippers Graffiti Stencil & Plush Toys, 2007-2008](image)

We were participating in art shows very frequently and all over the country, and though that was what actually got me noticed by my future graduate program in the first place, I wasn’t happy with the artistic level of what I was doing. I didn’t realize how emotionally detached I was from my artmaking; I thought the problem was the scene I was in. I thought that if I quit making toys...
(which I actually loved), and tried to focus on making a higher grade of art, that I’d start feeling fulfilled. I was really foolish back then; I didn’t really know anything at all, about art or myself.

All I knew at the time I entered this program was that I felt restless and discontent. I didn’t see where my problems were really stemming from, and so I dropped all the styles and mediums I was using, and started over from scratch. I always loved the process of developing new materials, and new ways to do things. I didn’t learn a lot about the formal ways to sculpt or paint when I was in my undergraduate, but I was encouraged by my professors to take my time, try new things, practice a lot, and fail just as often. I knew that I wanted to incorporate the synthesis of machinery and organic material from my childhood into sculptures in a way that was fluid; I didn’t want to make folk art or messy assemblages. I wanted the forms I made to be living and cohesive. The different materials and components need to flow together smoothly. They could be abstracted or expressionistic, but they had to look alive. By the end of my first year, I’d learned to mix latex, nylon, and clay into a new material that could be molded around metals, bones, or plastics, and hold everything together very strongly without cracking or going to pieces. I was so proud of being clever enough to solve my problem that the work I made as a result was becoming incidental to me. My desired to experiment had begun to outweigh my desire to achieve successful results, and also my desire to deal with my lack of strong emotional content.

I wouldn’t say that I wasn’t also proud of the work that I was making; I loved my pieces, like they were my children. It sounds crazy, but I would talk to them as I was making them. I still do, when nobody else is around. I like them, and I like their company. But despite the natural affinity
I had towards the pieces, I did not understand at the time why I was making them. To test new materials? To explore abstract, armchair philosophies? At the time, those were the best explanations I could give and they were not very good. Looking back now, it’s so obvious to me why I created the pieces that I did that year: the digital artist that I was making art with had left me the week before I started the program. When you’re with somebody a long time and then you’re suddenly alone, there’s certain things you take for granted: the casual affection, the conversations, the reassuring physical contact. Over the course of that year, I sculpted a being that had been silenced by a missing mouth (as seen in Figure 2), the broken, discarded arm in Figure 4, and a heart forced to keep beating by machinery in Figure 3. I wish I could have understood what I was doing, that I was creating a mythology based around my own emotional issues. It’s embarrassing now to see how oblivious and transparent I was.
Figure 2: The Agony of Separation: Unspoken, 2008
Figure 3: The Agony of Separation: Irreparable, 2008
Figure 4: The Agony of Separation: Untouchable, 2008
By my second year, I was very frustrated. I liked the work I was making but I was making very little of it and I felt like it was because I was still very inarticulate. I couldn’t read myself, and I couldn’t draw anything out of my own head that had any emotional resonance to me. I felt very lonely and I was embarrassed by it and I felt like if I tried to make any work that explored that then it would just embarrass the people looking at it too. I liked the new style I’d created my first year, so I just settled into it, creating strange sculptures and paintings that got me attention and praise but didn’t have any real value. I needed an ego boost and I didn’t want to think about my problems. I heard from home that my father was starting to get sick and that it was like his body was falling apart. He was going to the hospital a lot and needed surgery, and that the junkyard had been sold off piece by piece to pay for it. I heard that the bank tried to take away our property and had cut and burned my forest down, but then had given up and just left it like that, ruined and rotting. All the good things in my life were gone and maybe it was good that I wasn’t trying very hard to connect to myself, to express what was going on outwardly through art or anything else, because I don’t think I could have coped with how scared and heartbroken I was. Halfway through the year, I became fed up. I pulled myself together and began to experiment again, trying to find my voice. I took what I learned my first year and began applying it in new ways. I became involved with an artist who created elaborate costumes and did performance art at public events, and she inspired me to try using live models and making installations. I wanted my work to live, so maybe making living spaces, and using living people, could help that happen. The materials I was using lent themselves very readily to creating elaborate mechanical prosthetics, and my final piece that year, seen in Figures 5 & 6: a techno-organic being wired
into a room that was retrofitted with life-supporting equipment and machinery, was very well-received by my professors and cohorts.
Figure 5: Silicon Creature Installation (Still), 2009
Figure 6: Silicon Creature Installation (Still), 2009
Personally, I was happy with the job I did but it revealed a lot of inadequacies to me, beyond just my inability to connect emotionally to what I was doing. I realized that if I wanted to create something immersive and interactive, then I needed to push myself harder.

My third year was bitter-sweet. It was meant to be my final year but I was told that clerical errors meant that I had to leave for a year, then come back and do it again. I still couldn’t get over my mental blocks, but I was trying new things and even though it seemed like nobody liked them, I was very excited about what I was making. I was very materials-focused, and took very abstract approaches to how I combined my materials. I was inspired by the Chinese artist Shen Shaomin to incorporate live plants into my work; my goal was to create sculptures that changed and evolved as the life contained within them did the same. The results can be seen in Figures 7, and clearly did not live up to my expectations. It was about this point that I began to realize that I’d been overlooking a very crucial element in my work, one that had started as an ignored element of my superficial philosophy and had become and equally-ignored element of my installations and plant-based work: the element of time. I had an entire summer to consider this as I left the program to explore my other options, bitter that I could not finish and unsure if I would return.
Fortunately, one of my greatest vices is that I’m stubborn, and after a year pursuing my Art Education Masters, I returned to finish my MFA. My final year has been an extremely good and productive one. The time that I’d taken off, and the fresh input of new faculty and cohorts, gave me a new perspective on my work and my motivations for making it. I really liked the education classes that I had taken, too. They’d given me a much stronger desire to get out of school and start teaching, and it was good to feel that kind of motivation, to have a more practical goal like...
that to aspire to. I was also introduced to a new medium that, in hindsight, I cannot believe never previously occurred to me. I’d always had a deep love of cinema, and film-as-art; it was a natural transition to move into video projects and installations. Inspired by filmmakers like Mark Romanek (who was in turn inspired by the photography of Joel Peter Witkin) and video artists like Matthew Barney, I broadened my concept beyond the limited, sterile scope of Futurism and began to explore the concept of time on a more personal level.

I chose to create an installation of several videos that captured my thoughts on the distorting effect time has on memory. I still focused on the idea of evolution, but on a less broad scale; I had now become concerned with personal evolution, the changes an individual goes through and how their experiences can act as either a catalyst for this change, or as an obstacle that keeps us from developing. I chose to utilize an 8mm camera effect to emphasize the inexact, hazy nature of a recollection. I was extremely proud of the end result and plan on continuing to work with video in the future.
Figure 8: In Dreams Video Installation (Stills), 2010
Later that year my father died. I knew it was going to happen sometime soon, but despite what everyone was telling me there was just no way to be prepared for it and I was a mess. I still am. My father was my model for what a man was, what a good person was, and I wasn’t anything like him. I can’t handle his death, and whenever I think about it I’m reminded of how badly I still need him and how incomplete I’ll always be without his guidance. I started receiving his belongings in the mail, in big boxes. Back home, my family was trying to put his affairs in order, to tidy up and purge his things, and at the same time I very badly needed to feel close to him. Among the boxes I found an old leather-working tool kit that I’d never seen before. I didn’t know anything about it or why my father had it, since I’d never seen him do any kind of leather work. It’s hard to describe how intensely drawn to it I was. I began to teach myself leathercraft with a vehemence that I’d never felt before. I was instantly and completely in love the medium and began crafting day and night, compulsively. I was losing sixteen, twenty hours to stitching and burnishing and riveting. I had begun to make masks. I had always been slightly fascinated by them, though I hadn’t realized before the extent of that fascination. I came to notice that even the creatures I sculpted in my earlier work had worn masks, or had masklike visages. It occurred to me that masks have always been with us, that people had worn masks before we were even people. Masks both connect us and push us away from each other; they give us something we all share, because while many of us might grow up never leaving our home towns, or never learning to ride a bike or drive a manual car, or even never making love, we have all worn a mask, we’ve all hidden or pretended to be something we’re not. They also create a barrier, a wall between the wearer and the people on the other side. They can expose us, by placing our secret selves on display for everyone to see, or help us obfuscate our natures even further. Hunters wear masks to
trick prey into letting them get close, or to frighten predators and keep them from attacking. Police wear masks, but so do criminals. When we wear a mask, we’re trying to be something else, and in that way there is nothing in the world makes us more human.

I find myself compelled to make all kinds of masks. Stylistically, they run the gamut from figurative, like the Praetorian Mask in Figure 9, to the highly conceptual, such as the Wedge Mask in Figure 10. While my primary focus is on leather pieces like Figure 12, I also like still to experiment with a wide variety of new materials, like the Wicker Mask in Figure 14. As far as my concept or intention behind each mask goes, it also varies wildly. Some masks are still just an exercise in the material, such as my Praetorian Mask. Many masks that are build from lighter materials are the 3-D equivalents of gestural drawings. Other masks, such as the mask in Figure 22, which I made of my father from his old welding apron, obviously have a far more intimate origin. I usually don’t share too much of what original intentions for a piece were with my audience, since I’ve always felt it’s best to let an individual make their own conections to the piece. I will title my masks in a way that I feel is appropriate to how they look to me, but I’ve found that my labels are often obtuse or strange and so reveal little.
Figure 9: Praetorian Mask, 2011
Figure 10: Wedge Mask
Figure 11: Fury Mask, 2012
Figure 12: Pheasant Masl, 2012
Figure 13: Priestess Mask, 2012
Figure 14: Wicker Mask, 2012
When I showed my mother what I had made, she told me a story. She told me that leather-working goes back generations in my family. We’d been tanners and cobblers and saddle-makers. My father had worked with leather for my uncle, who learned from my grandfather, who had brought it from the old country. I’d wanted to so badly to find something that made me feel close to my father, something that would comfort me and torture me horribly all at once, and in doing so I’d not only connected myself to him in an unexpected way, but I’d also accidentally reconnected to a part of my family’s lost history. By discovering these tools, I’d reawakened a tradition that had been locked away in my blood for over a hundred years. Maybe even more. And in making masks, I had connected to my humanity in a way that was both deeply personal and timeless. When I think of the weight of it all, when I think of my father and how I have failed to be the kind of man that he was, when I think of how badly I miss him and how close to him working with his tools and making these masks lets me pretend to be; when I think of how when I make masks I’m bringing myself closer to the people and the world around me in a way I never was before—there aren’t any words anymore. The years of armchair philosophizing fall away, the gulf of emotional disconnection closes. For the first time in my life, I feel broken and vulnerable and more human than I have ever previously known. I find myself breaking down every time I build anything anymore. I have so much to say, and I say it loudly with my art but I do not even care anymore if it ever gets heard. It hurts now, yes, but making art finally feels good.

This is where I find myself now. I finally feel like I am creating work that has emotional content, and I feel good about what I’m doing and the reception it receives. I’ve begun to incorporate my
masks into my video projects, but it’s not quite there. One medium is so raw that it’s hard to control, and the other requires so much control, and so much forethought and refinement. It’s a chaotic process joining two preoccupations that come from such different places, but I’m not worried. It feels right even though it’s wrong and I know that when it finally comes together, it will be perfect and beautiful.
CHAPTER THREE: COMPARISONS/INFLUENCES

My current body of work consists of two separate and distinct concepts, existing in two very different forms of media, which I would eventually like to bridge together. The first project is my video installations, which currently explore the concept of time as it pertains to memory, recall, and the effects they have on personal growth and development. The second are my masks, which are more conceptual in an aesthetic way and explore the broader concept of identity and the nature of our humanity.

At the time of its completion, my first video installation was composed of nine films: non-chronological vignettes and scenes inspired by my thoughts and contemplations on the effect our past experiences, and our naturally shifting and warping recollections of those events shape who we are. My focus was the idea that while our past experiences and the people we experience them with shape who we are and help us to change and evolve, our memories or those experiences are inevitably warped by time and our own willful (though often subconscious) revision of these events to suit our purposes. Due to the decay of memory, our recollections become clouded and the resulting effects are often not ideal. Many of us are deeply affected by events that we recall them all wrong, or we may even recall events that did not occur. Many of us are also chained down by our memories; preoccupied by them to the point that there is no going forward or moving on, so that we become stagnant and haunted.

I think I do both. I think that I tell myself that I began exploring these concepts as a way to grow and to free myself, but in reality I’m just trapped, and the scenes I film draw from the memories
that torture me the most. I receive no catharsis from filming these scenes and drawing the memories out; I often watch the films alone, over and over, lost in my own head and thinking about the people and the places that are gone now and that I regret not holding onto as tight I should have.

While in the end I was pleased with my first film installation, I found that once the videos were complete two issues remained: the first was just how I should present them in a gallery setting (which I solved by utilizing several stripped-down cathode ray screens), and the second was the unavoidably oblique nature of the scenes. For one thing, I had chosen to film each scene in an 8mm film style; the low-fidelity of the imagery was meant to simulate the haze of recollection. For another, the content of the videos was, for the most part, characteristically dark and theatrical, muddying the symbolism and subject matter. They were my memories through my filter after all, and were burdened by baggage and symbols that would only ever resonant in the right way for me. I tried to solve these issues by showing the videos on smaller-sized screens, in order to avoid a loss of resolution, and by providing a brief-but-elegiac synopsis of each scene. I was worried that the synopses might be an overstatement, but the overall effect, when presented plainly, worked well. People really seemed to like reading what each little film was about.

While filming for this project I spent a lot of time researching the work of directors like Mark Romanek, who is well-known for his work on music videos in the late nineties. Romanek’s work is characterized by a strong use of an aged, sepia-toned, low-fidelity look, likely due to a heavy influence by photographer Joel Peter Witkin, both of which you can see examples of in Figure 16. Romanek and Witkin love to use old things; objects, places, furniture, etc. and so do I. I read a
long time ago that in the Shinto religion, people believe that old, well-used objects develop a life and a soul and I don’t disagree. I love things and places that feel haunted.
Figure 16: (From Top to Bottom) Woman Once A Bird by Joel-Peter Witkin, The Tall Woman (Still) by myself, and a still from 'Closer' by director Mark Romanek
My work has always skewed towards a very dark aesthetic. I also have a bit of a habit of falling into the theatrical even when I don’t intend to, which I have found does occasionally give some people the impression that I’m trying very hard to achieve the tone that I do. However, after three years and a great deal of really considering what those people say, I still contend that the strange and macabre tone that my work takes is a natural, reflexive expression, a reflection of my personal philosophies. I have always found a powerful beauty in the negative things in life. I know that it sounds ridiculous, but I mean it. It’s easy to appreciate the good things: a beautiful place, falling in love, success and achievement. It’s hard immediately perceive the beauty and elegance in tragedy, of seeking only to never find, of trying to hard only to fall short, but it’s there. I see more of the sublime in loss than in anything, because in failure, in pain and heartache, that’s when we’re the most human. When we suffer, that’s when we’re the most pure and honest. We cry, we rage, we collapse and give in and the world, the whole world, it washes over us and for that moment we are carried away. The universe envelopes us and we understand our place in it. My sculptures, the actors in my films, they suffer because they are beautiful and fragile, and there is more poignancy in the moment when a fragile thing finally breaks than in all the time it that remains untouched. Until tragedy and hardship befall us, we’re not alive, we’re just killing time.

When I first got into the program and began to make work that I was really trying to think about, much of what I was doing was heavily influenced by the literature I was reading at the time, which mainly focused on Transhumanism and Futurism. I drew a great deal of inspiration from artists who also explored these ideas, which included Japanese cyberpunk artists like Tatsuya
Terada, Shinya Tsukamoto, and particularly Tsutomu Nihei, who can be seen in Figure 17 and has constructed a fathomless, commercial/industrial, fantasy landscape based around the concept of the Dyson Sphere and populated it with individuals that had been artificially upgraded beyond being even carbon-based life forms, into beings that were human in form only.
Figure 17: (From Top to Bottom) Panel from Abara By Tsutomu Nihei, and The Overlord by myself
During my second year in the program I discovered the work of artists like Shen Shaomin, Egon Schiele, and Sachiko Kodama (All of whom can be seen in Figure 18); I was inspired by their work to broaden my conceptual horizons and explore new mediums. I rediscovered my passion for 2-D art through Schiele and developed a small collection of graphite sketches that mimicked his style. I loved how simple his work was. I share Schiele’s penchant for finicky, nervous line work, and I tried to assimilate his ability to both bend and honor reality and true proportion to achieve something expressive yet real. I also attempted to work with live plants and electromagnetic Ferrofluid, but in the end I feel like these experiments were merely fun exercises. I learned more through the failure of these experiments, that when I allow myself to become lost in the science and the engineering of a project, then I fail to deliver a piece with any emotional content. The lack of emotional content was still my biggest obstacle at this point, and exploring new media that I connected with only in terms of scientific curiosity wasn’t going to magically gift my work with sudden resonance anytime soon.

By my third year I’d begun to explore artists that spoke to me more on a philosophical or emotional level, rather than an aesthetic one. I stopped listening to people when they recommended artists to me based on how “creepy” my work looked. Instead, I tried as hard as I could to break myself of my habit for avoiding contemporary art as a source of inspiration and I began to pursue the work of artists that hooked me in ways that I could not immediately understand. One professor showed me Folkert de Jong, and I loved how raw his sculptures looked. Inspired by him, I stopped trying to refine my pieces so much; I realized I was stripping my sculptures of any evidence of the artist’s hand and was essentially creating a product.
I have mentioned Joel-Peter Witkin already, but I have really come to be inspired by his work. A horrific childhood trauma disconnected Witkin in a way that immersed him in death and decay. He could not separate himself from his nightmarish preoccupations, and instead embraced them. There is so much suffering and pain in his work, but at the same time it is all unquestionably beautiful. I often wish people would stop questioning me and my work and see the same beauty that I do, like they have done for Witkin.

One artist that has fascinated me in a unique way is Mathew Barney. While I don’t explore the same concepts as he does, or utilize the same mediums or style, I found that I commiserate with Barney on another level entirely. Through his work, Barney likes to explore the concept of physical tension; the human body struggling actively with a task or a dilemma. Often, while struggling to physically force leather into the shape I want, or when stabbing myself badly while pushing a needle through a thick piece of hide, I find myself thinking of Mathew Barney and how he finds beauty in such a struggle, how he find transcendence through gauntlets of suffering and pain. It does not change the end-goal of my work, but it does inspire me to invest as much of myself as I can into every piece. Every cut, blister, puncture wound, and strained muscle is another part of myself given to my work.
Since I began to make masks, many people have asked me if I’m familiar with Nancy Grossman; I am, and while we’re both using leather and making headpieces I feel the similarity ends there. As you can see in Figure 20, Grossman does not make masks and her pieces cannot be worn; they are solid sculptures. My masks are meant to be worn, and while they can be uncomfortable or awkward it’s very important to me that they remain true masks. Grossman also uses leather to give her work a sexual, fetishistic undertone; more often than not her pieces are constituted of
repurposed fetish gear, nailed or crudely attached to wooden heads. I have never explored my sexuality through my art, and I am not necessarily more drawn to fetish and bondage than I am to traditional sexual themes. Honestly, I have always found sex to be an incidental part of my life; I crave/fear human contact and emotional love/loss more than I desire to dominate and punish/submit and suffer.

I often can be provoked into praising hyperrealism, and hyperrealist artists like Patricia Piccinnini and Ron Mueck, who you can see in Figure 21.
I support art like this on a personal and philosophical level, but do not necessarily strive for hyperrealism in my work. I lack both the skill, materials access, and desire to recreate life as we already see it. Hyperrealism is an exercise in process and technique, a showcase of craftsmanship and skill. Often, I will make something as crudely as possible, in order to make a point. For example, I build a mask of my father from his old leather welding gear, and I made it as piecemeal and imperfect as I could. The reason is because I desperately wish to be like him, but I fail miserably on every level and my imitation is crude and inadequate.
Figure 22: Father, 2012
I love hyperrealism because it represents a return to a time when skill, and the investment of an artist’s blood and tears and effort is recognized and rewarded with genuine appreciation. I think the failure of our economy and the collapse of the “blue chip” art scene is a wonderful thing; no longer can an artist produce the bare minimum, concoct a cockamamie, pseudo-intellectual statement to accompany it, and command center stage. The public can only afford now to invest in art with aesthetic merit, work that displays skill, craft, and emotional authenticity. Hyperrealism shows us the implementation of materials and the rendering of form at its zenith, and sends the message that no longer can an artist float a basketball in a fish tank and command a spot in a top-tier gallery. The “con” is being forced out of conceptual art, and as an artist utilizing a traditional, skill-based craft I find that to be very comforting and inspirational.
CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION

I say that I find beauty in tragedy and I mean it, I’m very grateful for everything that I’ve experienced these past four years. I love the work I make now; I am completely connected to the place in myself where my work comes from, and that work is content-rich and beautiful. I can speak openly and confidently about my process, my concepts, and my inspirations. It was an extremely difficult and trying time in my life, but in the end it was worth every moment.
LIST OF REFERENCES


"Nancy Grossman on artnet." Fine Art, Decorative Art, and Design - The Art World


