

# Layered Self

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## Introduction

Layered Self is a collection of memories, feelings, thoughts compiled into three large-scale portraits. By layering images, paintings, drawings, resin, and wax, a hidden story will be told about myself. These images will have three main themes, besides the subconscious background images that fill the frame. The themes are my coming out, my hearing loss and my adoption. From far away these images will create a self-portrait, but upon closer inspection the viewer will see how the images relate to each other. As moments change we perceive them differently each time, however as these memories are captured in wax and resin and become stationary. This oxymoron of what our memory can recall competing with what is tangible brings up the question of what is real?

## Contextual Background

Starting my research I was immediately drawn to building and collaging images with resin. This three-dimensional collaging brings together many images that tell a narrative. Dustin Yellin's large-scale resin and glass pieces showcase this technique. Yellin's work is made from magazine cutouts and carefully arranged and layered to create a humanoid figure. In his latest project called *Psychogeography*,<sup>1</sup> he catalogs news and images found in magazines and arranges them in a chaotic manner. As the viewer looks closer, the overlapping images create a composition that tells a narrative. The images explode all over forming myths, legends, and narrating pop culture. This mapping of the media shows what enters our minds and the

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<sup>1</sup> Yellin, Dustin. "A Journey through the Mind of an Artist." TED. October 2014. Accessed April 19, 2016. [https://www.ted.com/talks/dustin\\_yellin\\_a\\_journey\\_through\\_the\\_mind\\_of\\_an\\_artist#t-147028](https://www.ted.com/talks/dustin_yellin_a_journey_through_the_mind_of_an_artist#t-147028).

unconscious mind perceives. As well as displaying the data it captures a moment in time. Like how tree sap captures bugs, resin shows an unobstructed view of the past.

Historically wax and resin (made from damar resin) have gone hand in hand together. Starting with the ancient Egyptians, they used bees wax and resin as decorative art and as well as to mummify and beautify the dead.<sup>2</sup> Later when the Greeks occupied parts of Egypt, arts and cultures mixed thus making encaustics more widespread. The beauty preserved from these ancient encaustics can be seen in the Fayum burial portraits.<sup>3</sup> Colors and textures are still seen vividly as if they were applied only years ago, not centuries, trapping time within a piece without major signs of aging and weathering. Time is an essence that is a constant variable but not always accurate. As memories are recalled, the mind can change the event by filling in the gaps and deleting parts.

The brain is a complex filing system, and memories are not a tangible element that can be cloned repeatedly. Simple memories can be completely twisted and falsified without notice. As neuroscience Karim Nader, who specializes in memory at Montreal University, explains, “For those of us who cherish our memories and like to think they are an accurate record of our history, the idea that memory is fundamentally malleable is more than a little disturbing.”<sup>4</sup> This conflicting notion of what memory is or drove the question of how can memories be actually preserved? As we try to recall memories outside influences change how we perceive them. “Television and other media coverage reinforce the central facts. But recalling the experience to

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<sup>2</sup> Pratt, Frances, and Becca Fazel. *Encaustic, Materials and Methods*. New York: Lear Publishers, 1994. Accessed April 19, 2016. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015020374446;view=1up;seq=11>.

<sup>3</sup> “Fayoum; Mortuary Artifact; Mummy Portrait; Wood; Paint.” <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/k/kelsey/x-0000.00.1798/0000.00.1798p2>. University of Michigan Library Digital Collections. Accessed: April 19, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Miller, Greg. "How Our Brains Make Memories." *Smithsonian.com*. May 2010. Accessed April 19, 2016. <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/how-our-brains-make-memories-14466850/?all>.

other people may allow distortions to creep in.” As Nader’s colleague and friend Oliver Hardt further explains, “when you retell it, the memory becomes plastic, and whatever is present around you in the environment can interfere with the original content of the memory,” Hardt says.”(Miller) Memories can be divided into two main categories: short term and long term and both of them can be affected. Short term memories are like seeing the ghost of a flash from a camera, we can only retain a limited amount of information in a short period of time.<sup>5</sup> Because of this short period, these memories are most susceptible to be corrupted and changed. Long term memory stores the important memories in our brain. “Theoretically, the capacity of long term memory could be unlimited, the main constraint on recall being accessibility rather than availability.”<sup>6</sup> This type of memory take time to recall, but the brain excels at remember face and names. Long term memory can be divided into three categories, procedural memory, semantic memory, and episodic memory. Procedural memory deals with muscle movement and how we move unconsciously, while semantic memory deals with the world around us, taking in facts and observations. And finally episodic memory deals with personal event and memories that stick with us. Even long term memories can be changed, however one way of solving this particular issue is through photography.

Photography captures a moment frozen in time on paper. As we look into the past we count on our photographs to be our guide. “Photography is inescapably a memorial art. It selects, out of the flow of time, a moment to be preserved, with the moments before and after falling away like sheer cliffs.”<sup>7</sup> Photographs are in some way a constant variable that can be

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<sup>5</sup> McLeod, S. A. (2009). Short Term Memory. Retrieved from [www.simplypsychology.org/short-term-memory.html](http://www.simplypsychology.org/short-term-memory.html)

<sup>6</sup> McLeod, S. A. (2010). Long Term Memory. Retrieved from [www.simplypsychology.org/long-term-memory.html](http://www.simplypsychology.org/long-term-memory.html)

<sup>7</sup> Cole, Teju. "Memories of Things Unseen." The New York Times. October 14, 2015. Accessed April 19, 2016. [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/18/magazine/memories-of-things-unseen.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/18/magazine/memories-of-things-unseen.html?_r=0).

used to spark our own memories. Even though these memories are contained on paper, outside forces can still penetrate into the mind and change them. Should we abandon the notion of keeping memories pure? Or should we enjoy more in the now?

## Creative Work

My work revolves around the need to create and discover. This creation and discovery is not just with the material that I use but also with my mind and with others. Art is my calling to dive deeper into my mind and find connections with life. "Layered Self" is about connecting the past, present, and future with the media that surrounds us. We perceive the world around us, not just through memories but also through photographs, stories, and artifacts. While recalling old memories and recreating new ones, these things trigger memories that affect us in different ways; memories that can be happy, sad, or can evoke a change.

Encased in resin are a multitude of magazine clippings, photographs, objects and culturally significant items that shape around my drawn portrait. These things represent the memories that pass through my daily life. My life is greatly influenced by what I see, especially magazines, family photographs, and items that have a personal motif.

In the two rectangle collages, both have an underlying self-portrait that peaks out from under the collection of material. The first one showcases the major moments of coming out. Safe sex has been drilled into my brain since I was a young child. Sex was not revered as a taboo subject in my family, but it was seen as an open yet delicate subject. However being gay I had to figure a lot of the mechanics on my own. As a child I thought of my sexuality as a childish endeavor, these feelings were suppressed by my affiliation with the church and the

heteronormativity of society. As I grew older I came to realize my interests and how I didn't fit into the cookie cutter idea of what it meant to be "male". I did not like sports or liked to go fishing, I would rather sit at home and draw and read. I hated being outgoing and taking leadership roles and joining boy scouts was a horrendous experience. As I explored my options I started to find my place in society, I came to terms with my religion and sexuality, and how both can coexist without the pressure of pleasing everyone. I used my art as a steppingstone to voice my feeling and opinions without saying a word. Existing as a gay male always has its up and downs but finding the right voice to convey your emotions has let me express myself through my collaging and layering.

The middle circular panel shows my heritage and how it affected my upbringing and how it affects me now. The rice and tea scattered throughout are essential to my diet. Being an



adoptee is never easy, being stuck in a racial and social limbo while growing up is hard to cope with. Trying to fit in with both my White and Asian communities and finding a balance was difficult. This circular piece

reflects that balance and finding who I am. The image moves outwards from the center in a vertical reflection. One thing that is seen throughout the piece is magazine images; these images are centered on the ideals of white beauty. Tanned, blonde, and tall are all considered beautiful

in America while times and trends are changing, these ideals are always aimed at the upper and richer classes of society.<sup>8</sup>

The final rectangular panel displays the conflicts and the overcoming of my hearing challenge. The main object scattered throughout the piece are my hearing aid batteries. These batteries power my hearing aids, without these small batteries; my life would be completely different. The lines that are drawn between the batteries are connecting everything together, represent the importance of having these batteries and how they power the world I live in.

All three panels represent three major events in my life. While each of them stand alone, repeating images throughout them create a unity and deeper connection between them. Given that memories are not just on the top layer, each piece encourages the viewer to look closer to see the intimate details that are hiding in each layer. Rice and tea are seen in all three tying into my heritage, and flowers from past lovers and admirers, express my closeted sex life all resonate in each portrait. While each self-portrait has its own distinct tone, the connection of past and present hold and join the imagery together.

## Methodology

Besides the physical layering of the resin in my work, *Layered Self*, the steps and process to get to the final product was extensive and detailed. My first approach was drawing on small paper plates; I was interested in the round shape of the plates, and interested in the idea of using ordinary objects as a canvas. I drew busts of Asian women in various stages of undress. The

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<sup>8</sup> Kane, Clare. "What Selfies in America vs. China Can Tell Us About Beauty Standards." *Mic*. January 26, 2016. Accessed April 20, 2016. <http://mic.com/articles/133484/what-selfies-in-america-vs-china-can-tell-us-about-beauty-standards#.V5pyUNDov>.

concept of incorporating the past history and adding in a contemporary design creating an intertwining of pasts and futures creates a dialog that uncovers more than what meets the eye. I wanted to further insinuate the deeper idea of memories and how we perceive them and added opaque materials such as glue and acrylic gel medium to conceal and reveal certain



characteristics and highlight areas of interest. However during class critiques, I discovered that the images drew away from my core concept and hinted at the sexualizing and fetishism of Asian women in today's society. To draw it back into my theme I decided to go in a more abstract self-portrait direction.

Building upon the first prototype, I kept the shape and materials the same and changed the imagery. I also scaled up the size, giving me more room to work with. I started to work with a recent self-portrait that was the base layer. Here I took the liberties of finding and using new materials that I haven't worked with before, inspired by Dustin Yellin's work I wanted to work with wax and resin. Seen that resin and wax were a relatively new medium that I have not used





before, I started on a medium scale. I created a nine-inch round that had multiple layers of pictures and wax that came together as a mind map. I used photographs from my

trip to Italy, loose tea leaves, and scanned film images to create a layered composite that played with concealing and revealing. The images created felt cramped and with encouragement from my peers I took the next step and scaled up.

After planning I decided to build two 2 foot by 4 foot and one 3 foot wide circular wood panels that would be the base to my self-portraits. Each panel would represent an arching collection of memories that span from non-existent to current day. I also wanted to take a more of an abstract approach to the portraits, allowing the images to have more movement throughout the panel. In order to fill the space, I began to search for images and artifacts to catalog into four main groups. The four groups consisted of my hearing, nationality, coming out, aesthetic images. By accident, the first three groups gained their own color scheme. I found images from old photographs, magazines, sources information about Vietnam and the adoption rights, and pulled from inner emotions.

The next step was to fill the space with the images to create a dialog with myself. I began placing the most important memories down first. Then a layer of paint and resin followed. The

paint went on runny creating drips that tied the piece together and the resin dried clear separating the layers. As the images built up I started to deviate from the core concept of each panel and the images and artifacts began to flow freely and randomly. As I neared the end the portraits began to look too much like a collage, the edges of the paper created harsh lines that contrasted with the natural flow of the paint and the wax. To unify all the layers I painted a light acrylic paint wash over all three panels, once the paint was dry I took sandpaper remove painted areas to bring attention and detail to certain areas of interest such as important images, quotes, and my face. Once I was satisfied with the sanding I poured on last layer of resin to bring back the luster of the sanded areas.

## Conclusion

Over the course of this semester, I learned a lot about my inner feelings and how I see myself within society. The self can be explained in many different ways and materials. The self was about finding my inner emotions, connecting the present and the past, and coming to terms with myself. I sought out what it meant to have a memory and found that it is not just a simple answer. The past and present are interconnected not only through memory but art as well. We keep art as a marker of time and a token for the future generations. Despite the flaws of our perception of to our own memories, we take it in stride and see the unlimited creativity that can spark from our errors.

While exploring new territory, I was also able to reinforce ideas that I previously had. From searching through old family photographs, cutting out magazine clippings, and pouring resin and wax, I created a strong connection with my work that reflects the triumphs hardships in

my life. My hearing, racial ambiguity, and my outing are all solid facts that need to be discussed and built upon. I started out small with big answers and ended larger with even bigger questions. My project aimed to look at my past and present and bring them together and highlight the major events in my life. I now see the complexity and power of working big and I plan to work on the same scale in the future. With size comes more area to express my ideas. Working large allows the viewer to step back to appreciate the level of detail and craftsmanship.

To take this thesis in a complete circle, I want to revisit and revise the plate concept, adding in resin and compiling images to extenuate the design and detail of the plate. I want to recreate my original plate design on a larger scale to call on the sexualization of the Asian community. With the complex symbolism that I found in my self-portraits, the imagery and story would be compelling, building a playground for the concepts to grow. Growth and abstract creativity are important values to my work, I strive from learning from my past and the mistakes that I have come across. The spontaneous procedure in my work is backed by calculated research and planning. Combining my process with new materials ties this new project into learning from the past memories and layering ideas on top of each other to create a larger idea. I want to emulate the same concepts as my thesis to create a new body of work addressed new topics. The evolution of my ideas and process are never ending, but the memories of each project leave imprints that will shape my future.

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