A Child Could Do That: Communicating Fragmented Memories Outside of Their Context

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A Child Could Do That:
Communicating Fragmented Memories Outside of Their Context

“Painting is the way I speak. I had such an anxiety-ridden youth that when I started to paint, it was as though I was speaking for the first time. I was creating a visual language through which I could say anything I wanted.” (Joan Snyder)

Section 1: Introduction

My work is an exploration of process and material, leaning heavily on instinct and intuition more so than any formal artistic training or theory. The artwork serves as a form of nonverbal communication. It is predominantly memory based and investigates the notions of ‘home’ and ‘childhood,’ as well as providing a means of communication. The works serve as reconstructions, both real and fictional, of fragmented memories. By overlaying different materials, images and text, I jumble the visual motifs to allow the viewer to make a variety of associations and connections. These personal visual narratives I am telling through my work can be interpreted in a variety of ways,
referencing the ambiguity of both memory and dreams. They are told non-linearly to encourage a web of associations rather than a distinct narrative, and exist without the expectation of decipherability. In a way, each piece I create is a self-portrait, as my body of work is reiterations of memories from my childhood, dragged through over a decade of mental distortion, recreated in vibrant, graphic expressions in a search for a visual representation of myself.

I’M WADING INTO YOUR WATERS
SLOOOOWLY MELTING
DROWNING IN HONEY,
What else could I do? I’ll get over it

Section 2: Theoretical Underpinnings

I want to explore how art operates as a visual form of communication. Often without verbal explanation, art translates something to its viewer through visual cues that have collective or personal associations in people’s minds. It can convey a narrative in a more dynamic, non-linear way. I’m interested in exploring how little needs to be verbally communicated for an audience to react or connect to a work and in seeing to what extent art functions as its own visual language.
There is a dichotomy in my work between the visual invitation to enter the narrative, and that narrative being unreadable. It exists in a liminal space. Because common, simplistic symbols recur in my pieces, they strike a chord with viewers who attach meaning and individual associations with them. These symbols are paired with emotive, vibrant colors and limited text to communicate an emotion associated with a memory or narrative. The work expresses a childlike sensibility and questions the perspective from which they are created; whether they are being presented by the artist as they were as a child or by the artist today. My work grapples with how time alters the narratives being portrayed and muddles the memories they are based on. It operates as visual poetry, painting a convoluted image for the viewer and letting them untangle meaning from it. My work is an excavation in nostalgia, navigating the chaos of memory for me to project a false or reconstructed reality.

Non-verbal communication is not only trivialized in our culture, but actively dissuaded. Children are taught to ‘use their words’ instead of expressing themselves through other channels more comfortable to them. They are conditioned to see verbal communication as the only viable mode of expression.¹

¹ Speaking emerges in the child directly out of [their] non-verbal communication. Children continue wanting to use their whole bodies to express themselves. Some teachers have been overly-concerned by this tendency, so they caution their pupils to

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hold their arms still at their sides and keep their feet together.

This “wooden Indian” approach is further evidence of the American culture’s to destroy, or at least to inhibit, non-verbal communication. [...] In telling stories [children] imitate fire engines, the sound of motors, howling winds, lions, pigs, breaking branches and express trains. After the first grade or two in school this “zoo and thunder” language does not meet with the teacher’s complete approval. Again the culture’s verbalism brings to bear its formidable weight. 

Visual modes of communication are immediate and often provoke intense emotional responses. Unlike written or verbal expression which requires a development of content, visual expression is fast and its significance can be extracted from a quicker analysis. This is especially true when relating to digital media such as television and advertisements; the reward is instantaneous and takes little effort from the consumer. It is also true in art, though subliminal messages and semiotic content can be deciphered upon closer reading, the image is first taken in as a whole. Sapir-Whorf hypothesizes that we are limited by language, trapped in time by verb tenses (to be) and vocabulary that restrict our ability to communicate and understand the full extent of our being, too focused on mapping out our existence to relish in the whole of it. Verbal and written expression conjure images of what is being described in our head, while the visual taps into the

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2 Ibid. pp. 10.
3 Ibid. pp. 10.
viewers emotions and subconscious while trying to find words to articulate what they see; one cannot exist without the other.⁴

Joan Snyder
Chant/Forever A.P. I/II, 2018

*From Joan Snyder’s artist statement:*

‘I was slowly developing a language with which I could speak and communicate. I loved to paint – it was the very first thing in my life that I had found that I had truly loved to do, and I felt that one day I would be good at it.’

‘Often referred to as an autobiographical or confessional artist, her paintings are essentially narratives of both personal and communal experiences. Through a fiercely individual approach and persistent experimentation with technique and materials, Snyder has extended the expressive potential of abstract painting and inspired generations of emerging artists.’

Section 3: Influences

Willem de Kooning
Untitled V, 1977

5 https://atlanticcenterforthearts.org/master-artist/joan-snyder/
I am primarily influenced by a generation of second wave feminist artists beginning their careers in the 1960s and 1970s, many of whom are still active today. These women include Joan Mitchell, Joan Snyder and Alice Neel, among many others. These artists all began their artistic careers during abstract expressionism, and were influenced by earlier 20th century artists such as Cy Twombly, Gerhard Richter and Willem de Kooning, whose works are both very emotive and convoluted but convey a narrative or feeling to their audience. While the work of these female artists is grounded in this tradition, they all veer away to develop a personal artistic language with which they express themselves. The use of color and imagery in each artists work give hints as to what the pieces are about, but leave it open to interpretation for the viewer. The work of these more contemporary artists exhibits many of the same visual cues as their earlier counterparts, but differ in tone. Where as de Kooning’s earlier works and Twombly’s paintings carry a solemn gravity,- de Kooning’s Ruth’s Zowie (1957) and Untitled V (1977), Twombly’s Untitled (Gaeta) (1989)- Snyder and Mitchell’s paintings hold a lighter, looser, more earnest quality, almost like a visual diary.

From Joan Mitchell’s Artist Statement:

The myriad things that comprised and moved within Mitchell’s world - water, sky, trees, flowers, weather, dogs - created images and memories from which she worked. These things are often named in her titles, which were always attributed after a painting’s completion. She observed her landscape intensely, and
her acute visual observations of form, space and color in life are part of the visual memories she drew upon while painting.⁶

I am also interested in a number of contemporary artists including: Mira Schor, Molly Zuckerman-Hartung, Sarah Lucas, Cecily Brown, Nora Griffin, Elizabeth Murray and Clare Grill. These artists utilize materials traditionally associated with home craft work, blurring the lines between fine art and mediums typically seen as ‘women’s work.’ Sarah Lucas’ use of recycled furniture, household objects, food, clothes and stuffed pantyhose

⁶ https://joanmitchellfoundation.org/work/artwork/cat/paintings
in works such as *Au Natural* (1994), *Sex Baby Bed Base* (2000), *Nice Tits* (2011) and *Chicken Knickers* (1997) demonstrates an abandonment of academistique, white-wall seriousness for witty, unfiltered playfulness. Nora Griffin’s vibrant color-blocked paintings also demonstrate a newfound sense of humor and playful sensibility in works such as *Diamond Heart* (2016) and *Time’s Fool of Love* (2013).

![Sarah Lucas, Au Natural, 1994](image)

For the past three years, I have been working intimately with three of my classmates; sharing a studio and materials, often working together on projects, and even having our final show together. Working in close proximity to them has shaped the progression of my work, and similarities become more and more visible throughout all of our bodies of work as we continue to work alongside one another; this was a major factor in the cohesion of our show.
Similarly, the recent Instagram tattoo culture and switch to using the body as a canvas has influenced both the way I think about mark making and permanency. Many famous tattoo artists who attended art schools and started their careers as visual artists have changed career paths both for monetary and philosophical reasons. The idea of one’s art forever existing on someone else’s body as a collaboration between artist and consumer, and between artists themselves displays a shift in the future of reproducible media that has an impact on both my art and my body, as I mark my own body with tattoos and allow other artists to use my skin as a vessel for the dissemination of their works. This brings up the impermanence of my work and materials, and forces me to reflect on temporality and what it means to create something organic that will live forever.
Section 4: Formal Problems and Material

“What modern art means is that you have to keep finding new ways to express yourself, to express the problems, that there are no settled ways, no fixed approach. This is a painful situation, and modern art is about this painful situation of having no absolutely definite way of expressing yourself.” (Louise Bourgeois)

The interdisciplinary mediums I use serve varied purposes for me. Painting and monotypes are free, fluid and don’t entail much planning beforehand, as opposed to screen-printing (and other forms of printmaking) and digital medias. Sculpture falls somewhere in-between these two ends of the spectrum; its process is usually instinctive and mostly unplanned, while its assembly and display is more planned. Even outside of painting, my work carries a painterly and fluid quality with it that translates into other media. By using different media, I want my work to break free from the inherent flatness of two-dimensional art, come out of the walls and invite the viewer into the dynamic spaces my work creates.

I try to give as much texture to the materials I’m using as possible by adding medium to paints and inks, casting glass in resin, layering glue on oil paint, adding salt to monotypes, scratching negatives and other forms of manipulating media. I’m drawn to the shine, depth, and smell that oil based paints and inks bring to my work. By layering these mediums, I want to create depth within a two-dimensional space.
In my Senior Thesis Show (*Hoooney, I’m Home*), glass and fabric work are intermingled with traditional two-dimensional media in pieces such as *Baby, The Stars Look Crazy Tonight* and *Happy Blanket for Sad Times*, a quilt incorporating screen-print and pastel. By using scraps from previous pieces, I rework familiar materials outside of their intended uses and repurpose them. Using the glass remnants from my stained glass piece, *Sutures*, I broke and reconfigured the shards by binding them together with spools of thread, dulling the edges but still leaving them sharp to the touch. To create the hanging pieces alongside *Two Strands of One Rope*, I used a bedazzled shower curtain printed with images of my mother. The extra edges of canvas stretched for *Hello There, Let’s Dance* became the two scrolls *Tempted by the Fruit of Another* and *Negotiations Between Lions and Lambs*. This incorporation of unconventional and found materials
places my work in conversation with artists like Sarah Lucas and their use of discarded objects; we share a playfulness and vulnerability in our work.

Two Strands of One Rope, 2019

Top: Tempted by the Fruit of Another, 2019; Bottom: Negotiations Between Lions and Lambs
Section 5: Personal

FEELINGS BASEMENT = FLOODED

My work has always functioned as a personal outlet. Before it was my passion, academic major or foreseeable future, it was a break for my brain to express itself without questioning what was coming out or having to express myself coherently. Having multiple learning disabilities, visual expression has always been much more feasible than verbal or written expression. Art assuaged academic learning when traditional avenues failed me. Through my work, I am telling personal visual narratives that leave questions unanswered. Though it expands across various media, the work is connected through recurring motifs, characters, and colors that express non-linear, emotive scenes of graphic simplicity and fluid abstraction. Abstraction appeals to the immediacy and fluidity of my work and offers a broader ability for communication outside the verbal realm. The recurrence of cars, in various forms, in work is emblematic of comings and goings, absences, and is at times a direct reference to my father, who I rebuilt cars with in my childhood garage, went to ‘car shows’ and conventions with, and drove to and from school with every day. The repeated image of an oversimplified house in many of my works references ideas of ‘home,’ ‘belonging’ and emotional associations to spaces.
The memory-based narratives I’m representing are cheerful in color and their graphic quality, but carry dark and unsettling undertones as well, displaying both the whimsy and misery of a childhood tainted with anxiety and learning difficulties. Working in both abstract and representational forms, my work is fluid, impulsive and painterly, as well as graphic and intentional. Through repetitive actions of pushing and pulling, scratching, carving, binding and layering mediums, my practice becomes an outlet for my subconscious to roam. The work functions as a nonverbal form of communication that is inherently personal and inhibits the viewer from fully comprehending the specific narrative, allowing them to bring their own narratives to bear on the pieces.

As an extremely shy child, I refused to speak to adults for years and was subsequently sent to therapy by my parents who wanted me to outgrow my introversion. Articulating my feelings verbally has always been a struggle, the information I did relay was coded
and only imparted part of my thoughts. With my therapist, I would draw characters and make up stories about them that she would transcribe. Working through my art with her was the only way I was willing to communicate and express myself, even if it was non-verbally. My lack of communication acted as both self-preservation stemming from a fear of vulnerability, and as a barrier from being understood by the outside world.

Detail of a drawing from my childhood, circa 2008

TRYING TO MANAGE MY EMOTIONS BUT

BLOOD RED CLOUDS DRIP DOWN

ON GRAZING HORSES BELOW

AND THEY KEEP CHEWING
Section 6: Aspirations and Goals

My work began with small prints on paper, particularly monotypes and woodblock reductions; vibrant and distorted self-portraits, fatuous images of animals and plants, as well as erratic, doleful abstractions. Working in multiples on this small scale, and with the constraints and precision of reproducible media processes, the pieces I created did not carry the same value and satisfaction of creating larger, more durable works. The move to larger scale, singular works of art alleviated many aspects of what was hindering my previous work, in that more emphasis was placed on each individual piece.

Moving forward, I want my body of work to move fluidly across mediums, juxtaposing flat and structural objects that work together to create a cohesive dialogue and function as a commentary on how we communicate and use language. I want to go beyond traditional uses of surfaces and materials. I want to continue experimenting with painting and sculpture-making with non-traditional materials, such as the use of layers of resin and modge-podge, and inclusion of googly-eyes and gems in my current work. My work this past year has begun to do this- painting on found pieces of wood and board, screen-printing on scraps of canvas and shower curtains, using left-over pieces of stained glass and empty spools of thread- and has provided a good foundation for future, more in-depth explorations of uses of unusual material. Throughout the use of these various materials, I want the same hazy, scattered, dreamlike quality of my current work to be reflected.
Section 7: Conclusion

My multidisciplinary work- ranging from painting and printmaking to stained glass and fabric work- engages with the notions of childhood, home, and the distortion of memory over time. It explores the idea of visual storytelling and non-verbal narratives through recurring motifs, vibrant colors and unconventional materials, exhibiting an illegible but almost decipherable quality that harkens back to children's art. The nature of these works draws the viewer in with their vibrancy and spits them back out without any tangible notion of what narrative is being presented to them; a representation of the memories I am recreating as they appear in my mind.
With influences in mid-20th century to contemporary women abstract expressionist, my work belongs to a new canon of artists interested in ephemera and emotion. Ephemera is the essence of many Sarah Lucas pieces, and others who use organic materials, because of their temporary nature. These pieces represent a finite moment in time, a transient occurrence. In my work, I wish to display the same vulnerability and grit as these women. By allowing my process to be intuitive and carefree, I am able to insert a wittiness and poignancy into my pieces, keeping them buoyant and full of vehement, raw emotion.

Peerless, 2018

Bibliography


