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Memory Box: Constructing and Exploring Narrative Identity through the Lens of Art and
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Abstract

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By Zoe Katsamakos

Studying both Psychology and Visual Arts, I focused on an overlap of the fields by exploring narrative identity development through art. Using three walls, my gallery space serves as a memory box of autobiographical memories depicted as paintings, drawings, and objects. The subject of my work is divided into four groups of autobiographical memories, which I have defined as memory webs. Constructing narrative identity is both an individual and socio-cultural process. Through creating and exhibiting my work, I have further incorporated these memories into my identity. In addition, the viewers use their own experiences to make meaning from my art in order to reflect on their own identities.

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Memory Box: Constructing and Exploring Narrative Identity through
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Without autobiographical memory, it is impossible to form and develop an identity: “our very sense of self and our sense of connectedness to others – we owe to our memory” (Squire & Kandel, 2009, ix). In the case of Patient H.M., Brenda Milner wrote that “his personal history stopped with the operation” because of his inability to store new long-term memories due to the bilateral removal of medial temporal lobe structures (Kandel, 2007, p. 128). By painting and exhibiting my memories, I have chosen specific aspects of my memory that I believe have shaped my identity. I have used this honors thesis as a platform for constructing and sharing my narrative through art.

Majoring in both Psychology and Visual Arts, I wanted to focus on an intersection between the two fields that spoke to me. Everything you do, say, and make is a reflection of who you are. Therefore, it is difficult to separate art and psychology. Alois Riegl, the head of the Vienna School of Art History in 1900, expressed that psychology must be considered when studying art (Kandel, 2012). Artists in the past have incorporated psychological themes into their work such as Edvard Munch’s *The Scream* (Munch, 1893), as well as Salvador Dalí’s *The Persistence of Memory* (Dalí, 1931). These paintings, among many, serve as examples of how psychology and art are intertwined: they are intrinsically emotional and touch on the human condition. In the textbook *Memory: From Mind to Molecules*, Larry Squire and Eric Kandel opened every chapter with a piece of art to represent a specific memory system (Squire & Kandel, 2009). Because memory serves as a major building block for art, I focused specifically on autobiographical memory as my subject in order to understand how narrative identity is created. By supplementing my artistic process and creative work with art historical and

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psychological research, I have gained a deeper understanding of how narrative identity is formed and influences both the individual and the social community.

Three artists have particularly furthered my understanding of how to approach memory for this project. Studying Louise Bourgeois, Chuck Close, and Joseph Cornell has provided me with a specific framework for executing my project.

I turned to research in psychology to theoretically support my thesis. My personal experience is grounded by the support of empirical studies. A common phrase used throughout the literature is “constructing a narrative,” which speaks to the artistic process of combining autobiographical memories to curate how the narrative is shaped. I have also been able to deepen the meaning of my artistic experience because the literature has highlighted the personal and socio-cultural components of narrative identity. Producing the art alone would lack the support the psychological literature illustrates.

The subject of my work is divided into four groups, which I have defined as memory webs. Each web encapsulates four periods of my childhood, many of which overlap, but can be separated by time frames and location. The four memory webs are organized chronologically in the gallery space clockwise as follows: my grandma’s house, my childhood home, Mohonk Mountain House (a resort where my family vacationed), and my sleep-away camp. Through conversations with my twin sister, Amy, I chose which details to focus on. My work includes paintings, drawings, and objects. Using three walls, my gallery space serves as a memory box. Although these memory webs are highly personal, the art leaves room for the viewers to fill the images with their own memories. In doing so, the viewer implicitly learns about my experience, but more importantly responds to my work with self-reflection on his/her own identity.

Artists as Inspiration

I chose to focus on three artists to help shape my approach for my exhibition. Louise Bourgeois is an example of how to integrate autobiographical memory into art. Chuck Close's process of creating his portraits serves as a metaphor for how memory is remembered. I emulated the physical structure of Joseph Cornell's boxes by transforming my gallery space into a memory box. The study of art history is imperative to grow as an artist and to highlight how artists with varying intentions and styles can all embody the idea of memory.

Louise Bourgeois, a French-American sculptor and printmaker, created work that was autobiographical by nature. As she said, "Life is made up of experiences and emotions. The objects I have created make them tangible" (Wye, 2017, p. 13). The themes in her work, primarily about motherhood and her life experiences, are emotionally powerful. Bourgeois felt that in order to let go of traumatic childhood memories, she needed to confront them in her work. In my case, my childhood memories are highly positive, and I want to make them resistant to time by focusing on them as the subject of my work. In doing so, I give these memories significance in shaping my identity. Both Bourgeois' and my use of childhood memories in our work may have opposing purposes, but our sets of memories have played a major role in defining who we both are. In some of her later work, Bourgeois printed directly on fabric, which she titled "Fabric of Memory" (Wye, 2017). Her family was in the fabric industry and she grew up surrounded by cloth, so her choice of medium in itself represents an aspect of her autobiographical memory. Bourgeois' elegant use of fabric encouraged me to incorporate fabric into my work.

Chuck Close, an American portraiture, suffers from prosopagnosia, the inability to recognize faces (Sacks, 2010). He visually can see individual characteristics of faces but lacks

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the mechanics to process and remember them as a whole. The process Close uses to break down the face into individual features on a grid brilliantly grants him the ability to process a whole face. He takes small pixels and transforms them “incrementally, one unit at a time” (Close & Finch, 2010) into portraits. Each piece of information is necessary for conveying the whole message. By doing so, Close explains that he flattens out the face and then is able to encode the flattened version in his memory (Sacks, 2010). Close’s artistic process is similar to the retrieval of declarative memory: the idea that he uses small bits of information together to create a whole is similar to how we retrieve memories. It is nearly impossible to remember all details of a single memory, but if we piece together the details, we can assemble a representation of the whole. Without this process of assembling snippets of information, it is difficult to gain the perspective to see the whole. On a larger scale, narrative identity is assembled in a similar fashion because the numerous autobiographical memories are joined together to form the self. Each painting, drawing, and object in my gallery serve a similar function to the pixels in Close’s portraits that work together to construct a representation of the identity. Each piece of work provides a snapshot about my identity.

Another artist who was a great inspiration for my project was Joseph Cornell. Cornell, an American modern artist, integrated found objects into the interior of wooden boxes that he also constructed. The three-dimensional collages capture magical moments of everyday life (McShine, 1980). I was inspired by these memory boxes to emulate Cornell’s style by placing my representations of memories mindfully within a three-walled space to convey a story. The space within the three-walls is not separated from the viewer by glass, but instead is open for the viewer to physically step into. The synergistic effect of the objects provides a miniature narrative within the defined space.

Psychological Ties

It is our nature as social beings to connect with others by sharing our experiences. Whenever we meet someone new, we introduce ourselves by telling stories that represent aspects of who we are. We even retell and share stories with people who also experienced them. These stories are more than just a means to relate to others; they also serve as depictions of who we are. Each story is like a brush stroke; it doesn't make up the whole painting, but it contains information that gives the painting life, depth, and emotion. Autobiographical memories are the brush strokes that come together to paint our identity.

Narrative identity is thought to emerge during adolescence. According to McAdams & McLean (2013), adolescence is a time when cognitive development provides the skill-set to think about oneself in a more abstract way. In addition, cultural pressures to have a stable identity are high. Erikson's stage theory emphasizes that development is a lifelong process, and adolescence and early adulthood are the start of the ability to consider narrative identity (Erikson, 1950, 1963). Culturally available tools mediate the ways we construct social narratives (Fivush, Habermas, Waters, & Zaman, 2011). One socially acceptable way for adolescents to develop identity is through blogging. By writing one's inner thoughts in a sphere that can be read publically, the blogger is able to learn about him/herself while connecting with others. By exhibiting my memories in the gallery show, I am essentially engaging in the same behavior. I am at a point in my development where I have the cognitive skills to reflect on my autobiographical memories and make meaning from them. Through this project, I focus on art as a means to explore identity development.

Building a narrative identity is a slow process that undergoes repetition, reflection, and editing (McAdams & McLean, 2013). This process often goes unnoticed as it occurs, as it is

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second nature. My drawings of the geese emulate the process of repeating and editing. My family would visit my grandma in New Jersey on weekends, until she moved in with us. There was a small duck pond in her town where we would stop by and feed the geese. On one afternoon when we were about four years old, one of the geese got frighteningly close to Amy, from her perspective. She continuously recounted this story for the next few years, but every iteration became slightly more dramatic. The goose, whom my parents named Drapper, nibbled at her dress in one early version. In a later version, Drapper bit Amy's pointer finger, and there was even blood! Although this is an exaggerated example of the editing process of a young child, it highlights the fact that as we repeat stories, the details shift. This doesn't necessarily mean that they become less *real*, but that the evolution of the versions impacts how we view remember the story. We don't robotically outline the same sequence of details every time we recount an event. Instead we construct stories (McLean, 2016).

In trying to remember the Drapper saga, I initially drew a sketch of a white goose and showed my mom. "No, no no. Drapper wasn't a white goose, he was a Canada Goose." Then I drew a Canada Goose to stay true to the story. To represent one iteration of Amy's story, I drew her finger pointing to the Canada Goose. I titled the three drawings of Drapper "The Creation of Memory" as a humorous homage to Michelangelo's fresco, *The Creation of Adam* (Buonarroti, 1509-1512). Michelangelo was an accomplished artist because of his keen understanding of the human body, which he studied in great depth (Elkins, 1980). Because of his knowledge of human anatomy, scholars have argued that in the fresco the object God is depicted inside of is a brain, which supplements my belief that psychology and art are highly intermingled (Meshberger, 1990).

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Creating a narrative identity is crucial for understanding both oneself and the world. By actively engaging in storytelling, patterns about oneself become apparent and provide information about one's character. We learn from our experiences, and thus they become part of who we are (McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007). In addition, we learn about our environments from these experiences. The narratives we create serve as a blueprint for navigating the social world (McLean, 2016). During the gallery show, someone told me that seeing the painting of the corn elicited a memory of family barbeques that she hadn't thought of in awhile. After reflecting on this exchange, I recognized that although our specific memories may be different, we all share similar culturally mediated experiences. Through the process of creating the work and interacting with viewers, I explored how I think of myself independently as well as in relation to the viewers.

The artistic license we have to interpret experiences through our own lens allows us to create stories that are unique. Because I have a twin sister, I can compare our joint memories. I found that although Amy and I experienced many of the same events together, the way we distinctly remember certain details illustrates that we each experienced events from a subjective lens and thus remember and internalize these memories in a way that is mediated by our perspective. When choosing the four memory webs to focus on, I brainstormed all of the memories attached to each web. This included what food, activities, scents, and objects were most significant. I then had Amy provide these details from her perspective and integrated them into one brainstorm diagram. There were many overlaps, which I expected, but I was more surprised by the aspects Amy found to be significant that hadn't seemed important to me. Once I read certain responses, I thought "oh, of course! I didn't even consider that!" This process of incorporating her memories allowed me to remember details that weren't initially accessible, but

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that brought to the surface components I realized had significance. Narrative identity is not formed in isolation.

The way we narrate our memories is highly influenced by socio-cultural context. In telling other people our story, their presence influences the details and tone of the version we share. In response, the storyteller picks up on the way the listener reacts and thus shapes the way we remember and narrate it in the future (McLean et al., 2007). Through narrating my stories visually, the way I create and exhibit the work is influenced by my prediction on how the audience will view it. Even if I had no intention of others seeing my work, I would still be influenced by the “imaginary audience” (Elkind & Bowens, 1979). Even when writing in a diary, people narrate as if there is someone on the receiving end. Riegl coined the term “beholder’s involvement” or “beholder’s share” which means that the viewer, by cognitively interpreting a two-dimensional painting into a three-dimensional representation, s/he uses personal experience to give the painting meaning (Kandel, 2012). Because everyone carries their own specific schemas that have been shaped by experience, they automatically take the information they see in the paintings and apply their schemas to fill in the ambiguity with personal meaning. After hearing the snippets of memories the viewers shared with me during the gallery show, my interpretation of my paintings and of my memories has shifted due to their feedback.

Part of constructing a narrative identity is taking ownership over our memories with a first-person perspective. We are aware that other people might have been involved in making the memory, but we have a belief that our memories are stored within us. In reality, the memories we hold are shared and shaped by others. Meacham argues that reminiscing is a “process of social construction” and that “all of our reminiscences belong not to individuals, but to the community

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and to society” (Meacham, 1995, p. 48). This argument that memories are not stored in just one mind parallels the idea that memory is not stored in one specific brain region. The communication between people, like synaptic connections between neurons, is where the memory is stored and is shaped (Kandel, 2007). This idea of the communicative aspect of forming a memory on a social level reflects the biological aspect of how we learn and remember.

The Artwork

I took a bottom-up approach to creating my work. I initially decided on four memory webs to focus on: my grandma’s house, my childhood, Mohonk Mountain House, and my sleep-away camp. I made a brainstorm diagram for each memory web and filled them in with as much information as possible. I then asked my twin sister questions about each memory web. I filled in the brainstorm diagrams with her memories and made distinctions between which were mine, Amy’s, or shared. At first I thought my project would follow the direction of a comparison between Amy and me, so I selected an equal number of our memories for each memory web to start painting. Although my twin sister could serve as a point of reference to highlight contrasts between our memories, I realized as I progressed that the details of her memories were just as much part of my own memories. Her recounting of the memories brought to the surface details that I hadn’t initially thought of rather than being points of conflict between our memories.

I primarily used oil paint on canvas, as I fell in love with this medium during my semester abroad in Florence. The traditionally structured introductory painting course fine-tuned my skills of mixing colors and using highlights and shadows to infer depth through many exercises of still-life paintings. We experimented with the color wheel and learned how to see color. I became confident using oil paint and had a drive to use this medium for my thesis. I love

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the quality of oil paint because it can be thinned out with a turpentine-alternative and can also be thick, like in the case of impasto. I applied impasto specifically in the painting of the tree bark in order to give it a realistic rough texture. I wanted to make it so realistic that it would seem like a portion of the bark that was used on the bunks at my sleep-away camp were cut out and imported into my gallery space. Another technique I learned in Florence was scumbling. After the paint had dried on the canvas, I used a dry paintbrush with a touch of paint to massage the new color onto the surface of the dry paint. By doing so, the new paint added a sense of texture and complexity of color. I utilized this technique in the painting of the sandals my grandma had given to Amy. We used to play dress-up in her closet as young girls and would try on all of her wigs, purses, and shoes. My grandma gave a pair of shoes, which happen to be from Italy, to Amy to grow into and wear when she was old enough. Although Amy was able to wear them for a few summer seasons, she decided to retire the delicate shoes and have them serve as a memento of our grandma's legacy.

I intentionally chose canvases of varying dimensions because I wanted to reflect the fact that some memories are relatively more important, and therefore require more space. For example, the painting of the gazebo looking over the lake is the largest canvas of the Mohonk memory web. I chose this because when reflecting on Mohonk, the gazebos were the first thing Amy and I both thought of. The gazebos are abundant around the resort and are the location for many of my memories over the years. In addition to painting on canvas, I also painted onto small wooden boxes. Although they were only an inch or two deep, they protruded from the wall and provided another dimension. This additional surface area allowed me to manipulate how I wanted to treat the extra space. For the "AMY ZOE" painting, I wanted to give it the feeling of being a child's block by painting the four sides with primary colors. I replicated the font that was

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used on pairs of my toddlerhood shoes, which said “MUNCHKIN” on the soles. For the teacup and pebbles paintings, I used fabric as a frame to cover this extra space.

I wanted to explore other materials beyond painting. Memory is composed of many different details with different sources and feelings. Some things we remember only the essence of, while others are remembered in much more detail. My use of varying media represents the diversity of how we recall memory. One assignment taught me to draw what I see, rather than what I think the object looks like. In one week, I made fifty sketches using pencil, marker, and charcoal. I also experimented with watercolor. When looking through photographs from my childhood, one photo of Amy and me particularly caught my attention. I decided to translate the photograph onto paper using charcoal and watercolor. The use of negative space draws the attention to the two little girls at the bottom of the paper. The purpose of the fifty-drawings-in-one-week assignment was to free my mind from overthinking. For one drawing, I used magic markers to sketch the view from a window from my perspective as a young child. The apartment we lived in for my early childhood was along the East River. If I were looking straight out the window, I could see the river and Roosevelt Island. But if I were standing on the windowsill, I could look down to the FDR Drive. Many afternoons were spent counting all of the red or blue cars with Amy and our nanny, Marilyn. I portray both angles and stylistically drew it as if I were my childhood self. There is a clear distinction between this childish drawing taped up on the wall, which was done in the style of being a child, and the drawing of Amy and me, which is from my current perspective looking back.

In addition, I added objects into the memory box. These objects include my grandma’s shoes and a chair (as if she or someone the viewer could imagine would be sitting there), a vase with lavender, and a photo-album type book. The photo-album is organized by memory web and

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serves as a record of the artistic process by including the rough preliminary sketches, the color palettes with leftover paint, and snippets of fabric. Similar to a family photo-album, this book treasures memories.

Bourgeois believed that “you can retell your life and remember your life by the shape, the weight, the color, the smell of the clothes in your closet” (Wye, 2017, p. 92). Many of the fabrics in my work are representative of clothing I wore as a child. The hunter green border of the pebbles painting is in fact a pair of Soffe shorts that are the same as the ones I grew up wearing. When collecting swatches of fabric at a local fabric store, I was drawn to certain textures and designs. Some of them immediately reminded me of a specific item of clothing from my childhood. The significance of other fabrics was less apparent to me while exploring the fabric store, but upon reflecting on my memory webs back in the studio I recognized the relationship. For example, the maroon and gold upholstery fabric fitted around the painting of the teacup is almost identical to the fabric of the furniture in the Victorian resort my family would go to in upstate New York. In addition, the use of the picnic tablecloth provides the painting of corn with an imaginable location. By incorporating fabric into my work, I added a dimension of reality and a dimension of texture to the memories. Memories are not all two dimensional snapshots, but have varying texture and feeling.

As I painted a specific memory, other sub-memories came to the surface. The process of remembering tends to happen like this; it’s difficult to start remembering, and only the big, important things are available initially. As major memories come to the surface, additional details begin to be remembered. I had several “ah ha!” moments as the doors to the more subtle memories were opened, allowing them to rush to my consciousness.

Reflections

Although the memories I represent through my art are personal and subjective, my intention for viewers was not to necessarily gain a better understanding of who I am and what these memories mean to me. I have told a few of the stories attached to my work in this paper, but I intentionally didn't display them during the gallery show. Instead, my goal was for viewers to reflect on their own narratives and fill the paintings with their own experiences. By sharing my autobiographical memories in visual form, my work influences the way each viewer thinks about his/her own narrative. I was able to engage in an exchange of memories during the gallery show. The act of sharing memories reinforces the idea that humans have a desire to actively participate in the construction of both their own and other people's narratives.

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