



**“Ollie & Pearl” by Marie Beard**  
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## “Ollie & Pearl”

When I was five years old, my mother asked me if I remembered visiting my great-grandmother’s farm in Missouri the year before. I said that I remembered showing her a magazine. A couple of years later I found a photograph of me doing just that. That moment left me questioning how accurate my memories were. Had I actually remembered the trip to Missouri or did I only remember seeing the photograph? As Mark Twain once said, “It isn’t so astonishing, the number of things that I can remember, as the number of things that I can remember that aren’t so.” In attempts to reconstruct my past, I have extracted memories from old photographs that had been carefully tucked away into albums and boxes by my mother and grandmother. Stored under beds, in closets, bookshelves, and attics, these photographs act as a marker to a past that I may or may not know. Just as memory flees us, only fragments have been left behind. Lonely, isolated, and without context, they sit, desperate to be found.

I have been collecting photographs from my mother and grandmother ever since I started finding them. I would stumble upon them on rainy afternoons rummaging through the many boxes of keepsakes, looking for old jewelry that had come back into style, or simply pondering at my mother’s previous life. As I got older, I started asking for more. The photographs date back to my grandmother’s childhood in Missouri. My grandmother left her life in Missouri behind to move to the state of New York after my mother was born. She was the only one of seven siblings to leave. While I will never fully know the farm, the southern twang is evident in the way my grandmother speaks. Her childhood stories are sprinkled with cows, chickens, and ducks. My mother knew the farm well too. She was taught to milk cows and spent many of her summers there. My memory of the farm is more like a dream; remnants of stories, photographs, memories,

and childhood imagination thrown together in such a way that it is no longer possible to declare what my memory is. The farm is the backdrop for much of my family's history. A history so close to me I can almost touch it and yet I will never fully know it.

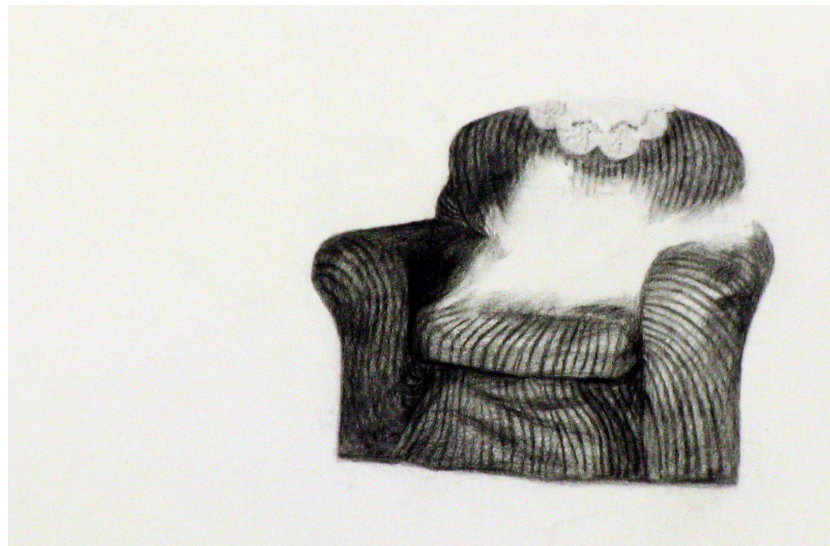


“Birthday” (detail)

While looking through the albums it is an automatic human response to start piecing together a setting. The rugged barn, the old stove, the picnic table in the back yard, the in-betweens left undefined. Photo after photo, the same scenes reappear— the same couches and chairs reappearing at slightly different angles with slightly different people posing; my mother's family posing on the couch revealing how much each child had grown from the previous year; my great-grandfather (who died just before I was born) smiling as my great-grandmother adjusts his collar. The recurring furniture became more familiar to me than the people sitting on them. My drawings consist of these familiar settings used to mark my family's presence through a photograph. The people have been removed from the drawings. While drawing the pieces, ghost-like voids of information appear where my family once was. The voids are loosely based on the 'cut-out' created by the lack of people, with only fractions of the gap loosely filled in. Other photos of the same scene inform the shape of the void, suggesting that drawing is not of a single instance in time, but of many instances of interactions over time. Along with furniture, there is also a recurring theme in the photographs of posing in front and around vehicles within the photographs. The cars are not special, just family cars and mini-vans, and yet they play a role in the photographs as a sort of marker, to remember a person's visit. They also become a way to date a photograph, depending on which year each different type of car or style appeared. Judging from my family's traditions today, I imagine these are goodbyes. Photographing the moment, as if to

prove to one's future self that the visit did occur, even long after they left.

My piece titled "Ethel Pearl" is a drawing based off of a chair that my great-grandparents, aunt, and mother had all posed in for photographs. I recreated part of the chair that had been cropped out of the photo. The shape of the void was created in respect to both photos, filling parts of the chair that were visible. I used the photos to draw as much as I knew, and then recreated bits and pieces, leaving the majority of where the people sat blank. The void of people created a ghost-like shape in the center of the chair, suggesting a remaining presence in the absence of people.



"Ethel Pearl" (detail)

The photographs left behind by my family reveal only a small fraction of their house, life, and presence. Each photograph is tightly framed around the subject matter of the people. The stories and memories left behind act in the same way— limited snapshots of a time. In my drawings, I have shifted the scale so that the small fragments of information left behind only take up a mere fraction of the large page. The drawings are very small and could fit in the palm of your hand, but they are on a paper that is 50" by 44". The almost-square shape of the paper mimics the shapes of the aged photos. The isolated fragments that I have selected and drawn from the photographs sit alone on this large frame, revealing how little is actually known. The placement on the page suggests a place yet to be defined, leaving only imagination to fill in the gaps. The

energy from the large blank page becomes dependent on the single object extracted from the photograph. Because the photographs focus so heavily on the people within them, these objects would often be overlooked. By removing the people, the viewer is encouraged to look deeper into the photograph's surroundings. The furniture is a constant, while the people are always changing. The chair becomes a "lieux de memoire" of a site of memory- the object that embodies my family's memories.



"September"

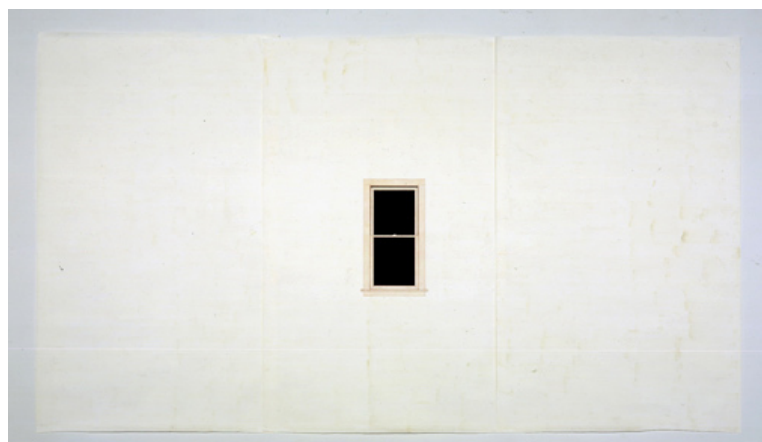


"September" (detail)

Our memories are reconstructed each time we remember them, each time with more opportunity to morph and change. "The more you remember something the less accurate it becomes. The more it becomes about you and the less it becomes about what happened" (Radio Lab). We often remember seemingly unimportant details, while the background of our memories can be largely created by our own imaginations. This natural process of memories morphing and recreating themselves is jolted by the single moment captured by photography. As we focus on the limited frame that a photograph has captured, we often forget about what was not captured. Outside lies an entire room, house, world, life, which we can only recreate with memory and imagination. The accuracy of a memory is questioned until the accuracy of the photograph is questioned.

My work has been influenced by paintings that engulf the viewer into the space by simply using a few lines on the canvas as seen in ‘Absalom Passage’ by Jules Olitski. The piece can be easy to overlook since it is mostly a ‘blank’ canvas, and yet if the viewer takes the time to notice the few brush strokes, it is easy to be swept away into the painting. It becomes more about the moment the viewer spends with the space, than what is visually given away. My drawings create a world for the viewer to not simply view, but to enter. In the same way I attempt to reconstruct my family’s memory, the viewer is invited to reconstruct the scene as well. By revealing only one object from the photograph, the large blank page functions as a presence to the void.

The work of Toba Khedoori has encouraged me to work on larger surfaces and to allow the dimensions of the blank page to suggest the space. The sheer size of the paper pulls the viewer into the space, forcing the viewer to pay attention to an object that could easily be overlooked. Much like the Olitski’s painting, Khedoori’s “imaginary spaces remind viewers of their own presence.... Whatever dynamic there is issues from the viewers” (Reust 141). Khedoori provides the gateway to the world she is creating, and once a viewer enters, the work takes a life of its



Toba Khedoori’s “Untitled (Window)”

own. Each viewer looks at the piece with different backgrounds, stories, and ideas, and therefore the work becomes different to each viewer; such as each memory is unique to each person, even when its of the same event. My work invites imagination to fill the void, however, my subject matter does not have the

same neutrality as Khedoori. My drawings do not create an empty stage, but a lost memory longing to be put into context. The memories take on a life of their own, straying from the truth, merging and twisting with other memories. The accuracy of the memory can no longer be proven one way or the other as it takes on its own life.

The work of Mike Kelley has also motivated my work. Though his work does not physically look like my drawings, the concepts and language surrounding it overlaps with my own. His piece “Educational Complex” is a small-scale model of all the schools he’s ever attended, and all the homes he’s ever lived in, with the forgotten parts left out. He calls this process “selective amnesia.” My drawings focus on the absence of people and setting in a similar fashion to Kelley. Memories are often thought of as factual until they are questioned. Once examined, holes in thoughts become apparent, much of the factual information is revealed as subconscious forgery. The brain fills in the gaps so easily, its easy to forget they exist. We believe these created memories until they are challenged by such things as photographs, text, or even other memories. Kelley says he is creating a “pseudo auto-biography,” by recreating memories and adding fictional elements. In a sense, I have been doing the same. While I have not intentionally been creating fictional elements, my limited knowledge of the photographs lends itself to bend away from the objective truth.

Many of the subjects in my drawings are also important due to their interaction with the people in the photographs. While each photo contains different people in different arrangements, the furniture does not move or change. The passing people captured within the photographs have encountered the same objects and in some form have left their mark on the physical environment of the room. Even after they are gone, their presence remains. The ghostlike presence left behind is similar to Christian Boltanski’s work, specifically “Personae.” While the installation does not include people, the mounds of clothing suggest a strong presence of individuals. In the end, the absence leaves us with an uneasy, eerie feeling. As we encounter the items, we are left to wonder about the lives that



Christian Boltanski's "Personae"

have encountered them before us.

My process of analyzing found objects has been enhanced with Daniel Spoerri's "An Anecdoted Topography of Chance." In this book he has applied "critical and scholarly methods to the arbitrary debris left over from his process of living" (Spoerri 1). Spoerri has documented and analyzed the content on his desk in what appears to be a scientific and objective manner, however the descriptions he provides of the objects are largely personal to him, often offering up connected stories to the objects. He describes his work in "the way Sherlock Holmes, starting with a single object, could solve a crime; or historians, after centuries were able to reconstitute a whole epoch from the most famous fixation in history, Pompeii." With my work, there is a dynamic, such as in Spoerri's, of the objective versus subjective. The memorabilia and photographs are simply 'objects' however in describing them, I project my own views upon it. By analyzing these artifacts, I am reconstructing my heritage, opening them up for possible stories and explanations behind them.

My photographs act as personal artifacts, "tangible evidence of history, memory, longing, delight" (Kalman 102). By reconstructing found memories, I am reconstructing my own stories, my own history. Whether my memories are from living, hearing stories, or seeing photographs, they are still my memories. They have merged in such ways that they are impossible to separate. The collective memories of my family's history has been passed down through these photo albums. While they may be stored away and out of sight, they are still carried with us. They have traveled from Missouri, to New York, to Michigan, from the 1920's to the present, and through four generations. They are our tangible markers to an intangible past. Desperately hanging on to a physical grounding for our memories as they become only the memories of memories.



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