

Michelle Crowley

MA by Dissertation

The Extraordinary in the Ordinary

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Abstract

I began my degree in Contemporary Art and Design in my early 40s with two young children, who were both still quite small and needed more 'hands-on' care than they do now that they are teenagers, which inevitably had an effect on my work. The 'everyday' is what I came home to at night; - the cooking, the laundry, homework, school trips, packed lunches and all the other countless things that provide security and certainty for those in my particular family unit. These 'everyday' things began to appear more and more regularly in my work, bringing a kind of comfort in the 'normalness', the ordinariness of their very existence. I began to realise that although these objects are almost invisible to us as they are such a familiar presence in our lives, they nevertheless have a value that we may not immediately recognise and perhaps they only have meaning for me.



Figure 1. Michelle Crowley, *Untitled*, 2015, Ink on paper. 50cm X 50cm.

Chairs, cups and cutlery feature quite often in my work and it could be surmised that these are indeed everyday objects that make up family life. (Fig 1.) But, I began to realise that for me, these items also convey a much deeper importance. For me, they represent the importance of 'people' in my life, whether that be my core family or the much larger one of extended family and friends. This goes back to my childhood when my grandparents would expect all their children, their wives, husbands and grandchildren home on a Sunday afternoon for tea. No excuse for not being there was accepted. Both my Aunts carried this tradition on when they became mothers and grandmothers so I grew up with Sunday teas that were in turn full of mayhem, noise, laughter, drinks being spilt, children crying because they were overwhelmed and overtired. With hindsight, I am sure that some of the time, some of those present were filled with resentment, annoyance and frustration but I much prefer to recall those days with rose-tinted glasses.

These 'teas' became an important part of my life as a wife and mother. My husband and I, with our children, moved away from our home town many years ago, opportunities have taken us to different parts of the country, so our 'family' has become that of our own making. Friday nights in our home became an 'open house' evening and anyone who was passing was welcome to join us for dinner

and a glass of wine. Friends new and old and now our children are older, their friends have become part of the evening, as well as our family when they visit, gather at our house to connect or reconnect with each other. In this way my memory and the tradition of these 'family' gatherings has been carried on in my own life with a modern twist. These evenings are a way for different generations to socialise together, swapping stories and creating new memories, we discover untold histories and shared experiences that create bonds and strengthen ties amongst our man-made family.

Over the course of my degree I realised that I place great importance on the objects around me, not because I am materialistic but because they remind me of my past, they are a method of remembering. I find it difficult to throw things away because I am throwing memories away in a very real way for me. Postcards, books, an absolutely hideous statue we received as a wedding present from a wonderful Aunt, that was so awful it became a much loved object and we were genuinely sad when it got broken in a house move.

As Wittgenstein says: 'The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something because it is always before one's eyes.)' (Sachs, 2011:47).

These items help define my life and what has happened in it, these constant reminders of what has gone before and what I would like to pass on to my children as a way for them to remember the family and home life they shared growing up. 'Telling stories about the past, our past, is a key moment in the making of ourselves. To the extent that memory provides their raw material, such narratives of identity are shaped as much by what is left out of the account – whether forgotten or repressed – as by what is actually told' (Kuhn, 2002: 2).

Introduction

The Community Quilt

Towards the end of the first year of my undergraduate degree I was thinking more deeply about the variances of family units in this modern age and how our friends, families and communities are still so important to us in the forming of our identity. I had been looking at the history of quilt making as this had traditionally been an occasion for sociability particularly in America,

'At a quilting bee women from the area would bring a quilt tops that were already pieced and work together to quilt the top. The quilting bee afforded the plains women a chance to socialise. Often a quilting bee would be a full day affair with lunch being served to the women who came to help and dinner for all the families. Sometimes there would be a dance in the evening. One of the happier functions of a quilting bee was to help to provide young women with quilts for their hope chests' (Johnson: 2017).

Our 'open house' philosophy became the core idea behind my end of year project. I organised a series of group meetings at my house asking family and friends to come along and bring along other friends if they wished to take part in a workshop. Each participant was given a plain calico square which were all the same size. They then had the opportunity to decorate them in any way and with any medium they chose. The groups ranged in size from two people up to six, we sat in the kitchen with coffee and cake or sometimes wine and crisps and we would create our squares. Some of the

people that took part I already knew, others I didn't. As we sat, absorbed in the task at hand, people offered up stories about their lives that I don't think they would have done if we were just having a conversation, certain walls came down because we were concentrating on making squares but there was also a feeling of camaraderie and the conversation flowed in a shared experience of creating something together.

One lady bought her children and visiting cousins to make pieces because she wanted them to bond over something they had never done before, there followed an afternoon of much laughter and teasing over acres of glue and paint (Fig 2). Another lady, who I did not know very well, suddenly became very upset and told us that her son and daughter-in-law had just got divorced and her daughter-in-law had moved back to her native New Zealand with the children and she had just realised that this would be the first Christmas she wouldn't be spending it with them. I don't think she would have shared this story if we had just been sat together without the focus of the quilt. Also, I don't think she realised that subconsciously she used Christmassy colours on her square which she explained was a picture of a beach hut because she was looking forward to going to visit her grandchildren early in the New Year (Fig. 3).



Figure 2. Niamh O'Hanlon, *Community Quilt*, 2012, paint on calico. 25cm X 25cm.



Figure 3. Eve Boatman, *Community Quilt*, 2012, various material on calico. 25cm X 25cm.

- b. the part of the brain that appears to have this function.
- 2. the sum of everything retained by the mind.
- 3. a particular recollection of an event, person, etc.
- 4. the time over which recollection extends.
- 5. commemoration or remembrance.
- 6. the state of being remembered, as after death.
- 7. Also called: RAM, main store, store a part of a computer in which information is stored for immediate use by the central processing unit.
- 8. the tendency for a material, system etc, to show effects that depend on its past treatment or history
- 9. the ability of the material, etc, to return to a former state after a constraint has been removed

(Collins: 2016)

There are different types of memory, one, semantic memory, which refers to the memory of meanings, concepts and facts. For example, historical dates and remembering names. Another is called episodic memory, recalling events which have happened recently, i.e. what we had for lunch yesterday. Then there are our autobiographical memories, those that retain an importance to us in our lives, moments like our 18th birthday or wedding day.

In her article The Psychological and Social origins of Autobiographical Memory, Katherine Nelson quotes the psychologist Endel Tulving as saying: Remembering past events is a universally familiar experience. It is also a uniquely human one. As far as we know, members of no other species possess quite the same ability to experience again now, in a different situation and perhaps in a different form, happenings from the past, and know that the experience refers to an event that occurred in another time and in another place. Other members of the animal kingdom.....cannot travel back into the past in their own minds (Nelson, 1993: 7).

Although this is a very broad statement as we don't actually know if other species remember in the same way as we do, the ability to travel back in time in our minds is a gift that we have.

In her book The Memory Illusion: Remembering, Forgetting, and the Science of False Memory, Dr Julia Shaw states: 'Our personal memories help us understand our life trajectories' (Shaw: xi).

And she goes on to say:

'More generally, memories form the bedrock of our identities. They shape what we think we have experienced and, as such, what we believe we are capable of in the future. Because of this, if we begin to call our memory into question we are also forced to question the very foundations of who we are.' (Shaw: xi).

It is the development of our long term memory that allows us to store our memories, this type of memory is present in babies but in a limited and very immature manner. From early childhood our long term memory begins to mature and carries on maturing until we reach around the age of 25.

This is why our childhood memories can become so easily distorted and unreliable. In a study, Kathryn Braun from Harvard Business School asked a team of participants who had previously been to a Disney resort when they were children to read an advert about this particular resort. In the advert they were led to believe that they would have shaken hands with Bugs Bunny. Afterwards some of them could recall quite clearly the memory of shaking his hand, but as Bugs Bunny is a Warner Bros character he would never have been at a Disney resort. 'It seems that even something as subtle as brief exposure to advertising can manipulate our precious childhood recollections.' (Shaw: Location 429)

We also rely heavily on memory as a means of interpreting the world around us. Our perceptions are influenced by what we already know about the world. This also to some extent colours our views on future and new experiences. For example, if we have had a very good or bad experience with a dog this will influence our reactions to a dog in the future.

'We almost never just interpret an object in isolation, but instead bring memory into our interpretation of the world. When we look at a flower we don't just see colours and shapes, we also know that we are seeing part of a plant, that it is part of a plant known as a 'flower', and that we should probably not eat it.....' This ability to interpret relatively basic information and make sense of it is surprisingly complex and memory-reliant.' (Shaw: Location 598)

In his studies on autobiographical memory Martin Conway believes that, 'autobiographical memory is highly structured and that within this structure there is no specific type of knowledge which can easily be singled out as being a memory. Rather, memories are compilations, constructions, or compositions of knowledge.' (Conway: 104)

He goes on to say that autobiographical memory is made up of three layers of knowledge. The first being lifetime periods, i.e. when you were at school, when you lived with a certain person etc, these generally represent years and sometimes decades in a person's life. The second is general events, these have a time span of days, weeks and months, so could include learning to drive or first time experiences and lastly event-specific knowledge spanning periods of seconds, minutes or hours. When all three layers work together we recall a specific incident. (Conway:109) This concept of memories being made up of different layers or fragments of recollection reflects in my own work on memory as my prints and paintings are a coalescence of images.

In a different paper, 'Memory and Desire – Reading Freud', Martin Conway discusses the emergence of memories and why they give us pause for thought, he says: 'It is significant because memories are an intrinsic part of us – they are the database of the content of the self. They ground it in a remembered reality that constrains what the self can be now and in the future, and what it could possibly have been in the past. Because of this, memories are not some sort of mental wallpaper that merely provide a backdrop for the self. They are alive, free, sometimes alien, occasionally dangerous, mental representations that can overwhelm as easily as they fulfil' (Conway: 548).

And, although Freud recognised that some childhood memories were unreliable he also recognised that these memories can still be useful in that they 'confirm important parts of one's own personal myth. They are also a resource of self that underpin current desirable self-images and which motivate goal-completion in the present.' (Conway: 549)

Whilst I was researching the workings of autobiographical memory I came across some studies that were investigating whether men and women remember things differently. And, although some

studies found that indeed there did seem to be differences, these studies weren't broad enough to really make this a statement of fact. Agneta Herlitz and Jenny Rehnman conducted one of these studies and discovered specific results indicated that women excelled in verbal episodic memory tasks, such as remembering words, objects, pictures or everyday events and men outperformed women in remembering symbolic, non-linguistic information, known as visuospatial processing. For example, the results indicate a man would be more likely to remember his way out of the woods (Herlitz, Rehnman).

In other words it would appear that men see a bigger picture, they remember symbols, signs more easily so if a man got lost in a town he hadn't been to before he would find his way around much quicker than a woman, but, it would seem from these results that a woman pays more attention to the detail of daily life so would be more likely to remember where the keys are or where a pair of scissors might be found. This concept resonates with me as the everyday things that surround me act as visual memories. The bowl on the window sill waiting to be returned to a neighbour who gave us some homemade chutney at Christmas, a completely useless letter Y that a different neighbour found on the street and decided should belong to us all become entwined with the events and people that shape our lives.

For most of us the act of remembering references episodes that we have experienced and we rely on the truth of these memories to guide our decision making. But for some people, if the area in the brain that stores our memories, the hippocampus, becomes damaged then our perception can change accordingly.

When we recall something it is as a memory not a state of consciousness. We recognise that it is something that has happened in the past, 'but in the case of certain psychological illnesses, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, the intense flashbacks to moments of trauma (often referred to as 'reliving') do seem to have the character of reconstruction. Possibly the imagery experienced in other forms of mental illness, schizophrenia, for example, might also reinstate earlier states of consciousness but in a dysfunctional way in that the imagery is not consciously experienced as being part of a memory.' (Conway: 550)

Oliver Sachs, a neurologist has written a book entitled, 'The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat'. The book details the plights of patients he has treated who in various ways have become brain damaged and this damage has affected their perception of the world around them. The man for whom the book is titled became unable to recognise everyday objects, he described a glove as a container for something and a rose was described as 'About six inches in length,.....A convoluted red form with a linear green attachment.' (Sachs: 15). He describes a man whose memory stops in 1945 and he is still convinced that this is the year even though it is actually 1975. Both become extremely agitated and distressed when their mistakes are pointed out to them. They realise that there is something wrong but they have no power to correct it.

Later in the book he quotes the famous Spanish film maker Luis Bunuel talking about his fear of Alzheimer's disease, 'You have to begin to lose your memory, if only in bits and pieces, to realise that memory is what makes our lives. Life without memory is no life at all.....Our memory is our coherence, our reason, our feeling, even our action. Without it, we are nothing.....(I can only wait for the final amnesia, the one that can erase an entire life, as it did my mother's...)' (Sachs: 25)

Our memory and memories are the essence of our own self-knowledge. The decisions we make and the responses we give are all informed by our past experiences, so to lose our memory is to lose our

ego or self. The importance of our 'everyday' surroundings is highly relevant to our use of memory. An old bus ticket tucked in a drawer reminds us of a trip we made, most pieces of jewellery, inexpensive or not, usually have some story attached to the buying or gifting of the piece that reminds us of an event and these memory holders are what we pass down to our descendants because at some point whatever their monetary value they were precious.

Memory and Literature

Probably one of the most famous pieces of writing concerning memory is that of Marcel Proust in 'In Search of Lost Time'. In one of the passages he describes a moment, in a café, when he takes a bite of cake and a sip of tea and is immediately transported back to his childhood. It is the combination of both that jolt the memory of a long forgotten moment.

'And once I had recognized the taste of the crumb of madeleine soaked in her decoction of lime-flowers which my aunt used to give me (although I did not yet know and must long postpone the discovery of why this memory made me so happy) immediately the old grey house upon the street, where her room was, rose up like the scenery of a theatre to attach itself to the little pavilion, opening on to the garden, which had been built out behind it for my parents (the isolated panel which until that moment had been all that I could see); and with the house the town, from morning to night and in all weathers, the Square where I was sent before luncheon, the streets along which I used to run errands, the country roads we took when it was fine.....the good folk of the village and their little dwellings and the parish church and the whole of Combray and of its surroundings, taking their proper shapes and growing solid, sprang into being, town and gardens alike, from my cup of tea' (Proust: 48).

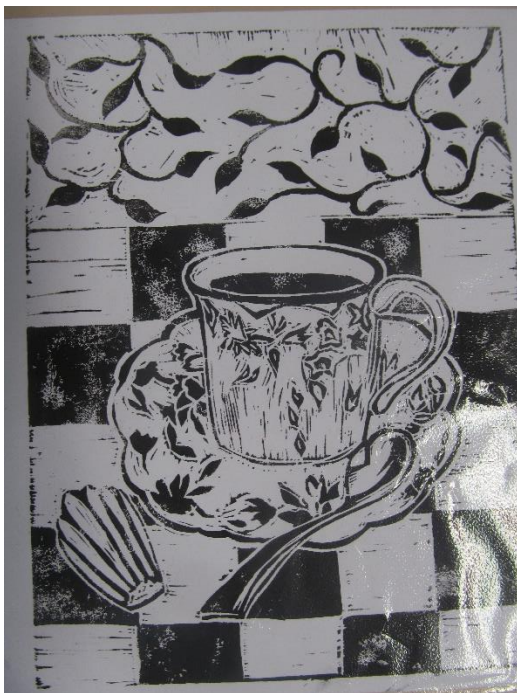


Fig 5. Michelle Crowley, *Tea and Cake*, 2015, ink on paper. 15cm X 20cm.

I think we have all experienced moments like this, where a taste, smell or piece of music remind us instantly of another time and place. For me, this passage resonates because it is the combination of two seemingly innocuous, 'everyday' items that when placed together call forth such a powerful recollection. It was this passage, in fact, that inspired one of my first pieces of work concerning

memory (Fig 5). It was also the moment when I realised that moving forward with my work I wanted to explore this area more thoroughly.

Alongside this, I also read *Camera Lucida* by Roland Barthes. What intrigued me about this book was Barthes search for the essence of his deceased mother. He is sorting through hundreds of family photographs and although he recognises the face of his mother as being her, he can't find a photograph that expresses her personality, that elusive trait that made her 'his' mother. In talking about one of the photographs he says, 'whereas, contemplating a photograph in which she is hugging me, a child, against her, I can waken in myself the rumpled softness of her Crepe de Chine and the perfume of her rice powder.' (Barthes: 65). But this, although a memory of her, doesn't define her in the way he wishes it to. He goes on to say, 'I never recognised her except in fragments,' (Barthes: 65). It is only later that he finds a very old photograph of his mother at around the age of five that he finds exactly what he has been searching for, 'I studied the little girl and at last rediscovered my mother.....In this little girl's image I saw the kindness which had formed her being immediately and forever,' (Barthes: 69). There are two things that I find extremely interesting about this, one, that the photograph which eventually reveals the 'essence' of his mother is taken many years before he was born so he would not have known or remembered her at this time, yet it is this photograph amongst all the others that releases the 'fragment' he has been searching for. Secondly, although there are quite a few photographs in the book we are not shown the photograph of his mother. We only have his words to say that the photograph actually exists.

In my own work, I rely on my own ability to remember my childhood, the smells, sounds and tastes. The little things that when combined together have influenced the person I have become. But, as Roland Barthes says I only remember fragments, snippets of information, not complete vivid scenes that replay like a film. I also only have my own certainty that what I am remembering is a true memory and not a false memory or something I have been told and over time turned into something that I am convinced that I can remember as a true memory. When I try to remember a specific incident I rarely picture a scene in its photographic form, more a glimpse of colour or the light. I went for a walk across fields near us yesterday with my husband. When I think about it now I can see the sleeve of his jumper, his right trainer, rutted mud filled with water, feeling colder than I thought I would, so perhaps there was a weak sun in the sky and a telegraph pole and although I know exactly where I walked these few ordinary images are what I remember most clearly.

This disjointed recollection of events reminds me of Tracey Emin's book *Strangeland*. Although this is a memoir of sorts, it doesn't read in a way you would expect. We are taken through a series of chapters recalling events from her childhood and adult life but they seem to be in no apparent order, chapters based on reality are intermingled with chapters describing dreams she has had. This gives the book a dream like quality. The front cover has a subtitle which reflects my own feelings toward memory, 'The jagged recollections of a beautiful mind.' The word jagged invoking feelings of cracks and brokenness, of a distortion to the incidents being described. (Emin: Front Cover)

Philip Larkin also addresses the theme of memory in the poem *Reference Back*. It is a short poem reflecting on his early adulthood and an interaction at home with his mother. In just a few sentences he gives us a glimpse into a memory of his home and his dissatisfaction but he also recognises that it straddles a length of time enabling him to go back and revisit it.

That was a pretty one, I heard you call
from the unsatisfactory hall
to the unsatisfactory room where I

played record after record, idly,
wasting my time at home, that you
looked so much forward to.

Olivers Riverside Blues, it was. And now
I shall, I suppose, always remember how
the flock of notes those antique negroes blew
out of Chicago air into
a huge remembering pre-electric horn
the year after I was born
three decades later made this sudden bridge
from your unsatisfactory age
to my unsatisfactory prime.

Truly, though our element is time,
we're not suited to the long perspectives
open at each instant of our lives.
They link us to our losses: worse,
they show what we have as it once was.
Blindly undiminished, just as though
By acting differently we could have kept it so.

Philip Larkin

This poem gives us a brief insight into a memory of an ordinary moment in an ordinary home. A young man bored and restless, itching to start his life, a mother happy to see and connect with her son, the separation of them both being in two different rooms but joining together over a shared interest in music. There is nothing that marks this as a thrilling or exciting memory yet through this one brief description we can picture a home, a family and the life therein.

Another book that I found immensely interesting was 'The Comfort of Things'. The author Daniel Miller, an anthropologist, selected thirty people out of one hundred individuals, all from the same street in London and he and his assistant, Fiona Parrott, studied them and their homes over a period of seventeen months. He says:

‘We live today in a world of ever more stuff – what sometimes seems a deluge of goods and shopping. We tend to assume that this has two results: that we are more superficial, and that we are more materialistic, our relationships to things coming at the expense of our relationships to people.....By the time you finish this book you will discover that, in many ways, the opposite is true; that possessions often remain profound and usually the closer our relationships are with objects, the closer our relationships are with people.’ (Miller: 1)

They first meet a man called George. He grew up with extremely strict parents who governed his every move, he left school when his parents told him to and joined the army, a decision his parents made, and on leaving the army he got a job as a clerk. He moved into a YMCA and then a series of hostels to be nearer to his job. He never married and had no siblings, at the age of seventy-six he found himself living alone for the first time in his life. On entering his flat Daniel Miller says: ‘George’s flat was disorienting not because of anything that was in it, but precisely because it contained nothing at all, beyond the most basic carpet and furniture.’ (Miller: 8) From all the years of living under other people’s authority and their rules he had accrued hardly any personal memorabilia at all. Miller goes on to say: ‘Even a space this empty wouldn’t have felt quite so disturbing if it had become filled with the presence of the man. His stories, his attachments and relationships would have re-populated the space.’ (Miller: 9). But George had no friends or family and only a few acquaintances from a local old age pensioners group, he spent Christmas alone as he has every year since the last hostel he lived in closed down. Daniel Miller goes on to say that even had he the confidence in his own ability or the psychological strength to take objects and images to decorate his flat it would still be empty because he is empty in himself. He finishes by saying, ‘.....one simply couldn’t escape the conclusion that this was a man, more or less waiting for his time on earth to be over, but who at age of seventy-six had never yet seen his life actually begin. And, worse still, he knew it.’ When George passes away the only record of his existence will be his birth and death certificate which seems to me, both horrific and infinitely sad (Miller: 17).

This lonely picture of a man contrasts greatly with the next couple that they discover. They meet Mr and Mrs Clarke just before Christmas, their house has ornaments, lights, small wrapped presents hung from the ceiling all of which have a number attached denoting who the present is for, there are decorations everywhere and on every surface, no plastic baubles or tacky decorations, all bought with thought and care over their many years together or inherited from their own relatives. Over the Christmas period they will host lunches and dinners for their five children, ten grandchildren and numerous friends and neighbours. The decorations are merely a backdrop to the opportunity for being sociable and more importantly appreciating one another. Each member of the families achievements over the year are revisited and discussed and praised, no one is more important than anyone else. Miller goes on to say that the next year they arrive to interview the Clarks on the day they are decorating the Christmas tree and are allowed to hang some of the decorations themselves. Miller says: Although Jewish, I was brought up with a full English Christmas; to be granted back my own eight-year-old self so unexpectedly and effectively, in the middle of the field work, was sheer delight.’ (Miller: 23) As with the Proust cake and tea moment, this man, through this one, very seemingly mundane activity was transported back to his childhood self.

Each of their five children has been allocated a colour and they are encouraged to put coloured stickers on anything in the home that they would like when their parents have passed away. They aren’t allowed to be serious about this, they are encouraged to joke around but it also retains a sense of fairness when someone explains exactly why they would like to inherit a certain object. Miller says: ‘They can also express their desire for particular objects such as a canteen of cutlery, in such a manner that it enhances rather than sidelines the care for persons, inseparable from those

attachments. This was the Clarkes' way of making a will. Instead of a ponderous sharing out of assets, it was a fun recalling of things which had, over the years, become evocative and therefore valuable to each specific person.' (Miller: 30).

This attitude towards their possessions is very similar to that of my own, it isn't about the monetary value but about the memories associated with the piece that gives something its value. It is usually the simplest of items that retain an importance for us rather than big flashy expensive items.

Another book dealing with the collecting of things is 'Important Artifacts and Personal Property from the Collection of Lenore Doolan and Harold Morris, including Books, Street Fashion and Jewelry.' By Leanne Shapton. Lenore and Harold have been a couple living together for a number of years. When they separate they decide that rather than split the contents of their lives neatly down the middle they will take the contents of their shared home in its entirety and sell it all at an auction. The book itself is actually the auction catalogue and everything they own has been divided into lots to be auctioned off. It contains, photographs, letters, a hand-made Valentine's CD, sun-glasses, ashtrays, a collection of business cards, anything that makes up a home and it is this attention to detail that I find so compelling about the piece. Although fictitious, I am interested in the fact that the 'couple' involved are now so separate and want to sever their union so completely that they are willing to sever the relationship with the objects they shared together as well. If everything were to sell at auction there would be nothing left of their lives together, not the smallest of keepsakes as a reminder of a once shared history, it would be as if the relationship had truly never happened. There is a violence in this response that I find both disturbing and formidable.

Artists working with Memory.

The artist, Louise Bourgeois has been a great influence on me. Much of her work focusses on an unhappy childhood and coming to terms with this and the way she related to both her mother and father. Her father moved his mistress into the family home under the guise of a governess when she was around twelve. I particularly like Red Room (Parents) (Fig. 5) and Red Room (Child) (Fig 6). In both we are given glimpses into two rooms, one of the parent, one of the child.



Figure 6. Louise Bourgeois, *Red Room Parents (detail)*, 1994, wood, metal, rubber, fabric, glass and mirror. 247.7cm X 426.7cm X 424.2cm.

‘Peeping through gaps one is immediately forced into the position of voyeur trying to see and make sense of the glimpses of scarlet red and bright blue from the objects set up inside’ (Coxon: 2010).



Figure 7. Louise Bourgeois, *Red Room Child (detail)*, 1994, mixed media. 83" X 139" X 108".

Both these pieces are closed off rooms filled with objects, some seemingly innocuous and others more sinister. In this instance, we are allowed access to her memories but only under certain conditions, conditions that are controlled by the artist. We can see a lot but we are not allowed complete freedom to roam amongst the pieces on show. There is also an ambiguity as to whether we can actually see everything that is contained in the cell. Are the cupboards full of more memorabilia that we will never know about?

Louise Bourgeois also used fabric and textiles throughout her career. Her piece titled ‘Ode a l’oubli’, is a book made from cloth and fabric that she already owned and decorated with applique and embroidery throughout. It is a reference to her childhood growing up in a tapestry workshop but for me it also embodies the ‘stitching’ together of different elements and the domesticity of the act, the homeliness and motherliness of using textiles found to hand to create something new. Each page of the book has been crafted with great care and attention but she also used pieces of material that were stained or had holes in them, celebrating the wear and tear of the fabric rather than rendering it useless. ‘Sewing is a way of drawing things together, of repairing or even ‘embroidering’ the past in glorious colour and detail’ (Coxon: 85). The ‘Community Quilt’ from my first year I feel has these similar elements. Louise Bourgeois said about the piece:

‘What disconcerts me are the holes in my memory, those of continuities. The coming back from the war and the Spanish influenza, Jerk....There are holes in my memory, its continuity doesn’t pay off, it’s moth-eaten. Retrace your steps. My memory is moth-eaten, full of holes.’ (Coxon: 85).

This comment appeals to me because as I have said before this is how our memories work. We don't remember the entirety, but flashes, a colour, a sound, the glimpse of some part of something but not the whole. Like a dream where we bounce from scene to scene but when we wake up it all makes perfect sense.

Louise Bourgeois, although influenced by her own childhood was also influenced by her daily life and her role as a mother, alongside that of being an artist, particularly in her early paintings. I too, am influenced by my daily life and routine because outside of my practice I am a mother and wife and have a family and home to organise and care for and this inevitably will play a part in the work I make. In her painting *'Little Boys: No More Food after 4.00'* we can see how her daily routine has been utilised and translated into art.

'A woman making artwork about her lived reality and domestic life may not seem unusual from a contemporary perspective, but in the mid-1940s there was no major legacy of feminist art practice upon which to draw. In their representation of the physical and psychological pressures of domestic life, Bourgeois's paintings made a radical move, one that enables others to follow her lead, to find ways of presenting, discussing, questioning or validating their experience as women artists.' (Coxon: 2010)

Louise Bourgeois uses art as the medium to explore and come to terms with a painful past:

'It is the attitude of the poet who never finds the lost heaven and it is really the situation of artists who work for a reason that nobody can quite grasp.' (Gibbons: 17)

She opened a door for women artists to generate work that allowed them to integrate these daily events into it. We shouldn't have to feel less of an artist because we have these domesticated lives outside of our art practice but to hold this up as a viable and important reflection of our place in society and the world today. We all have 'to do' lists and mundane jobs that need to be attended to when we would much rather be doing something enjoyable, but it is the very tediousness of these things that enable us to appreciate the more satisfactory aspects of our lives and as such shouldn't have to be hidden away. Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock broach this subject in the book *Old Mistresses, Women, Art and Ideology*, and discusses the way in which women artists have been undervalued in the history of art. They state:

'This division of so-called 'fine art' extends to the distinction between art and craft. Women's practice in the forms of art using needle and thread have been dismissed as painstaking and merely dextrous, while great art is defined as intellectually testing and truly inventive, qualities that are only exercised by men. These differences have been misrepresented to us as a hierarchical division between great art and lesser decorative crafts' (Coxon: 77).

Another artist whose work I greatly admire and who uses memory in a similar way to Louise Bourgeois is Tracey Emin. Again, she has used events from her childhood and early adult life as a means of expression and as a tool to investigate the feelings that she has from this time, again, similarly to Louise Bourgeois she has used embroidery and applique as a means of conveying this. In the piece, *'All the People I Have Ever Slept With'* she records the names of literally, all the people she has ever slept with inside a tent, using applique. At first glance this could seem quite provocative but as we read through the names we realise that the list includes the names of her mother, brother and friends as well as those of a sexual nature. I would imagine that for her, these memories, are in turn comforting, emotional and hurtful. She is allowing us full access to the intimate memories of her life. In the piece *'My Bed'* (Fig. 7) we see an unmade bed with soiled sheets, knickers and condoms. We

are being presented with the aftermath of a particularly painful period in her life but in a familiar and domestic way.

‘Moreover, in selecting forms from popular culture in this way, Emin uses a method of representation that parallels the way that memories themselves are frequently mediated and reshaped using images and forms that are familiar and readily available in the wider culture.’ (Gibbons: 21)



Figure 8. Tracey Emin, *My Bed*, 1998, Mattress, Linens, pillows, objects. 79cm X 211cm X 234cm.

Louise Bourgeois in her pieces lets us see glimpses and hints of what has gone before but she controls what and how much we can access about the work and we are left wondering if there are still secrets being kept from us, whereas, Tracey Emin seems to lay bare every detail of her memories, hiding nothing, allowing us complete access to her emotions.

Another artist working around memory and the everyday is Felix Torres-Gonzalez. He was an artist who was openly homosexual in America in the 1980s, he knew that there were certain sections of society that were ready to vilify him if he chose to show any work that could be construed as offensive in any way. Much of his work centres around his relationship with his partner and his subsequent death in 1991. For example, *'Untitled' (Perfect Lovers)* 1991 (Fig. 8), is two ordinary 'every-day' clocks hung side by side as closely together as possible and keeping perfect time with each other, symbolising the closeness of their relationship, their hearts beating together and *'Untitled' (Loverboys)* 1991 which consists of 355 pounds of cellophane wrapped sweets laid out in a gallery. This being the combined weight of his partner and himself. He also completed a series of billboards, one of which depicted a recently vacated bed still showing the indents of two heads on the pillow. This is his own bed and the indents are that of himself and his partner. Gender has been removed from these pieces of work and by doing so they become universally accessible. All the aforementioned works could refer to a gay couple, a straight couple, a parent and child. I think that as with Roland Barthes search for the essence of his mother, Torres-Gonzalez has given us the absolute 'essence' of love. He also ensured that these pieces that were so important for him couldn't be held up for judgement in a sleazy way. He says, 'Two clocks side by side are much more

threatening for the powers that be than an image of two guys sucking each others dicks, because they cannot use me as a rallying point in their battle to erase meaning.' (Gibbon: 27).



Figure 9. Felix Torrez Gonzalez, 'Untitled' (*Perfect Lovers*), 1991, clocks on wall. 35.6cm X 71.2cm X 7cm.

It is not always easy to create work around your own memory because of its very nature it can be painful and it is always personal. As Leigh Gilmore writes in her book *'The Limits of Autobiography; Trauma and Testimony'*, self-representation is constantly burdened by 'its public charge to disclose a private truth,' (Gibbons: 22).

Although these three artists inspire and influence me with their work there are other artists who are also working around the concepts of memory and memories. In contrast to the artists mentioned above, there are artists who are presenting us with the memories of others. Jeremy Deller and Alan Kane travelled around the country collecting a 'folk archive' of the strange pursuits and pastimes that we celebrate in Britain, from gurning to barrel rolling. In some cases the reason for enacting these pursuits each year has been lost in time but the tradition of the event carries on year after year. I like this use of memory as a tool, as a means of passing information down through the generations. Before modern technology if we wanted something to be remembered one way of ensuring this was to create a series of rituals around an act that would hopefully continue on even after the original creators had gone. Much like a church service where the same ritual is carried out every Sunday, there is a comfort and familiarity in these rituals and a connection between those that have come before and those that will come after.

Doris Salcedo, a Colombian artist, has also travelled the countryside forging relationships with people but for entirely different reasons. People in Colombia can just disappear without trace. This is even more terrifying because it could be a kidnapping by drug barons or it could be by the government. But in both cases it is buying the silence of the victim or of the victim's family.

'Seeking out direct accounts, or obtaining physical evidence from victims of their relatives and friends, she becomes what she calls a 'secondary-witness' (Grynsztejn: 1).

In '*Atrabiliarios*' 1991-6, (Fig 9.) she has inserted shoes into cavities in the wall, which are then obscured by layers of animal fibre stitched over the openings with surgical thread.

These shoes all belonged to people who have disappeared and were donated by their families. In some instances they were the only means of identification left. This is using memory on many different levels. We have the memory of the person who has disappeared, we have an item that belonged to them, a piece of memorabilia as such, then there is the actual imprint left by the person who wore them, the memory or trace of their actual physical presence.

'The direct imprint of the wearer in each shoe harbours an accumulative trace of that person, and, for those left behind, a presence of the missing person. In other words, memories are quite literally connected to the reality of the person.' (Gibbons: 59).

The use of every-day objects here evokes feelings of anger, horror, grief, loss and vulnerability and also brings the plight of these people to the attention of the world in a way that we can emotionally and immediately connect with. It is also reminiscent of the aftermath of the Nazi camps.

Doris Salcedo said about the work: 'My work speaks of the continuation of life, a life disfigured, as Derrida would say. Memory must work between the figure of the one who has died and the one disfigured by death.' (Gibbons: 59).



Figure 10. Doris Salcedo, *Atrabiliarios*, 1992-1997, timber, gyproc, cow bladder, shoes and surgical thread. Installation dimensions vary.

My Practice and its Development

The realisation of the importance of objects as symbols in my work provided me with a greater insight into the process that is necessary for me to make work. When I begin a project my head is filled with thoughts, images and colours. Through a process of sketching, stitching and printmaking I make a series of preparatory images, some of which will be developed into a final piece, it is at this stage that I begin to decide what feels relevant to a particular canvas I will be working towards. With my first year project, the quilt, the choice of what was to be included in the final piece was taken out of my hands and as I have described previously, although I enjoyed the act of joining together the work of other people, I realised that I much prefer to be in control of the decision making myself and that for me being 'hands on' is an important part of my process (Fig. 10).



Figure 11. Michelle Crowley, *Untitled*, 2015, ink and acrylic. 20.5cm X 14.5cm.

At the end of the second year of my degree I had been experimenting with printing and had already been using this as a method of squeezing out initial ideas and images. It was whilst making a large lino print that I realised that this method of mark making allows me to relax into the process and start to resolve any issues I may be feeling about a piece of work. It was at this point I discovered printmaker Sandy Sykes (Fig. 11).

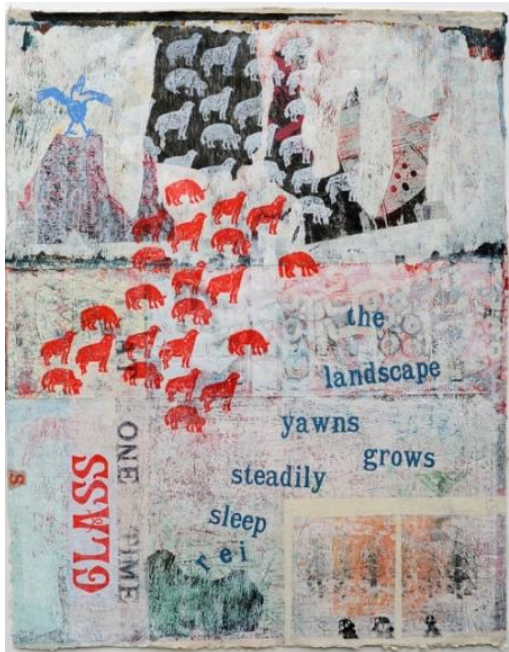


Figure 12. Sandy Sykes, *The landscape yawns (The Flying Itself series)*, 2013, woodcut. 105 x 80 cms

The landscape yawns (The Flying Itself series) is a mixed media and wood cut piece, I am interested in the way she layers and collages papers and her use of text, some of which seems randomly placed whilst other parts read as sentences. The colouring is often subtle with bursts of bright colours and images are often repeated through various pieces of work. I think her prints have a fairy tale quality to them which remind me of my own. And, again, it is this process of building up layers in different ways and the repeated use of certain images that inspires me in my own practice.

I also find the work of textile artist Tilleke Schwarz inspiring (Fig. 12), I think there are similarities between her work and that of Sandy Sykes, and both feel like they are telling a story without there being a direct narrative. Although I rarely use text in finished pieces it often appears in my preparatory work and I think this may be an area that should be explored further in my ongoing practice.



Figure 13. Tilleke Schwarz, *Bye Bye July (Detail)*, 2016, embroidery thread on material. Average 60cm X 70cm.

As I entered the final year of my degree I knew that memories and the way we recall them had become of particular interest to me. I began trying to recall memories of my grandfather who died when I was three. There were certain instances, not many, that I could visualise clearly, but I couldn't remember his face. I remembered his hands, him laughing and him being with me in the garden but I couldn't remember his face and sadly we have no photographs of him anymore. The most clear memories I have of him include sunshine, being in the garden, his silhouette, his shadow, me looking through a garden fence and hearing him laughing behind me, I knew the final piece would reflect the colours of a garden in the summer. I also recognised the fact that though I was adamant these memories were real I also couldn't rule out the possibility of having created these memories from anecdotes I had heard about him. I spent the first few months of my third year exploring printmaking and textile pieces with images that were all connected to him in some way and once again, by the time I was thinking seriously about the end of year exhibition, images that had been teeming around in my head began to consolidate into a much clearer picture of what I wanted to include in the final pieces (Fig. 13).



Figure 14. Michelle Crowley, *Untitled*, 2015, oil paint, paper, ink on canvas. 40" X 50".

As mentioned previously, I had read Camera Lucida and the excerpt from Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* and that these two writings had become a huge influence on how I was thinking about memory. I didn't want or need to paint realistic portrayals of people or places as for me a photograph can show these things. Rather I wanted to show my own emotions connected with the subject matter. I could show someone a picture of my grandfather and as the viewer you would be able to see that it was a man who, in all likelihood was a grandfather but what it would have difficulty in showing you would be his love of tea and his love of the garden, his passion for the piano, his patience and his tenderness and it was these parts of his personality that I preferred to focus on.

This concept led the way for my M.A. Exhibition. At the start of the year I looked back through my work from the previous three years and certain themes that I seemed to return to quite often began to emerge. Printmaking and embroidery of some sort are apparent in work from each year. I like the slowness of these processes, the thought behind each mark. For me as a woman and a mother, there is a deliberation and tenderness involved in making printing plates and sewn items that is reminiscent of home making and traditional values, things that I have realised have a real importance in my life. I would not consider myself to be nostalgic or sentimental but I do gain a certain satisfaction and comfort from the familiar. I am drawn to 'community' and how we interact with the friends and family we are surrounded by. We all want to feel needed and valued and that we have a place that we belong to in this world and part of that is knowing where we have come from and passing that down to the next generation (Fig. 14).

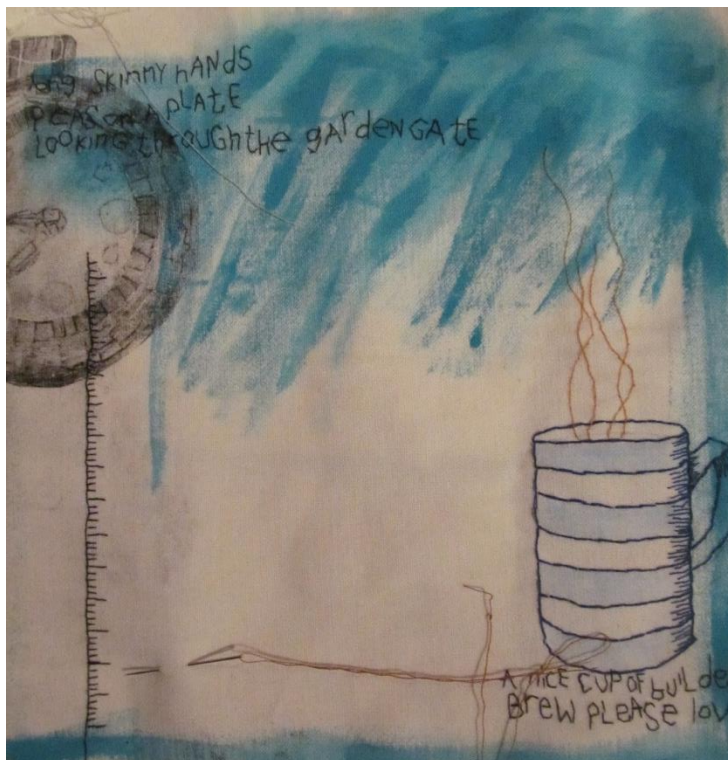


Figure 15. Michelle Crowley, *Untitled*, 2015, acrylic paint, thread on calico. 30cm X 30cm.

I had been looking at the work of Rose Wiley, I like the scale of her work and the seeming simplicity and boldness of her paintings (Fig. 16). She often uses images of the everyday in her work too. Married for many years to Roy Oxlade, at that time a more successful artist she says, '[Roy] was the dominant artist, certainly, because I was the mother, wife and cook' (Sooke: 1) In an interview with Alistair Sooke he asks if she ever felt she had made a huge sacrifice in putting a hold on her work for many years whilst she raised a family and her response was:

'That's such a crappy question' 'People like to think that I was frustrated – that the male element was working and that must have made me jealous or angry' 'I think children are important, relationships are important, life is important' (Sooke: 1).

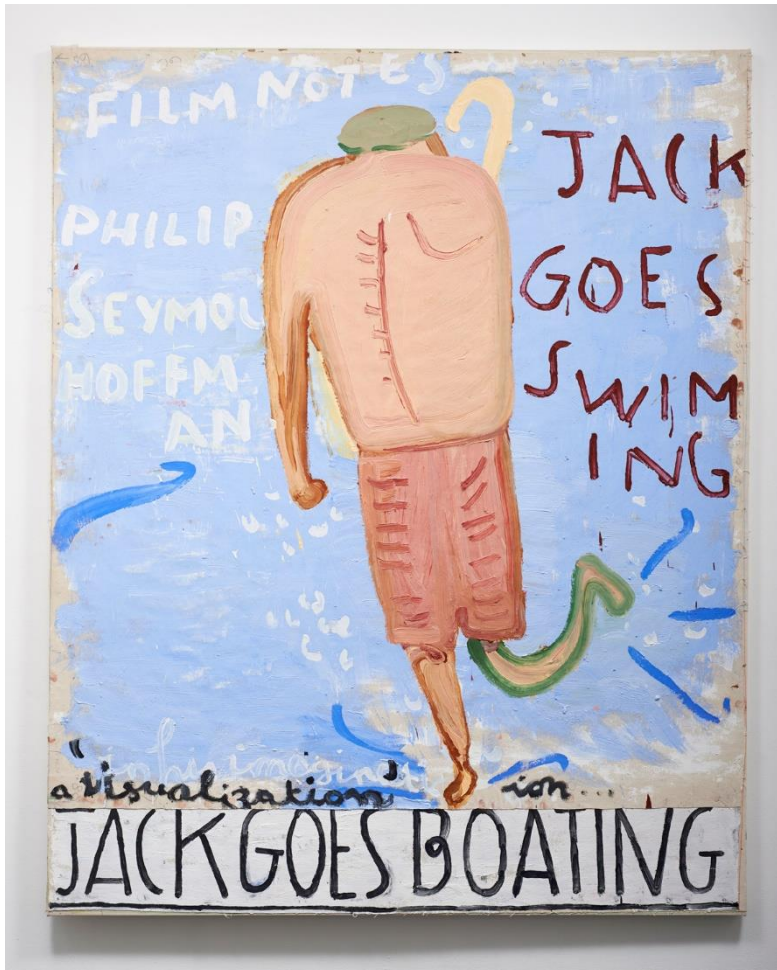


Figure 16. Rose Wiley, *Jack goes Swimming*, 2013, oil on canvas. 207cm X 168cm.

In a manner reminiscent of Louise Bourgeois Rose Wiley doesn't shy away from the value and richness evocative in the seemingly ordinary of our daily lives.

Alongside Rose Wiley I had also begun looking at paintings by the artist Squeak Carnwath. There are often images repeated throughout her work and she too likes to use text. She also utilises the everyday in her work to express emotion. In the foreword to the book *Lists, Observations and Counting* Leah Levy writes:

'In its exploration, Carnwath's art emphasizes the way our lives are organized in and about daily minutia that tend to echo a broader envisioning of space and time. The particular and the generalized, the personal and the universal are equal in importance in her work' (Levy: foreword).

Both these artists and their style of painting began to influence my work, I knew I wanted to make work on bigger canvasses and be bolder in the execution of the work. Previously I had used printmaking as a tool to focus and sift through various options but I began to combine the prints I was making with the oil on the canvas and experiment with layering different papers as the work progressed.

As the exhibition approached I recognised that the symbols and colours I was using in different pieces of work were sometimes unconsciously emerging from a place of remembrance and finding what I considered to be the true essence of my grandfather. Equally, I acknowledged that I felt no

real desire to decipher why certain symbols were important but rather to just accept that in this instance they were.

Karen Tsujimoto talks about the use of symbols in Squeak Carnwath's work and states, 'The lack of interpretation of Carnwath's iconography is due, in part, to the artist's own reticence to identify 'things',' (Tsujimoto and Yau: 11).

I feel the same way about my own practice, I don't need to identify the importance of lack of importance of every small thing, I feel I have already addressed those questions in my preparatory work, I am more interested in the finished painting as a sum of all its parts rather than the parts that form it.

For my final exhibition I decided to show two oil paintings, both centred around memories of my grandmother. Both pieces I feel are stronger than my third year piece and I think that reflects my growing confidence in what I have to say. The first reflects the home of my grandmother and the warmth I always felt when I was there and the second, though still of my grandmother also embodies the times in which we lived. The colours in the second are harsher and applied with more boldness than the first, it was the 1970s in England and there was unrest across the country, strikes and worries about employment dominated the tabloid headlines. Technology was moving on with colour television and more television programmes aimed at teenagers, punk rock made its debut encouraging people not to accept the status quo. There was a feeling of discord and hope for change in equal measure. I also decided to show a smaller piece that had arisen from a doodle I made on an envelope while my attention was focussed on a conversation I had been having. It was so different to my usual style of drawing that I felt it would be worthwhile exploring the image further and it became a small oil painting (Fig. 16).

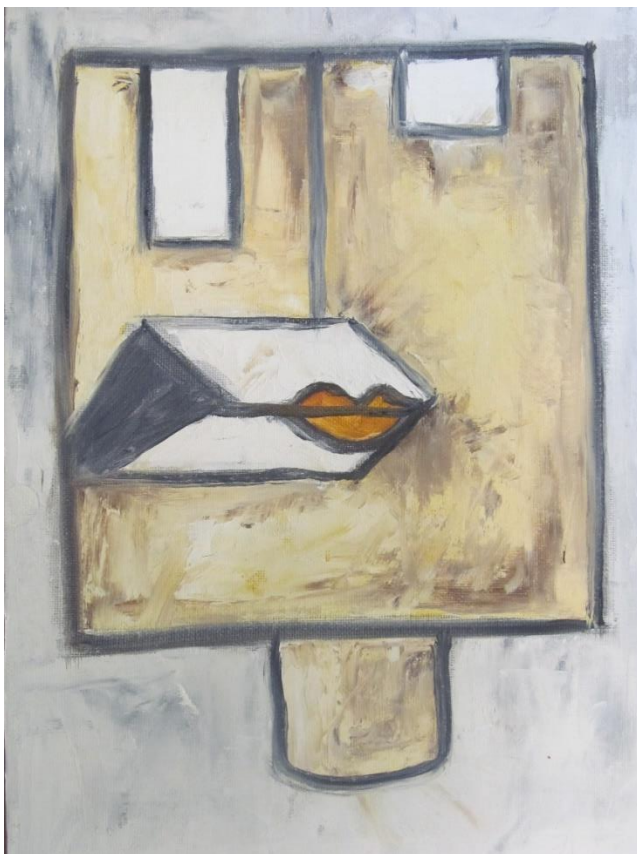


Figure 17. Michelle Crowley, *Untitled*, 2016, oil on canvas board. 25cm X 35cm.

I hung the two larger canvasses on the back wall and the smaller piece on the side wall of my space. I felt the three worked very well together and although the smaller piece was quite different I still felt that together they created an interesting unity. My space was changed at the last minute because the organising committee felt the work wasn't being shown to its best advantage and the light would be better in a different space. Although the new space was exactly the same size as my first there was something about the space, the whereabouts of the space, the light or a combination of all three that didn't gel together as well as in the previous space so I decided I would only show the two larger canvasses. They worked well together but I still felt that the three pieces had a more intriguing connection and something was lost by only showing two, which I found greatly disappointing, I had spent a long time preparing the first space, making sure it was painted well and any holes or blemishes were filled in and there was no time left to put the same effort into the second space as initially it was going to be used for food and drink so had only been given a cursory going over. I think this created a disconnect with how I felt about my exhibition overall and I would have felt more confident showing the three pieces in the original setting. This was an important process and I think going forward I need to remember to articulate more clearly why a certain dialogue works or doesn't work in my mind. Not to ride rough-shod over other people's opinions but to ensure that my opinion and how I feel about my own work and how it is displayed is also taken into account (Fig. 17).



Figure 18. Michelle Crowley, *Untitled*, 2016, oil on canvas. Personal exhibition photograph.

Conclusion.

Since the exhibition I have taken a reflective view of my work. I thought I had been exploring the power of objects and memory working in unity to evoke emotions from our past. I recently realised that I was really exploring the notions of death, loss and grief. Not just the physical presence being absent but the emotional and psychological absence that we have to try and stitch back together when a loved one is suddenly gone. I have learned that as we tell the stories of our joined histories memories that we held as an absolute truth can be coloured with someone else's recollection of the same experience and although our memories will always influence our decisions can we really rely on them? Over this period I have become more and more interested in the everyday objects that surround us and the inspiration they give. We are continuously bombarded with information and

fast moving technology and we are urged to keep up, get the latest gadget or the newest must have app, Rose Wylie's painting '*Girl in Lights*' was inspired by photographs of Kate Moss wearing 'charming' knickers in a glossy magazine. 'I was stuck in London, there was nothing to draw, so I flicked through this Vanity Fair and thought smashing' (Sooke:1). But even as we are so consistently exposed to a fast changing world I feel we are also looking for something comforting and familiar. In happiness studies the Danes nearly always come in at number one and they attribute this to 'hygge' or 'koselig' in Norway. The closest translation in English would probably be 'cosiness'. Hygge for the Danes is a lifestyle and effects all elements of their lives. Small groups of friends to create intimacy, good slow cooked food, interesting textures in the home, comforting and relaxing colour schemes, well designed and carefully selected furniture.

'More than anything, koselig is a feeling of warmth, intimacy and getting together. A perfect koselig evening would consist of good food on the table, warm colours around you, a group of good friends and a fireplace, or at least some lighted candles' (Wiking: 33).

I think moving forward my practice is focussing more on the elements of the here and now rather than looking backwards for inspiration. The everyday things we are surrounded by that bring comfort to us. My work is becoming far more multi-media in nature, combining layers, textures, paint, print and ink and becoming richer for it. Our daily lives provide an ever changing yet familiar source of never ending material to be plumbed and that is why I find the ordinary so extraordinary.

'We seek the absolute everywhere, and only ever find things' – Novalis (Shapton: foreward).

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Images

Figure 1. Michelle Crowley, *Untitled*, 2015, Ink on Paper. 50cm X 50cm. Personal photograph.

Figure 2. Niamh O'Hanlon, *Community Quilt*, 2012, paint on calico. 25cm X 25cm. Personal photograph.

Figure 3. Eve Boatman, *Community Quilt*, 2012, various material on calico. 25cm X 25cm. Personal Photograph.

Figure 4. Various, *Community Quilt*, 2012, paint, ink, material on calico. 75" X 64". Personal Photograph.

Figure 5. Fig 5. Michelle Crowley, *Tea and Cake*, 2015, ink on paper. 15cm X 20cm. Personal photograph.

Figure 6. Louise Bourgeois, *Red Room Parents (detail)*, 1994, wood, metal, rubber, fabric, glass and mirror. 247.7cm X 426.7cm X 424.2cm. <https://bourgeois.guggenheim-bilbao.eus/en/red-room-parents> (Accessed 20th July 2017).

Figure 7. Louise Bourgeois, *Red Room Child (detail)*, 1994, mixed media. 83" X 139" X 108". <https://rawartint.wordpress.com/2008/11/13/moca-exhibits-major-survey-of-works-by-pioneering-artist-louise-bourgeois/> (Accessed 20th July 2017).

Figure 8. Tracey Emin, *My Bed*, 1998, Mattress, Linens, pillows, objects. 79cm X 211cm X 234cm. http://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/artpages/tracey_emin_my_bed.htm (Accessed 20th July 2017).

Figure 9. Felix Gonzalez-Torres. *'Untitled' (Perfect Lovers)*, 1991, clocks, paint on wall. 35.6cm X 71.2cm X 7cm. <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/81074> (Accessed 20th July 2017).

Figure 10. Doris Salcedo, *Atrabiliarios*, 1992-1997, timber, gyproc, cow bladder, shoes and surgical thread. Installation dimensions vary. <https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/372.1997.a-o/> (Accessed 20th July 2017).

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Figure 13. Tilleke Schwarz, *Bye Bye July (Detail)*, 2016, embroidery thread on material. Average 60cm X 70cm. <http://www.tillekeschwarz.com/medium/> (Accessed 20th July 2017).

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Figure 15. Michelle Crowley, *Untitled*, 2015, acrylic paint, thread on calico. 30cm X 30cm. Personal photograph.

Figure 16. Rose Wiley, *Jack goes Swimming*, 2013, oil on canvas. 207cm X 168cm. <http://www.royalacademyprints.com/image/1143296/rose-wylie-ra-jack-goes-swimming-jack> (Accessed 20th July 2017).

Figure 17.
photograph.

Michelle Crowley, *Untitled*, 2016, oil on canvas board. 25cm X 35cm. Personal

Figure 18.

Michelle Crowley, *Untitled*, 2016, oil on canvas. Personal exhibition photograph.