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LULLABY

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Bachelors of Fine Art Ceramics, California State University: Long Beach, 2011

Director: Andréa Keys Connell
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Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
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I would like to thank my Mother and Father, for supporting me on this adventure so far from home. To my sister, Hope, I'm very excited to be back home close to you again. I'm sorry I was gone for this time.

To Travis: I know we have missed a huge part of each other's lives since I have been here. We have had some very rough moments, but we have made it through now. We came out of this time away as better individual people. Starting this next chapter in our lives together will bring new challenges, I'm glad I get to go through them with you.

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Abstract

LULLABY

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I have been investigating the way in which my mind has altered my memories, especially from childhood. The more a moment is recalled, the less precise it becomes. The most inaccurate memories from childhood are the ones I have fixated on. Bedrooms are spaces where dreaming, sleeping and reverie take place leading to even more fragmenting. The intimate space of a bedroom allows me to represent the personal distorted recollections. The bedroom furniture is missing parts, shifted in height and placement or combined together. By making doubles of furniture, a direct comparison can be made from

the real piece to the made imagined work. A counterpart can be a defense against loss, by having multiples of the same. Through dwelling on the past I have lost most of the original content and am left with disintegrating parts

House

It is hot. Dad is at work. My Mom with me and my brother at home. I am six. My brother is 2. His name is Austin. My brother is big. He is strong. He gave me a black eye and pulls my hair. He can open doors. In the backyard is my swing set that I got as a present. Next to my swing set is the peach tree. In front of my swing set is the swimming pool. It is one of those pools above the ground. We have a ladder we use to get in. My brother opened the back door to get outside, the ladder was still over the side of the pool. He climbed in. I'm inside the house. I'm standing outside in the grass. I am over at the neighbor's house. I am sitting at the hospital crying, the hard tissues hurt my eyes. They ask me if I would like to see him and I say no. I am sitting in the car, at the funeral, looking back to where he is. We return there on the weekends to cut the grass, water and replace the firetruck stickers. We are going to the park. My parents go to group meetings and I play in the lobby with other kids. My sister is born, her name is Hope. We are moving to a new house. I start at a different school.

In my first year in college for my English class, our assignment was to write an autobiography. I have excerpted the part talking about my brother's death.

"My parents decided to have another child. My brother Austin Eugene Smith, was born on April 28, 1991, when I was 4. He was a really big boy with blonde hair and blue eyes. He loved fire trucks and pulling my hair. I remember once he was playing with one of his toys and he hit me with it in the eye and gave me my first black eye.

On July 27, 1993 my family had the three neighbor kids over along with my two second cousins. It always gets so hot in the summer so we had our swimming pool put up. We were all running around and playing and then we realized that my brother was not with us. Everyone split up to try and find him. My mother went in the backyard to look for him and found him in the swimming pool. The ladder to get in to the pool was sitting in the middle of the pool but he decided to climb on the swimming pool filter and get in to the pool. He drowned. I remember him being on the grass in the backyard and having someone take me away. My dad was called and the ambulance came. While my mother and father went to the hospital I stayed at the neighbor's house. I remember crying and holding onto a doll they had given me. The next thing I remember is sitting in my grandma and grandpa's car going to the hospital. Once I got to the hospital I was crying and using the hard tissues they had there to wipe the tears away. Someone asked me if I wanted to see him and I said no. I never have regretted that decision, it would have been too hard and I would not want to remember him like that. There were just so many things that went wrong that day and we could have fixed them. I do not remember anything from the funeral. As time goes by I also remember less about the day that he died or get the day all mixed up."

When I wrote this paper it was one of the few times I talked with my mother about the events of that day. She did not remember the neighbors giving me a doll. The doll that I thought they had given me, she said came from a different place. I had applied meaning to that object as a way to comfort myself. My cousins and neighbors who were over that day, I now have no recollection of them being there. I don't see them in any of my thoughts about the day. My strongest memory from the day is the hard tissues on my face at the hospital. I can remember this moment the best because I was using another sense, touch. The visual of the funeral and sitting inside the car looking back to the hill where he is buried is engrained in my memory. I have this memory because of all the times we returned to the cemetery and have seen that picture. We visited there a couple times a month for years.

The first work in which I started to show these fragmented distorted memories was in a stepladder titled *It's Not Just Something You Take It's Given*. It was a child's stepladder but had one of its legs missing and the steps extended out into space. Our mind wants to fill in the blank leg missing from the ladder, which parallels filling in the blank spaces of our memory, getting farther from the original. The stepladder I made child size but it is also an object an adult uses. It was stylized as a very generic stepladder, easily recognizable. It became a model. By making it from balsa wood it emphasized the model aspect but also heightened its non-functionality. In making from balsa wood, the material is so light in color and in weight; it makes changing the orientation easy. When re-creating furniture from this material it creates a separation from the real-functional to the sculpture.



It's Not Just Something You Take It's Given, 2013

Bed

In the past I have called the death of my brother a tragic event for my family and I. However, last year I finally realized the extent of my trauma. I am fixated on this event in my life; the works I create all have to do with trying to better understand this time in my life or the aftermath. What I do remember from the event has changed and been altered through time and recollection. In being hyper focused on this event, as I recall what happened, my brain makes new pathways to remember causing my memory to shift and change. I am making my memory worse the more I recall the event. This altering and repetition of the event shows up in the work as multiples of the same object or distortion of objects.

The catalyst for recognizing my trauma came from reading about someone else's traumatic event of their mother dying. The narrative came from the book *Trauma Explorations in Memory* By Cathy Caruth, in the contribution by Bessel A Van Der Kolk and Onno Van Der Hart, "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma". Irene was a young adult when her mother passed away. Irene had not slept and was exhausted for months working and taking care of her mother. One night her mother passed away and Irene kept trying to revive and talk to her, treating her like she was still alive. An aunt came and found the dead body but Irene refused to believe the

death. She had blocked out the night in her mind. Everyday her truth was that her mother was still alive, because she had no recollection of the funeral or death.

Her story inspired *The Bed Piece*. I press molded around ninety miniature clay beds. The press mold gave them a similarity to represent the same thoughts every day. However, each bed still had slight differences showing that each one was individual and a separate day. The beds went on the ground up against the wall and circled the room, even the door. I created a physical barrier when this is normally a mental barrier, which cannot be escaped from. The arrangement brought on anxiety because there was no way to escape from this image. When stuck on an idea and trying to get away from it, it becomes even more apparent that you can't find relief or exit. I chose to create an adult bed but, by the beds being miniaturized, it kept a relationship to the child and dollhouse/toys. Irene's story helped me to realize how much I think about my brother's death and my frustration that I can't accurately feel or trace what occurred.



The Bed Piece, 2013

Home

Multiples were everywhere in the house growing up. My mother filled the house with stuff, often with illogical amounts of the same objects. When going to the grocery store she would buy two more jars of peanut butter even though there were already two at home. This idea applied to all the food in the kitchen. Most of the food would expire before we could go through all of it. The pantry and the refrigerator were always jam-packed. In shopping for clothes we would buy another jacket, knowing that it was not needed. I think there was a sense of not wanting to be missing something but also filling a void. In having so many items around the house, it was always cluttered. I now have a messy cluttered house and studio. My work however, especially the furniture I have been making comes out clean and with nothing placed upon it. It is the outlet to keep things clean and not to fill in the empty space with anything. In the work a table top will be bare in contrast to at home you wouldn't be able to see the table.

Repetition in my daily life was not just present in objects. It existed in routines as well. My father has had the same job since he was 18. Every day, Monday through Friday, he would leave at 8:30 and come home at 6. Dinner would be at 6:30, at 8:30 I would have a bowl of ice cream. 9:00 pm was bedtime. This schedule was maintained till I had almost graduated high school and the only thing that changed was my bedtime. In repeating

objects like through the bed piece I am referring to my thoughts, the set daily schedules and repetition of my life growing up.

Imaginary Double

I have been interested with the idea of doubling. I have been doubling objects and using mirrors to achieve two objects or the completion of one. The doubling for me represents a couple of concepts. In a double, you have more than one so if one is lost then there are more. In Mike Kelly's Essay *Playing with Dead Things: On the Uncanny* he says "Multiplication insures that the loss of one part is not a total loss". The double is a way to keep something here longer. Roger Fry's "An Essay in Aesthetics", brings up how people live a double life, one of actual life and the other as imaginative life (Fry, p.76). There is what happened at the moment and then my perception of the experience. This concept mimics Fry's idea of imagination and real. Fry talks about the freedom and open imagination of children (Fry, p.76).

I studied children's drawings which illustrate their imaginative life. The first piece upon arriving was using a child's drawing, it was a figure that had its body on the floor but its alphabet blocks were on the wall. I was playing with shifting the orientation of the wall and floor as a distortion. I have also used children's toys mainly dollhouse furniture in the work to reference the imaginative play. Using the children's drawings and play in reference to my own childhood, I directly express the imaginative life. "Art then is an expression and a stimulus of this imaginative life..." (Fry, p.76). Fry seems to value the

imaginative life over actual life, saying that the imaginative life shows us our true human nature and can help to inform our actual life.

He talks about how the imaginative life is not always pleasant and what we might want from the imaginative life isn't always nice. (Fry, p.77) Since my work stems from this traumatic event in my family, most of it is not pleasant. Where in actual life most of what is desired is to be emotionally stable but in the imaginative life it is open. What I would like to find in the imaginative, is these past emotions. At the time of my trauma I could not fully understand my feelings or the circumstances due to my age. I now want to understand these in my actual life. I can use the imaginative life as a tool to connect

In my practice I analyze my significant event to see how it has shaped the person I am becoming. The distressing thing for me is that I want to now remember some of the more traumatic parts of that day but my mind has repressed them. Because of my focus on wanting to understand the effects I have created false memories. This can mean even layering different time periods and combining memories. Freud mentions, memories in which the person recalling the memory can see themselves in the recollection. This would be a double of oneself, and shows that the recollection was altered.

M.F.A Candidacy

Before moving to Virginia, I had always lived in California. I had been living in Long Beach, California for six years. For the MFA candidacy exhibition I recreated my half of the bedroom from Long Beach. The work was titled *You Wish You Were Younger so You Could Make Mistakes Again*. This was the first time I focused on the recent past. The room I created was made from my memory of it. There were not huge portions missing from the objects or orientation shifts because I could still remember my room fairly well. It was the common items used everyday that I could remember being present like a lotion bottle, hairbands, receipts, my radio. The objects became slightly off in relation to one another. Sizes of things by comparison were not right. I made by hand all of the objects, so things that are normally mass produced looked less precise. It was important that I make everything because it is all coming from my head. I shifted materials from balsa wood to paper, foam board, clay, and tape. I chose to use these for their malleability, fragility and structure because I feel they convey memory more effectively.

I used black to show that this time period was dead, in the past and I cannot get back to this place and time again. The black gave cohesion between all the different materials used. The objects that were in contact with the floor such as the bed and nightstand were attempting to merge into it. I used this device to bury objects to illustrate

they had died, and to allow the viewer to feel slightly above them. The piece became a memorial for that time period.



You Wish You Were Younger So You Could Make Mistakes Again, 2014



Box

After candidacy I wanted to start doubling the room through mirrors. Our adult bedrooms are typically doubled, two pillows two nightstands, two dressers. I made a series of boxes with the outside being parts of the house that one looks into or through, such as a door peep hole, a cabinet and a drawer. In Gaston Bachelard's book "Poetics of Space" he writes "The drawers and cupboards are all spaces for our memories to take refuge in (Bachelard, p.8). This is when I began thinking of furniture as being figurative or a self-portrait. In looking into the cabinet or drawer, I was using this device to parallel my self-analysis in looking into myself and exposing the viewer to what I decided to reveal about myself. Inside these boxes are mirrors at an angle to double the image. In all of the boxes the viewer could then see themselves. In my own practice I try to become more self-aware through the pieces I create. I wanted the viewer to become aware of themselves in seeing their reflection in the mirror. The reflection in the mirror creates an unreal space and just the image. The boxes are white and in conjunction with the mirrors they became clinical. When looking into topics I find myself more on the analytical side, rather than the emotional side now that I have analyzed and researched so much.





Lullaby

By adding the mirrors on the chifferobe for thesis I want the viewer to again become aware of self in the space. In Mike Kelly's writing "Playing with Dead Things: On the Uncanny" he writes, "this self-conscious state is, I think very close to the uncanny. One becomes aware that one is not normally self-aware." The mirrors on the actual chifferobe are tall enough only to reflect about to someone's neck. The mirrors being cut off to not show the head leads to the balsa wood area as representing a psychological headspace.

While I have been using houses as a major motif in the work, I focused on the bedroom after *The Bed Piece*. The bedroom I have been using in work recently is a private place. When you are in someone else's bedroom there is a heightened sense of awareness. It is the space where sleeping occurs and when one processes the day, distortions can happen through that processing. It is a place where dreaming takes place and new thoughts can be made.

The objects I chose to include for the bedroom installation for thesis are a toy chest, dresser, nightstand, chifferobe, and a bed. The bed is the most fragmented and only a corner of the footboard and a bed post are visible. In previous work the bed has been a bigger focus, here to avoid certain readings I emphasized it less.

Orpheus a movie from 1950 directed by Jean Cocteau is a film that has influenced my thesis installation. In this movie mirrors are used to move about through another world and

the real world. The mirrors can be passed through into others houses. The arrangement in the gallery has used the chifferobe with mirrors to confront the viewer upon entering. The audience must walk next to the chifferobe to get to the other arrangements. The viewer walks through the space where there would usually be a wall that the chifferobe would be up against.

In the movie *The Student of Prague* (1913) directed by Stellan Rye the main character Balduin meets Scapinelli. Scapinelli, after Balduin signs a contract, creates a double twin of Balduin. The double person is created through the mirror reflection and the reflection walks out of the mirror and comes into the real world. This parallels having the balsa wood chifferobe in front of the real chifferobe. The balsa wood chifferobe has the mirror and side panels removed. The structure then frames the footboard fragment hidden inside. There are also a multitude of empty frames to act as more portals to move through the space. The empty mirror frames distort the space behind them that they are framing. They also can replicate the pathways our brain makes when trying to recall, leading to the distortion of our memories. I was drawn to the chifferobe as a piece of furniture because of its unique drawer and door layout. All the drawers and the door leave places for things to be stored in.

The other pieces of furniture are placed hanging on the wall to separate them from the real chifferobe close to the ground. Each one has a different orientation, the toy chest is upside down and the nightstand is cut off at an angle. The chifferobe and the toy chest are

also slightly skewed to have the viewer question if it is really off. The dresser placed high on the ceiling presented a new view of looking up into the bottom which one never sees. The placement of the balsa wood became an investigation into space and creating a shifting environment.



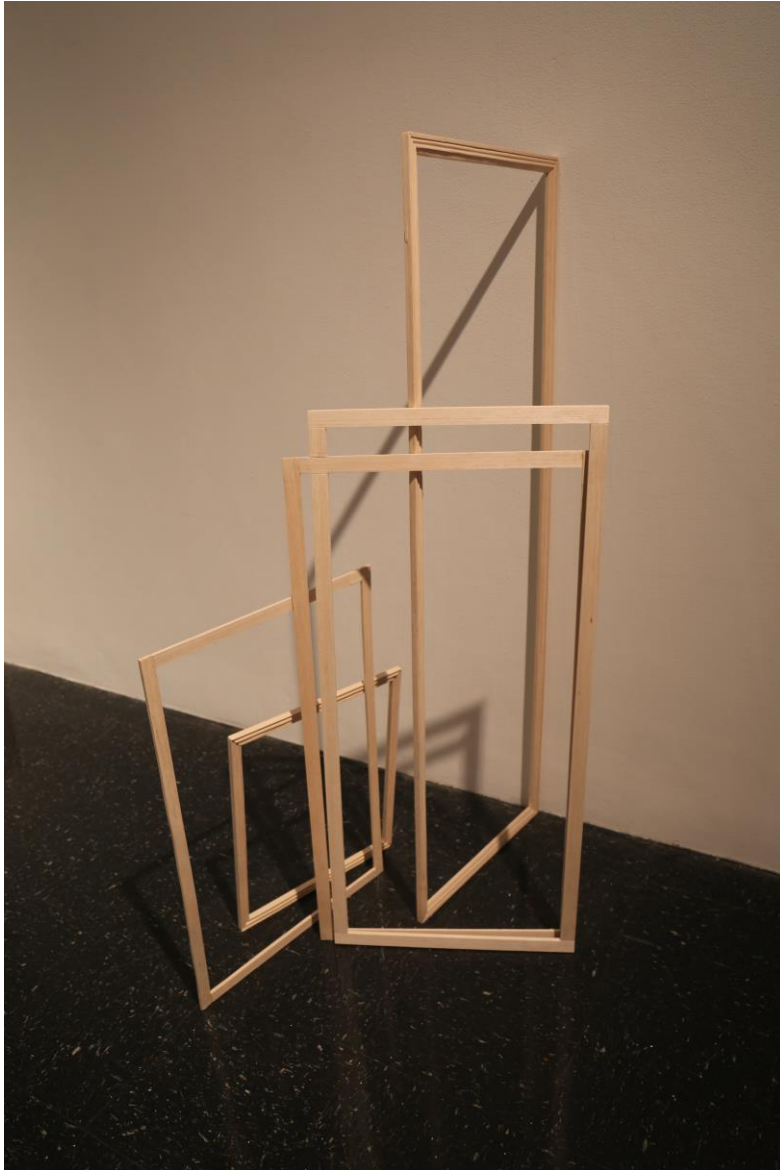
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APPENDIX A

Other Notes Not Included Yet

Mike Kelley, *Foul Perfection: Essays and Criticism*

When something happens to us in the “real” world that seems to support our old discarded psychic world, we get a feeling of uncanny

Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*

“In fact dreams are works of art, born of a compromise between the conscious and unconscious. They can only be understood by sustained historical investigation into the imaginative life and memory of the dreamer” p. ix Introduction

Freud’s “the creative writer and daydreaming” child makes up their own world or changes it to please themselves to a new one in play “the opposite of play is reality” - hang things upside down the fragmentation of everyday things

summary p. xxii adult art replaces child play and adolescent reveries so we can live through all the things we give up as we grow.

“this is the day dream or the fantasy, which has its origin in present experience and the recollection of the past: so that past, present and future are strung together on the thread of one desire that unites all three.” p. 29

“... at night we are visited by desires that we are ashamed of and must conceal from ourselves, that have for this very reason been repressed, pushed into the unconscious. Such repressed desires and their derivatives can be allowed to express themselves only in a grossly distorted form.”

Uncanny definition a feeling of “un homely”, unsure. A long familiar thing that has been repressed which happens in the house where a lot of our most familiar items are kept (the way of unexpectedness). Repetition to a feeling of something you think you know. I have been here before I know of this. Uncanny reoccurrence of the same thing un-conscious

Imaginary real or imaginary or real what is a true memory?

The double creating an unsurity in knowing oneself.

The double created to not die, deny death.

Double repetition compulsion to repeat

Sigmund Freud, *Screen memories*

“Not until our sixth seventh year are our lives reproduced by the memory as a coherent chain of events”

Why do we remember some things and omit others?

When you want to remember something met up with resistance from your mind
compromise needs to be reached “conflict repression substitution involving
compromise

“it is perhaps all together questionable whether we have any conscious memories from childhood: perhaps we have only memories of childhood”

“Not forgotten but omitted”

Gaston Bachelard, *Poetics of reverie*

“the faithfully beloved images which are so solidly fixed in my memory that I no longer know whether I am remembering or imagining them when I come across them in my reveries” p. 2

Reverie is practiced w/o attention it is often without memory (diluting memories even more)

“in contrast to a dream a reverie cannot be recounted”

Solitary dreaming memories arrange in a tableaux

The imagination ceaselessly revives and illustrates the memory p. 20

Jung the subconscious self is made of forgotten memories p. 59

The reveries from day are to relieve us from our dreams at night p. 63

He says reverie is more a double than dreams and reverie goes looking for our double in a yesteryear

“this shadow knows the being which double doubles the being of the dreamer through reverie. The shadow, the double of our being knows the psychology of the depths in our reveries”

The double is the double of a double being p. 80

“all reality, that which is present that which remains like the heritage of past time, is idealized put into the movement of a dreamed reality.” p. 86

Our childhood remains to be re-imagined

“A potential childhood is within us. When we go looking for it in our reveries, we relive it even more in its possibilities than in its reality”

(So our childhood is never over (or at least mine isn't) I have had multiple childhoods as my memories have changed over time, how does this relate to time?)

“we dream while remembering. We remember while dreaming”

die in dream it is a double

pure memories are framed images

“the further one goes towards the past the more in dissoluble the psychological memory imagination mixture appears.”

Softening or erasing the traumatic character of certain childhood memories reverie can calm us.

“the object is then the reverie companion of the dreamer”

“the poet gives the real object its imaginary double, its idealized double. This idealized double is immediately idealizing and it is thus that a universe is born from an expanding image.”

The imagined world gives us an expanding home, the reverse of the home is the bedroom. p. 177 the bedroom is the goal of the returning

“there is still water at the bottom of all memory” p. 196

Water can create a beauty through a reflected world and a doubling and with that soften colors and then create an idealized world
the double of the sky reflected in the water and the space created in between and the depth of that space p. 205

Gaston Bachelard, *Poetics of space*

Imagination build “walls” no protection or false sense of protection

“Memory... does not record concrete duration.”

“I talk to myself” double

“A house of dream memory that is lost in the shadow of a beyond the real past”