MEMORY AND VISUAL PRACTICE: SWIMMING BACK TO SHORE

Thesis Presented

by

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AN EXPLORATION OF HOW A MENTAL DIFICIENCY WAS TURNED INTO AN ASSET IN TERMS OF VISUAL RECALL AND CONSTRUCTED MEMORIES

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ABSRACT OF THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Masters of Fine Arts in Studio Art in the Graduate School of the College of Arts, Media, and Design of Northeastern University April, 2018
The sea is ever changing. And with change comes destruction as well as rebirth. Years ago I skirted death out at sea by using my wits and only now with time and distance can I reflect on that memory. This act of looking back on our actions, looking through the lens of time, this introversion helps us survive by helping us discover secret lessons within our mistakes. Lessons are hard to come by, experiences we stumble into, but the lessons can elude us for years. I am a painter, and this thesis explores my relationship with my memory and the paintings that are a result of them. Throughout history, people have time and again used their memories to create art, and in turn used art to create new memories. I explore here why artists, critics, and I, do the same. But I also explore this simple idea in the light of my strange relationship with my own memory, a compromised one. Early childhood meningitis robbed me of the faculty of memory one would call normal at a very early age. This distortion of the normal processes of my memory makes me unique, however, and my accommodations over time have given me a novel approach to painting in relation to the things I wish to remember. What if the things I leave behind will be forgotten? What if I could, instead, enshrine the memories I wish? Could I physically weave my own life together with a series of important memories? What if these paintings or augmented memories will now be my only record of my life, not only for myself after my true memory has left me, but for others too? What would this say to those trying to understand me, and would this enable them to better relate to their own loss of time? Essentially, like most people, I am melancholic about the loss of time all around me. But due to my compromised memory, I am well aware that the time I do have is extremely precious. And one way or another, intentionally or unintentionally, my paintings reflect that. I may have survived that day out at sea, but immediately back on the beach my mind did all it could to forget the near-drowning incident. Now, however, looking back years later my memory of the incident is crystal clear, and there are
lessons I clearly mine from that memory today. Perhaps my paintings are the same. A record, or memory of a feeling, an incident, a moment of curiosity, that only till much later, will truly make any sense in the overall stretch of my life. Only time will tell. But perhaps one day my audience will be able to tell too, and, hopefully, they will let me in on the secret.
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Once, when I was as strong as an ox and as overconfident as a boy desperately in need of
direction, I learned a really big lesson that changed my life. The strange thing is, I didn’t realize
the moral of that lesson until much later. The experience just gradually stewed at the time; it
mixed with who I was, blended my memories into a jam that tastes bitter sweet now but only
now that I can recognize the potent fruit that the lesson truly was. I was in my twenties, touring
Mexico with a backpack and a friend, and we had found this great isolated beach where I pitted
myself against the Pacific Ocean. Now, as any seasoned sailor would tell you, the Pacific Ocean
almost always wins, especially against the young and naive. But what did I know? I was a boy
who came from a pristine beach, who had never truly seen the terror the sea can summon. I was
testing myself against nature just for the afternoon. I swam out, jumping and diving through the
surf, which was far taller than I was. I even hurt my back in the process, but I brushed it off as
one would the aches and pains during the first mile of a serious jog. I was out there a while, until
I realized I was out too far. Yes, this is one of those stories where you know someone’s in
trouble; the question then becomes how do they get out of it. I summoned my courage and started
to swim to shore, pushing back my fatigue and the ache in my back, which was now sucking the
wind out of me, knowing full well that I could die if I didn’t get through the surf zone with its
ferocious, massive waves. I tumbled once, I tumbled twice, and soon I found I had tumbled too
many times. I just couldn’t catch my breath before I was hit again and again, each tumble
sapping what little strength I had further and further. The horrible thing was the beach didn’t
seem that far away, but neither did the rocks on my right or the open ocean back behind the surf.
In one moment a flurry of thoughts hit me as I watched the next wave approach; I was going to
die here if I didn’t do something right now. I couldn’t go to the rocks; that was a death sentence. I
couldn’t stay tumbling; that was also a death sentence. I couldn’t go out to sea as I would only
get more tired and would still have to fight the surf later. And I couldn’t make it to shore no matter how close it was; I was too weak and I kept on being pulled back away from shore. What other option did I have? So in that instant before the wave overcame me, I chose to go down. The wave hit and instead of trying to keep my eyes shut and survive the tumble I kept my eyes open and looked for the bottom; luckily, it wasn’t far away. The wave actually helped by pushing me down to the bottom, and I grabbed ahold of the sand with both hands and clung on, fighting the pull of the rip tide. When the backwash slowed, I clawed my way across the ocean floor as fast as I could toward where I sensed the beach was. When I couldn’t take it any longer, I surfaced, took another breath, a quick look, and repeated the procedure three or four times until I found myself on the shore, alone, panting, and hugging the sand. I had won, but only by the skin of my teeth. A simple jaunt in the ocean to experience the Pacific had become a life or death struggle to stay alive. I could have cared less about what lesson God, nature, or man was trying to teach me at that moment. I hobbled back to my buddy, explained what had happened, downed a Corona and a fish taco, and we got on with the trip.

How does that play into who I am today, or why I make art the way I do? What was the fruit that formed the base of that jam? To varying degrees, continually, memory after memory, I have been asking myself those very questions throughout my life. It wasn’t just that experience, but many experiences all seemed to follow a similar pattern of progression in my life: intelligence, overconfidence, fear, recognition, instinct, struggle, survival. I somehow always managed to get out of these terrible situations by the skin of my teeth, by my wits, not just intact, but often in a better position than before; as for that experience in the Pacific, my back still feels it today. What was this cycle I was caught in? Was I actively embracing it? I became known for being able to perform in last minute situations that I most likely got myself into. I became known
for producing my best work when I thought the least about it and just acted on instinct. I became known for struggling terribly against myself to achieve something greater than I had initially wanted to make. I had always thought that my defining characteristic was my ability to think on my feet, but instead it might truly be my chronic struggle with myself to keep on living or to keep on winning out of necessity. My artwork is defined by memory and time, but it is also defined by my need to struggle with myself not only to isolate these memories that matter to me, but also to enshrine them within myself so I will never forget them. By first looking at why I have this constant issue with my memory and then analyzing what memory means to other artists and critics, I hope to contextualize my work not only within art history but also throughout my own personal development. Why do I paint what I do? Why do I keep being drawn back into the same struggle? And why do I believe that if others can connect with me on something as human and relatable as memory and time, that ipso facto I should be able to connect with everyone else and their perspective on what memory means to them?

*What is memory to us?*

When I was five, I was critically afflicted with meningitis. For those that don’t know, meningitis, according to encyclopedia.com (2009) is an inflammation of the protective lining of the brain, the meninges, which can easily cause brain damage or death. After slipping in and out of a coma for roughly six months, I was miraculously saved by the combined ingenuity and risk-taking of my parents and a good many doctors. But who can really be completely saved after a brain swelling and a coma while being pumped with experimental drugs to bring them back to life? Clearly, I was never again the same boy that I had been before, and I could only imagine what my parents thought about the changes in their son’s personality. Like most patients who suffer serious trauma, I remembered nothing of that experience, but I also found out later that I remember
practically nothing of my childhood past that point. Everything from before the illness, that
certainly was gone. But trying to remember up until I was twelve, those memories are gone too,
and that wasn’t always the case. Something was broken; whether true or not, I slowly became
aware of the problem and I started to believe that my memory was seriously compromised.
Frequent examples kept presenting themselves, from the simple forgetfulness of misplacing my
keys, to completely missing entire episodes and days in recent memory. By the time I hit my late
twenties I realized that I had a chronic problem in this area that others just didn’t have, and I
created all kinds of tricks and techniques that helped me get by. I had eventually accommodated
the deficiencies in my memory. And by learning to accommodate, I also recognized that when
one door is closed, another has to be opened. In this case, that new door opened due to my lack of
attachments to long held memories; after all, I continually seemed to lose so many. In my fog of
forgetfulness I might have felt lost, but it also allowed me to create easily as I could reinvent
myself frequently and clung to less personal baggage. What is it that makes us who we are in
terms of our conscious ability to recognize ourselves? How do I know that I am distinct from
someone else if we have the same memories of precisely the same thing? Our definition of
ourselves is a big debate in Psychology, and I tend to fall on the side of Sir Frederick Charles
Bartlett, one of the pioneers of cognitive psychology, in my belief that our memories not only
construct the story of our lives but contribute to the construct of our entire psyche.

“Remembering is not the re-excitation of innumerable fixed, lifeless and fragmentary
traces. It is an imaginative reconstruction or construction, built out of the relation of
our attitude towards a whole active mass of organised past reactions or experience,
and to a little outstanding detail which commonly appears in image or in language
form. It is thus hardly ever really exact, even in the most rudimentary cases of rote
recapitulation, and it is not at all important that it should be so.”

Bartlett (1932)
Our sense of self or the story of our lives is a complex thing, and I don’t pretend to believe it is defined only by our memories, but memories are a huge part of it. So what happens to a person when their memories go? What happens to a personality when it is aware it is missing a considerable amount of the bricks and mortar that constitutes it. Collapse? Reinvention? Accommodation? Depression? Survival? Elation? Check with any family members who skirt with senility or suffer from Alzheimer’s, and you will recognize all these traits. These facets are evident with me as well. I’ve experienced all stages and sensations either progressively or randomly at different moments in my life, but one thing I've found useful with art and especially visual art, is that painting has helped me fight the loss of my memories in the fog of my daily life. Add that to my ability to constantly reinvent myself, and creativity became second nature to me.

Art requires an intense amount of study, thought, regurgitation, reflection and activity. According to the Dana Foundation, this practice stimulates the brain to grow and create more connections within itself via the multiple senses and the resulting memories which are created.

“Practicing a skill, either in the arts or in other areas, builds a rich repertoire of information related to the skill. Scientists conducting neuroimaging studies of many human tasks have identified networks of widely scattered neural structures that act together to perform a given skill, which may involve sensory, motor, attentional, emotional and language processes. The arts are no exception: Specific brain networks underlie specific art forms. As we practice a task, its underlying network becomes more efficient, and connections among brain areas that perform different aspects of the task become more tightly integrated.”

Posner, Michael I., and Brenda, Patoine (2009)

It is no surprise then that art practice, as detailed by the Encyclopedia of Theory & Practice in Psychotherapy & Counseling, is used in the rehabilitation of many patients that have suffered psychotic breaks, or are recovering from brain trauma.
“Studies have demonstrated the efficacy of art therapy, as applied to clients with memory loss due to Alzheimer’s and other diseases; stroke residuals; cognitive functioning; depression; post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); traumatic brain injury; dealing with chronic illness; and aging.”

Jose A. Fadul & Lulu Press Inc (2014)

Additionally from the point of view of memory alone, and Pablo Picasso, what is a painting but a testament to a place and feeling in time.

“Painting is a blind man’s profession. He paints not what he sees, but what he feels, what he tells himself about what he has seen.”

“Pablo Picasso Quotes” (2001-2018)

So if art via creativity is a core attribute of human nature and therefore can stimulate the brain not only to recover but to grow, can an artist make it their mission to document their life, not so others can learn from it, but so that he or she can use it as a genuine source of therapy? And if this artist’s method of creativity involved enshrining certain moments in his or her life, not only would he or she be fabricating real tangible artworks that document the artist’s life, this artist would also be doing his or her best in trying to retain crucial memories in the strongest possible manner. This would be a deeply personal race against time for the artist in question. And yet it would also be significant not only to them, but just as significant to anyone trying to stem the flow of time. We all have different takes on life, what living means to us and whether there are any rules that one can truly pin down. Well, here is one rule I believe to be true. It is true, that none of us are the same. It is true, that no matter how much artists try to discover universal truths that bond humanity, we can never connect everyone. And why? Because each person is unique due to the memories they collect from the experiences they’ve had. And just by virtue of these two points, the memories we collect and the experiences we have, no one person can ever be a carbon copy of another (Kahneman, 2010). It's almost as if the Gods watching above us ensured
that we could all be something special just by applying these two facts of being alive to everyone. But where does that lead us? Yes, we are special. Yes, our memories are fluid and fickle. Yes, we need faith in ourselves to keep fighting on and achieving even though our ideas about ourselves are based on memories which we know are not a perfect record of what transpired. I seem to keep cycling back in my argument and for good reason. That is because the discussion of memory is not really about what we do and do not recall or whether it was factually correct or a fabrication by our psyche; the discussion is about the struggle to survive. Isn’t it so convenient that I forget so much of my life during my illness, that with serious trauma of any kind memories of those experiences are almost always put aside by our brain (Straker, 2004). Repressed memories might hold us back, but we keep them hidden from ourselves due to the rules of survival. If those memories hadn’t been hidden at the time, they would have gotten in the way of us continuing on successfully. So is it any surprise that our own biological process for creating and recalling a memory leaves a considerable lag between the two (“Memory Encoding,” 2010)? It's almost as if through evolution our body created a loophole for us to exploit when things fall apart, because through trial and error, our body realized things fall apart frequently.

Now at this point in my discussion, the reader might have serious issues with what I am saying. After all, most of it is based on my own personal logic and that of a group of people on one side of a psychological debate. Naturally, there will be counter arguments. None of these ideas or my sources describe a law; all of these ideas are in flux. Then, lets focus on me, and a person like me: a person who lives in a fog of some kind, a person who has been gifted with intelligence and creativity, but is plagued with doubt and a lack of drive, due to them not having bearings. Memory not only constructs our reality, it gives us an enhanced sense of self, by providing us with waypoints. These points are like coordinates on a map; with only three of
them, we already know roughly where we are and can then decide where we are heading (“Methods of Position Fixing,” 2011). What if we had no waypoints, how would we know backward from forward, and what’s worse, how would we set goals? Only time and experience can help in that regard, trial and error, for the lost to fumble their way through things. And with time I learned some things about myself. I learned to be persistent. I learned to be stubborn. I learned to act quickly and trust myself, and I learned to try again when I failed. And with these lessons I found a truth, I was an artist not because I had the temperament for it, but because over time it was the only thing I could trust, it was the only thing that helped me keep track of the story of my life. If I felt I had forgotten something, I could always research a memory and enshrine it as a product for as long as I could recognize it. And the simple fact was that the more of these works or memories I fabricated, the more I could ensure that I stitched important aspects of my life together. Time therefore became my ally. Time helped me find myself. And soon it seemed most of my work revolved around my memories, revolved around the loss of time I felt while experiencing something new that perhaps connected with something missing. I realized when I stared out of windows or daydreamed during mundane trips, that I wasn’t just drifting, I was feeling melancholic because I knew I was losing time. I suppose we all feel sad that we lose time. We all feel sad when we age. And we all feel sad when we go through old photographs. But for most people, the memories captured in those photographs can easily be recalled. In my case, if I don’t take steps to document my memories, those memories really will be gone for good. I suppose that is why I finally got serious about painting.

*How do artists use memory?*

Artists have been depicting memories as far back as time itself. From the stone age wall paintings in France, to allegorical renditions of oral storytelling in Medieval Europe, to the
documentary film making of today. Even though art, and painting in particular, is not always used to capture or reconstruct ones memories of an incident, more often than not, that is its preferred use. Lets track then, exactly how painters have used memory in their work alongside how I do as well. My first example is where it all began. At the dawn of Art History, one of the first explorations of Man’s journey in the visual arts starts with the cave paintings at Lascaux and Altimira (Gardner, 1996). Even though these two sites are not related in geography or time and are not even connected with the same researchers, the majority of those involved researching those two sites were led to the same conclusions. At the time our ancestors used those sites, Man had no written language yet. Why were these paintings made? Fertility? Glory to the divine mother? Documentation? Realization of the world around them? Whichever reason they could have had, we don’t have the artists here to answer for their legacy. But considering the fact that these early people couldn’t write, the only thing we know for sure is that they could draw. And I venture that drawing came before complex language, as is postulated by John Berger, because technically it is easier.

“Drawing is a form of probing. And the first generic impulse to draw derives from the human need to search, to plot points, to place things and to place oneself.”

Berger (2011)

I live in the Middle East, a thriving mess of all kinds of cultures, languages, races, and as ancient a place as any other place on earth. And what I know from my life here is that when all else fails in oral communication we simply draw out what we mean to say. Either it is a set of instructions that someone can read, a map that someone can follow, or a pictogram of something we want them to understand. Doing this is so instinctual in fact, that one almost feels they are a troglodyte when they find themselves in that frustrating situation. And that might be because once when we did live in caves, this was the preferred method to communicate. Perhaps it was the first way, the
easiest way. Whether language came first or not, my intention is to point out that ancient people
used these images to ease communication with each other first, and then to do the same with
others later. And what were these cave dwellers communicating about? They were
communicating about something important that had happened; for example, that an enormous
Auruch had been sited, or their achievement that day needed their handprint for validation, or
their desire for another fertile season meant another painting for the Goddess. All these images
were linked directly to memories. These people were painting their hopes, dreams, and
memories, in an effort to communicate to others their intentions so they could make sense of the
world around them, which in turn, might have given them that much more luck in surviving their
daily challenges. When they made spear heads, when they learned how to make a fire, when they
raised a family or fed that family from the livestock around them, they wanted each other to
know how each task was done and how great they were for doing it. Art to them was a crucial
element of life. We know that man has never been a solitary animal; we lived in societies even
before we climbed down from the trees (Boyd, Robert and Peter J. Richerson, 2009). And all
societies demand a pecking order, which in turn demands recognition and communication. So as
soon as we physically could, we started to draw out what we wanted others to know, and we did
so because it was crucial for our survival. And that is the crux of what I am saying. My memories
are crucial for my own survival, and my documentation of certain ones, is only myself cherry
picking, like my ancient ancestors, what I want to remember and how I wish to be remembered.

I suppose it is easy to link memories in such a direct way with early human culture. After
all, what more did these people have to communicate with? Well, how about artists during one of
the golden ages of Art History; the Renaissance? The stories of Raphael, Michelangelo, and
Leonardo are so famous that at this point the fiction outweighs the fact. But in a time of extreme
politics, learning, and wealth, why did these artists make the works they did and how was it related to memory? We know that in Renaissance Italy the Roman Catholic Church needed to expand, and to this end it used the Medici’s banking prowess, as is highlighted by the Economist, to fund its wars and expand its influence.

“And at the centre of that sat the Medici family. This one family supplied four popes and two queens of France, and ran Florence, with a couple of interruptions, for almost 400 years.”


We also know that one way for these Italian Renaissance artists to raise themselves in society was to rise through the ranks of the then Medici-funded Ateliers in pursuit of fame and good fortune. But why make the images they did? Remember, just like Stone Age Man, many in Europe at the time had practically no education, and they might have as well been cavemen themselves. I don’t think it’s a long shot to guess that the rank and file peasant was only slightly divorced from the most enlightened chieftain of a caveman’s clan. At the time, The Church had suffered various blows, was weak, and needed more strength, and a great way to get more strength is to get more people into the fold. Yes, the gentry and the armies mattered a great deal, but what did it all matter if there was no one to fill the churches? Who was the pied piper without the rats behind him? Art was a sexy car used to communicate with the masses, and the Church was the ideal dealership to sell that car. Whether it was for the Medici’s private wars or the Church’s, paintings helped the uneducated, the illiterate, the deaf and dumb understand the agenda of those in power. Paintings helped the kings rally the masses. And what messages were the powerful communicating to the masses? They were brainwashing them in their doctrine, of course. They were forcing onto the masses a fictional memory of what they wanted them to believe. Either it was the story of Christ and his apostles, or it was the story of the Ancient
Greeks and their nobility, or it was the history of massacres and wins written by the winners. Art was used for pleasure, documentation, prestige, and all the same things we know that it is used for today, but crucially at this time it was used for political propaganda. So how did the artists approach this? Michelangelo was not present at the beginning of time, yet he had to paint the Sistine Chapel with a story of the genesis of life. A story is as much a memory as a thought of an actual one. In fact, false memories are a huge problem in the legal profession today, as a false memory can be so easily implanted in a witness of a crime with such a few accidental situational elements, as was pointed out by Scott Fraser, an eminent forensic psychologist, at a TEDx Talk in LA in 2012 in relation to numerous cases he had worked on.

“There is decades of research, examples and examples of cases like this, where individuals really, really believe. None of those teenagers who identified him thought that they were picking the wrong person. None of them thought they couldn’t see the person’s face. We all have to be very careful. All our memories are reconstructed memories. They are the product of what we originally experienced and everything that’s happened afterwards. They’re dynamic. They’re malleable. They’re volatile, and as a result, we all need to remember to be cautious, that the accuracy of our memories is not measured in how vivid they are nor how certain you are that they’re correct.”

Fraser (2012)

If our memories are so pliable even when a man’s life is on the line, just imagine how real a captivating story becomes for us when retold through paintings. And the stories Michelangelo was tasked to portray were not insignificant stories. These allegories were the stories of who we are and how we must behave. These were the big stories. I can just see Michelangelo thinking about what his story would say even before he made that first sketch. How was that mural going to be read in the minds of the simple, as well as the mind of the Pope, his all powerful patron? He
had to think about something so elemental that it would activate everyone’s memories of what father figures should look like, what mother figures should act like, and what Paradise must have been like, all based on memories of stories from the Bible that were related to everyone while they were growing up. His memory, the people’s memory, and our collective human memory, these are distinct things, but Michelangelo managed to tie them all together. And today, his painting of the Sistine Chapel is so widespread that most of us who know about his work, can’t even think of the Bible without calling to mind this particular work, because his memories have now fused permanently with ours.

It’s no lie that all artists covet fame and fortune, and Michelangelo’s example is just one among a countless number. The word “famous”, as stated by Miriam Webster Dictionary (2018), simply means, “widely known or honored by achievement”. Naturally this means by people, however, people can only know or honor something if they have a memory of it. At its core then, the aim of all artists in connection with fame is to be known by as many people as possible; in essence, their task is to implant an idea about themselves and their work into all these minds for as long as possible. And when those artists stop being famous and become legends, they essentially become immortal because they my pass on in this life, but the memory of them and their work will continue forever. They, and the idea of who they were, will be trapped in countless memories reinventing themselves from mind to mind, generation to generation, until we as a people could not have known what life would be like without their work guiding us. Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Monet, Picasso these names are so large, that anyone in the Western world with even a basic education will know something about them and will even use these names as adjectives today. But sometimes an artist hopes not for fame but simply to make something that matters, to make something that can change the world and alleviate a problem.
The documentary filmmakers of today supersede almost anyone in this ability, and regardless of whether they seek fame, which they usually do, their greater struggle is to make something that matters. These artists wish to create a document of an issue and they wish to construct a memory, not only for themselves, but for all of human society. And this is not an ordinary memory; this is a memory that can force us to change. In the 1960’s, Clement Greenberg famously claimed that representational painting was dead, and that painting needed to reinvent itself.

“As such, representation, or illustration, does not attain the uniqueness of pictorial art; what does do so is the associations of things represented. All recognizable entities (including pictures themselves) exist in three-dimensional space, and the barest suggestion of a recognizable entity suffices to call up associations of that kind of space. The fragmentary silhouette of a human figure, or of a teacup, will do so, and by doing so alienate pictorial space from the literal two-dimensionality which is the guarantee of painting’s independence as an art. For, as has already been said, three-dimensionality is the province of sculpture. To achieve autonomy painting has had above all to divest itself of everything it might share with sculpture, and it is in its effort to do this, and not so much -- I repeat -- to exclude the representational or literary, that painting has made itself abstract.”

Greenberg (1961)

And whether painting reinvented itself in the manner he expected, painting did reorient itself in order to carve out a clear niche for Photography, Video, and Film, which filled the niche of representation and documentation far better than painting ever could. Movies, as commercially crass as they may be, are arguably the highest form of art making today and certainly with 4D cinemas or virtual reality techniques, they can make an idea, a fiction, as real as the world around us; they have cornered the area of representation. Additionally, they employ almost all the fields in the arts to make these stories real: music, visual arts, dance, theatre, writing, all rolled into one
giant effort to make something visually incredible and hopefully significant. Each film can be so expensive it is practically a business on its own. And in some cases movies created by the large studios are not just short-term businesses, but businesses that run franchises profitably twenty years or more after the initial film was produced. These studios are the modern-day Renaissance Ateliers, workshops that keep producing artworks for the rich and powerful all the while placating the consuming masses. Documentary filmmakers and artists use this fact to push their own fiction. Whether it is, for example, Michael Moore or Werner Herzog, whose styles and approaches couldn’t be more different, documentary filmmakers fabricate something for the audience to remember, they fabricate a fiction that we believe as truth, and they do so to further a cause they feel is worthy enough to change the flow of human thought. Do my paintings, Michelangelo’s paintings, or anyone’s paintings have that ability? Yes, they do. Are my paintings, or any paintings nearly as effective as Film in changing human thought? I doubt it. But painting is a silent medium. It is a medium in which I approach my audience one person at a time. Quiet reflection is the only way I can approach them. I will, of course, use all the tools of the trade to enhance my message, but my message can only be heard by those that are willing to hear, as I cannot physically speak to my audience. Documentary filmmakers grab you by the scruff of your neck either as a solitary viewer or as one amongst a group and literally call you to action. And like the churches of the past, the movie theaters of today are also a great dealership for the rich and powerful to push the newest vehicle they are selling. And if the theatre is the dealership, and the movie is the vehicle being sold, our memories are the currency.

What do critics think of memory?

Artists and critics are different. I am an artist and I could also be a critic, but I would always be biased as someone who feels more comfortable as a maker first and a consumer
second. Additionally, it is natural for people on both these poles to be skeptical and enamored of each other at the same time. Therefore, artists and critics will automatically differ regarding their perception about the use of memories in the practice of making art. Wassily Kandinsky was both an artist and a critic in his time. And even he would struggle to figure out what pole he sat on or which he was closer too. John Berger started out as a painter but was clearly a better critic, and only he could say for certain which pole he sat on and to what degree. Why does this topic even matter when discussing my work? Because art is not made in a vacuum. In my first year in critical practice back in the Art Institute of Boston, a principal set of rhetorical questions was raised: Do you make art for yourself, or do you make it for others, and if the audience matters, how does it matter, and how much? That definitely opened a Pandora’s box. I noticed while studying painting, there always seemed to be two camps. The grumpy introverted artist who refused to “sell out” and the exciting extroverted artist seeking a method to sell. Neither one of these camps is better than the other, they just are what they are, and to some degree they define themselves on how they interact with an audience. The other universal question that tied directly into these points was the old philosophical exercise regarding the tree in the forest. If a tree fell in a forest and no one heard it fall, did it fall? The same idea can be applied to making art. If one found themselves on a deserted island and chose to make the most beautiful art work to pass the time, would it be art if no other person ever interacted with it or would it only be craft regardless of how gorgeous it may be? This goes to the core of the concept of art and perception. Is Art with a capital A defined by an audience or not? This is an unanswerable question, but it is a line in the sand all artists and artisans have had to fall along nonetheless. It is the critic’s job as the most serious fan of all artists to keep pushing artists to ask questions about their ability to create in the first place. The critic is always going to be included in the artist’s audience. And since I fall into
the camp of those believing that Art with a capital A is only made with the acceptance and integration of the concept of the audience as someone other than myself alone, the critic becomes my best friend and hated enemy all at the same time. So if I see artists and their relationship with memory as craftsmen working with their material, focused on and enamored of the process and the products they make, critics then are the consumers of this product, and they see how the artists, process, and the products they make fit into the greater story of human evolution. Critics care about what artists do, but they care more about what artists are trying to say. When one is watching the other, that distance between the craftsman and the audience is important; it creates a chasm that can only be bridged by dialogue between the object created and the audience. This distance helps the critic contextualize what that artist is doing not only in relation to other artists, but within time as well.

A good example of a critic and his relationship with memory is Wassily Kandinsky. A lawyer first, he chose to abandon his practice and become an artist from scratch in his thirties (notablebiographies.com, 2018). And what an artist he became! But being a lawyer never left him. He had training that wouldn’t just disappear. He loved to read, he loved to write, he loved to investigate, and he loved to argue. These were the things that made him who he was, these were the memories he had gathered throughout his life to that point. Up to when he started his art career his critical faculties were arguably stronger than his hand. Then how could one blame him, when as he improved at his visual practice, he grew hungrier to document what he discovered, not only for himself, but for everyone. I would argue he was the first artist/philosopher that wanted to lift the veil of secrecy around the practice of art. He wanted to bring the audience into the fold of the artist. Artists tended then, as they do now, to horde their secrets; he was sharing them. He wanted to make everyone a critic, as he naturally believed more critics would force
artists to make better work. Remember, lawyers start to learn the law through the Socratic method, a method of learning based on a teacher posing questions so that the students may answer them of their own accord through discussion within the collective audience. This dialogue of artist and audience was important to him, and he discovered things from the audience that no one knew at the time. The early twentieth century was a time of immense discovery and change, education was far more widespread, and communication across the world was possible. The demand by so many people to know what secrets the world held was intense; before, these insights were only for the educated, the rich, and the powerful, but now anyone might have access. Psychology and psychiatry were developed at the turn of the century, and the fracture between Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung was just about to manifest itself when Wassily Kandinsky published his famous treatise, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, right before the breakout of the First World War. Can you imagine this time of so many ideas all bubbling to the surface at the same time in different locations, and everyone eager to absorb, discuss, and use these new ideas? Just as Jung started to separate from Freud in his thinking, Kandinsky was separating from the rest of the European painterly pack with his ideas on abstract art in the aforementioned treatise.

“A painter, who finds no satisfaction in mere representation, however artistic, in his longing to express his inner life, cannot but envy the ease with which music, the most non-material of the arts today, achieves this end. He naturally seeks to apply the methods of music to his own art. And from this results that modern desire for rhythm in painting, for mathematical, abstract construction, for repeated notes of colour, for setting colour in motion.”

*Kandinsky (1977)*

It is no surprise that Wassily Kandinsky's notions of the spiritual in art reflect the notions of Carl Jung’s idea of how spirituality is manifested in the human mind.
“There is, however, in art another kind of external similarity which is founded on a fundamental truth. When there is a similarity of inner tendency in the whole moral and spiritual atmosphere, a similarity of ideals, at first closely pursued but later lost to sight, a similarity in the inner feeling of any one period to that of another, the logical result will be a revival of the external forms which served to express those inner feelings in an earlier age.”

Kandinsky

“The dream is the small hidden door in the deepest and most intimate sanctum of the soul, which opens to the primeval cosmic night that was soul long before there was conscious ego and will be soul far beyond what a conscious ego could ever reach.”

Jung (1934)

Carl Jung would later go on to describe man as having a collective unconsciousness, a deep well of memories that have somehow traversed time and given each culture and each epoch of mankind a rope to hold on to in the dark as we evolve forward. Wassily Kandinsky, whether he was aware of Jung’s work or not, was barking up the same tree. He believed that within our soup of memories lay something common to us all. He called it spirituality, and its basis was a language of color and line. His was the early days of art theory, color theory, art therapy, and abstraction. Being an artist first, through actual practice, Kandinsky could feel something unseen in his paintings, in his memories, in discussions with his audience, in the way color and line interacted with him and everyone else. Armed with his instinct and his memories, along with those of others, he proceeded to put into words in the groundbreaking, Concerning the Spiritual
in Art, a language for the visual realm that eventually would be applied to all people across all demographics. He could have only done this with a healthy appreciation of his audience, by recognizing that he could use the common well of our deep collective human memories to link us all in order to form a new language we could all communicate with. This was definitely done off the back of Carl Jung, who developed the idea of Jungian Archetypes. As he argued back and forth with Sigmund Freud, he inevitably created a whole new area of study for the mind in the collective unconsciousness, all based on an instinct he had about the nature of memories, which he pursued. Interestingly, even though both these men pursued subjects of study far broader than memory alone, both also viewed our memories as the fulcrum on which our consciousness played out its balancing act. In both their tones, in both their treatises, memories are always represented as some mystical elixir that spans time and reflects back on us, our lives, as well as our destinies, and since we as human beings were situated in time, with time, perhaps memory could be much more?

John Berger, on the other hand, approaches criticism in a much more formal way, not by feeling and experimenting through practice via discovery, but by analysis and inference. He had an advantage over Kandinsky in that by his time in history Art Criticism was an established field of study thanks to his predecessors. Yet he did something impressive as well: he brought Art Criticism to the masses via TV. John Berger’s, Ways of Seeing, was one of the first theoretical premises I read in my art studies, but it was also a groundbreaking TV show, and it is still something I quote and understand the best. For a TV audience, the language was structured to be understood. The complex concepts were pared down into digestible chunks and organized in an entertaining manner, the same way that Stephen Hawking pares down the theory of black holes in, A Brief History of Time, for those who like to study the universe. But paring down such
complex ideas requires one to get to the heart of the matter quickly and further simplify that, too.

And one lovely thing about *Ways of Seeing*, was John Berger’s discussion of the idea of Mystification; the fact that an artwork feels different and speaks differently to us based solely on the context it is placed in, screams volumes to me.

> “The art of the past no longer exists as it once did. Its authority is lost. In its place there is a language of images. What matters now is who uses that language for what purpose. This touches upon questions of copyright for reproduction, the ownership of art presses and publishers, the total policy of public art galleries and museums. As usually presented, these are narrow professional matters. One of the aims of this essay has been to show that what is really at stake is much larger.”

Berger (2008)

I have pointed out how important I believe memories are in the creation of artworks. But what about how memories are created in the first place? Is that as important as the final memory itself? If, as John Berger says, I view an artwork in a museum differently from the same work in my home, what happens to me if I view these same artworks at different times as I myself age and develop? Each time I start to create a memory of an artwork, I will later remember it differently, because I will always be different from the time of the memory's creation to that of its recall.

Each time the artwork and I will have a different unspoken discussion as a new memory is created by a new me. And each time this artwork touches my memories, which are the core of my being, it has the chance to change my destiny in a new way. We are all in flux, and each interaction with a person or thing is a new one with the possibility of changing our path in life.

John Berger very neatly points out how the silent and intangible dialogue between artwork and audience can actually be inferred as real by the fact of mystification alone.
“Visitors to art museums are often overwhelmed by the number of works on display, and by what they take to be their own culpable inability to concentrate on more than a few of these works. ... Art history has totally failed to come to terms with the problem of the relationship between the outstanding work and the average work of the European traditions. ... Third-rate works surround an outstanding work without any recognition - let alone explanation - of what fundamentally differentiates them.”

Berger

If it is clear that in a museum setting all the artwork I see has a veil of pomposity to it denoting that the artworks in question are the works of geniuses, when in fact only a few of the works are that significant; what can also be clear is that the silent discussion I am having with each painting has been subverted and influenced. This is Mystification. And Mystification by its very existence in turn indicates that such an unseen and silent discussion between object and audience actually exists. For if I saw the same paintings in the comfort of my own home without the pomposity of the museum setting, I would probably think far less of the artworks in question, simply because the change in context alters this silent discussion so significantly. If I now know that a memory can be altered by just experiential factors alone, then theoretically I can form any memory I wish by controlling how I remember something. This now makes it very clear to me, a man with a memory problem, on how I should proceed. First, I should pick something I want to remember. Then, I should drum it into myself, via as many sensory inputs as possible. And finally I should create a painting of it, so even if I forgot the process, I won’t forget the final result. Also each time I interact with this memory, a process of sensory input and recollection has to take place, so even though the memory in question might have definitely altered for good from the initial one, it
is still a memory I want to remember and one that I will have the best chance at remembering, regardless of whether it is the original memory or not.

*My memory and me*

I didn’t wake up one day and think I was going to paint this way. Like every other artist before me, trial and error seems to be the best way to find oneself. And do I think I know more about myself now than before? Hardly, I still feel very much like I am stumbling around in the dark. But today I have a process and a method that helps me not only make good paintings but helps me better remember things. I now feel a bit more secure about my surroundings, and I have some bright spots to look back on and remember fondly almost as waypoints in the dark. A problem with these waypoints is that they become fall back options, safe zones, when one is afraid of the dark and the risk discovery entails. And that’s the worst catch of all; the better one gets, the more one has to lose. Over time, as I had gotten better at painting I started to notice I was getting too tight. I was reusing my processes again and again to avoid failure, but each time I added more to the process, and at some point this process had grown to become a burden instead of an asset. Even though repetition of forms in different formats was good for my hand and for me retaining my memory, it was terrible for the art itself. The final artworks were being repeated to death (see figures 1, 2, 3). My goal in trying to achieve my MFA was not only about trying to bring life back to my paintings by enjoying the process of art making again; it was also focused on finding new ways to translate what I was feeling into paint. I feel fairly confident that I have achieved that today. First, through persistence, I painted against my anxieties and fear of failure and found simple tricks to get myself to paint freely again with as little process as possible. My anxieties were always present around any significant memory I wanted to retain, and they would slow me down. So by detaching myself from the weight of those anxieties and by painting fast, I
could paint with more ease and in a more instinctive manner with better results (see figures 4, 5, 6); after all, I was painting more with my hand than with my head. Process, my head, as great as it was for retaining my memory was killing the spontaneity and freedom of my hand; I needed to find a balance within the spectrum of head and hand. Additionally, I was a big guy at 6 feet 2 inches. Why was I creating small paintings that only used the dimension of my hand instead of my whole body for strokes? When I was getting my BA in fine art I never shied away from size, but over time, the convenience of small paintings shrank everything down, and naturally my process altered and tightened with the reduction in scale. With my anxieties at bay for a moment, I decided to jump in deep and just go large, and once I felt comfortable painting fast in both acrylics and oils on a bigger scale about things that mattered little to me, naturally I switched the subject to things that did matter. That conceptual jump was not as easy as it seems. Anxieties are built up over time for a reason. Subconsciously, I had attached so many weights to my process in regard to the memories I cared about and wanted to remember. When I used to plan my paintings, these paintings were chosen memories I wanted as a record of my experience, so they had to be just right, even if they lacked a life of their own. I knew I had to ease my concern about the reality around these images if I wanted a breakthrough, since all memories are fluid and inaccurate anyway. After all, what my hand instead of my head chose to make might just as well be as accurate a representation of the memory in question. The aim then was to get both, my hand and my head, equally involved in both recalling and imprinting the memory in paint; and if my head helped with seeing, my hand helped with feeling. In regard to the subject matter, it was once again about my memory. I can’t escape the fact that I love to paint because of a lack of a decent memory. And I can’t escape the fact that I love realism because I love to see a memory come to life. But through practice and exercises designed to distract myself from my anxieties and
crutches I was able to fool myself into painting in a manner and method I hadn’t ever really explored in the past. I had started painting from my gut, and that helped me have a confidence I always needed in painting. My process retooled, my confidence restored, and my mind refreshed, I set about my new work.

During my study for my MFA an idea had slowly been gnawing away at me that maybe why I painted what I did, in the way that I did, was not only to remember the memory, but to experience the struggle of that memory once again. I had learned long ago that when a memory is created it is created via sensory inputs that help the experience go into our brain and there it will be stored via these multiple avenues in the brain all at the same time. This is why the context of a memory is so important. We can all recall a specific memory via any one of the senses alone—sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste, or with them all together. So previously, when I realized that I wanted to remember something and paint it a new, I assumed I should use as many of these inputs as possible. Like a method actor, I would try to replicate the feeling of that time and that memory. I would make sure music was playing and always created a play list that brought up some of those sensations, I would paint when only in a conducive mood, and most importantly I would do as much study of the work as I could. Today the process is essentially the same; however, it is different in a few key areas. First, I still do prep myself with music and mood to make sure my setting is conducive to the memory, but I try not to let this stop the painting from actually happening if something is not in place. And more importantly in the second point, I still do study the work prior to making it, but I do each study only to partial completion. This last point is key, because I want to instinctually understand the forms of what I am going to paint. I still need the study through practice to internalize the forms because these textures need to be real to me as if they were right in front of me; after all, I am trying to bring my memory back to life.
But I don’t want to practice the entire artwork to death. That would be as if I painted the image over and over, killing any discovery or revelation from the final product. I now do this practice in partial studies to know just enough information about form so that when I finally make the painting in totality, my hand is guided by instinct and confidence instead of practice; hence, the resulting painting is created fresh for the first time (see figures 7, 8). Why am I leaning on instinct over practice? Well, practice is key to being a good artist, but it is mechanical, it is formula. When one practices, it feels like a thing is made and remade, and eventually it is made perfectly. Instinct is a sensation one has that says this puzzle piece needs to go here. One should not think twice about what instinct says; if one chooses to listen, one needs to act on it. Instinct is something that comes from deep within who we are as individuals, but to make beautiful things, artists need the confidence to follow through on instinct. And the great thing about practice is that it gives you that confidence through trial and error. Why then the emphasis on instinct over practice for me today? I think that is just a matter of age. A professor close to me once said very succinctly, “You’re a Painter! Don’t you know enough by now? Just paint!” She was right, after years of study by this point I know more than enough about method, materials, theory, and practice; now I need to trust my gut as that is where I haven’t put enough time. After all I pick the subject with my gut, I select the composition with my gut, why not paint with my gut? So first with all my prep and studying, I fabricate an alternate reality in my mind’s eye, and then I begin painting. At first the painting just plods along, but soon I am completely engrossed in the movement of it all. I am remembering anew as I am painting. Another significant friend and professor of mine used to say that he liked to paint without music, so he could listen to the painting itself. I agree; there does seem to be a form of silent communication between the painter and what they believe will be on the canvas, but we all have different methods of getting that
paint on the canvas. I need the music to keep me engrossed and keep the mental image in my mind alive. Does that mean that I can’t listen to what the evolving painting is trying to tell me in return? Perhaps less so than if things were silent, but at least I am enthusiastic and I keep my mind open as I attack the surface one stroke at a time. I paint, I move, I pause, and I look away and I come back, keeping this up, leaving enough space for errors, corrections, accidents, changes, etc. Before, I used to paint to replicate, replicate what I remembered, replicate an image, achieve a kind of realism I wished I could achieve for my own ambition and fulfillment. Now I paint to see how this vision of a memory actually changes as I paint it. I might have started off with one idea, but I very clearly see it morph into another, and that is intriguing, because not only can I not predict where the painting is going but the painting is clearly trying to tell me something new about myself as it manifests into its final form. And what is really exciting about what I find in these paintings is that I find myself speaking to another version of myself; a reflection of me who lives in my subconscious separated from me by the chasm of language, who until the construction of the painting had no way of telling me what I should do next or what I should watch out for (see figures 9, 10). So these paintings are not only a source of alleviating a memory dysfunction, they are now almost a form of guidance and therapy as I struggle through internal battles to get them done, and if they’re done well, they reveal to me something about myself that spurs me on to the next one.

Process aside, why the subject material? Why kids? Why these actions? Why Time? Why not! It might have been done a million times over, but who cares? I don’t! I am too old to care about what others wish; I care that I am losing time! I care that I lament the loss of my memories and my life with it! And what better way to show this loss by focusing on those moments when we were kids, those moments that are universal moments. Does anyone really believe that the
first time their child was surprised by the sight of the sea, this moment was a unique and original moment? Or that the first time their child experienced real disappointment at the dropping of their ice cream, that this same feeling hasn’t repeated itself throughout Man’s entire history one child at a time? When we are first developing as people, we are new, and we are as close as we will ever be to God or that collective unconsciousness, if you believe it exists. We experience lots of “firsts”, as we as individuals grow, but they are not truly unique “firsts” in the context of all people; in fact, they are universal “firsts” that all people experience at some point. Yes, the way our memory works means that we, as individual people, are unique and therefore these “firsts” are unique memories within us. But the sensations, the feelings associated with the memories, the lessons learned these are common lessons that need to be learned for us as individuals to grow and for us as a people to survive. And therefore, because of human survival, these lessons have needed to be learned throughout time. Our fear of the dark, our fear of snakes, but it is not just fear, our love of a blue sky, our relief of the rain these are important human lessons. I am not going to reach deep into psychotherapy and link these “firsts” to Jungian archetypes, because I don’t need to. It is simple pragmatic logic that links these “firsts” not only with me, but with anyone, and not only with us today, but with anyone throughout time. So by picking just the right moment to capture, a child in the midst of joy or distress experiencing a “first” of significant comprehension, and by reaching into myself to connect with my own memories of such a similar time, I can fuse the two ideas. And by fusing these two ideas, or memories if you will (mine and the subject’s), I can hopefully paint a reflection of these ideas that connect not only myself and the subject but anyone else who shares a similar memory or lesson learned. Artists borrow, steal, and sometimes just plagiarize ideas simply to regurgitate them back out as something new. In my case, the earth moved when I saw Yigal Ozeris’s show in New York City at the Louis K Meisel
Gallery in the fall of 2015. I could have easily passed it by, but it was by complete accident that I walked into that gallery uninvited and saw those beautiful realistic paintings emulating a deep depth of field we commonly find in discarded accidental tourist photography. Of course, his skilled and confident use of oil or watercolor to emulate a photo was so stunning that it could capture anyone’s attention and now these images were transformed by paint into something that no one would discard in anyway, and all the while I was thinking, “How can I use this idea?” If I were to paint like him, would I want to be stuck with making every blade of grass, or every pore. What was clever about his paintings was that he chose what to focus on and what to avoid. He was giving us a sense of the mystical nature of women by alluding to them as prancing fairies in fields (see figure 11). And he was also using a subject as old as time like the countless number of painters before him who painted nymphs frolicking in hidden grottos (see figures 12, 13). Yet his paintings felt new, crisp, and fresh. And he was emphasizing his subjects only by emulating the tools of photographers. By reducing his depth of field, by adding movement and freezing the subject in mid movement, he causes our sense of time to automatically stop. This freezing of time is common in editorial photography, but in painting it makes us feel as if we are witnessing something sacred. And the best part of the paintings from a technical point of view was that all those shapes that were out of focus were now simplified into large areas of color that needed just a hint of recognition by the viewer to identify their form: a very modern concept of paint use used in a very traditional approach of realism. Fortuitously, at the time, it just so happened that my current ideas about depicting kids revolved around similar concepts. What does one feel while spinning round and round on a carousel looking at the child one cherishes? The rest of the world is turned into a blur, only the person of interest is in sharp focus, and time does seems to slow, if not stop, for an instant. And how would I paint this feeling? Why not the same way he
did? Instead of turning my children into metaphors the way he did, I would be transforming them into earlier versions of myself (see figure 14). In effect, by using these tricks, every time a viewer connects with a painting like this, time should stop for that viewer if the “first” depicted resonates with them; as they are essentially transported back to reliving a similar moment they might have experienced before. The portraits I make, then, are no longer accurate representations of any one child; they are attempts at painting any child experiencing life’s gifts or struggling with and overcoming life’s obstacles. I paint them large, with the subject’s head large as well, to arrest the viewer and involve them into the momentary action of the subject. And then the effects in paint, freezing of time, blurriness of movement, shallow depth of field, all work to focus on the child’s emotional state and should work their magic to slow time down. Finally, these paintings become reflections of us as we watch a child moving forward toward the promise of adulthood but paradoxically away from the purity they are born from. So if I am successful in doing these paintings, I will definitely be able to convey to the audience the sense of time I feel I lose in my daily struggle with my memory and the sense of loss I feel with every new moment I enjoy with my kids. I might be both happy and sad about the moments I experience, but hopefully these paintings will convey a lot more than my state of happiness as my fabricated memory interacts with a real memory of someone willing to listen.

**Conclusion**

The wonders what a beer and some food can do! Even with my horrible memory, I still remember vividly sitting on that rickety table in the middle of Mexico, sand between my toes, Roger and I playing cards with both of us simultaneously trying to keep the sun out of our eyes. From time to time, I would look up at the sea, that beautiful turquoise, fresh, and violent sea. I was exhausted from the beating it had just meted out, but the pain in my back now seemed like a
distant itch next to the relief of just sitting there alive. The sun was bright, the sea was vivid, and
the wind was gentle. I had just gone through a major episode in my life, and at that moment, it
was all just slipping away amongst the calming elements around me. My mind at the time wanted
to forget, and I did, for a long time. But now years later, I still haven’t forgotten those series of
events, yet other moments I had once thought so dear to me I can’t remember at all anymore.
Why did I remember that incident for so long after it seemed to have even left me? Like
everything, only time seems to lend clarity. It took me close to twenty years to figure out through
my paintings and life in general, that I am defined not by what I am losing, but by what I have
gained through my struggle and will to survive. My paintings try and catch a moment in time
when a child experiences a significant first. I do so not for the revelation of the lesson he or she
learned. I paint these images of my kids or others to try and resolve within myself why a similar
memory made such a difference within me, why did that similar experience help me grow? If
memories are the threads that weave the tapestry of myself together, then I paint to understand
what that whole tapestry is trying to say. I stumbled upon this subject by simply viewing my first
child, my daughter, go through her daily trials: some successful, some not. And even though I
could no longer remember my own experiences when I was young, I could sense they were there,
somewhere lost in the dark, and as real an experience as what she was living right in front of me.
I was seeing myself in her, living through the same action. Painting these obvious “firsts” helps
me connect with my own lost memories but they also help me connect with others. Yes, you
might not want to hang an image of my daughter on your wall, but you would want to hang an
image of a child lost in fun as she splashes through a fountain on a sunny day. Because if any one
of us experienced that simple and basic joy once in our life, we would all want to remember that
sensation again! With that said, does it hurt me in any way that by coincidence I happen to
mostly paint experiences with my own kids? Well, no, because for me it is therapy, not a form of vacation photography. I see a moment in their faces. I see them connecting with something pure. I see them understand this perfect moment as it happens, it’s written in their features; and I see them, myself, and all of us, connecting with this same human realization throughout time. And I think, what would this moment reveal to me, about me, if I painted it? Would I fill a void in my psyche, would I find a missing puzzle piece of who I am, would I just like to lock away this particular memory for my own keepsake, or would this new painting lead me to a revelation that will create the next painting? All could be true. So I paint that painting knowing little of what I will discover, and I hope it leads to the next painting. I keep crawling on the ocean floor having faith that I get to shore. I keep trying to figure out what’s in that sticky mess of my memories even though the jam keeps spreading. And every once in a while, I strike gold. A new waypoint is created, a new bright spot in the dark. I am thrilled, I am overconfident again, I pat myself on the back. And for a while I am actually satisfied, and I think I’ve achieved something special. But the silent darkness all around glares on unmoved at my celebratory jig. And I realize again, I am still stuck out there in the middle of the surf. Another challenge overcome for sure, but a bigger one yet to come. So with one final breath, I think of all that life has given me, and all that I would want to keep fighting for, and I duck under the wave to keep swimming back to shore.
References


Figures

1. “Der Lowe”, 2014, Suhail Jashanmal Jhangiani, Graphite sketch: First draft just to understand the subject and see how I can tackle the trees.

2. “Der Lowe”, 2014, Suhail Jashanmal Jhangiani, Charcoal sketch, 11 x 25 inches: Second draft to understand the true values of dark and light and see how hard it would be to execute in a medium more similar to paint.
3. “Der Lowe”, 2014, Suhail Jashanmal Jhangiani, Acrylic on Wood, 39 x 17.5 inches: Final draft to see if I can feel the climate and create a sense of the cage the lion is really in. I was very happy with the result in simplifying the trees down to something that felt good and made sense, but the painting took months to make because I took so long on the multiple drafts. In the end the painting itself was only a pale reflection of some of the drafts which had more life in them.
4. “Ready, Set, Go!”, 2014, Suhail Jashanmal Jhangiani, Acrylic on Canvas, 16 x 12 inches: First attempt at painting without drawing. Done from life, and without thought on subject matter. I just set up the still life in a slight story and let it go from there. The size was tiny and took one hour to complete. I found this to be a very liberating painting. Fast, easy, and fresh; my goal became to paint like this even as I increased in size and complexity.
5. “Snow Day”, 2014, Suhail Jashanmal Jhangiani, Acrylic on Canvas, 3 x 4 feet: First attempt at painting from life, with a still life, on a medium format, with changing weather conditions. Because of weather changes this took a long time, and I struggled to continue to finish it. Also, at a much larger size, acrylic works against you as it dries fast. Even if I consider this a failure I learned valuable lessons that helped me on the next projects. Additionally, the mouse was developing into a real character and the subject developed as well.
6. “Whazz up?!”, 2014, Suhail Jashanmal Jhangiani, Oil on Canvas, 3 x 4 feet: First attempt at oil painting after years. Large format. I planned this subject; shot the mouse in certain positions and was looking to emulate flash photography of paparazzi as they caught celebrities in the act. The mouse had now developed into a full character, a discarded child’s toys that had moved on considerably from playing hide and seek. The emphasis on technique was to paint fast even if it was large and the most challenging medium. The result was great. Strokes had character. And the subject’s large head made a big difference and was able to immediately link the viewer to the mind of the subject.
7. “Luna sketch”, 2014, Suhail Jashanmal Jhangiani, Graphite on Paper: I knew from experience that I still needed to study the forms of at least a complicated figure in movement. So I focused on the most important part of a portrait, the face. If I could get that right in a drawing then I knew I would manage somehow in the painting. I actually drew it a few times, and finally I found one in which I felt some freedom in the expression and in my use of line. Even though this wasn’t a complete drawing in any way, it was enough for me to move on and see what would occur in the painting itself.
8. “Jumping on the Bed”, 2014, Suhail Jashanmal Jhangiani, Acrylic on Canvas, 36 x 54 inches: I was very happy with this painting, and it developed quickly with a lot of confidence on my part. It was also a subject I cared about, and it was a large format. But while I was painting it, I noticed some issues that I resolved to fix the next time around. First, being in acrylic, I was fighting with the drying time. Even though in this case I was happy with the rawness of the strokes, this was accidental in nature and not something I had anticipated. Additionally, even though I loved my daughter’s expression, her head was so small in the image, that the expression on her face was almost not a real player. Because of this far view of things, we as the viewer are looking into a scene, but we don’t feel as if we are linked psychologically to the child participating in it. However, my greatest achievement on this painting was that I was happy the way previous partial sketches just came together in a fresh final painting.
9. “Tut Tut Tut”, 2016, Suhail Jashanmal Jhangiani, Oil on Canvas, 3 x 4 feet: I had been quite frustrated with the subject’s face in drawings, so I decided to abandon getting things right and just start. As one can see, I was literally pushing and slapping paint on the canvas as fast as I could to just wing it and let the form take its shape. I was very unhappy with this painting in the beginning at this stage, but as things moved along, I became very proud of how I got through this stage and made it to the end. This was a format that was large, but once again the size of the head still didn’t seem large enough to arrest the viewer. We were now involved in the subjects thoughts, but it didn’t stop us in our tracks.
10. “Tut Tut Tut”, 2016, Suhail Jashanmal Jhangiani, Oil on Canvas, 3 x 4 feet: By this point I decided I could have two versions of these kinds of paintings. One could be raw, and one could be tight. Since I particularly didn’t like this image to begin with, I decided to take this painting as far as I should in terms of tight control of the portrait. Yet I wanted to experiment with blurriness and distortion and depth of field as well. So the idea was to see how the painting developed and to accentuate things that were working and eliminate things that weren’t. To me the aggression and sloppiness didn’t work, but the contradiction between 2D flat shapes in the out of focus areas and the sculpted 3D subject’s features did work. I liked the sense of oddness that was created as both 2D and 3D interacted. Not only was I emulating the camera, but a wooziness of the moment as time slows down was seeping into the painting. Additionally, the subject took on a whole different dimension than I ever planned as the image now seemed to be of a child watching and chastising us instead of what was the actual case.
11. “Untitled; Olya”, 2014, Yigal Ozeri, Oil on Canvas, 88 x 110 inches: This image impressed me not only with its detail, but with the way the artist chose to blur out some areas and not others. Yigal Ozeri had realized that as far as our eyes are concerned we don't seem to care how accurate or smooth a gradient is in a depth of field. As long as key focal areas in the foreground are sharp, and key descriptive areas in the background are blurred, our mind will fill in the rest of the image and make it as real as it needs to be for us to believe it. Why? Mainly because in this postmodern age, with photography being so pervasive, we automatically see a painting like this and recognize it as a photograph and then are immediately impressed by how “real” it is. When in truth vast amounts of information in the image is actually altered or altogether missing.
12. “Untitled; Zuzanna”, Yigal Ozeri, Oil on Paper, 2014, 42 x 60 inches: As with Olya, this image has the subject looking on at the viewer. In this whole series of work, Yigal Ozeri’s emphasis is on women, their gaze, their alluring, seductive, and quixotic nature. One looks at them and is drawn in, but one is also alarmed at how easily they are being drawn in by the subject’s hypnotic glare. I thought the artist’s use of hypnotism was clever too. Making an image large, focusing on the gaze or the action, but all the while making sure we are close enough to that gaze to force the viewer into the psychological state of the subject.
13. “Nymphes et Satyre”, William-Adolphe Bouguereau, Oil on Canvas, 1873: An example from Art history where a classical painting embodies the same set of ideas as those of Yigal Ozeri’s paintings. Bouguereau may be reenacting mythical stories of Nymphs and Satyrs but his subject’s core is the simplicity and fickle nature of beauty in women, especially when young and free. Notice how he manipulates light and shape, drawing our eyes to into the centre of the maelstrom of the action. This helps freeze time for the viewer.
14. “Mama's Boy”, 2016, Suhail Jashanmal Jhangiani, Oil on Canvas, 6 x 4 feet: In my most successful piece of the series, I already knew going large would work, but I didn’t know how arresting it would be when the viewer is faced with such a large head of a child. Having something large in the foreground and sharply in focus very quickly forces the viewer to want to discover why. The background then, no matter what it entails, becomes an area full of clues or cues for the viewer to decipher what the subject is doing or thinking about. Additionally, by applying an extreme soft focus to the background one definitely gets the sense that time as slowed if not stopped, this only helps in enhancing the message that this memory is significant.
Dear Ygal Ozeri

I am completing a Masters dissertation in Studio Art at Northeastern University in Boston, USA, entitled "Memory and Visual Practice: Swimming Back to Shore". Not only am I a fan of your work, but I believe seeing your work in one instance in NYC in 2014 led me to a key turning point in how I view my own. I would like your permission to reprint in my dissertation images from the following pieces of your work which I found and sourced through the internet mainly via Louis K Meisel Gallery in NYC. Unfortunately as most individuals facing graduation, I am under a lot of pressure to meet a deadline this month in April, I would greatly appreciate it, if you choose to allow me to use the following images, that you inform me as quickly as possible. And of course if you are generous enough to say yes, by all means please sign below. Additionally I would be pleased and honored to share my dissertation with you if you so need further information on how your images will be used; the following images and descriptions are what I plan to use:

Name of Work:
1. Untitled; Olya, 2014, Ygal Ozeri, Oil on Canvas, 88 x 110 inches:

My attached description used to bolster my thesis:

This image impressed me not only with its detail, but with the way the artist chose to blur cut some areas and not others. Ygal Ozeri had realized that as far as our eyes are concerned we don't seem to care how accurate or smooth a gradient is in a depth of field. As long as key focal areas in the foreground are sharp and key descriptive areas in the background are blurred, our mind will fill in the rest of the image and make it as real as it needs to be for us to believe it. Why? Mainly because in this postmodern age, with photography being so pervasive, we automatically see a painting like this and recognize it as a photograph and then are immediately impressed by how "real" it is. When in truth vast amounts of information in the image is actually altered or altogether missing.
Name of Work:
2. Untitled; Zuzanna, 2014, Yigal Ozeri, Oil on Paper, 42x60 inches:

My attached description used to bolster my thesis:

As with Olya, this image has the subject looking on at the viewer. In this whole series of work, Yigal Ozeri's emphasis is on women, their gaze, their alluring, seductive and quixotic nature. One looks at them and is drawn in, but one is also alarmed at how easily they are being drawn in by the subjects hypnotic glare. I thought the artists use of hypnotism was clever too. Making an image large, focusing on the gaze or the action, but all the while making sure we are close enough to that gaze to force the viewer into the psychological state of the subject.

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If these arrangements meet with your approval, please sign this letter where indicated below and return it to me in the enclosed return envelope. Thank you very much for taking the time to address this issue.

Sincerely,
Suhail Jashanmal Jhangiani

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