BEYOND THE VIEWFINDER: FROM ORIGIN TO TRACE

By

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Abstract

This essay describes the final body of work produced during my MFA research. The *return* series explores the subject of personal memory by referencing family photographs to create painted works on paper. Incorporating certain aspects of the photographs while omitting others, the paintings oscillate between the familiar and the unknowable. It is this concurrence of intimacy and distance, and the potential this combination holds for evoking a particular type of desire, that are the driving concerns of this research. Questions related to what is being re-membered are addressed through themes of the 'original', absence, and spirit animals as well as through the formal techniques of tracing and layering.

I am intrigued by the capacity for certain images to engender a visceral impact that is similar to the experience of memory; to discuss this aspect of my work I refer to Roland Barthes's notions of the *studium* and the *punctum*. To discuss the potency of absence as a strategy to cultivate a sense of longing, I examine the work of painter Brenda Draney. In relation to the implications that are inherent to missing faces, I consider the writing of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.

Thinking through the simultaneously intimate and distant, I also situate my work in relation to American poet Susan Stewart's meditations on the "souvenir". Fascinated by the ability for paintings to hover between states, I discuss the gap between the visible and the signified with reference to Jaques Rancière and through the enigmatic work of painter Ben Reeves. To further my understanding of some of the ways in which memory's mercurial and archival nature can be invoked, I look at painter Angela Grossmann's use of layering and at the creation of imagined contexts of origin in the work of photographer Augusta Wood.

I intend for my work to generate an experience of partial recognition, the incompleteness of which echoes the fragmentary construction of memory and provokes in the viewer a longing for connection. Through the process of editing and embellishment, I move across time, the question of what is being recollected revising itself along the way.

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I dedicate this document to the memory of my father, Arthur Israel Tratt.

1924 – 2005

Absent but not forgotten.

Introduction

I begin by selecting a box of slides, the title and date of which necessarily inspires an initial curiosity often fostered by my own "not-knowing" of the events inferred by the inscription. I then liberate the slide from its hard plastic cage, drop it into the viewfinder and tilt it towards the light. It is through this repetitive process that the content of each murky square is revealed to me, every instance of which contains the possibility of remembrance and of connection's arbitrary and fleeting sting.

I cannot recall now what exactly compelled me to open that first box. What is clear is that I quickly became interested in the re-presentation of its contents as paintings and in what it was that I was searching for, perhaps best described as what cannot be remembered. French historian Pierre Nora suggests that, due to a decisive shift in contemporary times in which the previously yoked constructs of history and memory were wrenched apart [1], the responsibility for remembering has been transferred from the archivist as professional – intent on recording and categorizing events of national importance on behalf of church and state (14) – to the amateur/ individual, consumed with the documenting and stockpiling of personal minutiae, effectively redirecting the focus of what is being remembered from the select to the banal.

Memorabilia of this commonplace variety found its way to me by default. Shortly after our father died in 2005, the family's archive of slides was shipped to my sister, where they were stored until she moved. Fearful that the slides would otherwise be lost, I accepted responsibility for their safekeeping. They remained un-examined until shortly after my thesis research began.

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[1] In "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*" (1989), Nora outlines how "a movement toward democratization and mass culture on a global scale" (7) has resulted in the separation of memory and history, previously considered to be synonymous. That *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory, "where memory crystallizes and secretes itself" (Ibid) have supplanted the now absent *milieux de mémoire*, or real environments of memory. It is important to note that while Nora's thinking on memory and the archive has proved useful to my research, his concerns, including history's acceleration and the construction of national and personal identity using his native France as an example, are not the subject of exploration in this document.

Now an integral component of my methodology, their inclusion queries what it means to depict photographs as painted works on paper. This question, when posed together with what is being remembered, forms the overarching exploration of my practice into what can personal memory be? Out of this broad discourse on re-membering, my thesis research has focused on the theme of the simultaneously intimate and distant, the role of the personal archive and the process of translation. What is at stake is whether the paintings generate a sense of longing for connection when encountered by the viewer.

Over the course of my research, these thematic concerns have been investigated through the production of dozens of paintings, ranging in scale, varying juxtapositions and media, with the contents of this family archive furnishing the vast majority of the source material upon which the works are based. However, for the purposes of this document, I shall examine the *return* series, the final body of work created during this period, the making of which has led to a series of new material discoveries and many more questions.

Faceless Affinity

In *return VI* (figure 1), as with all these later paintings, the faces of the human figures are represented as voids. Left unpainted, they merge with the empty picture plane that surrounds them, a “bleeding” that invites alternative associations. The ontological genesis of the face and its function in constituting subjects is analyzed by French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and French psychiatrist and political activist Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Considered by both as “a whole body unto itself” (115), the face is described as “the Icon proper to the signifying regime.” (Ibid) Understood as that which accords the signifier substance, Deleuze and Guattari posit that it is the face that “fuels interpretation, and it is what changes, changes traits, when interpretation reimparts signifier to its substance.” (Ibid) Vacating that locus of identification through which subject formation is constituted, the faceless figures of *return VI* at once frustrate and facilitate recognition. By removing all facial “traits”, their “substance” effectively emptied, the space created in its absence seems to be suspended between the

Fig. 1 - Maria Tratt, *return VI*, 2017, gouache and pencil on paper, 61.5 x 92 cm

discernible and the unknowable, the remembered and the forgotten, compelling one to look elsewhere for signifiers of identity. The voids operate as traces of faces nonetheless, shaped and framed by their hair (or, as in the case of the older adult male in the upper left-hand corner of *return VI*, a hat) and a faint pencil line that delineates the jaw-line and, in some instances, the nose. According to Alejandro Zaera-Polo, the Head of The Princeton Envelope Group, a design and research unit at the Princeton University School of Architecture, "dismantling or constructing the face is a political action involving real becomings". I propose that the voids in *return VI* create a space into which viewers are liberated to invest their own imagined narratives potentially rooted in a longing for connection.

My transition from fully rendered figures and surroundings to their faceless counterparts articulated in vacant spaces echoes a similar treatment in the work of Canadian First Nations painter Brenda Draney [2]. In the 2010 *Canadian Art* review of her exhibition "Hold Still" at Edmonton's Latitude 53, author Amy Fung writes, "Draney composes a moment in the manner in which we remember—informed by what has not been represented, by what is not known." (*Aim is Important*, figure 2) In her 2009 thesis document, *Watermarks: Resonant Absences in Painting and Memory*, Draney discusses how absences might perform a dual function, serving to augment the importance of what remains while maintaining their own inherent worth. She states, "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… Like a mouth hanging open in disbelief." (p. 27) Draney's practice includes drawing, her thoughts on which I share: "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." (19)

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[2] Brenda Draney's practice explores themes of destruction and loss associated with her own personal history: the devastating 1988 flood and 2011 fire of Slave Lake, the small town in Northern Alberta where she grew up, and the effects of the Indian Act, residential schools, band membership, and Bill C-31, on her life and artistic process. However it is her use of the expanse of raw or empty canvas that I am looking at here as that is what has informed my own process and practice. In an article published in the fall of 2017 in *Border Crossings*, Draney concedes that these voids or absences are, "about the uncertainty of memory, when you remember something one time and then you remember it another time and other parts get informed and replaced and changed." Draney also states that her intension with this strategy is "to cultivate desire". (36: 69–73)

Fig. 2 - Brenda Draney, *Aim is Important*, 2009, oil on canvas, 122 x 132 cm

The material decisions evidenced in the *return* series represent the outcome of in-studio experimentation executed over the course of the MFA program. The gouache allows for a soft layering of colour that can be removed by working into it with water and creates a matt and velvety finish, at once tactile and ethereal. These properties can also be found in the nuances of the graphite. Additionally, both materials afford a high degree of flexibility, their elements remaining unfixed during production as well as after the paintings' completion, invoking a sense of impermanence similar to memory's transient nature. Through the possibility of addition and subtraction, embellishment and editing, ad infinitum, what is being re-membered remains in flux.

These ephemeral qualities are also present in the paper substrate, at once substantial in its ability to contain the presence of the figures and flimsy in its construction. Gouache, graphite and paper speak to a time and an art production that predates our electronic age, their

application in the present an attempt to reinvigorate a sense of materiality that distinguishes the paintings from the reproducibility and ubiquity of digital images.

Return VI is created by combining figures from several slides and so the experience of connection's momentary sting, a phenomenon that occurred with each slide used in the *return* series, took place multiple times. To be sure, this embodied reaction, characterized by an ache, at times resembling loss and at others joy, is difficult to substantiate. Here, French literary theorist Roland Barthes offers valuable context for this fickle occurrence. 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*; [3]… that accident which pricks me." (*Camera Lucida*, 26-7) According to Barthes, a photograph's ability to "prick" the viewer is what allows certain images to stand apart from most others whose function is purely indexical.

For instance, the male figure in the right-hand side of the painting is sourced from a box with the words "Norway – June 1971" on the front. In it, my father is caught by the camera-operator leaping out of the way of a reindeer, his gaze directed towards the animal partially visible in the lower left quadrant of the frame. The immediate visceral response triggered by the image was not because I recognized the scene, as I was neither there when it took place nor do I have any clear memory of my father from that time. Rather, it was as a result of certain elements that each consist of and invoke his "essence". Perhaps most profoundly, it is present in his arrested posture – right shoulder forward, left knee bent, his hair caught by a gust of wind or his sudden lurching out of harm's way. It is in these traces that he is momentarily restored, bridging the gap created by distance, a distance interpreted as an absence of memory, as the passage of time and in the event of death.The vulnerability of the gesture and the tenuousness of the restoration are simultaneously deeply personal and intrinsically, inclusively human. This essence is also

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[3] In "The Memory of Pictures: Roland Barthes and Augustine on Photography", Anselm Haverkamp situates Barthes's strategy of the "studium" and the "punctum" within the larger discourse of the image and its dialectical properties of "trace" and "aura" (273), the visible and the signified. Haverkamp discusses Barthes's proposition of the photograph as the paradox of the simultaneously readable and unreadable, "'things that make themselves manifest' but resist analysis" (261), a space of duality in which, Barthes would have us believe, lies the photograph's uniqueness as site of mourning, its power of resurrection and its "preservation of the absently present other." (266)

located in my father's clothing, in his button-down shirt, his V-neck sweater, and his slacks. This uniform of sorts, culturally specific and emblematic of a past era, is also what permits a sense of relation for those not acquainted with the source material, democratizing to an extent the specificity of the personal archive.

Once I have selected a slide, I then establish a loose composition. This is largely contingent on what the static poses of the figures seem to ask for – their gestures, the direction they face and the feelings they engender determine where they want to be located in the picture plane as well as how they interact with the other elements, either as individual figures or, in the case of *return VI*, as a grouping. I then cut the full sheets of medium-weight, neutral-coloured paper into smaller, more intimate sizes reminiscent of enlarged photographs. Diminutive for this reason, these experimentations have raised the question of how scaling up future iterations would impact the way in which the paintings are encountered. I subsequently project each slide onto the paper and commence tracing. [4]

It is at the point that the fragmented memories of the people that populate the paintings materialize fully formed. This process by which the figures are re-animated is at once faithful to the original *and* incomplete, mimicking the approximate reconstruction of memory. The bodies, hair and clothing of the figures are diligently traced in pencil, while their faces and their surroundings, including objects that they might be holding or otherwise engaged with, are edited out. Examples of such omissions include a clothes line, pegs and doll clothing that extends between the two children in *return VI*, the balcony on which they stand as well as the gardening tool that the adult female figure holds in her left hand, the small patch of dirt that she is kneeling in and the house behind her. I propose that it is in the painting's hovering between these two disjunctive states that a space is created in which the original source material is revitalized, a fragmented resurrection that transforms the deteriorating effects of distance on memory into the veneration of the trace (Nora, 13) and sites where new narratives become possible through the act of translation from one medium to another.

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[4] This process is similar to rotoscoping, a technique employed by animators in search of realistic action that involves tracing over film footage, frame by frame. Director Richard Linklater, who used this method in his dreamlike feature film *Waking Life* (2001), aptly described its potential as hovering *between* states.

The Intimate Distance

Fig. 3 - Maria Tratt, *return IV*, 2017, gouache and pencil on paper, 38.5 x 51.5 cm

In *return IV* (figure 3), the figure of an adult male stands in profile, facing left, his arm outstretched poised as if about to open or unlock something. To his right stands a young child, facing forward, the fingers of her right hand curled around an object that, like the man's door, has vanished, a translation that is concurrently accurate *and* partial. This is also the case with the painting's palette. Drawing on culturally specific associations with certain historical periods,

the colours in the *return* series are at once faithful to the source material and inexact. Selections are determined in part by what is found in the slides, the man's gray trousers, as well as by how certain complimentary colours operate together, the "auburn-ness" of the child's hair was augmented to play off of the blue of her jeans. Altered in certain instances to produce a cohesiveness in the paintings and at others to emphasize a particular element, as with the child's red clogs, these modifications nevertheless remain true to an identifiable palette indicative of the era from which the slides originate.

Here Susan Stewart's meditation on the "souvenir" (citation) has proved seminal in thinking through "the transference of origin to trace, moving from event to memory and desire" (134-5) and what that might mean for the production of narratives on memory and on longing. In chapter 5 of *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Stewart examines how the "souvenir" cultivates an always frustrated desire for the "authentic" experience. She defines the souvenir as a partial recovery of the original experience it both supplants and embodies, an approximation whose differences and inexactness generate narratives on longing: "There is no continuous identity between these objects and their referents. Only the act of memory constitutes their resemblance. And it is in this gap between resemblance and identity that nostalgic desire arises." [5] (145)

I propose that it is in the absences as well as in the presence of traces that the *return IV* operates similarly to Stewart's souvenir. Mimicking distance in their denying a frame of reference, the figures' lack of faces and the empty landscapes can be understood as impoverished aspects of the original slide. Conversely, what is re-membered – the bodies, their hair and clothing – is a largely loyal approximation of the slide, demonstrating an intimacy with its source.

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[5] Stewart's focus is literature and as such describes ideas that lie outside of, but are not unconnected to, artistic practice. It is her thinking on the incomplete nature of the souvenir and its connection to narratives of longing and of origin, that remain the critical points for my thesis research. Stewart writes, "The souvenir replica is an allusion and not a model; it comes after the fact and remains both partial to and more expansive than the fact. It will not function without the supplementary narrative discourse that both attaches it to its origins and creates a myth with regard to those origins." (136)

Otherwise expressed as a trace, sample or fragment of the now-distanced original experience, the painting attempts to provide enough information to foster a degree of recognition. Combined, these gaps and traces endeavour to permit embellishment in the form of narrative(s) composed after the fact that sit on top, if you will, of *both* the original and the painting.

I experienced this paradox of the concurrently intimate and distant in the making of this series. The closeness stems from my deeply personal and detailed engagement with a familiar and familial subject and the remoteness from the passage of time between the moments when these memories were first documented and the present, many decades later, when I translate them into paintings. I also felt an affinity with the painting and drawing processes, in the richness of the gouache and the immediacy of the graphite, though this was frustrated by my own separation from the original elements, people and the emotions that I was trying to resurrect.

Though Stewart's souvenir broadened my understanding of how the simultaneously intimate and distant functions to invoke a sense of longing, the making of the paintings also exacted a reversal on the intended trajectory of the souvenir, moving instead from memory to event. Operating as original objects that afford an authentic experience when encountered, they supplant their source material. Initially generated by a singularly personal archive that is denied the viewer, the intimacy and distance provoked by the paintings's gaps and traces invites associations with other, similarly mercurial histories, potentially querying both the banality and the poignancy of memory's composition.

In *The Future of the Image*, French philosopher Jaques Rancière considers the relationship between images and narrative discourse, between what is visible and what is signified. He describes the artistic image as an integral tethering and untethering of the sentence that gives it flesh, linking it to something greater than what is merely visible, and the power of rupture contained within that image (46). He calls this paratactic image a "sentence-image," (citation) whose power is located in its ability to simultaneously resist and reveal meaning. In *return IV*, the paired figures of the adult male and the youngster function as a symbol for the parent/child relationship. The muted tones of their clothing, their hairstyles, their "whiteness" and the figure of the bull all operate as signifiers of a culturally specific North-Western heritage originating from a recognizably bygone era, united on a picture plane. The gaps, on the other hand, attempt to

frustrate expectations of a linear and cohesive meaning created by those carefully articulated components.

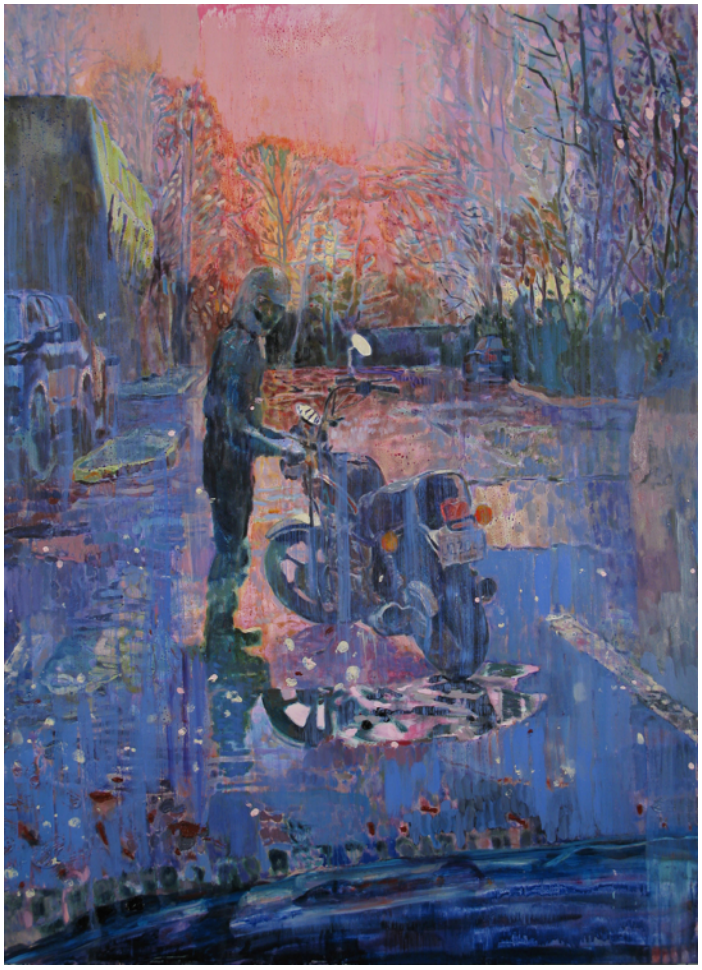

Fig. 4 - Ben Reeves, *lot*, 2015, oil watercolour and acrylic on canvas, 180 x 130 cm

The paintings of Canadian painter Ben Reeves deploy, among other strategies, the materiality of the medium to create just such a concurrence of clarity and opaqueness. In *lot* (figure 4), a lone figure stands beside a motorcycle in a parking lot. A pink and orange sky suggests that is either dawn or dusk and, from the light, shadows and reflections, we can also determine that it has rained and perhaps continues to do so. These elements serve to produce an ambiguity that also suggests a disruption and a veiled narrative or secret. What is not visible but rather signified is a hallucinatory essence evoked by the way in which figure and ground blend and blur and in the work's hovering between beginnings and endings.

In *return V* (figure 5), three elegantly dressed figures occupy the upper two-thirds of the image while a single hare, sketched in pencil is tucked into the painting's bottom left-hand corner, seated in profile with its right eye trained on whatever lies outside the painting's borders. The faceless human figures are united by their attire and their proximity, but also alienated from one another, their postures suggesting a pre-occupation with their own immediate circumstances.

Fig. 5 - Maria Tratt, *return V*, 2017, gouache and pencil on paper, 38.5 x 51.5 cm

The man, uncomfortably close to the painting's right-hand edge, is in mid-stride, his head bent, hands help up to his ears, while the woman in the centre appears fixated on her dark green skirt and the female figure to the left wrings her hands as she looks outward, the only human figure to actively engage the viewer. All four figures are suspended in empty space. Potentially disarmed by the recognizable traces found in the figures, what is left out is meant to thwart a total apprehension of the fragmented scene, coaxing the viewer to search the painting's remaining elements for alternate signifiers. Divorced from a specified identity and location, these traces aim to furnish clues that suggest possible narratives connected to a culturally defined time and place, to family and to childhood. As Stewart offers, "The souvenir… must also be restored through narrative and/or reverie. What it is restored to is not an 'authentic', that is, a native, context of origin but an imaginary context of origin." (150)

This notion of an "imaginary context" rooted in childhood remembrance is explored in the photographic practice of American artist Augusta Wood. Wood creates her unique images by selecting from among her enormous collection of family slides, projecting multiple images

Fig. 6 - Augusta Wood, *Garden (1976, 2012, 2013)*, 2013, chromogenic print, 121 x 210 cm

layered one on top of the other onto the wall of her studio and then photographing the composition. These remnants of architecture, family and childhood are described by Leah Ollman in a 2014 *L.A. Times* review: “People and objects repeat themselves, stuttering across time. Internal rhymes and clues, triggers, puns and poignancies turn these ordinary domestic scenes into something more broadly interesting: vigorous assertions of memory's nature as construction, projection and echo.” In *Garden (1976, 2012, 2013)* (figure 6), as with her other photographs, we are witness to the otherwise impossible, characters represented at different moments in their lives all at once, mimicking memory’s nature in its compression of time. Ollman asserts that the, “veracity-cum-emotional realism” that these combinations achieve are otherwise unattainable by their individual components.

Time's compression is also explored in the *return* series. It can be experienced in the trace of the original as well as in the absences that deny specificity, engendering in the moment a longing for the authentic experience located in the past while holding a place in which a narrative can continue to unfold into the future. The work strives at this brief rapprochement by offering up re-membered fragments of figures, synchronously unrecognizable and representative of culturally specific archetypes. It is in this metaphorical “re-attachment” of limbs, in their partial re-membering and recuperation, that memory’s inexact and reiterative construction is implied.

Spirit Guardians

Fig. 7 - Maria Tratt, detail from *return VI*

Synthesis is also attempted by combining these family figures with their daemon/spirit animals, embellishments that are indicative of a heritage that sits alongside the slides in which they do not appear. These animals are symbolic of the Nordic folklore of my childhood. Here I am thinking of folklore as a form of memory, a means of telling the self and of contextualizing that self within a lineage and a history that is passed on orally and therefore hinges on a repetition that is synchronously true and approximate. These animal embellishments offer the possibility of additional signifiers, hinting at the notion of pluralism and giving rise to the question of what that diversity might mean for the fostering of narratives on longing.

The animals that inhabit the *return* series include reindeer, wolves, hares, a bull and, in the case of *return I* and *return II* (figures 8 and 9), two lambs and a horse. These daemons, taken from the Danish dæmon, are understood here as guardian spirits intended to function in the tradition of Philip Pullman's fantasy trilogy *Dark Materials*, where they manifest as external physical aspects of a person's soul and/or character. In *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds: Ways of Telling the Self*, British novelist Marina Warner discusses Pullman's books writing, "…his

Fig. 8 - Maria Tratt, *return II*, 2016, gouache and pencil on paper, 38.5 x 51.5 cm

trilogy reveals clearly how literary adventures with metamorphosis have now fashioned a new, compelling way of presenting the self, as constantly shadowed by another, an unconscious incarnate, in animal shape." (207) Though Warner's focus is literature, her ideas are nonetheless valuable in thinking through the presence of the guardian animal spirits in the painted works on paper, especially as her ideas speak to larger, more universal concerns with respect to the postmodern impact of pluralism on subject formation. Warner clarifies, "I would suggest that the template lies, again, in models of consciousness, and is nourished by the

growing fallout from such concepts as the subliminal self, with its connections to spirit voyaging, to revenants, and teleporting souls, to animism and metempsychosis, to a vision of personal survival through dispersed memory, in life and in death, rather than to Freud's unconscious, and its hopes for potential individual integration.” (209)

In *return I*, daemons manifesting as lambs accompany the figures of two small girls. Rooted in the ancient customs of Norse and Greek mythology, “these daemons possess the power of protean metamorphosis during the years of childhood, but once adulthood is reached the

Fig. 9 - Maria Tratt, *return I*, 2016, gouache and pencil on paper, 38.5 x 38.5 cm

daemon acquires fixed form," (207) assuming the appearance of the animal which the person most resembles in character. In *return II*, an adult female figure occupies three-quarters of the bottom left-hand portion of the painting. She faces forward, her head turned slightly to the left of the frame looking out, her arms relaxed at her sides. That she appears unaware of the horse in the upper right-hand corner, its front legs raised in mid-gallop towards her, does not diminish its potential for expressing and revealing aspects of her personality. Alternatively, the figure's evasion of its guardian animal can be interpreted as a physical turning away from, a rejection and a reaction to the idea of itself as fractured where pluralism becomes a symbol of a deeply desired wholeness instead. Warner states that, "with this instrumental realization of physical metamorphosis comes a deeper dread of obliteration and evacuation, of shattered and dispersed selves." (209)

Fig. 10 - Maria Tratt, detail from *return II*

As guardian spirits these animals can also be understood as protectors, watching over their human counterparts, perhaps operating as vessels for the figures' absent essence. Maintaining their vigil from a distance, both physically and through distinctions in their rendering, these animals effect a transformation on their charges. Already represented as floating in the empty space of the picture plane, their faces pale and nondescript, the figures take on a "ghostly"

aspect symbolic of the secrets and even hauntings that are often concealed and evoked by an archive such as the one from which these figures spring.

Rendered in pencil only, the animals nevertheless remain distinct from the painted figures with whom they cohabit on the common area of the picture plane. This choice to depict the animals unpainted has several objectives, though I question how inverting these material constraints could effect future paintings and their uptake.

The first of these intensions is to suggest a gap between the daemons and the human figures, one that points to the guardian spirits as being what they are, elaborations, not found in the original source material. I acknowledge that this distancing is also undermined by the similarities between the pencil daemons and the thin pencil lines that outline the figures' empty faces as well as in the survival in the finished works of some initial tracing of the figures' clothing and hair. This synchronous experience of disparity and connection perhaps signals the moment when the figures become their daemons and is similar to what Foucault described as the "common locus". [6]

The second ambition for rendering the daemons in pencil is a subtle layering. This directly references the experience of remembering, where traces of multiple memories overlap and merge and no one memory presides over another but rather supplements one another. Art historian Dr. Joanne Morra writes about a palimpsestic mode of translation in her publication *Daughter's Tongue: The Intimate Distance of Translation*. In it, she describes this strategy's potential for producing representations that "are partial and therefore not total or totalizing." (98)

Though Morra's focus is on work created by exilic or diasporic film-makers and installation artists, her ideas on visual multiplication and fragmentation offer context for the inclusion of the animals as another layer through which to interpret the human figures that enhances the reading without dominating it.

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[6] In *The Order of Things*, Foucault is concerned with the culturally experienced similarities of things. According to Foucault, resemblance is invoked through the presence of a "common locus" which permits the joining of diverse and otherwise incompatible perspectives. (xvii)

Fig. 12 - Angela Grossmann, *Smaller Than Life* (studio view), 2010, mixed media

In *Smaller Than Life* (figure 10), Canadian artist Angela Grossmann employs layering as intervention and rupture in her rendering of the human form. With this work, Grossman paints directly on top of found photographs to produce a constellation of miniature works, achieving a delicate balance and an interplay between surfaces that at times conceals and at others discloses what lies beneath, providing the figures in the original photographs with the gift of additional agency. In the *return* series, the animal daemons aspire to the same lofty goal for their human companions.

The third and final objective of the graphite guardian animal spirits is cohesion. Sketched into the paintings at a transitional point, once the human figures have been traced from the slides but before they are painted, they acquire a “completeness” long before their human counterparts, a cohesion that I suggest is sustained even after the figures are finished. This they achieve by remaining intact, no aspect of their anatomy omitted, in short with faces. I cannot help but wonder how disrupting the integrity of the animals would impact their influence.

Despite their absence of colour, this wholeness operates as a foil to the faceless figures whose souls they represent. As such, they can also be interpreted as pluralism's "other", as a compliment to the human subjects that also serves to emphasize their lack of faces, perhaps signifying how essence survives well beyond the body. These daemons often gaze out of the paintings, engaging the viewer in a manner largely reserved for human figures, those same figures who, in the case of the *return* series, have been denied that option. When combined with the human figures a connection is formed through a shared substrate, medium and treatment – a peaceful cohabitation that is also not a complete integration. Liberated from the constrictions of time implied when landscape is introduced, the animal daemons and human figures are free to associate with one another, generating a narrative constructed by what remains as well as through what is absent.

Reflections and Projections

Through the production of figurative paintings on paper I have focused my exploration into re-membering, the work striving to foster narratives associated with longing by combining media, traces and absences, human figures and their animal spirits. Though this interrogation

Fig. 13 - Maria Tratt, *return XI*, 2017, gouache and pencil on paper, 38.5 x 51.5 cm

has spanned the better part of two years, I have only begun to scratch its surface, with each new painting asking more questions than it could ever hope to answer. What do origins look like and who embodies them? How much information is enough and can more be edited out? Are the traces that remain sufficient to render relevant these constructed personal memories for those not pictured in the source material?

When working in the semi-seclusion of my studio space, the *return* series represented the culmination of my practice-driven research. Following the group exhibition and the presentation of eight pieces from that series, my thinking has shifted, with the work now operating as outlines for future chapters.

Conversations with visiting artists, curators and colleagues support scaling up new iterations and I am considering working at twice the size of *return VI* (61.5 x 92 cm), the largest painting exhibited. I see this approach as a way to heighten the sense of absence in the paintings and enhance the already floating quality of the figures that occupy them. I also propose shifting from miniaturized figures, small enough to be experienced in their entirety even when standing very close to them, to figures that are encountered corporeally. I believe that this will influence their apprehension and I am keen to explore how it will impact the work's thematic concerns of intimacy and distance.

Increasing the scale of the figures potentially brings to bare certain techniques that, until now, I had reserved for my work as a scenic artist in theatre. Owing to a lack of wall space, soft and hard backdrops of varying sizes are generally painted on the ground, a constraint that requires that I negotiate the distance by taping brushes to bamboo poles. I am thinking about using this method as the work becomes more unwieldy and I wonder if it will afford the work a new looseness.

Wanting to continue to work with water-colour paper, I anticipate limitations with regards to the availability of larger sizes. Serendipitously, the process of Vancouver-based interdisciplinary artist Lyse Lemieux offers me a potential solution. To meet the large-scale demands of her practice, Lemieux often creates a single image out of multiple pieces of paper. Adopting this approach in my own practice introduces other nascent possibilities, including the option to create irregularities, ruptures and cuts in the figures.

The empty spaces surrounding the human and animal figures seemed vast when working in the studio. That experience is perhaps the result of having created each painting separately, however, I suspect that it is largely due to my own intimate knowledge of all that exists in the original slides and all that has been edited out of the paintings. Such breaches include the wrought iron and mesh fence that snakes through the centre of the frame to the left of the children in *return I*, the doll in the older girl's right hand and crowd in the distance.

Displayed as a body of work on the white walls of the gallery, the paintings expertly lit with ample room in among the works of my peers, the figures of the *return* series felt paradoxically trapped on their otherwise blank surfaces. This feeling of confinement might also be a consequence of the closed lines or "borders" that delimit the human figures and their spirit companions and I propose breaking more of the graphite contours and the gouache brush strokes in future paintings. I understand these planned ruptures as a method for activating the negative space between and around the figures and for inviting a more integrated figure-ground relationship. I am curious to discover if increasing the instances of incompleteness will serve to strengthen the exchange between the animal and human figures as well.

I would like to build a larger, more complex vocabulary that speaks to both the failure of memory and the failure of the photograph. My thoughts involve editing out entire aspects of these figures, in addition to having them bleed to the paper's edge, and I intend on introducing more variety to the elements represented as disintegrating or empty.

The *return* series is largely consistent in its production and appearance. I plan to explore the potential of "inversions" as a way of disrupting my process and this prompt has liberated me to re-image the figures in a variety of new and provocative ways. The spirit animals of the *return* series are rendered in pencil only, while their human charges enjoy the animating attributes of colour. How would painting these daemons transform their ghostly presence and what alterations would it perform on the animal/human relationship? Conversely, if graphite were used to render the people, how would its ethereal qualities impact their representation and reception? As they exist now, complete with faces and eyes that confront the viewer, the spirit animals are granted an agency that will no doubt shift with these proposed interventions. At the moment, the relationship between the animal and human figures is proportional, detached and

distinct, with the human figures foregrounded in most of the paintings. What will become of their conversations if they were to touch, overlap or even obstruct one another?

All of the final thirteen paintings created during my time in the program were produced over the five months leading up to the graduation exhibition. As such, they are still very new to me, the work still very much in process. Through their making I have come to understand that my exploration is of a deeply personal nature and is not meant to demonstrate universal claims with regards to all memory, family history, or identity. I now realize that the work wants to investigate myth building as it relates to a personal archive and to my Nordic identity and the relationship between that construct and the viewer.

As I continue to think about the work in these ways, my search for contemporary and art historical references that grapple with similar concerns persists. At the moment I am seduced by the hauntingly beautiful work of Montreal-based painter Kristen Bjornrud, whose gouache and watercolour works explore community and connection through the lens of Magical Realism. As a strategy for bridging the personal and the collective, this genre offers potential for investigation in future works.

Indeed, with paintings created and unpacked revealing a multitude of intriguing propositions, material for new work seems abundant. Through the evocative and unstable methods of tracing, embellishment and re-membering, I hope to deepen my research into the depiction of personal memory and its articulation as a shared experience of the simultaneously intimate and distant.

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