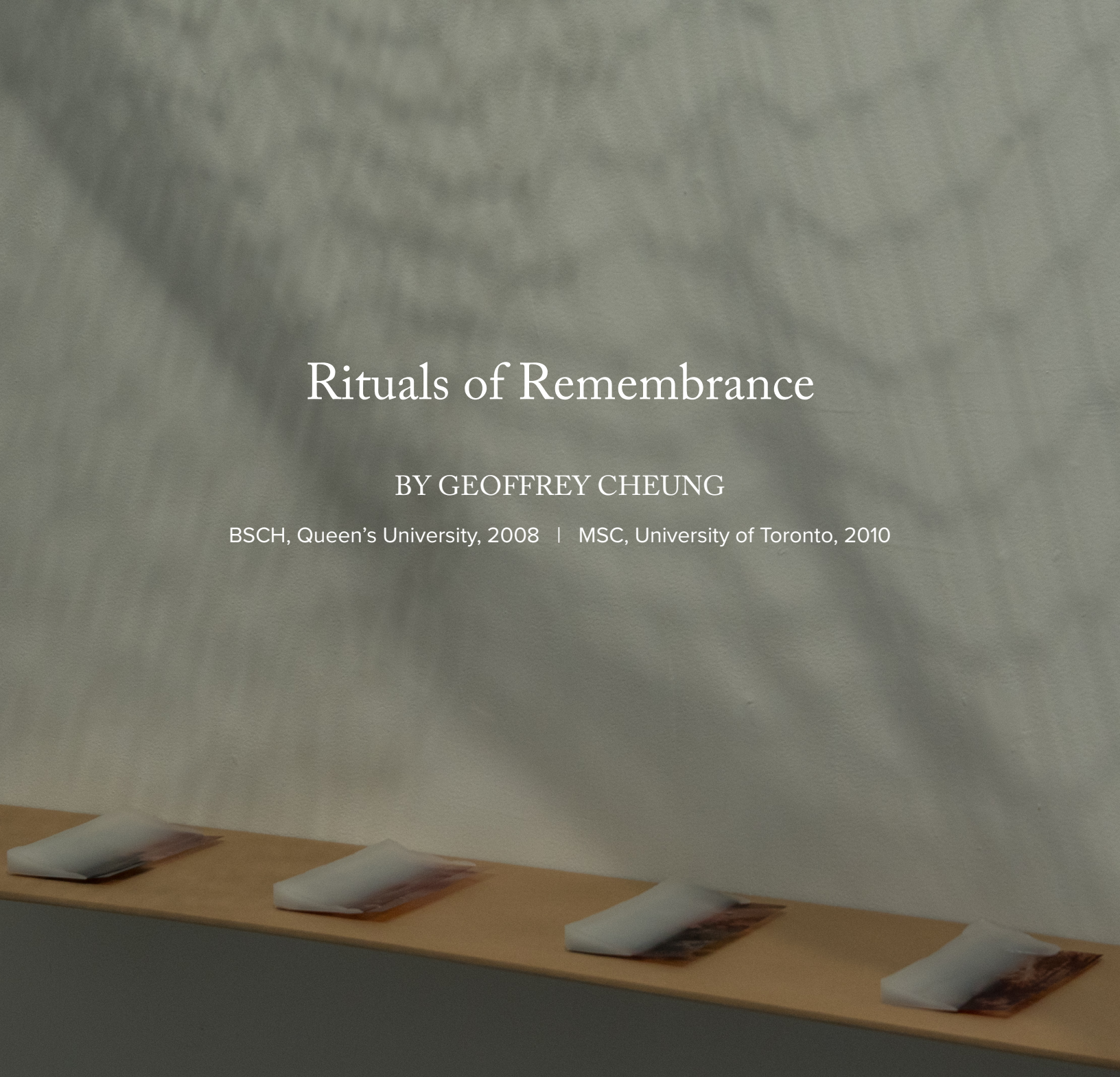

Rituals of Remembrance

BY GEOFFREY CHEUNG

BSCH, Queen's University, 2008 | MSC, University of Toronto, 2010

A thesis support paper submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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Abstract

Geoffrey Cheung's photo-based practice explores the ways we hold and transform memories and how they inform our sense of self. Inherited, intergenerational memories, such as postmemories, can often impede our efforts to actively shape our identities and to find belonging. In recognition of this, Cheung's thesis explores how rituals facilitate the reshaping of memory and how they can become an adaptive tool to renegotiate the past with the present. Photographs, photo-objects, and installations comprise this thesis which investigates how the act of layering—of materials like wax, organic matter, and digital processes—overtop photographic images are reflections of his own memory rituals. His research examines how such material strategies, which obscure and occlude the image plane, can speak of the erosion of memory and invite viewers to reconsider their own agency in memory transformation. Cheung's inquiries lead him to engage with Marianne Hirsch and Roland Barthes who both explore the role of photography and image technologies in the formation and propagation of cultural memories. Obfuscation and occlusion are also discussed in the context of Karen Barad and Judith Halberstam who both suggest non-productivity and failure as strategies for recontextualizing identity and the past. In this way, Cheung proposes rituals of remembrance as a strategy for renewal whereby narratives can be rewritten, opening up space for new relationships with the histories we carry.

Acknowledgements

I am a settler living and working on the unceded and traditional territories of the Coast Salish peoples, including the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwətaɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) First Nations. Ancestry and belonging are important themes in this thesis project, and ideas of home are deeply intertwined with the landbases we inhabit. It is my wish to build healthy connections and relationships with the people and places I encounter.

Thank you to Birthe Piontek and Gwenessa Lam for co-supervising my thesis. Your immense knowledge and guidance has been invaluable. Thank you to the community of staff and instructors at Emily Carr University of Art + Design for your commitment to my creative growth and development. Thank you to my amazing classmates for your company, trust, and shared curiosity. Thank you to my family and partner for your patience and support throughout this journey. This work is for you all.

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Introduction

The memories we carry are not limited to those we've accumulated through personal experience. We also inherit memories from our family and communities. Memories of hardships and challenges passed down through generations can profoundly inform our identities, our sense of self, and ability to find belonging. Equally, we have the ability to mould and reshape memories, whether to better fit within our personal perceptions of truth and reality or out of a desire to uphold and honour histories. My practice explores the ways we hold and transform memories—how the act of remembering dynamically, and inevitably, shifts our relationship to the past.

In my thesis, I examine how the layering of photographs and materials—like wax, organic matter, and digital processes—can speak of memory transformations and reflect my own rituals of remembrance. A primary avenue of research involves the creation of what I refer to as photographic objects, artworks that feature a central photograph which acts as a substrate for the construction or layering of other materials. *After Thought* is an installation that consists of a dozen photographic objects set against walls as shelves that sit at waist height (Fig. 1). Each box is constructed to contain a portrait of a grandparent upon which wax and organic matter have been layered to obscure the image plane (Figs. 2 and 3). Materials like chrysanthemum petals are chosen for their personal and cultural significance; burnt wood references the domestic and the ceremonial; essential oils are included for their ability to precipitate memory experiences. Their inclusion serves as evidence of offerings and ritual, and it also reflects the passage of time and the ephemerality of memory.

Fig. 2. Geoffrey Lok-Fay Cheung, *After Thought* (detail), 2023. Family photos, wax, incense ash, spent tea leaves, chrysanthemum petals, sandalwood oil, musk oil, burnt oak.

In my printed artworks, digital processes layer, alter, and build upon a photograph taken during my travels to my ancestral homes. My method is informed by meditation and mindfulness whereby ideas and memories are allowed to coalesce together, to form new synaptic relationships. This is exemplified in my piece, *Another Channel,* which I discuss further in the following chapter (Fig. 4). The photo is manipulated such that multiple forms and textures overlap, flattened onto a single image plane. Layering, in this example, creates a different kind of obscurity and illegibility. In assembling images together, collapsing them onto a singular plane, narratives co-mingle to inspire new, non-linear interpretations.

This approach to recounting the past recognizes that memory is not encountered sequentially nor organized temporally. The act of remembering is iterative

and palimpsestic. Memories change and are redefined each time we access them, while losing their definition between moments of retrieval. In accessing memories, we subject them to transformation.

Creating densely layered and repetitive artworks serves to highlight exaggerated forms of memory transformation, suggesting a point of irretrievability. Such artworks place memories secondary to the processes of their transformation. Many family photos in the installation, *After Thought,* are treated in this way. Wax obscures the image to the point that they cannot be seen.

Illegibility and obfuscation are strategies that also encourage viewers to pause, meander, and meditate. Installations such as *After Thought* or “Inadequacies of Care” (Figs. 5 and 6) invite viewers into the space via multiple points of entry. Should they engage, their bodies are guided into a performance, such as bowing down to peer into a work and to walk in procession down the row of boxes. While my thesis research does not address performance specifically, the artwork does consider viewer participation and engagement as an active ritual component of remembrance.

I choose to create artworks that acknowledge the belaboured and obfuscated aspects of memory rituals. Caring and carrying memories can be burdensome. It can feel endless and aimless. Yet, in the cycling and recycling of memory, subtle changes are refracted into our consciousness. At the heart of my research, I explore the possibility that personal, familial, and cultural histories are constantly renegotiated. Just as our relationships to others grow and change over time, so too do the relationships we form with our memories. The artworks created for this thesis address these changes and suggest the possibility of new pathways for living with the past in the present.

Fig. 3. Geoffrey Lok-Fay Cheung, *After Thought* (detail), 2023. Family photos, wax, incense ash, spent tea leaves, chrysanthemum petals, sandalwood oil, musk oil, burnt oak.

Peering into Photographs

The concept of “postmemories” is a core aspect of memory which this thesis explores. Marianne Hirsch, a Professor of English and Comparative Literature, first coined the term, describing it as the intergenerational passing on of trauma where stories are “transmitted so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right” (107). Her research focuses on the experience of Holocaust survivors and their descendants, but the principles brought forth—how postmemory is generated, developed, and manifested—offers insights into its impact upon generations of peoples across the world who have inherited trauma through their ancestors who experienced them firsthand. Hirsch argues the possibility for two distinct pathways for postmemory to develop: first, among descendants with immediate familial ties to the original memory, and second, among individuals who are only affiliated through community and cultural ties. In both cases, memory transferences are made possible because of our human ability to identify patterns and to build emotional connections with them (114–115).

Hirsch implicates mass media, particularly photography and the moving image as a key facilitator in the development of postmemory. Photographic images have transmissive properties—the ability to transport individuals into another’s experience—however imperfect or unstable such transmissions might be. With the advent of the camera, certain histories have been able to take hold in the imagination of peoples such that entire generations and cultures have come to adopt them as universal truths. The consequence, however, is that the past becomes homogenous and diluted. The nuances and individuality of experience within a collective can be passed over in favour of

Fig. 4. Geoffrey Lok-Fay Cheung, *Another Channel*, 2023. Digital print on watercolour paper, 40" x 40".

generalized narratives (115–117).

The concept of postmemory is perhaps best understood alongside, or as expanding upon, the earlier work of theorist Roland Barthes who offered an analysis of how images and photographs are transmitted and understood. Barthes's seminal text, *Camera Lucida*, breaks down the content of the photographic image into two categories, its cultural signifiers and its affective qualities. The former refers to the context of the image which includes time, place, and history. Barthes notes that these referents don't always signify something to the viewer if they do not have the cultural knowledge to recognize them in the first place. If recognized, the signifier is called a *studium* which provides the viewer access to the general meaning of a photograph. Barthes then introduces us to the term, *punctum*, which describes the affective and subjective elements of an image that pricks the viewer's attention on a personal and emotional level (18–45).

Barthes's breakdown of the photograph provides a meaningful way to discuss the nature of images and their affect. These principles then allowed him to posit photography as a modern, now ubiquitous, facilitator to humanity's relationship with time, death, and instability of memory. Hirsch expands upon these ideas and implicates the camera as the technological incubator for postmemories in contemporary life. Photographs are neither inert nor mere documentation. They are carriers of memories and catalysts of remembrance. They nurture our connection with old memories and allow for new memories to take root in our consciousness.

For this reason, photography was a natural starting point in my research. However, it bears noting that I do not invite a conventional interpretation of the

photographic image for many of the artworks shown in this paper. I use photographs as vessels for memories, some specific to my history, and others alluding to broader cultural narratives. Beyond this, I use the medium of photography as a substrate for interactions with other materials and objects to guide viewers towards the experience of memory—of the act of remembering.

At the beginning of this thesis, I was interested in drawing inspiration from my meditation practice. When meditating, I often experience remembrance as something that is multilayered, repetitive, and opaque. Sitting with a memory is to also sit with a suspension of multiple other ideas, thoughts, and histories. Though Hirsch does not describe postmemories as a lack of clarity (in fact, far from it as I will discuss in the next chapter), I was drawn to the tension that arose from the idea of it and the process of remembering as something that was highly complex and entangled. Without diving too deep into the philosophical or spiritual practice of meditation, I wanted to speak about the experience of being at ease with unease—of carrying both personal and inherited memories.

In response to this line of inquiry, I created a series of prints, such as *Another Channel* (Fig. 4), where I used digital software to collapse multiple images onto a single plane. The compositions consist of a broad range of photographs including personal and familial objects, places, and people. Upwards of six to twelve images, more than what can normally be expected in multiple exposure, are composited together onto a single plane. Digital blending techniques allow for colours, lines, and textures to intermingle, creating new unexpected forms. The series of prints explores the harmonies and discordances that arise from this intermingling of memories.

In a related avenue of research, I wanted to examine the limits of the concept of *punctums* and *studiums*—to see how they may become diluted, or to observe if there was a calculable limit to how far I could suffuse the pictorial plane with an overabundance of entry points as to make them illegible or discomforting. Anecdotally, the artworks are successful in creating an impressionistic effect that communicates the feeling of nostalgia. However, I wasn't able to capture the more discordant qualities of meditation and remembrance. Nevertheless, as a milestone, *Another Channel* and other printed artworks would guide my thesis to move beyond the pictorial plane towards the incorporation of other materials that speak to themes of memory, ritual, and obfuscation.

Fig. 5. Geoffrey Lok-Fay Cheung, “Inadequacies of Care” (installation view left), 2023.

Fig. 6. Geoffrey Lok-Fay Cheung, “Inadequacies of Care” (installation view right), 2023.

Cultural Unburdening

My thesis research into Barthes's concept of the *studium* dovetails into broader material investigations as it relates to the issue of cultural signifiers. Whether in the creation of prints, photographic objects, or video installations, I am mindful in my assemblage of imagery and materials for how they may allude to ideas of the past. My approach is primarily informed by a postmemory perspective. As Hirsch explains, postmemory is necessarily derived from the transmission of memories, and there are two modes for this occurrence: through "familial" or intergenerational transmission from one generation to the next, and "affiliative" or trans-generational transmission through shared cultural signifiers (114).

This reading of postmemories raises a few considerations. The first is a matter of ethics. Through my artworks, I am sharing familial stories to a wide audience, and I'm aware that I have no direct experience or involvement in many of these stories. I spend considerable time deliberating what and how much to share of my family's past and how much I should rely on broader cultural narratives. My secondary concern comes from a desire to better understand myself. The concept of postmemories implies that there is always a tension and interplay between what is truly known or unknown—between what is fabricated and what is real. Lastly, there is the practical matter of how to use symbols, metaphors, and other postmemory devices. Affiliative, that is non-familial, signifiers are disproportionately more affective in their ability to generate postmemories and to be recognized across a culture. This offers a postmemory-specific framework to understand how there is a tradeoff between depictions of the personal versus the generic.

“Inadequacies of Care” is an installation (Figs. 5 and 6), consisting of individual artworks discussed in subsequent chapters, that showcases a variety of visual and material strategies in response to considerations listed above. With regard to ethics, photographs of people and specific histories are often occluded. Details are obscured, but recognizable enough to still convey a generalized sense of time and place. Ceremonial detritus addresses the secondary concern by establishing a connection between myself, as the artist, and the memories on display. As it was for *After Thought,* “Inadequacies of Care” makes use of flowers, tea leaves, and incense ash as evidence of ritual and performance—of my honouring and remembering. Simultaneously, they draw attention to my complicity in the obfuscation of the memories as they further block access to the photographs hidden below. This leads us to the final matter of how signifiers are managed. By choosing to remove specificities of my personal and familial past, emphasis is placed on broader cultural signifiers, such as the scent of incense, melted wax, and haphazardly constructed domestic altar spaces.

My instinct, or the strategy, to lean onto broader cultural and cross-cultural signifiers is driven to some degree by practicality. A reality for many descendants of intergenerational trauma is that there is simply a paucity of verifiable and accurate recounting of stories. For myself, I am twice removed from the generation, my grandparents’, who held vows of silence as a result of the traumas they faced. They spoke little of their experiences to their children—my parents—who in turn passed what little they knew to me. I do not believe this disqualifies me from speaking on behalf of my predecessors, but it does highlight the unique and precarious nature of postmemories and how we speak about them.

In his article, “Representation and Event,” the art historian Matthew Biro unpacks the visual strategies employed by the artist Anselm Kiefer whose subject matter often deals with memories of the Holocaust (Biro). Citing Hirsch, Biro describes the psychological labour and postmemory formations that would have influenced post-war Germans, and he posits how this kind of environment would have influenced Kiefer. He explains how the very imagery that would have constituted the artist’s postmemories would become the signifiers displayed in his artworks. As his fellow countrymen would have inherited the same postmemories, Kiefer is able to tap into the collective imaginations of his peers by drawing upon a common pool of cultural memories. Thus, despite never having experienced the traumas of the war himself, Kiefer sidesteps the issue of individualized experience, creating captivating artworks that spoke of shared narratives and realities.

I use the same strategies in this thesis. Tea, flowers, and incense are familiar material components for many who share some aspect of my identity or ancestry. They are readily recognizable symbols that reference cultural ideas and histories, but they are also not overly coded as to inhibit cross-cultural interpretations.

Yet, herein lies a series of ironies at the heart of my thesis and, more generally, my personal experience with heritage and legacy. Underlying Hirsch’s concept of postmemory is the idea that the affiliative competes with the personal-familial. Speaking strictly about the viewer experience, the more specifically my work speaks of my family’s story, the less predictably my audience will be able to understand the reference. Utilizing more common cultural stories, however, also comes at a cost because it reinforces affiliative postmemories not only for those who view my work, but for myself as well.

Here, I argue that rituals of remembrance in themselves do not transform memories, but they open up memories to the possibility of transformation. Because I was spared the details of my family's traumas growing up, I am poorly inoculated against affiliative postmemories that are more widely circulated. Therefore, in the pursuit of honour my ancestry through rituals, I open up their memory to the more readily distributed and affective narratives that exist around me. In this case, the ceremonies that serve to celebrate memories inevitably erode the nuances that made them worth remembering.

Recalling My Own Past

The previous chapters foregrounds postmemory as the underlying concept of this thesis, and it offers insights into my own fascination with my family's immigration story—why I and others may be motivated to dwell in the past in search of creative and spiritual inspiration. It offers a compelling explanation for the tensions that I've personally experienced growing up at the intersection of different cultures. My lived experience is not only anchored by powerful memories inherited through family, but it is also complicated by cultural postmemories shared by my extended community. This experience of cultural, genealogical friction is something that I consistently negotiate in my work.

I was born to Chinese settlers on the traditional unceded territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations, also known as Vancouver, British Columbia. Here, I grew up as a queer Chinese Canadian in a three-generation household. I was brought up with stories of the Sino-Japanese war and of my family's exodus from China during the Cultural Revolution. However, these stories hardly ever came from my grandparents who experienced them firsthand. They were imperfectly filtered through members of my family, including my parents and a handful of aunts and uncles who resided in North America. The gaps and details of this past were then filled in by limited overseas media.

After the last of my grandparents passed away, my family found letters to unfamiliar individuals back in China. Unbeknownst to everyone on this side of the Pacific, not-so-distant relatives still lived and resided in the cities of Beihai and Shanghai. After

some sleuthing, my parents and I reunited with many of them, and in doing so, my concept of family was blown wide open. I was now hearing first-hand, for the first time, deeply intimate and personal stories from my newly expanded family's past. I was suddenly contending with an onslaught of familial postmemories that didn't always fit with my sense of self which had, up until this point, been largely constructed from affiliative postmemories.

Speaking philosophically, my artworks are not meant to be memoirs or retellings. They are about my experience sitting at the confluence of new ideas, stories, and relationships. They speak about letting go of old incompatibilities and the acceptance of new incongruences. They are about the feeling of helplessness and the hope of new potentialities. From a Buddhist perspective, of which I do ascribe, it's about being present in the void of infinite possibilities and the quiet observation of transformational unfolding. This thesis only aims to examine the aspects of this experience where rituals and ceremonies coincide to facilitate the transformation of personal stories and familial histories.

For my thesis research, personal experience is an important source for critical reflection. In this sense, my art practice is autotheoretical. The term "autotheory," as defined by Lauren Fournier, describes a self-reflexive method of critical inquiry supported by an "integration of theory and philosophy with autobiography, the body, and other so-called personal and explicitly subjective modes" (7). By studying the way I engage with memories, I am inquiring into the nature of memory access, transmission, embodiment, and transformation for the purpose of creating artworks that truly represent my personal and familial practices of remembrance. Artmaking is a continually self-reflexive process,

Fig. 7. Geoffrey Lok-Fay Cheung, *Florid Scale*, 2023. Digital print on watercolour paper, 24" x 20".

and the artworks themselves enable me to engage in dialogue with fellow Chinese diaspora who may share my experiences in some small or major way.

To reiterate, my artworks are not concerned with the recounting of specific memories. Rather, their aim is to portray the act of recollection and my personal experience of that action. *Florid Scale* (Fig. 7) seeks to assert this position in its composition. A traditional Chinese vase containing flowers is placed overtop a photograph. The vessel, representing culture and affiliative notions of identity, is centrally placed in the frame, whereas the flowers and photograph are either cropped or occluded. The piece speaks of the cultural disruption of the personal and the familial—the weight of postmemory as an interference to remembrance. It also questions the complicity of the hand of the assembler—whether the artist or the ritual participant—in the silencing of memories.

Many people might find this to be an uncomfortable topic, but it is imperative that we make room for these discussions. It is my belief that the sociohistorical and psychological trajectories of the Chinese people over the past century has not allowed us to adequately acknowledge, let alone heal from, the traumas and challenges that persistently haunt our collective memories. My position is neither to condemn nor condone the actions of the past, nor their shadow over the present. By sharing my own postmemory experiences, I wish to break the silence that, in my belief, only leave our wounds to fester.

Rituals of Remembrance

Meditation, ceremonies and other repetitive acts are some of the ways we connect with the past. I refer to them as rituals of remembrance in my artwork, I use a variety of methods and materials that have a layered or repetitive quality to express my own memory rituals. In *After Thought,* I used layered wax and repetition of forms (Fig. 1). *Another Channel* is made up of layers of digital photographs (Fig. 4). More obliquely, *Florid Scale* is compositionally layered, or stacked (Fig. 7). Across all these, I aim to capture my rituals—my performances of meditation and ceremony in the capacity of both a practitioner and an artist—within the materiality or visual content of the final pieces. Equally, I strive to use installation, compositional, and display techniques that encourage viewers to participate with the artwork in a bodily manner as a way to emphasize the performative aspects of ritual.

As part of my thesis research, I studied artists who investigate similar themes of memory, work with installation, and reference photographic traditions. These artists offer unique perspectives into how memories can be transformed and what such transformations may yield. Crucially, these artists create installations that invite different kinds of audience engagement, some preventing access to memory and others enfolding them into acts of remembrance.

In her work, *An Archive of Rememory*, Emma Nishimura confronts her viewers with a large wall lined with long shelves, each holding a series of small similar-sized objects (Fig. 8). Viewers who move in for a closer look find that each bundle is wrapped with a photograph, carefully folded and moulded around what could be stone (Fig. 9).

Fig. 8. Emma Nishimura, *An Archive of Rememory: 2018 Installation View I*. 2018, *Emma Nishimura*, https://www.emmanishimura.com/an-archive-of-rememory. Accessed 1 Dec. 2023.

The artist reveals that while these bundles were formed around compacted packages of sand, they are drained of their contents before display, leaving only the appearance of weight and volume. Nishimura writes, “Thinking about the weight of memory and the stories that are passed down from one generation to the next (and the stories that are lost as well), this body of work explores the idea of what it might look like to package and archive memory” (Nishimura). On one level, the trope of the past as burden is reinforced; however, the meticulous wrapping and emptiness of the bundles invite a deeper reading.

Nishimura’s work draws on her family’s history as Japanese-Canadians and their experience living in internment camps during the Second World War. Each bundle

Fig. 9. Emma Nishimura, *An Archive of Rememory: Kay age 17, 1937*. 2017, *Emma Nishimura*, https://www.emmanishimura.com/an-archive-of-rememory. Accessed 1 Dec. 2023.

reveals a worn image, further fragmented and made inaccessible to the viewer as the photographic material itself solidifies into its current form. Nishimura's work addresses the transformation of memories, and our relationship to those memories once they are sedimented in the present. Viewers are left to consider the emptiness of the vessels. The orderly arrangement speaks of an archive, laden with powerful histories given their weighty appearances. Yet, their hollowness speaks of illusion. The weight of the past exists only in our perception.

In my installation, *After Thought*, I address similar issues of memory transformation as a function of time. The work features a series of boxes arranged in a

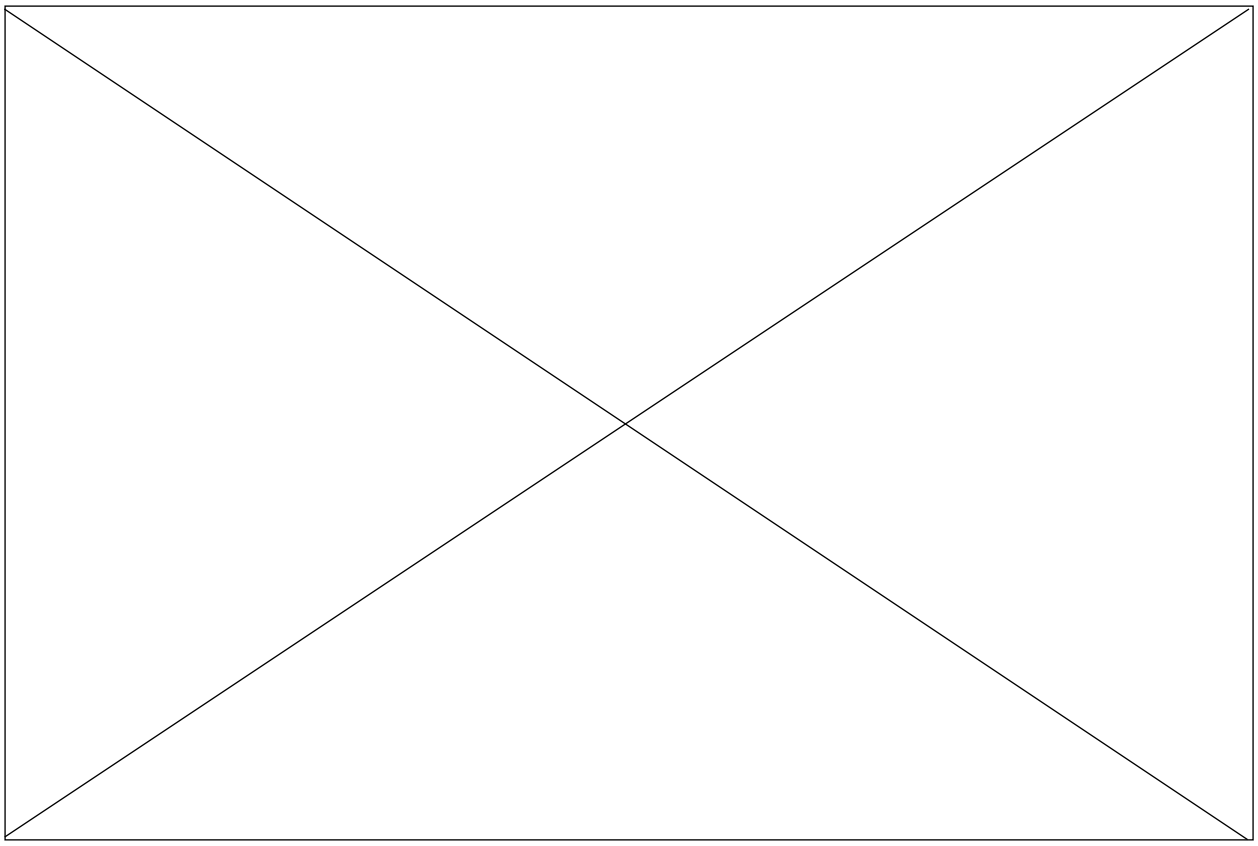

Fig. 10. Idris Khan, *Seven Times*. 2010, *Victoria Miro*, https://www.victoria-miro.com/artists/14-idris-khan/works/artworks13143/. Accessed 23 Nov. 2023.

row at waist height, each jutting horizontally from the wall (Fig. 1). The boxes are made from burnt oak, and each contains a family photo buried under wax, incense ash, chrysanthemum petals, and spent tea leaves (Fig. 3). Viewers who choose to lean in for a closer look may get wafts of sandalwood and musk. Walking down the row of containers, the accumulated layer of wax and offerings gets progressively thicker, signifying the passage of time and the ritual occlusion of memory (Fig. 2).

Unlike Nishimura's *An Archive of Rememory*, there is a gradual temporal progression within my work. Nishimura's wall of wrapped bundles addresses time as binary. The photographic image represents a universal concept of the past, and the folding represents our capacity to carry memories into the present. Tension exists from

the juxtaposition of wrapping, a protective gesture, and the fragmentation of the image we are meant to hold dear. In my work, the density and thickness of wax increases from box to box across the length of the installation. The quantity of ritual detritus is gradual and measurable, and it emphasizes the artist's complicity in the erosion of memory. Nishimura posits memory transformation as binary. In her work, time is the primary culprit, and the artist's hand can be excused as a gesture of care towards something already lost. Conversely, in *After Thought*, the progressive accumulation of wax implicates the artist as an accomplice to time; the more we try to honour our past, the more we irrevocably alter our relationship with it.

Another point of departure between my work and Nishimura's relates to the way our installations are activated by viewer participation. In both installations, the artist's presence—their hand and their acts of care—are embodied within the materials of the work, providing viewers a foil to reflect on their own memory rituals. Beyond that, viewers encountering the artworks are guided into two very different performances. In Nishimura's *An Archive of Rememory*, the arrangement of long rows overtop each other leads viewers to walk along its length and to adjusting their height to peer at images above and below. Viewers are encouraged into a search pattern, accessing points along the archive sporadically, occasionally landing upon moments of relative clarity against an imposing catalogue of fragmented memories. In my piece, *After Thought*, photographs held in wooden containers are placed at regular intervals along a corridor. Each is intentionally placed at waist height so that viewers need to bow to peer into them. The motion of bowing, a gesture of respect, precedes their access to a memory. Should they proceed along the length of the installation, they will see increasingly thicker build-up of

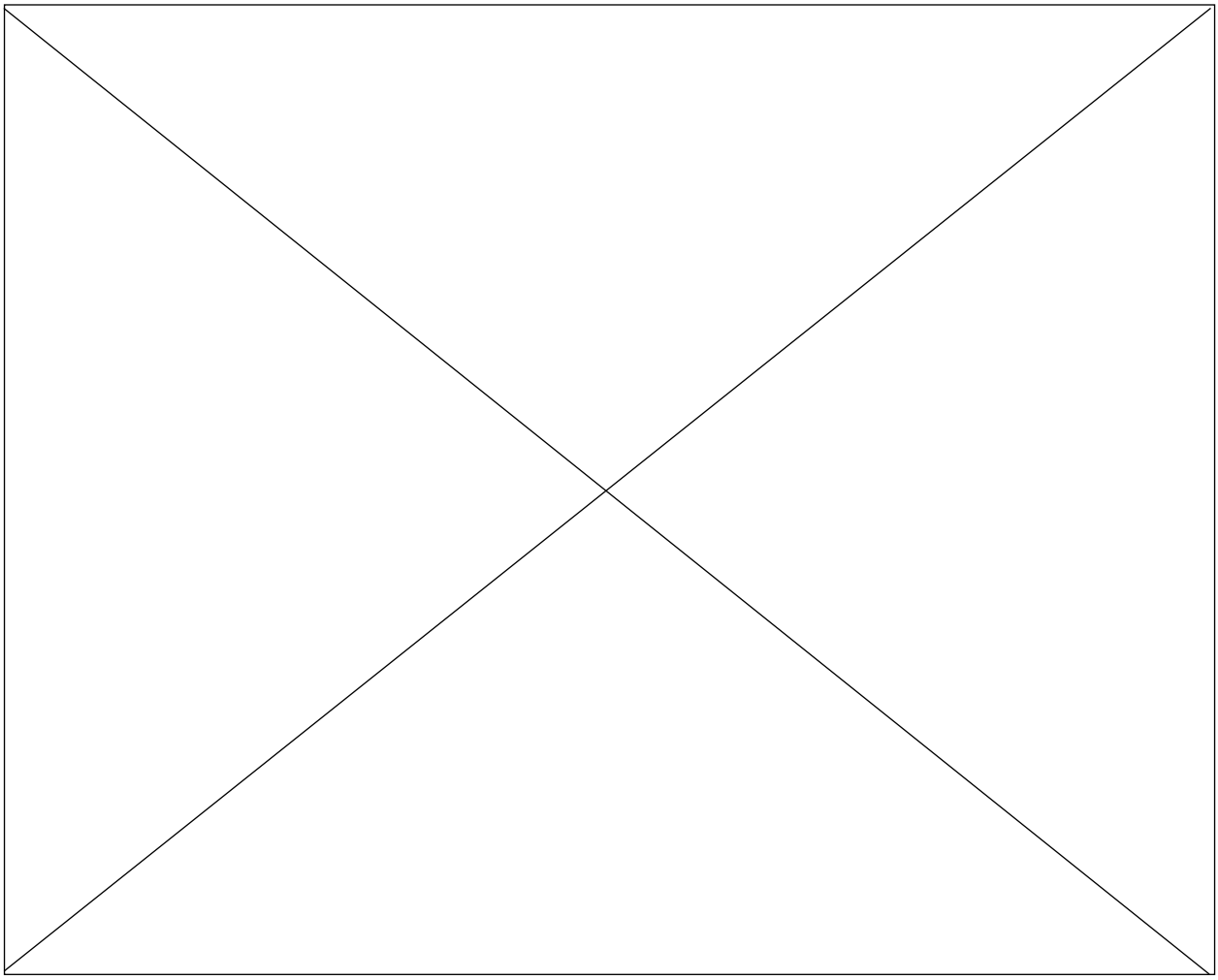

Fig. 11. Idris Khan, *every… page of the Holy Qur'an*. 2004, *Victoria Miro*, https://www.victoria-miro.com/artists/14-idris-khan/works/artworks5491/. Accessed 12 Dec. 2023.

wax across the image surface. The walk is akin to a temporal procession, encountering each memory as moments along a passage of time.

Idris Khan offers another study for comparison. With his sculptural installation, *Seven Times*, Khan presents an entirely different approach to viewer engagement. The installation is comprised of a hundred and forty-four steel cubes, arranged precisely as a grid to cover a surface area identical to that of the Kaaba, the central structure in the Holy Mosque in Mecca (Fig. 10). Khan imbues the piece with layers of physical and symbolic

meaning. Excerpts from the *salaat*, daily prayers to be performed five times by devout Muslims, are sandblasted five times across the surface of the cubes, rendering them illegible. Ritual wears away at the surface, charging each cube with personal, spiritual meaning. Yet, as a whole, the installation subsumes the individual. Slick and oiled, precisely cut and arranged, it transports us right into a modern industrial Islamic heartland.

Encountering the piece, viewers will first take in its abstract and minimalist form. Moving in, they are then invited to consider how the personal ebbs against the totality of the experience. Regarding this experiential aspect of *Seven Times*, Art historian Gus Casely-Hayford writes, “It is this awareness of that sense of interconnectedness that is sought, to commune through prayer with infinity, through repetition to build an understanding of self in relation to others, which connects Muslims over geography and time” (Casely-Hayford). Walking around and into the piece, viewers enter into a pilgrimage and become integral to its activation. Someone who journeys in becomes a participatory subject, a component collapsed as a layer into the work.

Unlike Nishimura’s *An Archive of Rememory*, *Seven Times* demands a very different relationship with its viewers. Nishimura’s installation is primarily experienced dialogically, acting as an archive or a map for self-reflection. Khan’s installation is insistent on viewer participation. Navigating through *Seven Times* is to let go of individuality as it becomes enfolded into the greater shared spiritual experience, the central subject and theme of the artwork. From this perspective, my installation, *After Thought,* is closer to Nishimura’s in that we are not nearly as adamant in our invitation for participation. My installation invites viewers in, though, like its namesake, almost as a gentle afterthought.

Nevertheless, I feel connected to Khan's practice in other respects, such as in the act of layering and the foregoing of legibility. Many of his photographic artworks are multilayered and palimpsestic. Khan uses annotations and texts from a variety of religious, literary, musical, and philosophical practices to create densely layered abstractions. As exemplified in his piece, *every... page of the Holy Qur'an*, Khan draws our attention away from the act of remembrance towards the broader implications of observing such rites (Fig. 11). This shift in focus addresses a crucial aspect of memory transformation that concerns my thesis. That is, once the fidelity of a memory is buried, our personal connection to a specific past no longer bears the same value or meaning. In this sense, Khan's work questions the *raison d'être* of memory rituals to begin with. In most of my artworks and in the examples shown thus far, there is an undertone of futility at play, where the motive for remembrance spurs us into actions which ultimately corrupt the very memories and experiences we hold dear.

Fig. 12. Geoffrey Lok-Fay Cheung, *After Care*, 2023. Digital print on watercolour paper, 20” x 30”.

Illusions and Disillusions

Photographs are fallible memory devices that are easily misunderstood and misused. As discussed in earlier chapters, it is much easier for audiences to latch onto shared cultural references than another's personal-familial stories. The counterpoint, however, is that culturally specific images have an immense potential for affectiveness. In other words, there are two axioms at play: an image that is specific runs the risk of being overlooked because an audience has a lack of context; but, an image that is specific to an event has immense affective potency in the event that it should be recognized.

In her book, *On Photography*, Susan Sontag wrote, "The images that mobilize conscience are always linked to a given historical situation. The more general they are, the less likely they are to be effective" (12). However, she also explains, "What determines the possibility of being affected morally by photographs is the existence of a relevant political consciousness" (14). In the passage, Sontag is speaking about the political mobilization of an audience through photography. For the purposes of my current argument, I invite us to substitute the term "political consciousness" with "gestalt"—meaning the prevailing desires, motivations, and cultural knowledge that any particular viewer brings with them into an encounter with a photograph or artwork.

With so many variables at play, it can be hard to predict how someone will relate to an image. However, this unpredictability inherent in the medium of photography is often exploited as a way to question the ways we relate to images, memory, and ideas of the past. In the previous chapter, we see how both Nishimura and Khan each leverage this mechanism in some way to create a sense of uncertainty or to become a

Fig. 13. Iris Häussler,"Archivio Milano 1991" (installation view). 2021, *Iris Häussler*, https://haeussler.ca/shows/Archivio-1991-2021. Accessed 23 Nov. 2023.

destabilizing force in the experience of their artwork. Pushing in this direction of research, I wanted to examine how the unreliability of memory transformation could lead to more fixed, pointed, or irreversible consequences.

Toronto-based artist, Iris Häussler, addresses such issues in her large-scale installations. In her project, "Archivio Milano 1991," memory is experienced as something irretrievable once sedimented within the past (Fig. 13). Originally conceived in 1991 as a performance, Häussler spent a week collecting news clippings before cementing them in wax. Articles were selected arbitrarily according to the artist's whims. Upon cooling, the wax tablets were placed onto shelves, and audience members were encouraged to pick them up as they will. At the time, the performance largely spoke about the ways history and memory were selected, made non-specific, and disseminated. Coming into its recent

Fig. 14. Geoffrey Lok-Fay Cheung, *Spills II*, 2023. Wax, photo transparency, brown packing paper, masking tape.

re-installation in 2021, the maturity of the archival materials embedded within the tablets gave rise to new interpretations. Displayed along shelves spanning a large wall, the monumental display became an epitaph to an outmoded kind of knowledge. More importantly, it was confrontational, a destabilizing force that urged us to reconsider our faith and security in our own memories.

Writing about the 2021 installation, Jayne Wilkinson said, "... opacity and confusion and cloudiness about the past can evoke a more personalized accounting" (Wilkinson). For those old enough to have lived during the 1990s, the long rows of tablets goad viewers to compare their own recollections with those on display. "I try, in vain, to find clippings related to my own memories of 1991," Wilkinson wrote of her own experience. "The search for meaning through which to frame a backstory is elusive and enigmatic." Häussler is interested in the generative space between fact and fiction, between documented history and our remembrance of it. That liminal space was first

created and explored as an interactive performance between artist and audience back in 1991. In its current form, “Archivio Milano 1991” lures us back into a similar space created from the tension generated between audience and the installation itself. Bodies move in and out as they try to close the distance between their own truths and the evidence on display. With each engagement and disengagement, certainty erodes. Häussler elicits us into a dirge, and she tells us we cannot truly trust in our own convictions of the past.

My installation, “Inadequacies of Care,” aimed to facilitate a similar sense of discomfort by withholding legibility and clarity from viewers (Fig. 5). Here, acts of care—the wrapping and layering of materials overtop photographs and photographic objects—are proffered as acts of refusal and of failure. In the piece *After Care* (Fig. 12), a photograph featured in the installation, viewers are kept in the dark. Handwritten labels adorn the surface of packages, but the cryptic descriptions do little to reveal the nature of their contents. In *Spills II,* another artwork in the installation, wax encroaches upon the image, deforming and warping the surface of the photo transparencies below (Fig. 14). The illegibility is a disruptive and frustrating experience, contrasted perhaps by the usual ease and availability of images in our daily lives.

Throughout the rest of the installation, surfaces and objects are meticulously packaged with non-archival paper. As with the wax, the gesture of wrapping is a deliberate means of protection, preventing viewers visual and physical access. In doing so, the subject matter in the photographs cannot be misunderstood or misappropriated. However, despite succeeding in this task, the use of improper materials—namely the non-archival paper— fails to safeguard the memories they simultaneously seem to want to protect.

To What End?

Rituals of remembrance, understood as acts of care and protection, are double-edged. On the one hand, ritual serves to honour memories, and on the other, it fails to maintain our connections to the past. Theorist Jack Halberstam wrote, “As a practice, failure recognized that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities” (Halberstam). In his writing, Halberstam introduces failure as an umbrella term that encompasses silence, refusal, and disruption, alongside other acts of resistance. Failure is a way to shift power away from dominant structures towards those who are weak or disenfranchised. In this context, failure operates as a social and political tool of resistance and protest.

I do not consider my artwork as overt acts of refusal; however, I do consider the transformability of memories to be a potential site for shifts in power. It is precisely because memories are fallible that we can change our relationship with memories that are unhelpful or harmful. From this perspective, the study of memory transformation is also a study of renewal, regeneration, and new possibilities.

Häussler realizes this in her infamous “Sophie la Rosière Project” (Fig. 15). The installation amalgamated her own creations—drawings, paintings, photographs, sculptures, and art objects—alongside found and archival materials. For the duration of the project’s exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Häussler worked with curators, docents, and other cultural workers to uphold the narrative that Sophie la Rosière, a completely fictitious character, was a real artist. By referencing real archival materials and

Fig. 15. Iris Häussler, "The Sophie la Rosière Project - Chapter I" (installation view). 2016, *Iris Häussler*, https://haeussler.ca/shows/sophie-la-rosiere-chapter1. Accessed 23 Nov. 2023.

artefacts, and by leveraging broad cultural signifiers, Häussler was able to create such a compelling semblance of truth that visitors were convinced of la Rosière's veracity.

It is easy to mistake Häussler's subject as mere deception, as did many patrons once the curtains were lifted. However, the intentions of the work can also be understood as an exercise in world-building. Jill Glessing who reviewed the exhibition explained that Häussler's "use of fiction and forgery enable her to escape the limitations of her own personal narrative, tapping what Gilles Deleuze called 'the powers of the false' and creating an imaginary space for subjects who, like so many women artists,

have been mostly ignored or forgotten by art history" (Glessing). By blurring fact with fiction, Häussler's work calls out the fallibility of memory, but also its capacity to accommodate new narratives and histories.

If our memories can inform our identity, then the act of remembrance can become an active tool for building and rebuilding one's sense of self. In "Nature's Queer Performativity," physicist and theorist Karen Barad writes, "Identity is a phenomenal matter; it is not an individual affair. Identity is multiple within itself; or rather, identity is diffracted through itself—identity is diffraction/différence/differing/deferring/differentiating" (125). Furthermore, with regard to the notion of "refracting," Barad explains that its importance lies in its capacity for non-binary relationalities, and as such creates "new temporalities (spacetimematterings), new diffraction patterns" ("Diffracting Diffraction: Cutting Together Apart" 168). By this logic, rituals of remembrance—or any actions, transformative or otherwise, that engage with memory—have the refractive potential to reveal new aspects of our identity. In other words, memories of the past can be transformed to make space for new realities to emerge.

These ideas of renewal and world-building are addressed in *Spills II* (Fig. 14). In this artwork, the wax is cleanly cut and demarcated along one edge of the image. As the wax thins towards the centre, more organic boundaries are drawn. The wedge is like a section of a glacier, extracted from time and place. I'm led to consider the geological perspective, to think of my rituals as the slow movement of solids across the surface of the earth. Measured against our human lifespan, the rituals we enact to honour and care for memories seem futile, especially when they erode the very connections to memory we are trying to maintain. Yet, when the enactment of ritual supersedes the original

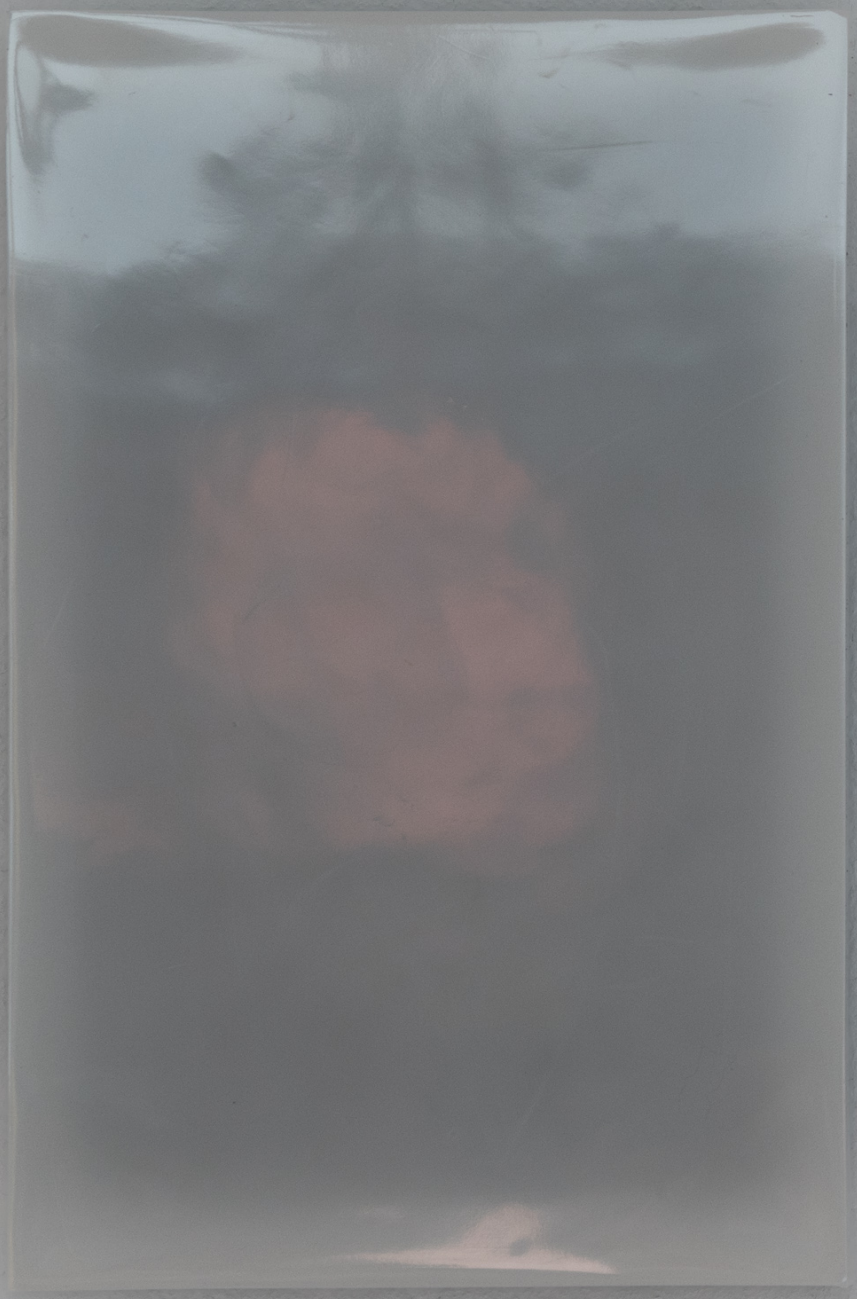

Fig. 16. Geoffrey Lok-Fay Cheung, *Portals I* (work in progress), 2024. Wax, family photo, burnt wood.

memory in importance, cultural connections are formed, and new interpersonal relationships are built. On a geological time scale, I wonder how our small, insignificant, and fallible gestures are as the molecules of frozen water which carve themselves across the surface of the earth as a regenerative act.

While thinking about wax as a reflective and refractive substance, in the metaphysical sense, my material explorations led to the creation of *Portals I* (Fig. 16). Taking lessons from artworks created thus far in the thesis, I began using silicone moulds to coax the wax into its most reflective material state. In conversations with colleagues and viewers, I was told that my artworks containing wax mixtures of incense and tea leaves were reminiscent of tea readings. While I did not pursue divination as a line of inquiry for this thesis, it did lead me to consider the reflectivity of different materials and the role of portals in mediating conversations with the past, present, and self.

In many ways, *Portals I* follows many of the same strategies used in my other artworks. A photograph is adhered onto the surface of a burnt wood panel, overtop which I then layered wax. The entirety of the image is occluded, speaking once again in the language of refusal. The wood alludes to the domestic, the altar space, and the idea of reverence. Yet, in its final execution, the piece attempts to advance all concurrent themes towards a new confrontation. In the compaction of ritual, we encounter a portal surface that reflects our own visage. The wax—both an embodiment of our labours—disrupts our reveries of the past. Instead, it implores us to acknowledge and honour the present and our presence of self.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to find a better way of living with burdens of the past. While it acknowledges the challenges that come from carrying and holding traumatic histories, it also recognizes that memories are not solitary, immobile entities. They are continuously shaped by ourselves, our family, and our community. As such, we have a say in how we engage with them.

I began my thesis by researching postmemory to better understand how the experience of trauma is passed down through generations. Such inherited memories can come to outweigh an individual's personal experience and to dominate their sense of self. Inversely, the mechanism of postmemory transmission offers us a means to relate to family, friends, and strangers through shared common narratives.

In my artwork, I use layering to speak about my own postmemory experiences, particularly addressing the idea of remembrance as a facilitator of memory transformation. In this paper, I argued that rituals that recall the past do not, by themselves, transform memories. Instead, they open up memories to the potential of transformation. Memories are eroded by external factors including time and affiliative postmemory forces. They are also transformed through our actions. In creating artworks that encourage viewers to participate with elements of ritual, I aimed to draw their attention to their own complicity in the erosion of memories and, more importantly, to suggest that they have the ability to guide and mediate those processes.

The languages of obfuscation and refusal feature prominently throughout my artwork. They represent the byproduct of change and serve to highlight different

dualities of memory transformation such as protection and destruction, or permanence and impermanence. There are strong themes of futility and failure throughout this thesis. However, in the breakdown of memories, there is also the potential for regeneration and renewal. Over time and through the labour of rituals, we can renegotiate our relationship with the past. In some cases, it means actively rewriting new, healthier stories. In other cases, it could simply mean confronting our own agency in matters of our history and identity. After all, the action to remember is something we initiate in the present.

Fig. 17. Geoffrey Lok-Fay Cheung, MFA Thesis Exhibition Installation, 2024.

Afterword

The final body of work I presented for the MFA Thesis Exhibition included: *Precipitant*, *Temporary Suspension*, *Spills II*, *After Care*, and *Florid Scale* (Fig. 17; *Florid Scale* not shown). *Precipitant* is composed of family photos mounted onto wooden frames which are then encased in wax (Fig. 18). *Temporary Suspension* is a cotton twine net which I have been slowly building over the past two years as a way to meditate on memories of my paternal grandfather (Fig. 19). The exhibited body of work is a continuation of my investigations into obfuscation. Similar to my installation, *After Thought*, I was interested in troubling the boundaries separating domestic versus public spaces of worship, and to question our valuation of memories. The setting is dim and sombre, and the light cast by the net suggests a sense of neglect. *Precipitant*, when seen from afar, invites viewers to approach by suggesting the silhouette of people below the wax. However, the portraits are made less discernible the closer one walks towards the piece. Instead, the wax's glossy quality is made more apparent, as are the reflections on its surface.

During the exhibition, I was interested to observe how viewers would move in and out of the space. I noted how many viewers made remarks about the shadows cast by the net more than they spoke about the net itself. This was encouraging for me to hear especially as I'm interested in the transmission of memories—the secondhand experience of a thing. What struck me the most, however, was what I noticed during the de-installation of the works, and what it informed me about the interactivity of wax as a material. Taking down *Precipitant*, I noticed that the wax surface had lost its sheen, and

Fig. 18. Geoffrey Lok-Fay Cheung, *Precipitant*, 2024. Wax, family photos, burnt wood, 60" x 9".

there were clear signs of lint and scratches across their surface. There was also a few prominent shallow gashes—nail marks—that could have only been placed deliberately and with intention. While the issue of viewer behaviour is complex and by no means unique to my experience, it does inform my research into wax as a malleable, plastic material that can embody and bear the marks of those who interface with it. Conceptually, I am also led back to the question of our valuation of memories. In *After Thought*, I suggested that disinterest and the passing-by of a work could be an interesting method of activating the concept of neglect. *Precipitant* now bears the mark of considered, intentional disregard. It leaves me to consider how such acts speak about the ways the subject of one's reverence is the subject of another's harmful indifference.

I'm left to ponder how this may or may not tie back into my investigations of refusal, resistance, and opacity.

During my thesis defense, a few points of discussion were brought up by my review panel that I would like to investigate moving forward. Firstly, it was noted that my aesthetic inclination, at least in formal appearance, appears to be borrowing from the language of minimalism. There were then questions regarding my interest in refusal and how I am situating my conceptual thinking in relation to Édouard Glissant's concept of opacity and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's generative refusal.

First, with regard to my aesthetic of minimal forms and clean geometric shapes, there were two primary drivers behind this decision. On one hand, I am very much influenced by my scientific background, and much of my aesthetic, and even conceptual choices, are guided by a methodology of calculated control and expression. This final body of work presents itself as something that is tightly controlled, but it is undercut by the message that those gestures are inadequate and opaque. On the other hand, I was influenced by my research into spaces of ancestral worship, and I was interested in troubling the boundaries between domestic and public realms of ceremony. Looking heavily into zen and Buddhist traditions, I found myself gravitating towards clean, simple forms that balances both a sense of monumentality and inconsequentiality.

My understanding of minimalism was that it was born out of a desire to move away from external narratives, symbolism, and expressionism in rejection of the abstract expressionist movement in the early to mid 20th century. Minimalism was a stripping away of concepts, and it strove to celebrate the forms, shapes, and ideas in and of themselves. This art-historical moment was then followed by schools of thought that

Fig. 19. Geoffrey Lok-Fay Cheung, *Temporary Suspension* (detail), 2024. Cotton twine, netting shuttles.

sought to move away from those strictures, a return to more humanistic art-making. My work is much more aligned with such post-minimalist and post-structuralist ideals. It seeks to embody human presence—myself, my ancestors, and the viewers—and it champions ideals of subjectivity, instability, and refractive discourse.

This predisposition is a leaning-in towards deeply personal and cultural themes in my artwork. Instinctually, I have also found myself using the language of refusal and opacity. In the chronology of my research, I was first introduced to these concepts

through artists such as Florence Lan Yee and Elliot Jerome Brown Jr. In Yee's work, what is often withheld is the cultural knowledge that has stopped short at the generation before them. They wrestle with the cultural and language barriers between their parents's generation and their own, lamenting that loss of connection through thick, opaque layers of text and textiles. Elliot Jerome Brown Jr., on the other hand, uses opacity as a way to rebalance the power dynamics of the artist, his heritage, and the public. Art curator Clare Gormley writes of Brown Jr.'s work, "... opacity is used as a means to reclaim space for complex black and queer subjectivities to emerge. Troubling the very function of portraiture as a means of 'capturing' the subject, Brown Jr.'s images present us with figures turned away or shielded from the camera's lens, their faces almost never visible" (Gormley 7–8). Opacity, in Brown Jr.'s case, is a rejection that access to, and clarity of, certain cultural spheres should never be assumed to be given.

In my paper, I refer to Halberstam's writing who approaches opacity and refusal from a queer perspective, looking at refusal and non-conformity as a form of resistance against heteronormative powers. This, alongside my research into Yee's works, was really the core influence behind the development of my thesis project. What I wasn't aware of was Glissant's concept of opacity and Betasamosake Simpson's generative refusal, but I recognize now how they align with Brown Jr.'s exploration of refusal as a form of protest against colonial and hegemonic powers. I also see, as a queer Chinese-Canadian artist showing artworks in a colonial setting, that I am already and necessarily engaged in such postcolonial discourse.

While my thesis project comes to a close, my research into memory, obfuscation, and the language of refusal is still very much in its infancy. Works like

Precipitant continue to challenge my understanding of viewer-artist dynamics, and it has already proven generative for new avenues of material and conceptual research. My work engages with deeply personal and cultural themes, and I wish to further develop my understanding of refusal as a language that can address issues of postcolonialism and queer resistance. I'm excited to see how my practice evolves, and I'm looking forward to sharing future works that speak about the complexities of identity, memory, and power.

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