An Exploration of Memory Archives
Fine Art Undergraduate Student Research Distinction Project
Autumn 2013 – Spring 2014
Ashton Montgomery

One of the pieces in the final exhibition is a six inch by six inch wooden box. Inside of the box is a found object, a small orange wick box, and a red artifact from a costuming internship with the Royal Shakespeare Company for their 2012 production of King Lear. Behind these two objects is a photograph taken at Walt Disney World in 2013, the photograph and artifacts are partially covered by cloudy and viscous encaustic medium. The glassine envelope resting on top of the painting has an image printed on it’s interior relating to the King Lear production.

This piece can be seen installed in the exhibition in images 7 & 8
An Exploration of Memory Archives

Thesis:

The project focus is to make a body of work that explores the function of memory; putting these ephemeral ideas into the visual form of paintings and objects.

Introduction:

I have always had an interest, an obsession really, in collecting experiences. Something worth collecting is an event you look forward to with anticipation and excitement. It’s something you plan what you might wear for and daydream about to help pass the time until the event itself. Fond recollection follows the event, filled with wishing to re-live the experience again, and focusing on the positive. The original proposition for this project was to look at the way people venerate memories, canonizing them in a way. The research progressed to explore more specifically how memories work, how they are stored in the brain and how physically they manifest themselves as artifacts and photographs.

I began collecting artifacts from memories no later than the third grade. I started storing things on a shelf and felt an impulse to label and date the things I kept. One of the first things I remember collecting was a small floral piece of fabric cut from a couch which was part of the set of my sister’s first play. I wasn’t in the production but I kept the fabric as a memory of seeing the show. I still remember the lyrics from one of the songs and recall eating a grape candy stick for each performance I attended. This happened in Spring of 2000 when I was nine years old. At the age of nine I was already concerned about holding onto memories and artifacts fearing I might forget. The focus of this project is to make a body of work that explores the way specific memories function by putting these ephemeral ideas into the visual form of paintings and objects. This body of work was made through the research of memory, exploration of material, and use of extant artifacts.

Memory:

Memory, as with most functions of the brain, is a difficult thing to study and research because it is part of the most complex organ in the human body. Memories are stored in a few different places in the brain with some inconclusiveness about how many places and what those
exact places are. There is an understanding that short term memories are stored in the highly developed pre-frontal lobe and those memories can be processed into long term memories that are stored in the hippocampus which is deeper in the brain (Ashford). A memory is created the same way we learn: neurons in our brain form new connections. Those new connections store the incoming information as it is being formed. When one recalls a memory, the brain re-lives the way those connections were formed. In an article about the storage and retrieval of memory it was stated by a professor of neurosurgery, "In a way then [...] reliving past experience in our memory is the resurrection of neuronal activity from the past" (Ashford)

It is a common idea that when a memory is recalled it is vulnerable to slight alterations and misremembering. It is also thought that as time passes, memories become less vivid and details become less clear. In a recent study titled *On the nature and accuracy of attributions that change over time* it was proven that “Events that occurred some time ago often appear to us in a different light than those that have just transpired. For example, it is not unusual for our interpretations of our own behavior, or of the witnessed behavior of others, to change as time passes” (Funder 17).

Psychologists and scientists are not the only groups of people interested in the study of memory. Many artists also seek to understand memory and use its unique principles and qualities to create art. Georges Perec, a French novelist and filmmaker, created a piece he describes as “not so dissimilar in principle from a ‘time-capsule’” (Farr 84-85). He selected twelve places in Paris that he had some affection for and twice a year for twelve years he wrote about the location; one writing occurred at the location and the other was written elsewhere recalling the details from memory. Photographs were also taken of the locations and all the writings and documentation were sealed in envelopes presumably until the end of the twelve years. Of this piece, Perec writes, “What I hope for from it, in effect, is nothing other than the record of a threefold experience of aging: of the places themselves, of my memories, and of my writing” (Farr, 84-85). This is art as documentation of elapsed time, of how things change over time, and of how the artist changes over time.

Memory and history are not dissimilar. History is simply a collection of memories that occur on a broader scale and is often well documented. History has almost infinite sub-categories like the history of fashion, history of modern architecture, or history of ancient Rome. The history of art, which is very important to the practice of making art, is a collection of art, artifacts, and ideas spanning almost as far back as the Earth itself to the present moment. Art
becomes artifact the older it gets. For example the bust of Nefertiti discovered in Amarna, Egypt with little trouble belongs in the ‘artifact’ category yet when it was created was it not art? An object plus time becomes an artifact and museums are full of these artifacts. I am one of those people who pores over museum artifacts, especially relating to clothing, eager to learn and gaze at the beauty and often impracticality of previous periods.

I have a strong passion for the history of clothing and an earnest desire to know with great accuracy what people of other time periods wore. My favorite films and novels are all set in previous time periods. I love the extra layers of different manners, style of dress, and language, pretending while reading or watching that I too live in the depicted era. Other periods seem simple and ideal making life now seems hectic and busy. It is, however, not an uncommon phenomenon to idealize a different time or a memory thinking only of it’s good features ignoring the imperfections, disease, and inequality. Life in the present moment is imperfect just as every moment in the past has been, but there is always the hope of a perfect period of time. People work hard to experience those moments or dream fervently of what it might have been like to live during their desired period of time. The 2011 film *Midnight in Paris*, directed by Woody Allen, is based around this idea with its ultimate conclusion being that there is no ideal time period. The interesting correlation with this film is its focus on periods of art and how, at least in this film, the different periods envied the style of the periods that came before it.

While I think there is nothing as beautifully rendered as a Da Vinci and the colors of impressionism are stunning, I also appreciate the artistic freedoms and style of the present and am glad to be part of the art world now. There is a time, however, based not on art but on fashion and lifestyle that I am most interested in. In the *Jane Austen Handbook of Proper Life Skills from Regency England*, there is a chapter on how to become an accomplished young lady. The following is a list of what one needs to do in order to be ‘accomplished’: “study several languages, acquire a basic grasp of geography and history, become a proficient musician, draw or paint the picturesque, master the art of needlework, and learn to dance gracefully” (Sullivan 16-19). During my time at The Ohio State University I have taken several classes in all of those areas except for music. I have studied French, taken several dance classes including Ballet and Jazz; I haven’t learned needlework but I have taken several sewing courses including tailoring, courses in Theatrical and Art history, and one of my majors is painting and drawing. This unlikely connection to the past only furthers my interest in history and memory.
Memory, to me, is not just a connection of neurons snuggled in folds of soft tissue in the brain. Memory is something that can be recalled with frequency and fondness, something to dwell on when life seems trivial. Malicious memories can stay vivid despite attempts to forget and positive memories can be forgotten over time. Smelling a particular scent or seeing an uncommon hue might bring a memory to mind just like a photograph or family video. Memories are vulnerable to change each time they are recalled. In the case of a positive memory, such as a trip to Walt Disney World, most people will only want to recall the happy portions of the memory. It then stands to reason that over time only the positive aspects of a memory will be left; fading from the complexity of a human day with sweat and irritation to just the smiles and the ‘magic’ of Disney.

This phenomena isn’t scientific in nature. Rather, it is based upon my experiences and hearing about the experiences of others, and is a sensation I find particularly interesting. I created a piece (Image 1) comprised of sixty envelopes representing in visual form this sensation of a faded ‘happy’ memory. The piece was set up in three rows of twenty columns. In the top row were twenty glassine envelopes made specially to fit guide maps from Walt Disney World. Inside these envelopes were twenty maps spanning from 1989 to 2013 arranged in no particular order. The glassine served to conceal exact details and fog the bright colors of the maps. This first row represents the memory soon after it happens; details are still fairly clear but are slowly being lost to time. The second row was painted on the backside, inside the envelope, with white paint. This is representative of a memory made long ago. Minutiae is gone, accurate colors are no longer remembered yet what’s left still has some substance and opacity. The bottom row represents a memory of great fondness after years of re-telling and remembering only the best qualities – exaggerating the good and omitting of all negative aspects. This row has been lightly dusted with a light pink spray paint, on the inside. Almost no opaqueness remains, only a soft pink hint that something of substance was once there; a memory through rose-colored glasses. This piece is to be read in columns from top to bottom; the substance and detail of the artifacts on the top fades to a blissful pink like the softness of a wistful memory.
My Memories:

Disney, specifically the Walt Disney World Resort in Florida, appeared in the aforementioned work and makes an appearance in much of the work I’ve made after working at the Magic Kingdom in 2011. Walt Disney World is consequently a key component to this research. I have been to Walt Disney World approximately forty different times including an eleven week stint of working for the company in one of the theme parks. Approximately twice a year I vacation at this magical place where millions of other people have visited since its opening in 1971. Walt Disney World is a place built for making memories. The company lets you know that explicitly before, during, and after your stay. There are signs posted around stating that this spot is a good place to take a photograph, and gift shops exist with an overwhelming amount of souvenirs. The invitation to take home an artifact and photograph of your trip is almost mandatory. Proof of your good time must be shared and re-lived. Perhaps there is something in this that attracts me. I have always felt a compulsion towards collecting memories through souvenirs (albeit non-traditional ones) and at Walt Disney World, I am not alone in this desire.
Leaves off plants (in the hopes of then growing a plant), napkins, hotel room keys, receipts, confetti from parades, and price tags are few examples of the oddities I’ve known myself and others to take home from a Disney theme park.

Image 2
One of the pieces in the final exhibition for this project is a small wooden box inside of which is encaustic paint and a box sewn out of canvas also filled with encaustic. Inside of the canvas box is a glass container with a petrified leaf plucked from a bush at the Magic Kingdom in October of 2013.

Walt Disney World is an elaborately designed and engineered set which uses theatrical terminology to describe its workers and locations. There is ‘on-stage’ and ‘backstage’ and Disney does not employ workers but has ‘cast members’ who work to create a good ‘show’ for the guests. While working there, I had a constant awareness that we were putting on a well themed show and not just running a theme park. This show included beautiful sights, specific background music, and engineered smells. Walt Disney first wanted to include smell when his company was still just making movies. The theme parks came after some of his earlier films and cartoons. He wanted to pump scents into the movie theatres to enhance the audiences’ experience. Financially and logistically that was too complex of a plan but the idea never left his mind. When creating his own controlled environments, he revisited the idea and all over his parks and resorts engineered smells are being pumped into environments using “Scent Blitizers”, a term used by patrons that isn’t confirmed by anyone working for the company. These pleasant aromas end the moment one moves from ‘on-stage’ to ‘back stage’, which is Disney’s terminology for where park goers are and are not allowed. (This information is based on experience from working at Walt Disney World). For example, at the Disneyland Hotel at Disneyland Resort Paris, the scent is available for purchase. The following is a quote from a blogger who describes the scent and how it behaves at the hotel: “This Resort’s infamous signature vanilla-based scent welcomes you immediately as you enter the front door […] follows
you along the expansive corridors and into your room. While it is noticeably strong in the lobby, the fragrance seemed to taper off in other public spaces, especially around the Hotel’s main eating areas “(Marie). Patrons are offered an invitation to buy the “Parfum D’Ambiance” before their departure. Guests can steal the towels, take the shampoos and soaps, hairdryers, and now the very smell of the hotel’s lobby as a souvenir from their stay. Creating an environment with pleasant and well themed smells undoubtedly adds to the atmosphere of the theme parks. However, the level the Disney company takes it to, at times, seems like a direct manipulation of emotions and finances. They pump the smell of sugar and sweets into the candy shop to lure the passerby in and to tempt patrons into purchasing a treat. To sell the scent of a hotel will remind the purchaser of their magical vacation and encourage future stays at the resort.

Another souvenir available for purchase in the gift shops sprinkled around Walt Disney World is a book called Let the Memories Begin! Impressions of the Walt Disney World Resort. Inside are colorful photographs of the theme parks’ famous sights and attractions and charming anecdotes of people’s first memories of the parks. The inside front cover is a photograph of carefully arranged trinkets, memorabilia, Mickey Mouse shaped confetti, and artifacts a person might collect on a vacation to Walt Disney World. As a part of the final exhibition for this project I created a book, which is described later in greater detail, which contains similar items to those pictures in these sepia colored photographs. Some of those artifacts include a napkin emblazoned with the Disney World logo, a FastPass (a now extinct method of waiting on line for an attraction), a map of the Boardwalk Resort, and an airline ticket with the Disney’s Magical Express logo. It should be noted that the back inside cover is a different photograph implying the vast number of memories a person will make at Walt Disney World. David Foster Wallace wrote a review about a seven-night pleasure cruise in which he described a similar idea:

In the cruise brochure’s ads, you are excused from doing the work of constructing the fantasy. The ads do it for you. […] And this… type of advertising makes a very special sort of promise, a diabolically seductive promise that’s actually kind of honest, because it’s a promise that the Luxury Cruise itself is all about honoring. The promise is not that you can experience great pleasure, but that you will. That they’ll make certain of it (Wallace 267).

The book never directly tells the reader they will make memories but the endless array of bright colored photographs of the theme park and the souvenirs implies that there is no escaping the making of memories. In front of the Magic Kingdom there was a sign on a glimmering gold
scroll saying “Let the memories begin!” a command also on the maps of the parks, on the napkins, on the card used to enter the park, and dozens of other places as a constant reminder to make memories. Walt Disney World is a highly constructed set through which memories are to be made, home videos are to be shot, and souvenirs are to be purchased.

On page ninety-eight of the book there is a full-page photograph of Walt Disney in front of a large map of the newly purchased property in central Florida which would become home to the Walt Disney World Resort. This photograph is the inspiration for the painting by Luc Tuymans called “W” which was painted in 2008. This is not the only use of Disney and his theme parks present in Tuymans’ work. He takes direct imagery from Disney but through his colors, painting style, and cropping makes the work somewhat enigmatic.

Disney is so prevalent in society and cultures around the world that international artists like Tuymans taking an interest in the company isn’t surprising. My appropriation of Disney began after working there. I wanted to inflect abstraction painting with symbolism so I used artifacts from working at Disney to insert subtle meaning; the medium was the message in this instance. As someone who studies theatre and spends much of her time backstage learning about how to put on a show, I wanted to know more about how Walt Disney World operates. Ultimately the theme parks are large sets with a huge cast working to provide a positive experience for people who pay large sums of money to be there. The theme park side of the Walt Disney Company is interested in making money and guest satisfaction and at this time I have no interest in critiquing the company or looking at it with blind admiration. Through this research project I was able to take that interest in artifacts and their relationship to memory and create a body of work that is less dependent on Disney and focuses more on the memories themselves.

**Memory Artifacts & Materials:**

Collecting artifacts of the day-to-day is not customary. Most days are like the next and it requires a special event to make the day worth an artifact. However I am equally likely to keep an artifact from a normal day versus an extraordinary day. I have this notion that even boring days may some day become important; that some day I may want something to hold and feel nostalgic about. An area of research for this project was what to do with these collected artifacts or extant objects. I wanted to blur the line between art and archiving at times leaning more into pure archive. At the start I wanted to collect artifacts from an array of people who have been to Walt Disney World, creating an archive of family vacations and a retrospective of Disney
souvenirs. That idea progressed as I realized that my interest in memory artifacts was less common than I thought and that the number of trips I have taken to Disney World was higher than most. Similar to the time-capsule piece by Perec who watched locations in Paris change over the course of twelve years, I have seen Walt Disney World change significantly since my first trip in 1994, when I was not yet four years old. I have been to the theme park approximately twice a year since with very few exceptions.

I began to explore my own experiences and ideas of memory instead of a generalized concept. Organizing these artifacts into neat rows and envelopes became an interest while on a small trip to Walt Disney World in October or 2013. If in the moment I become aware that this might be a historic moment in my life, I will purposefully take inventory of the colors I’m seeing, of the smells, textures, sounds, emotions, and often I’ll take actual things like napkins or a leaf; anything small that can be kept as an artifact from the moment. This action led to the appropriation of the envelope. I’ve taken it out of its utilitarian context and given it a place in my art practice. An envelope is something that holds and transports just like a memory. Memories hold the specific details like smells and colors and can transport the holder of the memory to a different time. My envelopes are usually made of glassine, which is used in archiving. It is shiny, delicate, and very transparent. I fill these envelopes with pigments, artifacts, images, and anything else that invokes the idea of memory or a specific memory.

Extant artifacts, glassine, and envelopes are just a selection of materials and methods I use in my practice. I also utilize collage for its ability to collect and accrue on a surface; cutting for its ability to remove so something else can be inserted; braiding because it’s a repeatable action that creates a mass; collecting for its ability to organize and protect; and installation for its ability to create and control an aesthetic environment.

Another new material I learned for this project was encaustic paint, which I discovered through further exploration of the artist Jasper Johns. I knew of the Johns’ Flag paintings previously but it was only recently that I learned what they were made of. They were created with encaustic paint, which is a combination of damar resin, beeswax, and pigment. The paint has to be melted in order to be applied to canvas and dries quickly leaving thick brush strokes. Johns would incorporate newspaper and other fabrics into his paintings thus encasing them in wax. He was both protecting and distorting them by embedding them in the velvety surface. Of his Flag painting it was said:
In its stilled lucidity lurk half-readable stories: the small-fry stuff of yesterday's papers, or important events? Do they add up to some secret meaning? There is the sense of many lives, many narratives hidden beneath the common identity of Americans (Jones).

This struck me as a lovely metaphor for memory and an interesting new method of adhering artifacts to a canvas. This new method of painting became a primary area of research during this project; learning how the material behaved, what brushes needed to be used, how to mix pigments and other paints with the encaustic, and how to embed things in the milky material.

**Final Exhibit:**

The three paintings in the final exhibition of the geometric un-intentionally brain shaped forms represent memory in a visceral way. The first in the series is on the top left (Image 4). It is the smallest of the three works and came first in the series. I began the work by laying out in a loose grid of “bricks” created from tearing down extant paper products from the time I worked at Walt Disney World in summer of 2011. On the back of the canvas I affixed a reverse photocopy of the map of the Magic Kingdom from the same year I worked there. Using embroidery thread I then stitched along the outside of the map threw the bricks and canvas creating an embroidered map on the front side of the canvas. I then painted encaustic medium over the layers of information creating distance from the text and colors present on the artifact bricks. The next painting in the series has the black and white layers on top of what otherwise would be a very similar painting. This painting is based not off the map and the artifacts directly but is a copy of the first painting. I painted bricks of white paper in similar colors to create the look of the artifacts and stitched the map freely only looking at the map on the first painting. Layers of black and white encaustic as well as another paper map were added on top of this second painting. With the third work (Image 3) I decided to revisit the original artifacts. I made scans of the originals and in Photoshop worked to remove any text leaving behind the shifts and color and shapes of the artifact. I then began sewing the map looking only at the second painting, then with white thread I created new shapes in response to this third generation of the map. I then painted with white and plain encaustic medium to create and atmosphere where things are more visible in places and more hidden in others. Going back into this layer some of the triangles have been carved in to, some have a black triangle inserted into the medium, and some are covered with a layer of glassine.
These paintings behave like memories in a variety of ways. At the most basic level the use of actual artifacts brought to mind memories while I was making the work. The act of sewing is making connection between fabric to create something new. In these pieces I was connecting shapes and lines to create a new shape; in the brain neurons make connections with one another and that it how a memory is formed. The layers of milky encaustic create a barrier between the artifacts or copies of artifacts just as time erases details from memories. The manner in which they were done, responding to the previous painting, is similar to how a memory might be passed down to a new generation. The third painting is more like the first than the second because the original artifact was re-visited. Making a period accurate garment from another time period will be more successful if one looks at an extant drawing or garment from the same time. Looking at a drawing made in 1950 of a dress from 1750 will lead to the making of a less authentic recreation.

Another series of paintings in this installation are the box paintings. Flipping the prefabricated structures around allowed me to fill what was once the back with images, artifacts, and encaustic. The painting of what appears to be, and in fact is, Snow White running through an eerie forest is representing a very specific memory I have from working at Disney World. The walls to the Snow White’s Scary Adventure (now extinct) were shared by ‘back-stage’ area meant only for the workers of the Magic Kingdom. The hallway containing this shared wall was one that I used not infrequently, I would often hear the recorded sound of a man yelling ‘Go! Go!’ This man, the huntsman of the tale, was telling Snow White to run away from the evil
queen and immediately following the scene I heard repeatedly was the scene of the heroine running through an eerie forest. Instead of hanging this quaint story next to the piece I chose to leave the work up to the viewers’ interpretation just as most artists do. I use specificity to trigger what I hope is specificity to the viewers, that perhaps they will recall a specific memory based on the images or colors I use.

According to McGill, as memories are played through the hippocampus, the connections between neurons associated with a memory eventually become a fixed combination, so that if you hear a piece of music for example, you are likely to be flooded with other memories you associate with a certain episode where you heard that same music (Ashford).

Memories are combinations of sights, sounds, smells, touch, and taste in some instances. The brain processes all of that information into one singular memory, experiencing one of the facets of a memory again will resurrect the memory it belongs too. Phthalo blues and cadmium reds are so visually prevalent that creating a depth of meaning or a specific memory with them would be difficult. I pull colors from memories or from my own aesthetic preferences, which lean away from saturated primary colors.

I often incorporate my interest in blues and greens but rarely indulge the fullness of my interest in extant artifacts and archiving in my art making practice. The culmination of this research found visual form in a catalogue and archive of memories, specifically my memories. These two forms are not unlike the way the brain function in holding memories. The book (seen in image 6 on the pedestal next to the archive) is a collection of memory objects cut and inserted into its pages. The transparency of the glassine envelopes allows for connections to be made between one page and another, bringing one memory into relationship with another. The different pages include photographs, extant artifacts, photocopies of artifacts, stamped text and dates, and a corresponding envelope. The book contains many extant artifacts cut and inserted into it’s pages, adhered to the page, or placed inside an envelope so the viewer can pull the artifact out and hold it in their hand. Accompanying these artifacts are photocopies and actual photographs of the artifact or things related to the artifact. There is also stamped next to each image a date and description of what the image or artifact is. This book shares an interesting relationship with costume design specifically the “Costume Bible” each designer creates for a film or show. The “Bible” is filled with sketches, ideas, fabric swatches, receipts, actors’ sizes, photographs, and anything else relating to the costumes for the show. Its function is organization
and ease of reference for the current production and for future productions wishing to recreate
the designs. The “Bible” is an archive of purchases and ideas that acts as a directory for the final
costumes; the catalogue in this body of work is a directory for the envelopes, which are lovingly
sorted in the archive.

The archive box (Image 5 & 6) is a found object once used in a department store to sell
toiletries. I imagine it would sit out on a display counter much like the pedestal it rests upon in
the gallery, the gallery that is within a building that was once the Lazarus department store.
Inside this box are drawers that the viewer may pull out and peruse the contents of. There are
hundreds of delicate glassine envelopes each filled with an image, pigment, a written copy, or
actual artifact. The viewer may look through both finding the matching page to an envelope and
discovering connection between different pages and envelopes. All of this is done with the wall
of paintings and objects as a context. The viewer may even discover images and colors from the
paintings appearing in the archive. My work, being about artifacts and memories, compelled me
to leave something visual and physical for the viewer to take with them. The envelope is a
souvenir from the exhibition and perhaps a reminder of a different pre-existing memory of their
own.

Image 5
Memory Archive in the gallery
with open glass display front;
two, of four, drawers open

Image 6
Detail of individual drawer in the archive; each compartment holds ten envelopes, each compartment features a different style of envelope.
Conclusion:

Personal history, commonly referred to as memories, and societal history continue to be areas of great interest to me. Having an extant artifact from long ago in the present is a strange condition. The object is out of its original context in time and location and naturally brings on thoughts and feelings about its origin. This phenomena is nearly the same for artifacts of personal significance and public significance. Objects of personal significance, like a boarding pass for a flight, have importance because I experienced that flight and spent time at the destination it lead to. Objects of public significance, like a Jasper Johns’ painting, are important when one knows its maker and context possibly introduced through a history book. A selection of my personal history is now available in the green Memory Catalogue in the exhibition giving a small amount of public significance to what was originally personal.

I have learned a great deal from this research about myself as an artist, new materials, and about memory. This research was not about solving something or coming to a conclusion but refining knowledge and learning how to use new materials. The body of work created is the result of spending a year with the questions of how memory works and how my own experiences and artifacts can become the artwork. Working in such vast multiples allowed me to meditate on the form of the glassine envelope. Each one was handled repeatedly in the process of making: they were drawn, cut, folded, imagery or pigment was added, and then they were glued into a functioning envelope. The envelopes hold whatever I chose to put in them but are susceptible to smudging, tearing, and wrinkling just as memories are vulnerable to alteration. They are then neatly stored in an archive awaiting perusal like a memory waiting to be recalled.
Works Cited


Images Cited


