

3 Guerrien

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Integrative Project Thesis Paper

Introduction

Growing up, I spent a lot of time living with my grandparents in the country. As a child, everything about it was magical: a garden full of flowers, a swing set that my grandfather had built for us, surrounded by small country roads, corn fields, forests, and cow pastures that stretched infinitely into the distance in all directions.

I savored every minute spent there, and even the most mundane things came to feel like sacred rituals. I noticed things that belonged either distinctly to my grandparents or to the culture around them. Either way there was something enticingly exotic about it, yet familiar. For example, my grandfather had installed a system of pipes that collected rainwater from the roof and led it into a large bathtub to be used to water the plants and flowers that adorned the sides of the house. Tiny details like this defined a way of life for them: a frugal practicality combined with a love of nature and a care for their environment. I was enchanted by the history that was deeply engrained in every square inch and the objects that came to represent their way of life.

As they aged, my grandparents' health began to take its toll on their lifestyle. Members of my family were no longer able to visit at the same time because of work obligations. Having reached adolescence and eventually adulthood, my siblings grew bored of weeks spent in the countryside. Eventually the trips became less about leisure and carelessness and more about tending to my grandparents' rapidly declining health, maintaining the house that was beginning to fall into disrepair, and working in the garden that was quickly being devoured by weeds.

Despite these ongoing changes, memories of childhood visits to my grandparents' house maintain their sense of magic and wonder. But certain elements are engrained in

my mind while others have undoubtedly faded. What determines which memories remain and the degree of accuracy with which they can be remembered? At what point is the present fragmented into the isolated instances in our memory? How much of our recollection is true, and how much is invented? *3 Guerrien* is an exploration of the distortion of memory over time. The result of this process is a collage of disparate elements that combine to form one narrative.

In our age of obsessive documentation, nothing is too mundane to be photographed and shared. The most ordinary images are treated with the same importance as ones that record important events—all reduced to tiny thumbnails on a screen that collectively record one's daily existence. What role does technology play in shaping our recollections of events? How do the ways in which cameras interpret the physical world affect the way we see and remember?

Contextual Discussion

With these questions in mind, I was intrigued to find that Peter Doig, who is known for his colorful, dreamlike landscapes, explores similar themes in his paintings. His process incorporates a wide variety of source material. For example, *Ski Jacket* was inspired by a brochure for a ski resort. More often, Doig's paintings are derived from photographs: some that he takes, others that he finds. It is important to note that these photographs only provide a starting point, and Doig takes many liberties in their rendition. His vivid use of color and deviation from realism suggest that his works deal more with emotional content than with the accurate portrayal of places. In an interview with *The Telegraph*, Doig explained, "I don't think my paintings are about Trinidad or

Canada. They're about my idea of what that place is. The place is a kind of portal to possibilities in painting. The painting is what it becomes, and when I start I don't know what that will be. That's what makes the process so fascinating."ⁱ

White Canoe, shown below as Figure 1, is a perfect example of a landscape that is deeply embedded in nostalgia and personal experience. The physical space that it depicts is almost unrecognizable—instead, Doig focuses on the intersection of a particular place and time to capture a fleeting moment that can only be revisited through this painting.



Figure 1

perception of history from the perspective of collective memory. I am intrigued by Ghenie's paint application, which combines gestural strokes of colors and blobs of paint to suggest objects and figures in some areas and precisely rendered objects in others.

In *'Every Painting is Abstract': Adrian Ghenie on his Recent Work and Evolving Sense of Self*, Ghenie claims that "people imagine that abstraction is some kind of gesture. But when you try to paint a tree, you realize, 'I cannot paint all the leaves, I cannot paint all the textures.' So you have to invent a movement of the brush that would suggest, in your mind, a tree. That is, essentially, abstract."ⁱⁱ Ghenie's use of seemingly haphazard color and shape to imply a dreamlike reality in which there is no absolute

Adrian Ghenie is another contemporary painter whose process relies heavily on the use of found photographs. Ghenie incorporates images of historically significant, often notorious figures into his paintings, raising questions about the

narrative. In doing this, he takes into account the complexity of any issue—the fact that there is no indisputable reality but rather, a collision of different narratives and perspectives that are often oversimplified in our accounts of events.

Joan Didion reflects on what it means to keep an accurate record of an event in her essay, *On Keeping a Notebook*. She asserts that the truthfulness of a narrative relies on the evocation of the emotional experience rather than on the accuracy of factual information. In this sense, an account in which details are distorted can be more honest than one that omits erroneous facts and delivers little to no emotional content.

According to Didion, a notebook is an accumulation of small details that only make sense in the context of a specific person's story. She reflects on the millions of tiny notes—snippets of conversations and events—that she has recorded, considering the reasons why she chose to write them down:

I suspect that the line 'That's my old football number' touched not my own imagination at all, but merely some memory of something once read, probably 'The Eighty Yard Run.' Nor is my concern with a woman in a dirty crepe-de-Chine wrapper in a Wilmington bar. My stake is always, of course, in the unmentioned girl in the plaid silk dress. Remember what it was to be me: that is always the point.ⁱⁱⁱ

Methodology

Considering Didion's ideas about recreating experiences from the past, I began by working from photographs that I had taken in places of emotional significance.

Referencing images from my recent study abroad in Dingle, Ireland, I wanted to address the discrepancy between the images that came to mind when I recalled my experience and the narratives depicted by photographs from the trip. I combined four different

images into a disjointed cityscape, shown below as Figure 2, attempting to depict the disorienting feeling of being transplanted to a new place and surrounded by strangers.

This painting set the tone for my work during the rest of the semester, which would be grounded in naturalistic representation despite subtle inconsistencies. I also began to experiment with collage, considering the connotations of different images when



Figure 2

imposed onto other ones. In the same way in which the Rorschach Inkblot test provides insight into peoples' minds through their interpretations of ambiguous forms, people respond to imagery based on their own experiences.

With this in mind, I began to sort through various newspapers and magazines in search of images that gave me a sense of nostalgia, regardless of how far removed from any tangible experience that I had had.

The process of pulling out images was very intuitive and I found myself drawn to ones that related to agriculture, nature, and rural lifestyles, reinforcing the significance of my childhood experiences with my grandparents, even if on a subconscious level. I also found myself being drawn to images of architecture and of the interiors of rooms: things that clearly reference a specific place, time, or way of life. I created collages and used them as references for thirty by forty inch paintings. Religious imagery was prevalent throughout—in the painting shown as Figure 3, I included a cross and the roof of a

Figure 3



church; in another I combined nonreligious objects in a shape that referenced the gothic arches of church windows.

Although some of these works were more successful than others in conveying my ideas, the paintings were not achieving the visual effect that I desired. It felt as though I was inventing too much and not observing enough. I shifted my process and began to work almost exclusively from photographs that I had taken at

my grandparents' house, using the imagery much more holistically. In doing this my process became much more about the formal elements of the paintings. I did not need to select images that felt significant, because the imagery on which I was basing my paintings were already drawn directly from my experience. This allowed me to focus more of my attention purely on the visual effects of the paintings. I became very interested in light and shadow and the ways in which they redefined the structures that I was depicting. I also thought about abstract ways that I could interpret forms, translating objects into shapes and colors much in the same way as Richard Diebenkorn's landscapes. I became interested in the idea of scenes and objects as functioning as figurative representations but also as elements in a repetitive pattern. I also began to work on much smaller canvases that demanded less time and therefore, less planning and preparation, allowing me a more intuitive and spontaneous approach and enabling me to work through different ideas much more quickly.

After having experimented with color and shape for some time, I decided to take a more deliberate approach, combining my own photographs as references with some of the collaged imagery but only using the latter in moderation. I wanted to present an image that is very clearly of a specific space, but with occasional glitches and inconsistencies that become more obvious upon closer observation.

Creative Work

My final body of work is a series of paintings displayed in the salon style on one wall, with two paintings on a much smaller wall facing the larger one, shown as Figure 4. Because the paintings were made throughout the semester, they reflect my changing



Figure 4

goals at different points in the process. Some paintings are much more loyal to the photographic references in terms of composition, with changes in the colors and varying degrees of clarity and detail.

The display on the main wall includes paintings at three different heights. The ones in the bottom row form a triptych (Figure 5) that is connected loosely by a set of orange curtains that my grandparents have in different parts of their house. The intended effect was to confuse the viewer as to whether the three canvases represent different parts of the same room,

despite drastic differences in lighting and tone. In these paintings I also included collaged imagery, but much more sparingly than I had in the past. The inclusion of a chicken behind a fence was an intuitive decision. I was interested in the horizontal and vertical stripes created by different objects in the room, and I wanted to contrast this with the pattern formed by the fence in front of the chicken. At the same time, my grandparents used to be farmers, so agricultural imagery—even found in a magazine and transported from another place and—seemed to make sense. This decision is the result of my interest in the deceptiveness of memory: can I reconstruct the memory of this room to include the chicken, simply because it could have been?

The chicken is fenced into a coop, which is simultaneously a source of protection and of restriction. Over time, age and deteriorating physical ability confine people to a smaller and smaller area. The bedroom is protective and comforting but, like any small space, it can become oppressive if one feels confined to it.



Figure 5

This idea of structure and constraint applies to my experience with my grandparents in many ways. Having been raised as farmers without much money, they have always been frugal, planning almost every aspect of their lives for practicality and the conservation of money and resources. Another source of strict routine was their

unwavering devotion to the Catholic faith. With this in mind, I worked from images where there was a clear logic in the ways in which things were organized.

All of these paintings are derived from photographic imagery, although it has been altered. In this sense, the moments when I took the photographs are just as much an essential part of my process as painting. The use of photography as an intermediary medium between direct observation and painting has many conceptual implications. The photographs feel documentary, taken in the absence of other people in an effort to preserve these places as they were at a specific point in time. In some ways, they feel factual and emotionally removed. At the same time, the attempt to record things as they once were implies the anticipation of change or loss. It is by studying and painting them that I can restore the sense of magic and emotionality that made them compelling to me in the first place.

Conclusion

In the future, I would like to display the same works in a more immersive environment—more spaced out along three walls that surround the viewer as if they are in a room. This will add an atmospheric quality, giving the viewer the experience of being in a more intimate space that relates to the spaces depicted in the paintings.

The work that I did this year began with a series of questions—not only about memory but also about why I draw and paint the things I do, whether a quick sketch or a large painting. Considering this while exploring different ways to paint and to derive imagery has led to infinitely more questions, and this project has only begun to scratch the surface. I would like to continue to explore interior spaces. I am fascinated by the

contrast between interior and exterior spaces and the tension that is created when they are indistinguishable.

ⁱ Hudson, Mark. "Peter Doig interview: the triumph of painting." The Telegraph. August 02, 2013. Accessed April 21, 2017.

ⁱⁱ Battaglia, Andy. "'Every Painting Is Abstract': Adrian Ghenie on His Recent Work and Evolving Sense of Self." ARTnews. February 17, 2017. Accessed April 21, 2017.

ⁱⁱⁱ Joan Didion, "On Keeping a Notebook," in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, 1969, London: Andre Deutch.