

**WATERMARKS:**

**Resonant Absences in Painting and Memory**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper is about memory and about narrative, both of which are concerned with what is missing. It explores the ways that the events in our individual lives, our collective lives, become history and narrative. The paper considers writer Thomas King's work on narrative, and Walter Benjamin's work on memory as theatre. Many of the stories included here are personal. They might have been heard at kitchen tables, or on the phone from family and friends. Some stories are ones which I can't recall not knowing. The paper poses questions such as how these things become important to our present. Whether and why it is important to remember, and what constitutes authenticity in memory. The narrative structure of the paper reflects these concerns, by highlighting spaces and absences. To an extent the structure manifested itself organically, as a result of attempts to provide an honest articulation of the questions and ideas which have impacted on my material practice. This has proven to be a delicate task, as it attempts to speak to a material practice that is ongoing, constantly changing. There are overlaps in the form and content of each but there is also a space in between. My *modus operandi* resists full disclosure. I have this image of myself, like I am in the backyard, in the dirt, excavating some things burying others. From a certain vantage point all you see is the upturned soil following me, dirt under my nails.

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## **Introduction (of sorts)**

My cousin Irene and I sat across from each other. She looked at me, she was studying my face. I waited for her to say something. She said, after a pause, "You look... eager to please." I did not like being that transparent, but it was true then (over five years ago) and it still is. I am ambivalent, either about the transparency or the eagerness to please, or both. Nevertheless, even now, I would like to oblige.

I could get some distance, put some space between myself and the paintings I make, offer up an analysis or interpretation of sorts, perhaps a comparison to other artists. I have not quite done that. Maybe I did not know how to begin. Maybe it was something else. I could have written something that, like one of my paintings, I ask to be independent in the world and create its own relationships and connections. I did not quite do that either. So, what can I tell you that will be meaningful for me to write and for you to read? I might not have even met you yet. This paper might be akin to lighting candles in order to set the mood. I could make the light softer and not even talk about the candles.

My sister is, as I write this, approximately twelve weeks along in her first pregnancy, so I have been thinking about pregnancies. I asked my mom about when she was pregnant with me, what she remembers. She told me she almost died. She said she was feeling pains in her back, but her doctors ignored her complaints. Then, while she was in labour, her fever spiked, and the doctors paid attention. She said she passed out. "The last thing I remember is being lowered into a tub of ice and water." When she says this, her eyes get big and round and the backs of her hands stand in for the rising water around her face. "Ohhh" she breathes in, "'twas cold." I lived thirty-two years without hearing that story.

## Watermarks

“One must always apologize for talking about painting”  
-Paul Valéry

There is a story. It is about the first painting. In Pliny the Elder's tale, he recounts the origins of painting. More accurately he recounts how the first painting is known to have happened. The origins, he tells us, are unclear: The Egyptians think it was in Egypt, the Greeks beg to differ. What is agreed on is that this was done by tracing the outline of a man's shadow. So he tells us what he can: A potter's daughter was in love with a young man. She knew the young man was going to leave. Maybe he was visiting her to say good-bye. Maybe she wanted to buy some more time. She traced his silhouette, as cast by a lamp. I imagine it was quiet; he was trying to hold still for her, her eyes concentrating on the wall, her back to him. Later, her father, the potter, pressed clay along this outline to make a relief. The story resonates with me, perhaps because in the act of pointing toward a centre, a circle is drawn instead. The lack of origin suggests to me an idea of countless beginnings. Near my hometown of Slave Lake there is a place we call Old Town. Actually it was named Sawridge, the name of the Indian Band I belong to. In my memory of Slave Lake, Old Town stands like a bookmark for a story. The few houses that still stand are all that was left when an entire town moved because of a flood that happened before I was born. There is no particular location then, only a story.

Lisa Saltzman<sup>1</sup>, in her book Making Memory Matter, writes about how Pliny the Elder's tale speaks of anticipating absence, remarking on absence, of memory. She remarks on the difference between the daughter's drawing, her outlining of an absent figure, and her father's creation of an object to fill that space. The daughter's action is the one Pliny the Elder associates with painting—the one which remarks upon the empty space, but does not fill it. The potter follows up by creating an object to stand in for the missing person. I imagine that he offered this object to his sad daughter to make her feel better. Her pain was too difficult to watch. The act of simply bearing witness is a powerful thing, for both daughter and father. Is a memory or a story able to transcend a fetishizing? Is it only a talisman?

I have uncovered more questions than answers. I am asking how photographs fall into parts of memory, both personal and collective, how personal and collective memory mingles and then separates again. How much should we remember? When is the memory fact? My interest, in part, is how the events in our individual lives, in our collective lives, become memory, history, and narrative.

In "Surviving Images," Marianne Hirsch<sup>2</sup> writes about trauma and its relationship to memory. How memory can be fragmented. Adding photographs into the mix complicates things nicely for me. I imagine all these photos from various people and places, being moved around and continually rearranged in order to speak to a memory, and then to another one. This opening up of a memory in the

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<sup>1</sup> Lisa Saltzman is a Professor of History of Art and Director of the Center for Visual Culture at Bryn Mawr College. Her work considers how loss and grief have operated in the history of visual art and culture, and the role of absence in working with such content.

<sup>2</sup> Marianne Hirsch is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. Her work is concerned with cultural memory, testimony and photography. She particularly focuses on the representation of World War Two and the Holocaust.

face of the fact-ness of a photo is strongly connected to my own work. Hirsch is writing about or around the ownership of memory, and memory's relationship to fact, when she talks about what she calls *postmemory*:

Postmemory most specifically describes the relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of their parents, experiences that they “remember” only as the narratives and images with which they grew up, but that are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right. [...] Postmemory is a powerful form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through representation, projection and creation. (9)

I was constructing my own narratives from photographs in my paintings. For some time this led me to questions concerning fact, authority, and the stories I tell, professionally and personally. I feel like I picked up a photograph one day and since then have not stopped responding. Since that first day, I have had to consider the difference between using a photograph which is familiar, and one which is not connected to me. I suppose I would first have to define the parameters or criteria for a photograph that is “mine” and one that is not.

I found some photos in a mall. A friend gave me some photos she found in a second-hand store, in an album. I have inherited photo albums from my family and could not identify the people in the photos. Sometimes I would use the photos and wonder if the people in them would approve. Perhaps the meanings I attach to photos became the stories. I used the photographs as starting points for my work, but I think there were times when they defined the contours of the paintings.



Sometimes I was figuring out whether my work could transcend the photographic source. When I was not so successful, it was usually because the photos became a fact that I could not move past, like the vast blue that contains the continents on a map.

Landscape photos worked well. The large spaces of sky or water allow for ambiguity. The structure and points of specificity had to be constructed. Alternatively, I might choose a photo for the people sitting around a table and what I thought was going on between them. Once I worked that out on the canvas, I would fill the space. Looking back, I think sometimes it is more meaningful to just leave some spaces empty. I think it is tremendously important to understand the subtle difference between ambiguity and vagueness; between a secret and a mystery.

Much can, and has, been written about what the photograph is. In some cases, photographs are documentations, fixing image and detail. Walter Benjamin was concerned with mechanically reproducible images, both photographs and film. Moving images do not allow the viewer time for contemplation in the same way a painting does. In film, by the time a person apprehends a single image it has changed again. The photograph has this relationship to the moving image: a freeze frame denoting an event that only happened once, but once captured holds the potential of being reproduced to infinity. I wanted to open these family photographs up, through the process of painting. Maybe I was painting a memory, maybe a story I once heard, or one I made up. I am not sure. I also considered how paintings might be in conversation with one another. When more than one painting was on a wall in a room, new narratives cropped up, and shifts in other narratives started to occur.

There is a British painter, named Anthony Green. Years ago, I saw a picture of a sketch for one of his paintings. The drawing had pieces of paper attached on all sides, sort of crawling its way to a resolution. He insists that his subjects, which are primarily his own family and life, are not bound by the edges which de-limit traditional paintings. So his own works are on irregularly shaped supports. In sort of the same way, when I am in a room with my paintings I see this remembering activity with the multiple beginnings, a way of loosening the traditional picture plane of painting. I think about several paintings in a room. Sometimes the conversation between them might change the way any of the paintings is read independently. This brings to the surface other questions about resolving things: paintings, stories, memories. It feels like I used to have to explain my paintings a lot. I would do this by talking about a flood in my home town. I spoke about it so much, it seemed that the story of it drifted away, pared down to just a reason. So I stopped telling it.

Perhaps I should introduce a caveat here. I am investigating some ideas, some questions, and I am dodging others. Years ago, my painting professor said, "You're the one who's cagy." I have this image of myself, like I am in the backyard, in the dirt, excavating some things, burying others. From a certain vantage point all you see is the upturned soil following me, dirt under my nails. My *modus operandi* resists full disclosure.

The memory/photography relationship looms large for me right now. I have been reading Roland Barthes' Camera Lucida. I heard that he wrote this after his mother died. He gives some consideration to the stilling that takes place in a photograph, and as he sees it, the death of the subject that occurs (14). He also

separates photography into the photographer or operator, the viewer or spectator and the person or thing which is photographed--the spectrum. He likes that word I think. He writes: "this word retains, through its root, a relation to 'spectacle' and adds to it that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead." (9) One time when I was looking through my grandmother's album I found a photograph of my family at dinner. There was my mom and dad, my grandmother, my sister and I. This was before my parents divorced. In the photo we are all looking at the camera and (perhaps) at the operator. There are different expressions on our faces and as I was looking at the photograph, I thought it seemed like an interesting portrait of my grandfather.

There is a question which haunts my work: why memory at all? Why do I mine the place of memory? What we remember, what we forget, these things tell us about who we are. A little bit anyway. Writer Marcel Proust spent so much of his life there, in memory. I like to think that he wanted to connect to other people who are trying to remember, who can recognise in his own struggle the process of remembering. There is a need, or at least an inclination, to remake an experience in hindsight, to produce a memory that feels closer to true than what someone else would tell. Perhaps memory contains a sort of diaspora. In my own experience, only after leaving my home did I recognise it as a point of origin. Before then, the circle around Slave Lake was too large for me to see myself as within it, like discovering the earth was round.

Maybe this will not be enough. What enough is, I am not sure. I wonder if there are expectations about this paper finally surrendering the answer to what the content is.

Author Susan Sontag writes in her paper “Against Interpretation”: “Real art has the capacity to make us nervous. By reducing the work of art to its content and then interpreting that, one tames the work of art. Interpretation makes art manageable, comfortable.”

Why would I rather paint around memory than write about it?

This feels clumsy, writing about this process. There is no one authoritative version or any one way to translate the material practice so that it is naked, just the bare facts. I am not looking for one anyway. Sometimes I think the act of painting is like saying “I remember.” Maybe it speaks specifically to a very fragile space between the memory and the story. Maybe I have said too much. Naming this space or this reason is crude and vulgar and makes me feel dishonest.

I am thinking about painting Kohkom’s house. Or my backyard. Either way, it may take more than one painting. There might be a story in there, maybe two or three, and a dream. I am still resisting full disclosure. Writer Thomas King<sup>3</sup> in his paper, “How I spent my Summer Vacation: History, Story and the Cant of Authenticity,” writes:

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas King is a novelist, short-story writer, screenwriter, photographer. He currently teaches English and Theatre studies at the University of Guelph. His work makes use of narrative devices to consider contemporary Native issues, including the current role of history within Native cultures in North America.

We like our history to be authentic. We like our facts to truthful. We are suspicious of ambiguity, uneasy with metaphor. We are not concerned with essential relationships. We want cultural guarantees, solid currencies that we can take to the bank. (249)

I came this far and I thought about what I could do with this. I think maybe what I have to offer are stories. They are stories that come from my own past, though that's not entirely true. They come from stories I heard: I keep them and then I gift them. I hesitate. I believe they have a value that is not always understood.

In a graduate presentation, I spoke about my interest in memories, and in photographs, how those two speak to one another. Someone in the audience said she wanted to hear more about the paintings. I have thought about how I could tell her. I believe I can approach an answer by putting the photograph aside for a bit. Not completely, not forever. Maybe, as another friend put it, putting the photograph down allows me to get to the "*punctum*" of the memory. *Punctum*, as Barthes puts it:

[...] designate[s] this wound, this prick, this mark made by a pointed instrument: the word suits me all the better in that it also refers to the notion of punctuation, and because the photographs I am speaking of are in effect punctuated, sometimes even speckled with these sensitive points; precisely, these marks, these wounds are so many points. This second element which will disturb the *studium* I shall therefore call *punctum*; for *punctum* is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole—and also a

cast of the dice. A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me, (but also bruises me, is poignant to me). (27)

When I look through the photographs I do not know exactly what I am looking for other than to say I am looking for the thing in the photo or photos that will stop me. It is usually not anything personal or sentimental, rather it is emotional. That person is lying on the grass, parallel with the bottom of the photo. If I pretend I don't know the people in this other photo, they actually look creepy. Feet. I am always looking for feet in photographs. When I decide to put the photographs down I have only to remember things or situations that hold that same element in my memory. The search becomes different.

In the absence of photographs this word *punctum* still has meaning for my work. It speaks about that thing in memory that stings me. I have not laid out a clear path, but as I go, there are points that call for my attention. There are parts of experiences I have marked. I think of a poem by Jane Hirschfield. Part of it reads:

See how all flesh grows back across a wound, with a great  
vehemence, more strong than the simple untested surface before. There's a  
name for it on horses, when it comes back darker and raised: proud flesh,  
As all flesh is proud of its wounds, wears them as honours given out  
after battle, small triumphs pinned to the chest. (34)

I started to leave the canvas bare. When there were empty spaces in those paintings, they felt like brevity. When I started to paint, the work was in part stopping. Just stopping. They felt like an unstoried memory. But in other paintings when I covered up parts, the feeling was different. I got to a point when I discovered

that the process of that painting might have been in part to get at only certain moments. So I painted over parts. I was holding something back or editing. Like the difference between saying I do not want to tell you about my content and saying I want to not tell you about my content.

Now I said I tell stories, and most of them are true. I don't think it matters. So when are the stories mine to give away? What parts are given away and what parts are kept close? I try to be careful not to confuse or conflate the original with the truth or the fact. Once I give it away it might be lifted and changed, much the way I change memories into stories, stories into paintings. Like using a teaspoon to dig dirt. I think sometimes stories can be a form of resistance. In the case of oral narratives, they can resist being made static, being archived, being a fact and maybe being irrelevant or dead. How do paintings sit beside this? Perhaps they offer something different in their thing-ness, which always exists in the present, or in the lovely complication created with the alchemy of paint -- as my supervisor, Ben Reeves, said, "the empathy with the artist's hand".

Author Jonah Lehrer, in his book Proust was a Neuroscientist, wrote about the science around memory, describing something called reconsolidation: "The memory is altered in the absence of the original stimulus, becoming less about what you remember and more about you. So the purely objective memory ... is the one memory you will never know." (85)

I was at a meeting once which left me very upset. When I told my friend what happened, he was also upset by the events. But somehow I think I was afraid of the reaction, the emotion. When I started to rationalize what happened, minimizing it, he said, "Well, you aren't lying, are you?" I could not be so sure. There were so many

of us in the room. Could we all have shared the same event, the same account? No one else seemed upset at the meeting. The alternative I was given was that I was lying.

Saying “I remember” can be a bit of an invocation. It is different than saying “this is what happened”. “I remember” is about some memory being held. It is like a physical action. You sound like you’re keeping busy anyway.

When my best friend was seventeen (I did not even know her then), her mother died of cancer. Years later her granny died. She remembers feeling anxiety, she was afraid she would forget all the things about her granny or her mother. When she is telling me this, for a while I begin to confuse which loss she is talking about. But she talked about a blanket that smelled like her granny. She put the blanket in a bag to try to hold on to that for a while. I would be willing to believe there are a lot of blankets and pillows and shirts in bags for just that reason. I know of two more such items.

In his Berlin Chronicles, Walter Benjamin wrote “memory is not an instrument for exploring the past but its theatre.” (611) Benjamin was trying to write about the city of his birth, and his own childhood. This endeavour is something he struggled with for a while. He resisted a chronological telling and instead framed his memories in vignettes of the city. I heard he tried several times to structure his own history in different ways: people who influenced him, buildings and neighbourhoods he knew. Proust is another writer concerned with his own memories and how to chronicle them. Comparatively, Benjamin chose brevity. Proust would recall all the details of



a single, seemingly innocuous experience, yet other descriptions were sliding and liquid. Proust understood that our memories were really more about us than the thing remembered. Perhaps it is not so much about our memories, but how we position them, how we connect them and string them together, almost like scaffolding, how we create the theatre around them.

I might tell a story. I might leave bits out. I might make up some parts. This is where it gets tricky. I am eager to please and if there is a request for the truth, the facts, it is difficult not to oblige. But I will resist, and you should resist asking.

British painter Howard Hodgkin says he has never painted an abstract painting in his life. He paints as he calls them, “emotional situations.” Sometimes I can see his subject or what he is getting at more clearly than at others. Sometimes his evocative titles (Haven’t we Met?, After Dinner, or Counting the Days, to name a few) are what give away his subject. His titles often suggest a memory or a past, sometimes a melancholy (well isn’t that the memory feeling?). He does not make sketches or drawings, nor does he use images as references. At times his paintings are less literal, but he makes clear, not abstract. His paintings are decidedly objects; he paints on wood small thick pieces that remind me of cupboard doors.

(Below: Howard Hodgkin's Learning About Russian Music 1999 oil on panel, private collection.)



Degas, like Bonnard, used images as visual references, sometimes the same one over and over again, tracing and repeating, the image taking on a slightly different pose each time. I can also understand that; the searching for, and the haunting of, a situation, a person, a subject. Emmylou Harris sings this line, “addiction stays on tight like a glove.” She uses it in two different songs<sup>4</sup>. And you cannot tell the same story twice anyway. I told a lovely story at a party. It was about my friend. I said, “She came to my house in a wedding dress.” Guests at the party

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<sup>4</sup> Emmylou Harris, “Deeper Well,” “Where Will I Be,” Wrecking Ball, Asylum Records, 1995

laughed and said, “Is that really what happened?” I said no. But it makes a beautiful story, and besides, a wedding dress was involved.

I don’t know what else to say. It’s like I can’t get my own head clear.

The photograph

Memory

Painting

Stories

This is such an uncomfortable process. The ideas show up, only peripherally, then just as I try to pin them down to text, they slip away again. So I will try repeating myself.

Louise Bourgeois works with ideas of memories and her own past. In the movie The Spider the Mistress and the Tangerine, someone close to her said that she could make her memories into something that would not be destroyed. Maybe this is where I come back to fetishizing, something to stand in for my memory so it will not be forgotten, will not disappear. An exercise in futility, perhaps. The anxiety around forgetting is a feeling that our own sense of who we are, our place of origin is being threatened. This perhaps suggests why this work, this research resonates so

strongly with so many people. Maybe we can become tangled up in all these stories and memories which become histories. Perhaps we need a way for all the different stories to stand, and have integrity beside all the others.

I cannot help but think that one person's trauma may be another person's barely-an-experience. What I mean is that perhaps Hirsch's idea of inherited memory may not be exclusive to trauma, and then maybe memory falls dangerously (or beautifully) close to story-telling. Well, this is not a new idea.

Thomas King talks about the ephemeral qualities of oral narrative tradition. It cannot be documented textually in the same way. A story told to you, performed for you, dances and changes and is a living thing. It cannot be pinned down but it also cannot be easily destroyed. I think painting is a bit like an anchor. It is heavy with tradition but if I am working with something as ephemeral and cagy as a memory, then perhaps an anchor is not so bad.

But first there was a flood. Everyone in my town tells this story. I was in grade five or six. We watched outside, and paced in the kitchen. The water filled the street and a man in jeans and a plaid shirt lost his hat with the wind, into the running water. He was on his way home I suppose. I do not know why we did not drive to somewhere higher. Maybe my mom did not have her car. I don't remember. It quickly became too late. We stood on the cement front step and I could feel it unsteady underneath me, almost floating. We watched as Rose came toward us. She was small and blonde and drove a red Mazda Miata. No, she swam. She came out of her car and waved her arms, the water around her collarbone. She came to help us. That was when I knew we needed help. I started to feel afraid.

Barthes talks about the photograph and death. Memory is also connected to death. Now that the experience exists only in memory, the resurrection is a drama that plays itself out. Benjamin writes about the drama of memory. He was trying to write about his own childhood in the Berlin Chronicles. He couldn't do it chronologically.

I am starting to understand something more now, the forgetting is part of the remembering. Believing something might somehow exist even though it is hidden, buried, or submerged is an act of faith. The forgetting is the necessary part for the feeling of remembering to be so poignant, like fingers in your hair.

Walter Benjamin was concerned about mechanical reproduction and what that would do to the aura of an image. When he writes of auras I think about things having their own specific history. Even more: What does a record or containment of that history look like?

Marlene Dumas is a painter from South Africa. Someone told me that Dumas works with reduction, applying paint and rubbing or scraping it off, applying more paint, and repeating this editing process. She writes: "[...] and if you're not prepared for a never-ending answer, don't ask me no questions." I think Benjamin worried about the auras. While Benjamin worries himself about auras, I make these things, these paintings, which have their own history which is evident in the mark I make on the canvas. And this is close to answering "why painting?" What a question!

What are missing here are the stories.

I told my friend about my research around memory. She told me: “Your sister remembers things differently. What you see is not what your sister sees.” She never met my sister. She wanted to tell me a thing or two about memory. She was talking about my research. She started out by telling me she had the weirdest dream. So she was telling me about her dream, but her family too. Her father left her mother when she was very young. He tried to see his daughter, but her mother punished him. “It was my punishment. We were always moving.” She was talking to me about my research. She told me stories about her father and her mother and the other woman, a two-bit Canadian. Her brothers and sister, both the living and the dead. She told me about fortune tellers, and the TV show *Coronation Street*. Sometimes it feels like people want to tell me stories. Sometimes it feels like they can’t get them out fast enough. She was telling me about standing at her father’s grave, and just when I thought she had forgotten her thread, there it is: “...But the memories are nothing compared to my brothers’ and sister’s..” Well, that’s what happens when I talk about my work: people tell me their stories.

Thomas King writes, “I tell the stories not to play on your sympathies but to suggest how stories can control our lives, for there is a part of me that has never been able to move past these stories, a part of me that will always be chained to these stories as long as I live” (The Truth About Stories 9). What I have learned about addiction is how it operates to numb and to silence. When stories start to surface in these unexpected places it is surprising. What you can discover, among other things, is that there was empty space that the story now occupies.

So I have been thinking about a painting I want to do. This one is about my backyard in Slave Lake; the trees and the highway beyond my fence. From my bedroom window I used to look out through the layer of ice on the window. I listened to the trucks going past (there is a truck stop just up the highway). I would imagine where they were going. I listened to the diesel trucks in the alley running all night in the winter. They belonged to the neighbours who either worked on the rigs or were truckers themselves.

Roland Barthes writes: "The Photograph belongs to that class of laminated objects whose two leaves cannot be separated without destroying them both: the windowpane and the landscape, and why not: Good and Evil, desire and its object: dualities we can conceive but not perceive..." (Camera Lucida 6). It is the space between object and desire, photograph and memory, that interests me. So I have this idea of what that backyard was like. But there are parts I couldn't catch in a photograph. Or in a painting. But the desire to catch it is enough. Lately there have been these blank spaces in my paintings. My work has created different struggles for me. These are the gaps, not necessarily in my memory but in my ability to articulate something, like a note on desire.

Why the bare canvas? What changes? What is the relationship with drawing? Hodgkin would say, I think, that he draws. The drawing is present in the strands of colour and paint, the composition. That seems bolder than my own notions of how drawing operates in my work. I need a tentative erasability that gives me an out and an exit point and an entry point. A pencil mark can do this while at the same time, it seems to compel me to define. It could make anything possible.

I am trying to write about my resistance. This part keeps getting erased and rewritten. I want to say something about how it is not always resistance, but desire. That feeling of desire is close to the feeling of remembering. To maintain the feeling of desire, to point to it, I must resist satisfying it. I won't tell you everything I can. I am trying to track down a memory. Get my hand to remember. As soon as a mark is made it changes what I see in my mind; kind of changes my memory. I am creating the images from nothing, and though I am even more aware of the construction of the image, it still does not fail to affect my memory. It is all there is.

As I said, I needed to set the photographs down in order to find out what they meant to me. When I started to put the photograph down, I became stuck. I was paralyzed and afraid to put the paint on the canvas. I started to draw on the canvas lightly with a pencil. I started with an image, or a memory. I was, in a way, thinking like a camera. I thought about what moment I would freeze, where the viewpoint should be from. I became tethered to the story of it, the memory. When I started with an image the process got lost. I would not allow the alchemy of the paint to tell its part. I decided, unconsciously that I would tell each memory once, and I would do it correctly, just the right way. Only afterward did I see that the very process I was stifling is so important. It is remembering; the process is all there is.

It seems like the part of addiction which is so powerful is the absence of the thing desired. To quell that desire an addict will go to dangerous places. Yet the very thing the addict craves eventually numbs. The satisfaction of the desire is where a person can stop feeling anything at all. Once you are addicted, you do not cure it, you manage it. The addiction is not in the drug, it is in the desire. That stays with you.



When I think of the addicts and recovering addicts I know I sometimes imagine all the memories and images that they carry in their brains, all the places they have taken themselves and where it stays evident on their bodies. Yet the moment of satiating the addiction is a place people have fantasies about erasing from their own physical landscape. This moment is usually not even enough of a moment to tell about. Important enough to keep secret. The need to keep it secret, unspoken, untraceable is the very thing that magnifies it. The story I heard about my birth, maybe it is on my own landscape. If it is, it is not important to me to sort out all the nuances and ways that it is and is not connected. I would rather let it be tangled up. Or make up an interesting reason of my own.

I am afraid to write about authorship. People who make things sometimes recycle imagery, recycle brushstrokes or colour palettes. When I think of Hodgkin, I think of wide brushstrokes, frames and wood. When I think of Bonnard I think of small dappling bits of paint and that woman who is forever bathing. This is how we know these painters. There is something of an authorship in that. They tell that particular story or tell it that particular way. And they can steal things too, take someone else's story and refashion it. But as Benjamin says, there is the object with the history and we are given space and time to apprehend it.

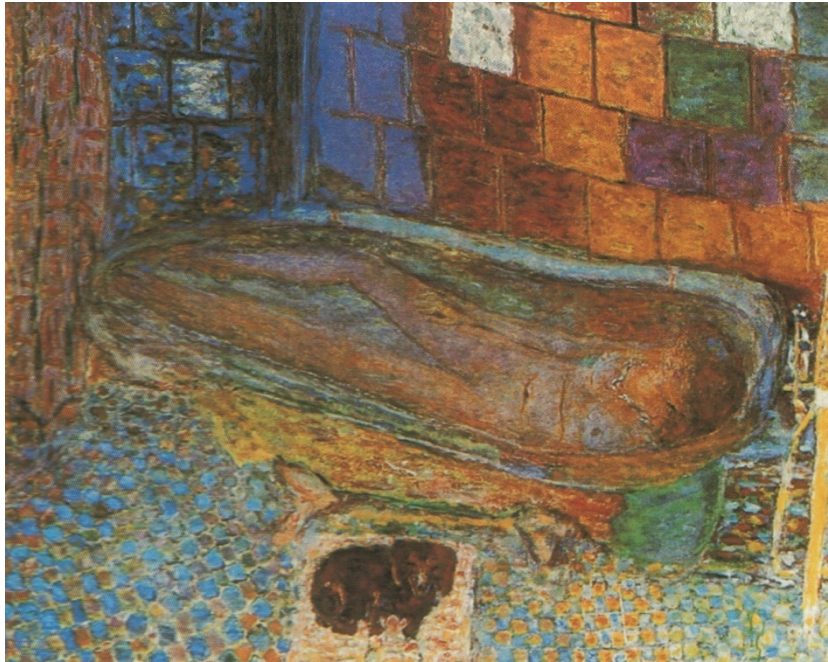
(Below, Pierre Bonnard's Le Bain, 1925 oil on canvas, 86x120cm Tate Britain, London)

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(Below Pierre Bonnard's Nu à la baignoire. 1936. Oil on canvas, 93X147cm. Musee du Petit Palais, Paris.)

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(Below, Pierre Bonnard's *Nu dans le bain au petit chien* 1941-46. Oil on canvas, 123X152cm. Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh.)



What was on my mind in the days to follow the flood is how this had happened to our town before and that the last time, they all moved. This time, my sister and I stayed in the hotel while my mom went to the house to see the damage, to salvage what she could. When we did go back I went into the basement, where it had been filled with water. I tried to imagine it. The only trace was a ring around the wall that the water had left behind. I was surprised how quickly the “I survived the Slave Lake Flood” T-shirts came out.

For my internship last summer, I worked with Emily Carr University's Vice President Academic, Monique Fouquet, who piloted the first year of the Summer

Institute for Aboriginal Teens. She took me on board with her to teach the program. It was a risk for her. I had been difficult to work with when I first arrived in Vancouver. Fear, I imagine. So I was teaching teenagers. Monique has a sense of humour. This was, as she suggested, a cathartic experience. I had to negotiate between being a student and a teacher. I thought about authority and agency, and how to communicate. There was a particular student of mine. She was sharp, and therefore a challenge. I think along the way we are all told stories about who we are or where we come from. She might have said, "The stories I was told about who I am are true, how could I also be something else?" She asked me why she should even try. I tried to tell her that I think she could only get to another place by telling another story. I hope I asked her to author a few. If I enjoyed success in this summer position it was when a student accused me of answering questions with more questions.

My aunt and my uncle were involved in this court case. It became known, reported about in papers and even on a television show. There were protests and death threats, and my uncle died. The court case still goes on though. My aunt is still involved. I am sure there will be more media reports and I guess it will be part of a legal or political history somewhere. I sometimes felt a little foolish. Maybe I still do. I don't think I ever understood the whole thing, it was complicated. I should know more, I should take a stand, a political or legal stand (something with acronyms likely). But what I experienced so far, and what I know about it are comparatively ridiculous details. I remember the big kitchen table and a glass of cold dry white wine with tortilla chips and hot salsa. I remember going to Slave Lake

from Edmonton with my aunt, forest fires making everything past Westlock a pink haze. I remember Sunil bringing us food from the Truck stop to the office. I was still in junior high school, so I don't remember if my sister testified in Ottawa, but when we went, my mom got us new clothes.

Perhaps an aura suggests an original and single history but also limits the possibility of a future or the thing having a life beyond. Perhaps there are several originals, all created in the moment, like oral narratives. But then if there is an aura, a single history of a place, a thing, a person, I would like to believe that it has an inherent value. More so, I would like to think both of these things are possible. Thomas King, in his work The Truth About Stories, finishes several anecdotes in a similar way. In one version King ends by saying,

Take Louis's story, for instance. It's yours. Do with it what you will. Cry over it. Get angry. Forget it. But don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story.

You've heard it now. (119)

Benjamin was talking about mechanical reproduction: a perfect copy that could be reproduced to infinity. But what if someone played a trick on him? What if the thing being copied shifted just a little, like the game of looking at two images and finding all the differences? In one version King ends by saying,

Take Charm's story, for instance. It's yours. Do with it what you will. Tell it to friends. Turn it into a television movie. Forget it. But don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story.

You've heard it now. (29)

I was on my way to the airport in Edmonton. I looked out the truck window at the frozen outside. I quite like the familiar snow and ice. It was silent and purple because the sun was going down, and the snow was glowing. I remembered Kohkom's house. It was empty and abandoned. My cousin Naomi took me there: "I wanna show you something." We wandered through the bush on the reserve and this house showed up. I had until then imagined that her house was brown, and maybe dark green. What she took me to was a small whitish cube. Inside it was bright and sunbleached. There was a kitchen chair. There was a light blue or turquoise plastic cup and saucer. It seems like there were patterns like flowers. "You mean they used to live here before they died? Are we allowed to be here?" I was pretty sure we weren't. But it was as though the daily activity of the house had just been stilled one day.

There is this story my mom told me. My kohkom and mosum went berry picking. I imagine them in a big, old Chevy truck (three on the tree). My mom corrects me: They never had a vehicle, it was horse and wagon, more difficult for me to picture. They are in the bush for a while, mosum and kohkom wandering to different parts. When they get back in the truck he says something to his wife. She is irritated and says, "Oh, you're talking to me now. The whole time I was out there talking to you and you wouldn't answer me." He tells her he wasn't near her. She argues, "I saw you behind me." My kohkom was legally blind since she was a young girl. My mom laughs when she tells me this. It must have been a bear. I love this

story, but I think it only works if we believe that it was, in fact, a bear. And we only have the account of a blind woman to trust for it.

I was talking to a friend about a play she is writing. She is doing work about memory too. She was struggling at first with how to thread all the vignettes she created, she transcribed, into a larger body of work. I think we have that in common. I am looking at a draft of this paper and I see an instructor's pen points all though the pages. I take heart when I think of Proust. He wrote and rewrote, in fact never seeing the process finish in his own life. As Lehrer writes it, we always inform our memories with what we know now, so the process is infinite, it is all there is.

When I was painting from photographs I wonder if at first I was using them as proof. Proof for what I am not certain. Perhaps that something was anchored in document or fact. Though I suppose the photograph is a poor substitute for a fact. When I set the photos aside (but never completely, they still sort of haunt me, which I am glad of), the first thing is that the picture plane as I understood it, began to change or fall away. I noticed how much I couldn't account for and that started to become important to me. On the simplest level, what is there gets heightened in importance by the space around it. But I like to think that the space maybe carries its own value, or substance. I wonder how the space might be a *punctum*. Like a mouth hanging open in disbelief.

Before the flood, there were warnings. My sister, my mom, and I went into the basement and piled our boarder, Rose's, clothing on top of her dresser. Thinking back it was only a gesture: The water poured in through the windows and

climbed up the walls. All that happened after we left. When my mom describes it, her eyes get big and her hands stand in for the rising water. She holds her hands flat, palm down, moving up, above her waist. What I remember was when the garbage truck came. I imagined escaping much differently. I looked at my mom incredulously, like she was making a joke. I walked down the back steps lowering myself into the cold, brown water. That was about when I understood: I was going to go through a garbage shoot.



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## Appendix A



“Installation view” Brenda Draney 2008.



“Installation view” Brenda Draney 2008.

## Appendix B

Media Documentation: CD containing visual work in support of thesis