

The Snapshots James Leslie Left Behind
& the Paintings They Became

by Dani Davis

Snapshots have been gathering in boxes, collecting dust and filling up family photo albums since Eastman Kodak invented the Brownie Box camera around 1900. For over one hundred years photographers have been capturing the cultural mélange of life, shaping our perceptions through the visible, and producing images that perpetually provoke the haunting nostalgia of memory, however for thousands of years prior to this culture-shocking invention persisted another means of visual captivation, painting. Historically, painting and snapshots have shaped ways of seeing and experiencing in distinct ways. While snapshots have traditionally been hoarded as familial historical documents, paintings have traditionally called for attention to the idea of a conceptual expression of the practitioner. It is in this divergence that I explore making paintings from snapshots that have been taken without artistic pretensions. I interpret reality through the poetic language of paint and reference snapshots that resonate with my childhood and family history. *The Snapshots That James Leslie Left Behind and The Paintings They Became* is a series of paintings that are inspired by the snapshots that James Leslie, my grandfather, captured, and is an exploration of the aesthetic and poetic characteristics that intuitively emerge in patterns derived from memory.

I. *THE SNAPSHOTS THAT JAMES LESLIE LEFT BEHIND AND THE PAINTINGS THEY BECAME*

James Leslie left behind a crateful of Kodak slides when he passed away over twenty years ago. In the crate, are the fish he caught carefully mounted in the grass, burly men in weighters deep in the lake, hundreds of tiny skiers captured from the passengers seat in the boat or midway down a northern slope, sunbathers, make-shift camp sites in the woods of Gaylord, hunted deer, the delicate face of a golden haired girl staunch in her motherhood, the devoted dogs squat down next to rows of pheasant, quail, and duck. Then there are the images of the lake, equally as bright in the summer as in the winter. This is the lake my mother and aunt took a running jump into. This is the place where Jim and Beatrice Leslie raised their three children in the summers and trekked to for vacations in the winter. Five miles down Mancelona road on Lake Tecon, the man my mother would marry passed a similar time, as have I. It is from these snapshots, that James Leslie left behind, that I have mused over my personal and familial ties to Northern Michigan and created this series of paintings. From the crate of Kodak slides, I pulled five images. These images served as references for the three paintings that they became.

II. THE FIVE SNAPSHOTS

From these five images, I created three paintings. The first painting, *James*, is inspired by a photograph captured in the woods of Gaylord, around 1965. In this image James balances as he walks towards his father on a bank of snow. On the right side of the image are two cars pulled off to the side of the road due to a difficulty. The second painting, *Otsego*, is inspired by a double negative that I created from two different images captured on Otsego Lake in the winter of 1967 and 1972. Using overlaid images, allowed for me to express a passing of time and people. In this painting, three ghostly figures and a dog frame the ice hockey rink on the lake, while six more opaque figures shovel, skate on, and walk around the rink. The third painting, *Tecon Summers*, references four different snapshots using two images each of figures jumping into Otsego Lake and Lake Tecon. The figures jumping into the water overlap to form one mass.

The ways by which I reference snapshots intend to create art from images without artistic pretensions. The experience of these images becomes new as they gain meaning through the body and language of painterly techniques. For each of these paintings there is a similar mode of conceptual expression that emerges. This is the experience of expression through painterly technique, differentiated from the experience of expression through snapshot. The common thread in these modes of expression is perhaps the desire to perpetuate familial memory and human histories through art.

III. RE-CONTEXTUALIZING THE FIVE SNAPSHOTS USING PAINT:

The snapshot, as an image, without artistic pretensions, is translated by intuitive intention in this series. Snapshots, once removed from their creator and personal meanings, translated into paintings, re-contextualize meanings through the imagination of not only the painter but also the viewer.

Snapshots are primarily personal records. Once removed from this context, their meaning inevitably changes. When the link between the snapshot and its creator or subject is severed, the 'anonymous' photograph is laid open to a vast range of potential readings. Lacking specific information, we rely on imagination to fill the gaps." [Sontag 9].

Contrary to the purpose of snapshots as serving a form of cultivated reality, paintings from snapshots can open a poetic portal into the human psyche through which a viewer may unleash from reality. The ways in which new meanings arise from paintings inspired by snapshots is dependent upon the painterly language unique to my technique and style, as well as the imagination of the viewer. In paint, no longer is the snapshot a naïve and fragile fragment of reflected reality. It is also no longer apart of the photo album ethos. Instead, the snapshot rhetoric is broken in by textures that might apply to the sense of

touch, and colors that evoke a poetic nostalgia, and figures layered atop of one another as if in passing. In turn, a narrative window opens for the viewer to experience and wonder.

IV. TRANSLATING THE POETIC:

The language of paint is one that cannot be reproduced in any other medium, but like any other language can be translated. It is a language that is co-dependent on the artist ' s eye as well as the body of the medium and the technique by which it is manipulated. The translations that I make from snapshots are interpretations of patterns and characteristics of memory that employ oil paint in terms of texture, opacity, poetic mark making, color, and form. These elements are the basis for the poetic language that I develop, and serve to create the overall expression and aesthetic thread by which this series of paintings is linked. I incorporate blur and distortion as representative characteristics of memory, and involve tactile mark making that aims to evoke poetic response.

V. BLOWING UP THE SNAPSHOT:

Today, life persists in a sea of images. billboards, products, flyers, television, the Internet, photographs, and posters flood our drawers and streets with images and pictures. With this in mind, I ' ve chosen to create this series on a grand scale contradictory to the modest size of the traditional snapshot. The decision to create work on a large-scale evokes the sublime via overwhelming a sense of self. An image that is bigger than the self has the capacity to envelop the viewer, like a mini landscape. A movie screen in comparison to the television screen serves to dwarf our bodies by overwhelming the field of vision. In effect, a viewer is pulled in hardly without a distraction as the only source of light illuminates from the screen. The effects of a large-scale painting are similar in vigor. The scale that I employ in this series draws the viewer in through its overall size, but also by the meticulous and detailed mark making that can be viewed in different respects according to the viewer ' s distance from the painting.

VI. EMERGING PATTERNS:

During the process of sifting through my family collection of slides, an aesthetic pattern of places and people was revealed. Places filled with snow, hunted prizes, northern cabins, the frozen and unfrozen Otsego Lake, ice skaters and skiers, swimmers and sunbathers all come to mind upon reflection of my grandfather ' s snapshot archive. Likewise, a similar pattern of faded memories unfolds in my mind when I think back to the family leisure of my childhood at Tecon: a pattern that has been passed down through the interests of my parents. Susan Sontag notes in her collections of essays, *On Photography*, " Through photographs, each family constructs a portrait-chronicle of itself-a portable kit of images that bear witness to its connectedness. " [Sonatg, 8]. The portrait-chronology embedded in my grandfather ' s snapshots subjectively and compositionally relate through place and persons, as well as stylistically. Blur, distortion, and transparency are recurring characteristics that I apply to the paintings through the use of double negative, overlap, and

overall rendering of figures. In effect, such characteristics are associated with the fragility and flaws of memory. Metaphorically, the uses of such obscure characteristics are a product of my nostalgic interpretation of these photographic experiences as hazy second-hand understandings.

VII. MARK-MAKING, REPETITION & TEXTURE

The experience of *Tecon Summers* varies according to the position of the viewer. Up close, there are layers of washes, small masses of dots layered atop one another in various earth tones. There are also patterns likened to nature, such as wood grains, rust, and settled mud. However, the experience of this painting from a distance begs a difference. From across the room, *Tecon Summers* is a painting of figures jumping into a sea of earthy browns, dots of whites and pink splashes. The figures are flat, and coincide. Their form is one and enlivened through a repetitive series of overlapping marks and violent patches of color likened to a visual sensitivity to heat. The surface is coated in a sea of repetitious marks that build texture and create a tactile sensitivity. The tactile nature of the marks are more apparent the closer one stands to the canvas. This can be compared to movements in art such as pointillism or impressionism. I use tactile mark making to provoke the sense of touch that we often attribute to memory. By incorporating a painterly technique that provides sense of touch, the viewer is enabled to form a relationship to the painting that goes beyond the visual. Mark making, repetition and texture are elements prescribed to each of the three paintings in the series.

VIII. COLOR

Color informs and exaggerates the imaginative and nostalgic qualities of my paintings. For snow, there are thick layers of white with fluorescent undertones that break through in shadow. The lake is an effervescent glow of bright pinks, tinted yellow, and yolky ochres that lay atop earthy brown and deep blue glaze. A glowing orange sky breaks through the branches of trees with touches of magenta and hints of royal blues. At the other end of the spectrum are the blue, brown and green blacks that splatter in vast areas across *James*, and form the figures in *Otsego*. Tree lines glow in misty whites and neon oranges. Together, these colors assert themselves as nostalgic exaggeration often does. This is the product of nostalgia that exists in my paintings. Using color as a form of nostalgia is an intuitive process. In this series of paintings, it is also phenomenon.

IX. THE DOUBLE NEGATIVE & PHOTO TRANSFER

My uncle James once gave me a photograph that he captured of a crow looking back at another crow calling out. It is ironic that the first crow sits on a branch separate from the second crow that appears to be sitting on the same branch, yet in an adjacent space. This is the phenomenon of the double negative. The double negative can show different times as coexisting in the same image. It is for this reason, and for the desire to commemorate my familial history as perpetual, that I use the double negative in my

paintings. The double negative presents itself as overlapping figures and ghostly silhouettes in my paintings, but landscapes remain unitary.

In *Otsego*. I incorporate another photographic technique called photo transfer. Photo transfers are images taken from photographs and coated in matte medium. The matt medium is coated in three layers and then peeled from the photo paper to reveal a semi transparent copy of the image. I chose to apply this technique as a way of creating transparency and ghost-like figures. The three photo transfers in *Otsego* are adhered to the canvas using gesso, and are in some areas scraped and sanded down. Using photo transfers allowed me to express the double negative in a layer for the Otsego painting. Clearly, because of a relational size difference between the figures of the two original images, and their difference in painterly treatment, these figures exist in a different time, but inhabit the same place.

X. THE GHOSTLY FIGURE

The figures in this body of work are not treated with the same detail and solidarity, as are the landscapes. Instead, the figures share a sort of fleeting delicacy; some are more transparent, while others are silhouettes with traces of color. The figures in *Tecon Summers* are confused in form and less delicate with lurid colors and marks. Together these figures are representative of past and present, people and places that have escaped but that remain celebrated and significant to the present.

XI. BASIS FOR PERCEPTION

The basis upon which this series of paintings can be aesthetically experienced and perceived derives from scale, personal remembrances, perceptual sensitizing of snapshots and associative elements relative to memory and experience. This basis is unique for each viewer and will provide differently the overall experience of the series. In his book *Neglected Knowing: Some Characteristics of Positive Aesthetic Experience in Painting*, John Tarlton writes,

“Despite certain characteristic similarities, it is suggested that heightened pleasurable response to a painting remains fundamentally a subjective concern for the viewer and that the attainment of pleasurable response may incorporate any and all such relational or essentialist manifestations which the viewer believes or deems necessary. Here, divergent importations, analytically elusive and non-conforming natures inherent in personal experiencing, rather than theoretical canon, drives heightened aesthetic response.” [Tarlton, 1]

We can conclude from this statement that a response is dependent on our individual experiences. Working from ideas such as Tarlton ' s, I ' ve created this body of work as a form of art open to a diversity of experiences and aesthetic responses.

PAINTING CAN CRYSTALLIZE MANY DISPARATE MEMORIES or EMOTIONS

The Snapshots of James Leslie and The Paintings They Became is a series of three paintings that use a poetic language of paint to interpret and celebrate a past that is ever present in my life. Beyond that, this body of work is a celebration of wilderness, wonder, and human experiences.

If we trace the history of painting all the way back to where we believe it originated, we find ourselves looking at primitive paintings on cave walls that tell simple stories of life that existed. In a sense, and in simplicity, this is it.

“A super-saturated solution of salt is liquid, but if you drop a thread into it and agitate the surface a little, it crystallizes into a solid form. I think painting can be the same way: a good painting can crystallize many disparate memories or emotions in us. The painter gives us the thread.” [Duane]

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