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FABRICATIONS

By

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Thesis

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for the degree of

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in Ceramics

The University of Montana  
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Fabrications

Chairperson: Trey Hill

The objects that surround us tell a story of our past, and act as physical stand ins for a person, place, or experience no longer present. My work explores the significance of objects and how we use them to preserve our memories and make them tangible. Memory is ephemeral and changes over time, simultaneously growing weaker and stronger. I use materials that accentuate this relationship; delicate fabric contrasts the permanence of fired clay and visually depicts both preservation and decay.

Inspired by my personal narrative, I recreate specific objects of significance by hand. This results in subtle variations of the original, much like the changes in our memory over time. Each piece becomes a fabrication of an original object, just as our memories are a fabrication of the original experience.

Themes of storage, disintegration, alteration, and addition reflect the processes involved in memory formation and the effect of time on our recall. Through this process, I am exploring how much our identity is reliant on our memories, how we preserve our past in order to inform our present, and the ways in which our objects serve as characters in our narrative of self.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Object as Memory

*The house is still. I sit motionless on the scratchy floral couch and watch the beams of light travel up the wall, onto the ceiling, and disappear as the car backs out of the driveway. I pause, making certain I am here alone before wandering down the hallway into my parents' room. The wooden floor creaks beneath my tiny feet as I bend down to reach beneath the dresser. I search with my little fingers grazing along the woodgrain until I feel the smooth cardboard shoebox. I slowly pull it out and take my seat on the floor beside it. This has become my ritual. I lift the lid, set it aside, and gaze down into the contents of the box. I'm greeted by even smaller boxes- some velvet, some cardboard- nestled among transparent satchels and old photographs. I pull the objects out, one by one, emptying each vessel of its contents. My fingers glide over the smooth pearls held together by delicate string, the Mickey Mouse watch with tiny arms that no longer tick excitedly but lay limp at his side. I wonder if this was a gift from dad or an heirloom passed down from a relative I never met. I begin to tell myself stories about each item; who wore it, where they got it from, where they are now. Once I've reached the bottom of the shoebox, I carefully place each item back in its home, replace the lid snugly on top, and slide it underneath the dresser until next time. As I patter back down the hallway to the scratchy floral couch I smile as if holding a secret.*

I used to believe that once an object was gone, the memory associated with it would disappear. As a child, I began collecting mementos of place. With every home, outdoor adventure, and vacation, I would add a tiny piece of place to a wooden box kept on the top shelf of my closet.

Space and home became an ephemeral idea to me. The one constant were the people and the objects that surrounded me. I could relocate across state lines and waterways, but I would always have my little wooden box full of rocks and shells. These became a comfort, and as I grew the habit grew too. In high school, a flower from every bouquet and concert ticket stubs began to fill up the empty spaces; in college, family heirlooms and small tokens of love from friends faraway. As time went on and the

number of moves and boxes increased, these objects began to fall under scrutiny. “Is it worth it to move you across the country?”, I would ask. “Why am I even holding onto you?”



*Fig. 1: Sitting on the steps of our new house.*

These questions led me to think deeper about our connection to objects and why we have trouble letting go of such seemingly insignificant things. In her book, *Evocative Objects*, author Sherry Turkle discusses the various functions of objects. Some are useful tools, some are necessities, others are simply aesthetic indulgences. Perhaps the most potent objects are the ones that enter our life at a significant moment and mark a time of transition or emotional connection (Turkle, 2007).

Objects connect us to those who came before. They transport us to a beloved place or remind us of a childhood friend. They decorate our bookshelves and windowsills, and sit on dashboards, and hide in the back of closets or under beds. They have a physical weight as they collect and occupy space in our homes, and they have a metaphysical weight as they collect and occupy the space in our minds.

I became fixated on objects that evoked memories<sup>1</sup> and brought me comfort. These memories served as houses of protection when everything else felt impermanent.

<sup>1</sup> When discussing memory, I am specifically referencing autobiographical memory, also known as episodic memory. This long-term form of memory includes conscious recollection of previous experiences and their connections to time, place, and emotion.



Gaston Bachelard discusses this idea in his book *The Poetics of Space*, describing it as “Motionless Childhood”. He explains that through the act of remembering, we live fixations of happiness and comfort ourselves by reliving memories of protection. He addresses memories of home specifically, saying that “Memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home...” (Bachelard, 1994).

As I began the process of identifying the objects that resonated with me, I started looking through family albums. I was paying attention not to the people in the photos but to the objects in the background. Years passed and people and locations changed, but the reappearing objects remained the same. These objects began to hold a presence of their own, acting as companions to the subjects in the photos.



*Fig. 2: The stepstool from my childhood.*

### Object as Identity

Janet Hoskins, Professor of Anthropology, studied the Kodi people of Indonesia. When interviewed about their personal lives, she found they had little to say. The idea of telling about one’s life to another person did not exist for the Kodi. However, Hoskins was able to gain insight into their lives when interviewing them about another topic- the history of trade objects and ritually significant domestic objects. These became a prop or a storytelling device for certain personal experiences. She found that the stories of objects and people were so complexly intertwined that they could not be disentangled. Hoskins explained that, “these people, although bashful and tongue-tied when asked to describe

themselves, were often great storytellers when asked to talk about their possessions” (Hoskins, 1998). The resulting account explored how identities and biographies are formed around objects, and the way that objects are used as a metaphor for the self through the memories they evoke.

Storytelling is a formative process. By creating a narrative of one’s life, people not only provide information about themselves but also form their identity, constructing a self-image for public consumption (Hoskins, 1998). In his novel, *In Search of Lost Time*, Marcel Proust searches for authentic personal truths. He thought of memory as something that is based in emotion rather than intellect and recognized the power of memory to bridge the gap between past and present in a way that connects personal truths to a wider audience. He developed a relationship between the private understanding and the public expression (Gibbons, 2011).

This overlap of the private versus the public is a large part of autobiographies, which play an important role in Western culture. From filling out medical forms to posting a photo to social media, revealing your personal life for public consumption has become a large part of our society. The work in *Fabrications* functions in a similar way. By acting as an autobiography, this work sits between the borders of the private and the public, inviting the viewer to both witness my personal life and contribute to a larger understanding of what it means to be human.

### Memory as Identity

When I was a teenager, I witnessed my grandmother lose her memory. This is an experience that became a catalyst to much of my work. Looking into the eyes of a woman I had known my whole life, only to have her stare back blankly, is a feeling that is hard to forget. This experience led me to question if the grandmother I know now is the same grandmother I knew then. How much of our identity is rooted in our memories? Can we be fully ourselves independent of our memories of past locations, people, and experiences?

Alison Phinney is a nurse who approaches this question from the perspective of a caretaker to patients with dementia. In her writing, *Self, Lost and Found*, she explains that

the notion of memory loss has come to be one of the greatest fears of aging rooted in Western culture, and questions why we have come to believe that the loss of memory leads to a loss of self (Phinney, 2018).

Dr. Bobby Azarian, a neuroscientist from George Mason University, confronts these questions through his research as well. A study in 2004 found that autobiographical memories create a continuous narrative that aid in forming a sense of self. Azarian references the work of British philosopher John Locke, who was among the first to theorize the factors that define one's identity. According to Locke's memory theory, a person's identity is directly correlated to how far their memory extends into the past. Therefore, as a person's memory begins to fade, so does their identity (Azarian, 2015).

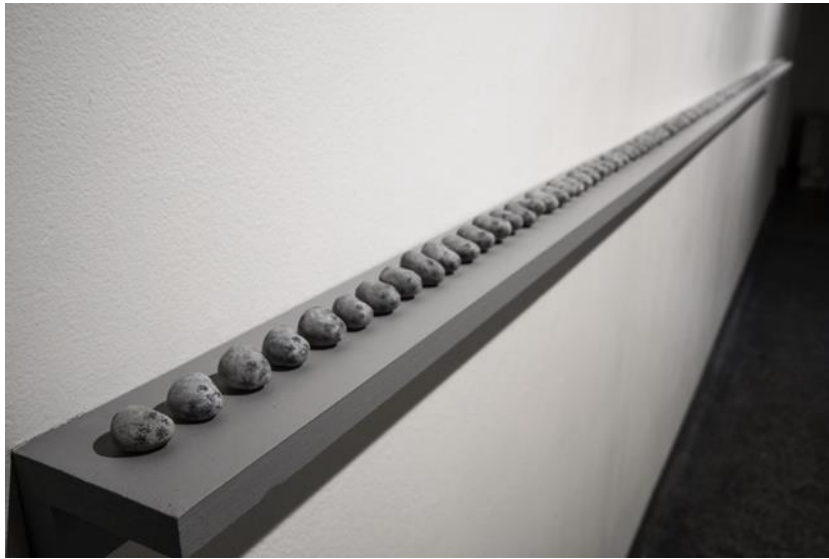
## EXHIBITION

My exhibition titled *Fabrications* is an exploration into the connections between memory, identity, and objects. Fabrication is the process of producing or manufacturing something, but it also means to invent a lie. Each piece in this show is a fabrication of an original object, just as our memories are a fabrication of the original experience; they are at once a remake and a falsehood. The show is quiet, with muted colors and small intricacies. The work blends into the surrounding gallery space and invites a slow, intimate interaction from the viewer. Details are easily missed, and the show reveals more of itself with each contemplative viewing, much like our memories that lie right beneath the surface and are easily overlooked. Themes of storage, disintegration, alteration, and addition are scattered throughout the work and reflect the processes involved in memory formation and the effect of time on our recall. The work invites quiet contemplation on the importance of objects and preserving our memory.

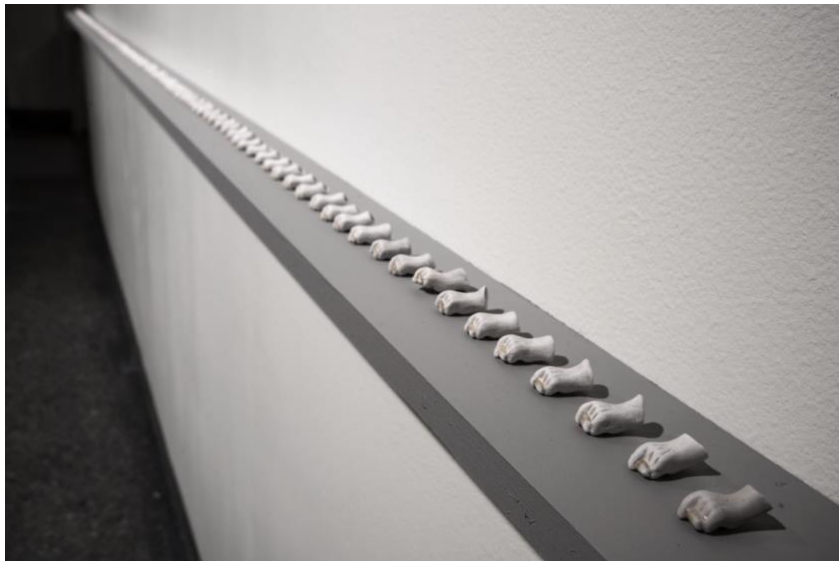
### Memory of Place

Upon walking into the gallery, viewers are beckoned down a wide hallway by long shelves skirting each side. Each shelf holds 120 iterations of the same object, a rock on the left side and a small porcelain hand on the right. At the beginning of each row is the original object, while all following objects have been remade with clay from the

memory of the original. By using a material that is permanent to talk about ideas that are impermanent, I am highlighting the process of preservation and the importance of these objects. The hand and rock are a reference to my memory of a specific location where the object was found. Viewed as a timeline, each piece visually represents the way our memory changes over time.



*Fig. 2: Memory of Place: Kingsley, MI, found object, stoneware, underglaze, 2019*



*Fig. 3: Memory of Place: Duluth, MN, found object, stoneware, underglaze, 2019.*

Charles Fernyhough is the author of *Pieces of Light: The New Science of Memory*, a book that focuses on the reconstructive nature of memory. Fernyhough believes that the unreliability of our memories stems from their reconstructive nature. Memories are changed by the very act of remembering them. He states that, “when you have a memory, you don’t retrieve something that already exists, fully formed- you create something new. Memory is about the present as much as it is about the past. We add to our memories every time we bring them out. They simultaneously get further away and brighter, more and less real” (Fernyhough, 2013). Essentially, each time we recall a memory, we recall not the original event but the last time we remembered it. This causes the memory to become less precise each time, to the point of becoming completely false in some cases.

These changes in memory are depicted in the series *Memory of Place* through the subtle variations that occur from one piece to the next. Over time, markings on the rock slowly shift over the surface, the width of the wrist on the hand changes in diameter, and colors fade from one shade to another. The result of this experiment is a visual depiction of what happens to a specific memory each time it is recalled.

*Memory of Place: Kingsley, MI* and *Memory of Place: Duluth, MN* also touches on deciding what we want to remember, and the act of physically taking a piece of place with us. Both the rock and the hand were found at locations where I spent a lot of time and felt at home during times of transition. Through the repetition and number of pieces, this work becomes a visual representation of what we mentally carry with us and the space it takes up in our minds each time we reflect on a place from our past. This is also evidence of the time spent with each object; the careful memorization of small details and the feeling of the object in my fingers as I search for that same feeling in the replica. While this work represents personal memories, it is displayed in a way that is far more analytical than emotional. The pieces feel more like scientific data with the precise and orderly rows. The spacing is dense and implies a rhythm that appears to crescendo when viewed from the side, a strong contrast to the slow process of making each piece.

With this series, I constructed a system for making. An object of significance was chosen which I then studied intimately. After I felt confident in the nuances of each object, I placed it out of sight. I then attempted to replicate it from memory. When I was satisfied with the replica, I placed it again out of sight and continued this process until the

entire row was complete. This system allowed me to physically and visually test the theory of memory reformation.

The artist Mike Kelley worked in a similar way by creating parameters to make the piece *Educational Complex*. Reconstructed from memory, this scaled tabletop model depicts the home he grew up in and the schools he attended. Floorplans were recalled, drawn, and combined with the original floorplans to create a chaotic final product. Kelley described how he could barely recall the spaces he occupied every day for years. These gaps in memory are represented by blanks and mistakes that have been left uncorrected. Overall, this work demonstrates the way we remember, represent, and reconstruct the past.



*Fig. 5: Mike Kelley, Educational Complex, installation view, Rooseum Center for Contemporary Art, Malmo, Sweden, 1997.*

*Fig. 4: Mike Kelley, Educational Complex, 1995.*



## What Passes Through

Upon entering the larger room of the gallery, viewers step into a space that functions quite differently from the hallway. This difference is accentuated not only by the physical change in location but also by a distinct change in the work. Where the hallway feels more like poetic data, the larger gallery space depicts a more emotional response. Here, the work is more ethereal with objects appearing to decompose and fall apart as remnants of the past are woven together in a dreamlike manner.

From the ceiling of the gallery hangs a large net structure, casting shadows that dance along the walls. Made from delicate interfacing that has been painted and cut to mimic woven rope, the net encourages the viewer's eye to swim around in the entangled patterns that are created by the translucent layers of fabric.



*Fig. 7: What Passes Through, interfacing, polyurethane, acrylic paint, thread, Velcro, 2020.*

Interfacing is a material used on the inside of clothing or quilts to give structure to the fabric, like the way our memories provide a structure for our lives. Whether the day to day of how to get to work, or the long term of where we grew up, our memory provides the structure which informs our present and future. The shadows created by this piece vary in clarity, fading from sharp to hazy and relate to the clarity of our various memories.



Displayed in a moment of action, the net is strewn across the ceiling depicting the moment right before something is captured and the desire to hold onto it, although some things inevitably fall through the gaps. Psychologist Janice Wood explains this by using the analogy of a colander for draining pasta. When we are children, our brains are like colanders with large holes trying to retain small pieces of memory. But as the water rushes out, small grains are lost as well. As we get older, our colanders are more like a fine mesh that allows the water to wash through while leaving the grains behind (Wood, 2018). This phenomenon is represented in *What Passes Through* by the variations in density created with the layered fabric; some areas have large gaps while others are more tightly woven together.



Fig. 8: *What Passes Through*, interfacing, polyurethane, acrylic paint, thread, Velcro, 2020.

### Evocations

The shadows cast by the net land upon objects on a nearby wall, drawing a connection between the two pieces and suggesting that these are the memories that have been retained. It is displayed in a way that references a domestic space, although presented in a way that is more ephemeral. The frames and shelves recall those found in my childhood homes, lining the hallway or the staircase and expanding as time passes. With each new year comes a new school photo or family member. Each frame represents



an addition to our storehouse of memories and suggests the preservation of those memories, both the remembered and the forgotten.

The frames, fireplace, and shelves have been created through casting actual objects and press-molding clay into the forms. Through this process, each piece is slightly different even though it has been molded from the same form each time. This is a correlation to our memories which become remolded each time they are taken out.

The sculptures of Rachel Whiteread rely on a similar process. By taking direct casts of architectural surfaces, the finished product holds traces of life that have become frozen through the process. She describes how these surfaces are connected to her own memories, but generic enough for the public to connect to them. Whiteread alters the final outcome of each piece by using the inverted surface from the first stage in the casting process. By using the negative surface, the finished piece mimics the original in size, scale, and detail but falls short of replicating the original.



*Fig. 9: Rachel Whiteread, Untitled (Library), 1999.*

The center piece of *Evocations* is a fireplace made of fragmented sections, a reference to the idiom, “the hearth is the heart of the home.” Historically, the hearth was an integral part of a home, used primarily for heating and cooking. It is where people would gather for warmth and comfort. Some cultures believe fireplaces are a shrine. Possessions and trinkets would be placed along the mantle while prayers were recited, sometimes even being burned as an offering.

Small objects, such as a finger puppet, driftwood, lock of hair, or a wristwatch, are scattered throughout the installation, each one evoking a specific memory of a past experience or relationship. Each one has been recreated from actual objects I have held onto for these reasons. The clay pieces act as simulacrum or an imitation of the original object. Through the process of remaking each one by hand, there are subtle differences that distinguish each piece from the original. The object is removed from its original self and becomes a replica, just as our memories are a replica of the original experience. Clay, a material that is inherently permanent, is being used to contrast the ephemerality and disintegration of memory over time.

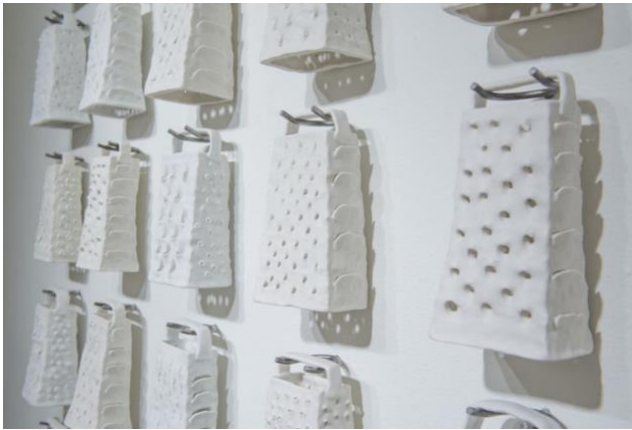


Fig. 10: *Evocations*, stoneware, slip, black copper oxide, 2020.

Everything within *Evocations* has been finished with the same surface; cracks and crevices are accentuated with a shiny moss green that contrasts a warm matte white to create the illusion that the work is being viewed through a veil as it has aged. The objects blend into their background and slowly emerge the longer it is viewed. Some stand out more than others, such as the pieces centered in the frames, while others are disguised along shelves. The experience created by viewing this piece is like the process of

recalling a memory; some details are more vivid than others. The lack of color alludes to the fading and disintegration of information over time, suggesting a loss of vitality. While each component in this installation is based off original objects that evoke specific memories for me, they remain objects that most people understand. Shells, a key, and pliers, for example, are common items in everyday life. This, along with the removal of unique color and material allows for anonymity and an additive process of meaning that is built through the viewers' memory and knowledge of cultural or social history.

Kelly O'Briant is an artist that explores similar ideas, developing narratives that reference the rituals of daily routine in the home. Through re-creating everyday objects from clay, she is attempting to elevate their importance. She explains that the permanent characteristics of clay juxtapose the ephemeral nature of light and shadow to construct perceptions of time, narrative, and self. Through her various compositions, she conjures scenarios that are familiar while telling a story that is often vague and ambiguous with incongruous details, just like our memories.



*Fig. 11: Kelly O'Briant, Recurring Dream, porcelain, metal, 2014.*

*Fig. 12: Kelly O'Briant, Cabinets for Important Things, coiled and pinched porcelain, wood, paint, nails, drywall, glass, ink, cotton thread, waxed linen, 2014.*



“...here and there in the brain, keep-sake boxes that preserve fragments of the past.”  
-Henri Bergson

### Carry You With Me

Sitting quietly in the far corner of the gallery, a milk crate, shoebox, and dilapidated cardboard boxes sit neglected on the floor. Boxes are used to protect our belongings, but also to purge them. Left open and empty, we are unsure if these are waiting to be filled or if they have been excavated of their contents. This also accentuates the preciousness of the boxes as vessels to protect and hide our curation of objects and moments. These boxes imply a gesture- it feels as if an action just occurred or is about to occur. Perhaps the objects on the wall came from these, or they are about to be placed inside for safekeeping.



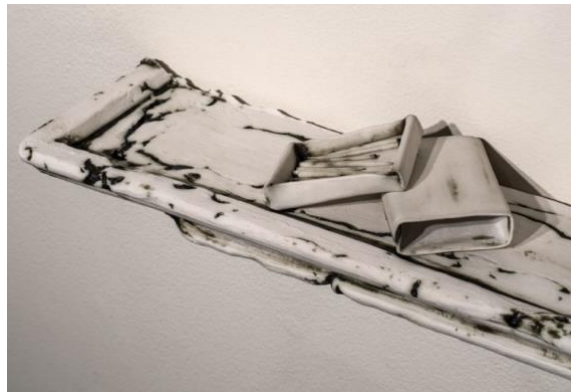
*Fig. 13: Carry You With Me, stoneware, slip, black copper oxide, latex paint, milk paint, 2020.*

Objects that are used as vessels has been a reoccurring theme throughout my work. Whether a jar used for rituals, a box for collecting mementos, or a house for securing our childhood, the empty space within has the potential to hide, protect, or preserve. These objects of storage serve as the thresholds between the private and public,

acting as barriers between the contents and the outside world. The boxes in *Carry You With Me* and the containers throughout *Evocations* are physical representations of psychologically storing memories within.

When studying the people of Kodi, Hoskins found that the objects people chose to represent their life stories were containers. A pouch, hollow drum, bottle, or funeral shroud all served as “memory boxes” for holding something inside (Hoskins, 1998).

These themes of storage and interior space are seen in other aspects of the show as well; the allusion to a domestic interior space, the area above the net, and the matchboxes, mini pots, latched box, button jar and frame interiors.



*Fig. 6: Evocations detail, stoneware, slip, black copper oxide, 2020.*

In *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard describes these interior spaces where memory is placed. Using the analogy of drawers, chests, and small boxes, he describes these as “organs of the secret psychological life.” These pieces are not only fulfilling a need of keeping a possession guarded, but they suggest a desire for secrecy and hiding places. Bachelard believed that memories must be retained in something closed because the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are. He also believed that not only our memories are housed, but the things we have forgotten as well. These hiding places hold our memory and knowledge without “an iota of haziness or shiftiness” and allow us to find our memories again with ease (Bachelard, 1994). Our objects of significance function like the index of a book, which lists the key points and directs the reader to the information they are seeking, speeding up data retrieval. Our mementos function in a similar way, acting as a roadmap to direct us to a specific location or experience and speeding up our recall of that memory.

### Conclusion

Throughout the process of creating *Fabrications*, I explored how much our identity is reliant on our memories, how we preserve our past through the objects we obtain, and how these objects serve as characters in our personal narrative. I have come to find that no matter how firmly our memories are rooted to our possessions, both the object and the memory will inevitably fade with time, and our memories of the past are not necessarily what constitutes our identity. Gaston Bachelard discusses how a sense of self is constructed through layers of memory that are far more poetic than truly historical. In other words, our identity is shaped by inaccurate knowledge of the past. If this is true, wouldn't our sense of self be inaccurate as well?

Professor of Psychology Giuliana Mazzoni believes that we create false memories to achieve the identity we want. She explains that we are a product of life experiences which are accessed through our memories of the past. But identity is often not a truthful representation. Research shows we do not access and use all available memories when we create our personal narrative; what we select needs to fit the current idea we have of ourselves. Mazzoni also explains that due to the highly inaccurate nature of memory, we



often make up events that never happened. We even create memories based off photographs or stories we have heard (Mazzoni, 2018).

The work of artist Michael Landy was instrumental in affirming my opinions of memory and preservation. In *Break Down*, Landy disassembled all his material possessions over the course of two weeks. This was executed in a fully functioning factory, but instead of creating new products he was destroying old ones. Each item was recorded into a document, totaling over five thousand possessions. All that was left were the clothes he chose to wear on the final day. In the end, he was left with an inventory that kept the memory of the object in a highly reduced form. Much like the work in *Fabrications*, Landy questioned the significance of objects and the value that is placed on them beyond their use value. This work counteracts the traditional methods of remembrance and social conventions of mementos and questions the need for objects as receptacles for memory, testing the limits of identity and emotional significance of material objects.



*Fig. 15: Michael Landy, Break Down, 2001.*

It is inevitable that memories will change over time. If our sense of self is not reliant on these, then where does it reside? In his article mentioned previously, Dr. Azarian writes about a new study that found identity is not rooted in our memory but is instead defined by moral behavior. In other words, how we view people is largely determined by our assessment of their moral character, and not their knowledge of past experiences. He believes that identity, then, is not what we know but what we stand for (Azarian, 2015). Likewise, Alison Phinney believes that who we are as humans resides in our bodies and not our past experiences. Memory is not simply recalling facts and events about ourselves. It speaks through our movements, gestures, and expressions as well. Phinney also mentions similar theories to Dr. Azarian, stating that personhood is not so much a function of individual memory, but instead how one is perceived and treated by others. Even if we cannot remember our past experiences, there is a chance we may know who we are through our embodied experiences in the world with others (Phinney, 2018).

*Fabrications* highlights the inevitable process of decay despite attempts to preserve. By investigating the significance of the objects I held onto since childhood, I found that while these possessions play a role in retaining memories and aiding in the telling of my personal narrative, they do not play as large or important of a role as I once thought. The work in *Fabrications* highlights not only the desire to remember, but also the inevitable decay of memory as preservation fails.

Marc Augé is a French anthropologist who observed that “without the ability to forget, memory is unable to function effectively; it would become rapidly saturated if we were even to try to consciously preserve all our past experiences” (Gibbons, 2011). Being able to forget is just as important as being able to remember. While our objects aid in retaining our knowledge of the past, this is not critical in forming our sense of self. Objects will fade and memories will disappear, but this is an integral part to our mental functioning. In the end, the only way to truly preserve a memory in its purest form is to forget.



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