

Interim Thesis Paper

Master of Applied Arts

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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Re-member	4
Re-image	7
Re-present	9
Conclusion	13
Works Cited	15
Works Referenced	15

“I will have spent my life trying to understand the function of remembering which is not the opposite of forgetting but rather its lining. We do not remember, we rewrite memory much as history is rewritten.”

– Chris Marker, *Sans Soleil*

Curious the degree to which we invest our remembered experiences with accuracy. Stranger still the active participation in what can be understood as a willful blindness with regards to endemic and verifiable phenomena. A reflexive myopia that influences our experience of the present and shapes our future.

My thesis research to date has concerned itself primarily with memory’s illusory nature, how the daily performance of life is reconstituted through this mercurial faculty and what marks the moments that matter. Though figurative painting is my chosen method of production, my practice’s methodological exploration takes as its focus these thematic concerns. What follows is an examination of my most recent body of work. At stake is how the painted montage mimics memory, frustrates expectation, and potentially acts as a surface on which to create a place for a substitute knowing, small truths that stand in for what is absent and can only be erroneously resurrected.

What links my depictive painting practice to photography and cinema and permits its deployment of montage as a strategy are the comparable effects these three representations have on time. That is to say, that cinema, photography and painting all render the present past. Through their physicality and their framing they are a means of looking at and understanding the present through an organizing or restructuring of the past, making them methods for

commemorating and celebrating that past. Simultaneously, they function as place-holders for actual remembered experience, as well as an inexact re-presentation of what has been, aping memory's uncertain daily reconstruction and synopsis of life. As such, they recreate or bring forward the past into the present, engendering the "prick" of recognition and affect in the moment. A final parallel exists in that all three mediums act as sites for visual narratives that offer an informed hypothesis on what might still be.

Re-member

Integral to my work is the sourcing of images from the private and public archives and their juxtaposition and careful coordination in painted montages on paper. The first of these is *Thaw: A stroll with my mother, 1971, slide #15* (see fig. 1). What is represented in *Thaw* is largely, though not exactly, what appears in the slide from which it is referenced. A woman pushes a stroller with a baby in it up an incline, both figures turning to look at the viewer, their features merely hinted at. Behind them, a stand of ghostly birch trees emerge from the soft, cool grey ground. Partially hidden in the leafless trees is a nondescript missile, its presence further concealed by its colours, painted in the same pale tones as the birches. Quietly menacing, this symbol of power and indication of political climate from the era in which the slide originates has been inserted into this otherwise innocuous domestic scene, serving to both disrupt and augment its montaged narrative. Though the particularities of the people depicted elude identification, the representation of that primary relationship of mother and child is clear, heightening the experience of the uncanny already alluded to by a sense of a time and a place that are culturally

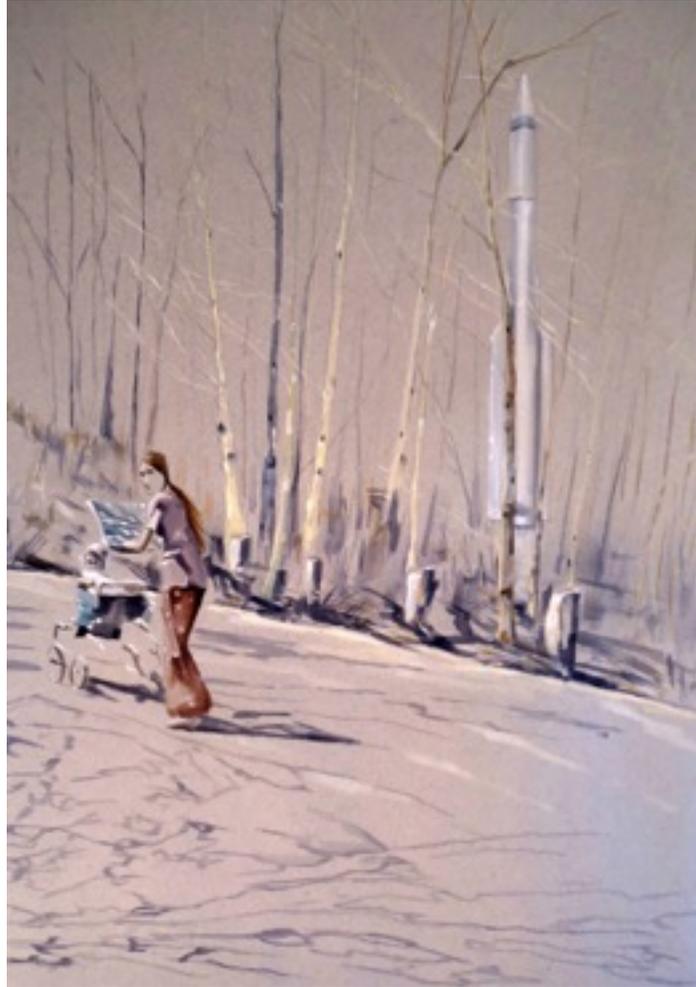


Fig. 1 - Maria Tratt, *Thaw: A stroll with my mother, 1971, slide #15, 2015*, gouache on paper, 30" x 21.5"

and historically shared. This oscillation between the personal and the public, the familiar and the strange, speaks to the very nature of memory as slippery and subject to change. I propose that this is also what engenders it with the promise of the “new” similar to how the loss of an exact memory whose context remains intact operates to permit embellishment: The fickle and the permeable as potential sites for new meaning.

By knitting together divergent elements, the work invites interpretation that resists resolution. This refusal, located in oddity, is what generates affect in the viewer. According to

Roland Barthes, this is akin to a photograph's ability to "prick" the viewer and is what allows certain images to stand apart from most others whose function is purely indexical. He writes: "... it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me... This second element which will disturb the *studium* I shall therefore call *punctum*;... that accident which pricks me." (*Camera Lucida*, 26-7) In "The Memory of Pictures: Roland Barthes and Augustine on Photography", Anselm Haverkamp situates Barthes's strategy within the larger discourse of the image and its dialectical properties of "trace" and "aura" (273), the visible and the signified. In the painted montage that merges disparate photographic elements there now exists a feeling of "is-that-how-it-was?", even "is-it-like-that-still?", that sits on top of the conviction of "having-been-there" (*Camera Lucida*, 40) and induces an uncertainty synonymous with a reinterpretation of meaning. As such, the work can be understood as a celebration of the "punctum", the signified aura of an image.

In the making of this and other works, secondary themes have emerged that I am only just beginning to grapple with. First among this subset is the myopic, an intentional blindness analogous to indifference exhibited by the figures appropriated from my private archive of images towards the threat posed by the elements that are out-sourced and integrated into the montage. What does this imperviousness imply about memory beyond that it is merely selective, what are the personal and global implications of this process of framing and archiving and how can the painted image contribute to our understanding of these questions in a way that is generative, inclusive and plastic?

Re-imagine

In *The Future of the Image*, Jaques Rancière offers insight into how images operate to construct meaning. He suggests that the artistic image can be understood through a strategy that is closely aligned with what Michel Foucault called the ‘seeable and the sayable’. Rancière calls this paratactic image a “sentence-image,” (citation) and defines his method as an integral tethering and untethering of the sentence that gives the image flesh, linking it to something greater than what is merely visible, and the power of rupture contained within that image (46). He proposes that individual montages of all kinds, ranging from the literal to the symbolic, act as containers for heterogeneous elements.

Among the visible elements in *Holiday, 1973, slide #14* (see fig. 2) is a small figure, fully clothed and wearing sunglasses, looking at an unspecified document that they hold in their hands. Centrally located in an expansive and sparse environment whose heat is implied by the vegetation, the colour of the water and the cloudless sky, the figure remains oblivious to the presence directly overhead of a single bomber jet from the same vintage as the slide. The addition of this widely recognizable image from the public archive into a painting that is also a translation of a personal photograph questions the veracity of remembered experience. The banality of the scene’s every-day-ness, the ubiquity of the experience implied by its title, momentarily disarms the viewer whose expectations are ultimately derailed by the presence of an incongruous though readily understood threat.

That there exists a menace, a violence that heightens and acts as counterpoint to its opposite, namely the innocence depicted in these otherwise quotidian scenes, forms the basis of my practice’s second auxiliary thematic concern, the politics of empire. That the bomber jet, or

its equivalent, the missile in *Thaw*, is of a certain era makes it no less prevalent now nor at anytime in between. Is its omnipresence and corresponding banality a result of a collectively shared myopia as demonstrated by the paintings' figures? What, specifically, does it reference about the politics of empire and how can the painted montage function to provide an incisive analysis of these emerging questions?



Fig. 2 - Maria Tratt, *Holiday*, 1973, slide #14, 2016, gouache on paper, 30" x 21.5"

Re-present

According to Pier Paolo Pasolini montage is the summation and synthesis of meaning, the creation of an alter-meaning that unifies the otherwise discordant elements in a work. *Storm*, 1973, *slide #3* (see fig. 3) offers additional understanding of the ambiguity and latent liberation

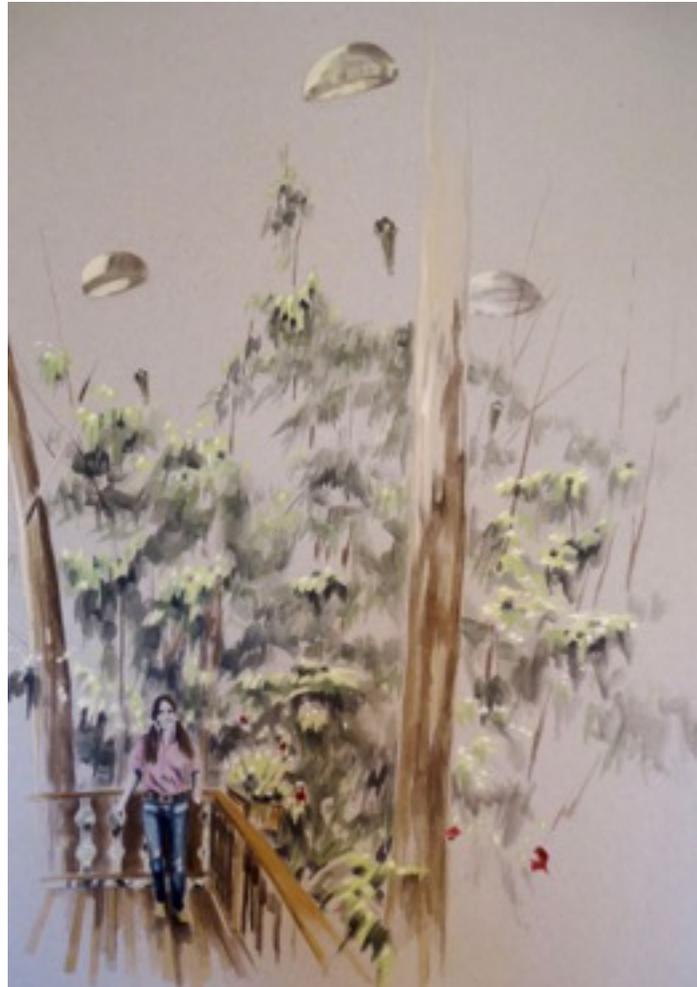


Fig. 3 - Maria Tratt, *Storm*, 1973, *slide #3*, 2016, gouache on paper, 30" x 21.5"

of meaning afforded by the painted montage. It depicts a woman in the lower left-hand quarter of the image. She is casually dressed, her gestures and expression effortless as she moves towards

the viewer along a wooden balcony, arrested in mid-stride. She is blissfully unaware of the three paratroopers descending upon the scene, somewhat obscured by the lush green foliage that fills two-thirds of the painting. In *V is for... 1973, slide #8* (see fig.4) the female bather is no less oblivious to the intrusion of the women picketing above her despite their lack of camouflage. Through the working of these painted surfaces a representation is created of what occurred at a particular point in both a subjective and collective past, though there exists no actual memory of that montaged moment. These works are a synthesis, re-constructed from archival images as well



Fig. 4 - Maria Tratt, *V is for...*, 1973, slide #8, 2016, gouache on paper, 30" x 21.5"

as from re-membered experiences that came afterwards. In “Observations on the Sequence Shot” Pasolini argues that, through the selective coordination of different subjective points of view, montage performs on cinema “the operation that death performs on life.” (237) That is to say, that until one’s life is complete it remains untranslatable, “a chaos of possibilities, a search for relations and meanings without resolution.” (237) Though painting is not cinema, the montage achieves, if not an identical, then an analogous function in both by connecting within a frame elements that are seemingly at odds with each other. Susan Howe describes the function of montage as, “constantly interweaving traces of the past to overcome restrictions of temporal framing.” (48) Though Howe’s focus in *Sorting Facts; or, Nineteen Ways of Looking at Marker* is documentary film and poetry, the struggle to express the “*feeling* of image-juxtaposition” (41) that she writes about is representative of how the *sentence-image* claims to operate.

That painting can be discussed and understood today through the aesthetic and theoretical concerns of photography and film has a great deal to do with the subversive shifts that occurred in the “depictive” and “movement” (citation) arts over the last half century. In “Depiction, Object, Event”, Jeff Wall defines the depictive arts as “canonical forms” (citation) characterized by an autonomy that engenders incalculable potential as well as artistic quality, “suggest[s] movement while actually excluding it” (5), necessitates technical skill and includes both painting and photography. Movement in arts is the domain of “theatre, dance, music and cinema” (5) and is cited by Wall as initiating advancements in Western art by providing for it other art “dimensions”. Wall asserts that the search in the 1950’s and 1960’s for new modes or dimensions of creativity led to a “vast range of new possibilities for action... [and] a proliferation of forms” (11) in the world of art. This attempt at art’s reinvention is epitomized by a blurring of

boundaries between the depictive and movement arts that “opened passages through which influences and ideas could move, in both directions.” (12) One of the results of this cross-pollination is what Wall refers to as the “second appearance” (12) and is described as ““instances of (contemporary) art”” (12) in which elements of the movement arts appear or influence any of the depictive arts. This re-articulation of artistic mimesis is less concerned with imitation and is grounded instead in reciprocity. By extension, montage, an operation that first appears in cinema, can be appropriated by photography and again by painting as both a formal device to activate the alteration of its surface and as a theoretical discourse to describe that function, performing in each case as an “instance” of itself.

In addition to the secondary themes newly materialized through my practice’s deployment of montage, there exist other questions that pertain to my process. These stem from an upcoming research proposal that involves painting in situ select locations that have personal significance in conjunction with the documentation of those sites using slide film. These slides will later be projected and traced over top the originals in the tradition of a palimpsest. Until now, I have concentrated entirely on combining images on a single pictorial plane. How the layering of images alters the reading of the work as a montage is a primary concern that now presents itself. Also, what new steps will need to be implemented in order to preserve the first layer and guard against any undesired cross-contamination of colours? Further to my goal of diversifying my process is a more in-depth investigation of other artists whose methodologies are engaged in similar pursuits. Topping that list is the work of photographer Augusta Wood, whose interest lies in photographing arranged spaces that conflate old photographs and newly authored images to understand a present that is influenced by a visual and personal history. The choice to

paint and photograph these sites in the present signals another salient shift away from references that are located exclusively in the past. This brings to bear the following questions: What images to source from the public archive and from when? How to incorporate those selected into an image that already merges multiple elements? If the privately sourced images now exist in multiples, could there also be included various images from the public arena? Out of these surfaces the overarching question of how these new factors impact my practice's central thematic concern, memory's fallibility and the integrity that it is nonetheless invested with. These are a few of the questions that require my attention and can, with little doubt, be best addressed through the execution of more work.

Conclusion

In *Sans Soleil*, the narrator warns that in a future era in which the human brain has reached full employment, "Total recall is memory anesthetized." Playwright Harold Pinter suggests in *Old Times* that, "There are some things one remembers even though they may never have happened." By carefully coordinating images from my personal collection of slides with others sourced from the public archive, this latest body of work strives for an interpretation of what might have been that functions as a proxy for the memory that is lost. As such it exists as a meditation on memory's fleeting and capricious nature. That the exact meaning or truth of the works' individual components are equally unknowable is what both permits and invites additional meaning. The re-imagining of original experience is an attempt not at mimesis but at retrieval more closely aligned with substitution than with duplication, inexact repetition that requires embellishment, similar to how memory itself operates. Its articulation is a quest to

transcend instability, to accept integrity as fleeting and to question the certainty ascribed images understood as reliable records of the past. Though their references would seem to assert that “this-is-how-it-was”, the paintings themselves suggest the additional narrative of “this-is-how-it-remains”, which serves to caution that “it-may-still-be-so-again” despite it only ever being different.

Through continuing to compose these painted montages, I hope to better understand their potential relevance for examining and expanding on a subjective and collective reflexivity located in the myopic and tethered to the politics of empire: The perpetual dance that yokes a refusal to forget with a reluctance to remember.

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