

# The Preservation of Memory

Katharine Kuehl  
University of Michigan  
School of Art & Design

Integrative Project Thesis  
2009-2010

**Memories** are evidence for our existence, of our past and our history. As a result of this, many of us strive to preserve our fond memories through photographs, scrapbooks, diaries, journals, and blogs. Over time, memories shift and change in a continuous process of mental revision. Some significant memories stand out, influencing our choices and opinions, while others fade into the background, forgotten with the passage of time. By allowing us to share pieces of our lives and our selves, memories give us the ability to connect with one another. It is this facet of memory that interests me the most.

I chose to connect with three different age groups of peers, friends, family, and strangers through interviews about their childhood memories, and I interpreted these memories into framed multi-layered paper cutouts intended for gallery spaces. I created the pieces so the layers have a small space separating each of them, in order to emphasize how fragments of memory come together to create a whole. It is the combination of all of these layers that produces the final image. Each final paper cut was displayed along with a short excerpt from the interview, which helped enhance and reinforce the story that was being presented. Following the gallery show, each paper cut was given to its respective interviewee. I hope that these pieces might become cherished possessions that will aid in the preservation of memory.

By creating five unique pieces of art for each person's memory, I aimed to produce a body of work that will serve as a catalyst for reflection, stirring up the memories of my viewers through shared fragments of other people's memories. Furthermore, by showing that everyone has an important story to tell, I wanted to inspire the interviewed participants to continue sharing their stories with others. The goal of my Integrative Project was to help and inspire both the participants and the audience to preserve their important memories and communicate those recollections with the people around

them. My project seeks to show how shared memories can build relationships, link generations, and even elevate the significance of memory preservation.

In considering the work of many paper artists, I was fascinated by the different uses of paper cuts, as well as by the intricacy and fragility of the medium. In paper cuts, an image emerges from what is made absent. Therefore, I find paper cuts to be an appropriate, poetic medium to capture the immateriality and embedded loss of memory. I also was interested in the level of involvement that handcutting paper requires, as artist Daniel Alcalá writes, using "cut paper—a demanding and obsessive technique—underscores the craft of making and the direct involvement of the artist in the work" (Museum of Arts and Design, 2009). Another paper artist, Aric Obrosey, talks about "the precision required in the cutting, the creation of negative space, and the play of shadow as an active visual component," it was this type of complexity I was seeking while creating my pieces (Museum of Arts and Design, 2009).

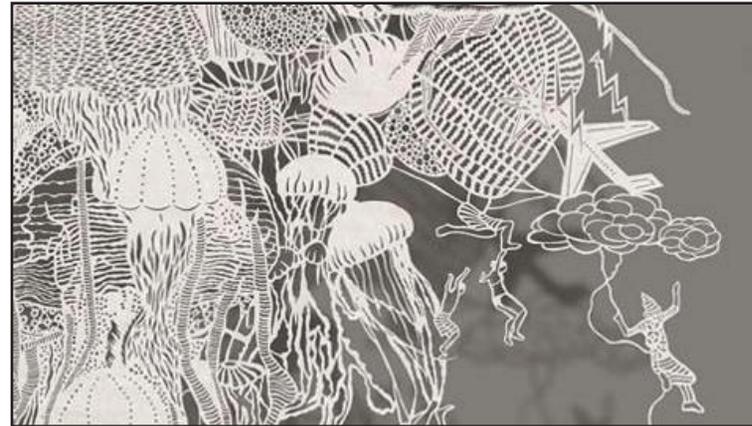
Additionally, I was drawn to the historical aspect of paper cuts and silhouettes as artistic media. Paper-cut portraits date back to late 16th century in France. More than a century later, in the 1700s, silhouette cutting became an art form in the US, due to its popularity among the aristocracy and haute bourgeoisie. However, by the mid-1800s, "shadow portraits" had been deemed as a craft for "good ladies" rather than as an art form (Lott, 2000). As a female, I have become aware and find it interesting that the preservation of memory; turning memories into material forms and possessions, is a very gendered activity, similar to silhouette cutting.

During the early 20th century, silhouettes gained favor as sentimental keepsakes and souvenirs, but until recently, cut-paper was generally considered a somewhat archaic craft. Kara Walker, who has been an inspiration to my project, wrote, "I was really searching for a format to sort of encap-



*My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love* by Kara Walker

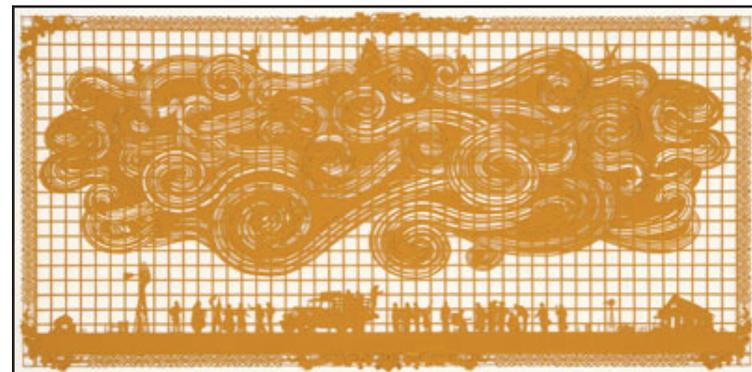
sulate, to simplify complicated things...And some of it spoke to me as: 'it's a medium...historically, it's a craft... and it's very middle-class'" (Walker, 1999). I can relate to Miss Walker's feelings; it felt appropriate to create art from modest materials while working with the stories of ordinary people. One of my other inspirations for this project, Rob Ryan, says "To me papercutting means that everything is stripped down as much as possible. There is...no pencil mark, no brush strokes. There is only one piece of paper, broken into by knives; within this is the picture, the message, the story, written and traced in silhouette. Such simplicity...makes my work more readily accessible and easier to digest" (Museum of Arts and Design, 2009). Additionally, the practice of paper cutting is commonly found in the histories of various cultures all over the world, grounding the medium in storytelling and in the creation of art.



*Atomic Jellyfish (detail)* by Bovey Lee



Julene Harrison and Béatrice Coron



*Rain Follows the Plow* by Dylan Graham

In my five interviews, I spoke to people from three different generations, people with whom I had varying levels of intimacy. I wanted to show how childhood memories could link different relationships and age groups. I recorded each interview with a digital recorder, posed questions when necessary, and tried to maintain the feel of a natural conversation. In a few specific cases, I returned to speak with interviewees to flesh out the details of the memory. I transcribed each interview word-for-word including notations for emphasis, tone, laughter, and so on. For each memory, after repeatedly reading through the transcript and listening to the audio files, I began selecting the key elements and an accent color for the layered paper cut. This selection came from brainstorming and making lists about the strongest visuals and emotions; my decisions were primarily based on intuition, as I became the author of the story. Then I planned and experimented with layouts on my computer. I used my final “sketch” as a template for cutting the final full-scale piece.

All five memories share a common thread: an “object” (a term I am using loosely) as the embodiment of a significant moment in the interviewee’s life. For example, my first paper cut is based on a memory that hinges on an ugly, purple, nineties boom box. The interviewee, my friend and classmate, describes how she and her sister recorded their voices on the boom box every night, and how the object brought them endless enjoyment. The boom box finally broke, coinciding with the time period when the two sisters began to grow up and could no longer relate to each other in quite the same way. The object, the boom box, came to signify her treasured childhood memories, her close relationship with her sister, and the end of her childhood innocence.

In another interview, a middle-aged family friend, described the diner her Greek parents owned and managed throughout her childhood. After school, she would be



*Kimmy's Memory*



*Mimi's Memory*

relegated to the back booth of the diner to do homework. When she had difficulty with math, her mother would enlist the assistance of businessmen from other tables, deciding that if they were dressed in suits, they must be good at math. In this case, the diner serves as the object; it embodies not only the interviewee's childhood struggles as a Greek-American, but also the impact of this Greek-American identity on her life.

For Agnes, one of the women I met at the Ann Arbor Senior Center, the object of her youth was ballet itself. Agnes was formerly a ballet dancer in the Munich Opera; throughout her childhood ballet consumed her life and her thoughts. She remembers sneaking to dance classes with a wealthier friend, the beginning of a progression of events that led Agnes to meet her first husband and come to America at age 22. Her determination and dreams for the future could not even be stopped by the events of World War II that were happening all around her; when theater buildings were bombed out, she simply would find a new place to rehearse.

My mother's memory focused on a specific day, one that so many of her generation can relate to, the day that President Kennedy was assassinated. She vividly remembers being let out of school and walking home in the rain, the drops from the sky mixing with her tears. Her mother was waiting for her on the porch, and they embraced; both were in shock on that horrible day for our country. Even today, my mother tears up when speaking about those feelings; that day continues to stick with her.

Gloria, the other women I befriended at the Senior Center, remembered how an older friend wanted to take pictures of her and her friend to enter into a local photography contest. There were quite a few adventures along the way as they climbed on icebergs in Lake Michigan and stood on top of ski hills. One photo of the two girls peeking over an iceberg ended up winning a prize in the local newspaper.



*Agnes's Memory*



*Gloria's Memory*



*Marilyn's Memory*

Gloria's mother cut the picture out; it was one of her prized possessions for a while. This was significant because her mother was divorced; a black mark at that time. She was a single, working mom, and as a result, Gloria and her brother spent a lot of their childhood in a boarding house for children with single parents.

I believe these representations of familial relationships, identity, significant events, and dreams for the future can relate to our own childhood memories; we can all remember things we loved, specific places where we spent time, or activities and events that continue to stick with us.

In many ways, this project has played out as a way for me to recapture my own lost history. I lost all four of my grandparents at a relatively young age, young enough that I didn't realize the importance of asking them questions and paying close attention to the stories they told. Now, I'll never get the chance. This has given me personal understanding of why the preservation and sharing of memories is so crucial.

Beyond viewing this project through a personal lens, I also have approached it with an anthropological eye. I'm a sociocultural anthropology minor and I think that this influenced the way in which I approached my interviews and the various stories I was told. One of the most common data collection methods for ethnographic writing is interviewing, conversationally speaking with people and observing them. In some ways, I view these paper cuts as my field notes, focusing on various artifacts, emotions, identities and so on. I believe it's this combination of a personal desire to emphasize the importance of preserving memories and an anthropological desire to understand universal human experiences through individual accounts that has made this project a powerful experience for me, and will hopefully resonate meaningfully with the audience.



## References

"Kara Walker." *Conversations with Contemporary Artists*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1999.

Lott, Tommy, "Kara Walker Speaks: A Public Conversation on Racism, Art, and Politics with Tommy Lott." *Black Renaissance* 3, no.1 (Fall, 2000): 69-91.

Museum of Arts and Design. *Slash: Paper Under the Knife*. Milan, Italy: 5 Continents Editions, 2009.