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How To Forget

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How To Forget: The Residue of Memory

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

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Abstract

How To Forget was born from a need to give tangible form to the psychic residue left behind by a life lived. Through the use of silk-screening of red clay mud onto ink-jet photographs, archival textiles, and site-specific installations, I attempt to tie and/or divorce myself from my own and my family's extended history and examine the function of memory within the dynamics of the archive. How To Forget takes a non-linear, non-chronological approach to this examination, compressing decades of time and space through the manipulation of the archive and my own self-portraiture, designed specifically to deny myself from its record. In this work, I explore life-altering experiences and photographs, question my rights to make family history-changing assertions, and ultimately embrace the probability of losing these connections in exchange for personal freedom.
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I. Introduction

From time to time, both my sister and I smell the fragrance of my late paternal Grandmother Vivian's perfumes. While the question of which scent has somewhat eluded us, we are convinced that we have experienced both Estée Lauder’s Private Collection and Yves Saint Laurent’s Opium, both of which we possess her personal bottles. Neither of us holds any particular beliefs about an afterlife or the existence of a “God.” However, we cannot deny the number of times when, together or apart, we have experienced what we can only describe as the overwhelming feeling that Vivian is dropping in to check on us.

These moments are what have formed the basis of much of my thesis work, exploring the residue of memory and how, as I watch my parent’s and remaining grandparent’s health and memories diminish, these artifacts and triggers become all the more critical as a way of record keeping and examining how the images we leave behind will tell our story.

The ideas surrounding memory are complicated for me as someone with an eidetic memory. Eidetic memory differs from that of photographic memory (which many psychologists question the existence of) in that, while not perfect in terms of remembering, those who possess it can easily free-recall many tiny details and tend to organize this data through spatial remembrance. For myself, this has often caused more harm than good, and for this reason, this thesis' accompanying body of work has been an exercise in attempting to let go of some of the more traumatic memories stored within my mind. This is my attempt at finding how to forget.
My work has long been exploring the ideas of histories, memory’s function with the physical photograph, and how process changes what a photograph is. While this work aims to construct and create linkages between real, existing, living, and passed subject matter, the work exists as constructed images created on my part. In an act of defiance against the problematic and often harmful fictions I have inherited and am now deconstructing, I am telling my own versions of these stories through additions, subtractions, and a shifting collapse of time within these photographic collages.

The constructed nature of these images also allows me to deepen my relationships with the subjects or, in some cases, create relationships, where, for me, the pre-existing ones were that of the memory told through another—a dangerous and identity-flattening version of generational telephone. Using the literal earth I grew up on as a chemical linkage allows me to use a piece of myself to recreate others in my own image and tie these people, who I have rich theoretical understandings of, but who passed before my birth, back into myself. This type of “in my image, from your blood” approach has allowed new connections. MeMaw (Fig. 1) depicts my great-grandmother Lucille Louis Bergeret Bowling, colloquially known in family as MeMaw, dead before my birth, but spoke about in such a way that my experience of her was that of a full but absent person. The memory residue that exists from her is a foundational part of my own justice-minded points of view and feminist nature. In interpreting her image through my work, I am closing a loop between us.
After the party!
II. Archive as Remembering/Forgetting

Growing up in rural North Carolina in a town with a tiny population of 1598, I was already predisposed to solitude during my childhood. My parents, having purchased the land I grew up on in 1982 and moving away from the more urban Charlotte, NC, began constructing what would eventually become our home, hidden in the woods of a 10-acre lot. Even before my Mother chose to pull myself and my siblings out of the local declining public schools and homeschool us, I had already begun realizing I was living in a strange, internal state. Though I could not understand or verbalize any of these feelings, they are what I can identify now as a complete confusion with memory and how my mind seemed to log every tiny thing away.

This was, early on, seemingly the natural way my brain worked. This became complicated, however, as soon as I began experiencing what would be 16 years of physical and psychological abuse at the hands of explicitly my older brother and, implicitly, my Father. Unlike the more common experience of memory loss that comes with abuse, my memory adaptation is that which holds onto every tiny piece of information, building a database of triggers in an attempt to avoid more damage at the hands of others. This was less than successful, as today, I have not only the emotional scars left behind by this aggregation of data but also the physical and various nerve damage.

Unsurprisingly, due to all of this, I became increasingly isolated and often found myself constructing different fantasies and fictionalized histories with family photo albums and various other photo sources. For as long as I can remember, I have been surrounded by photographs. Like much of America, my immediate and extended family
retains volumes of photo albums documenting decades of home life, vacations, formal portraits, and other experiences. I had access to images of my immediate family and those of far-flung relatives that I had never laid eyes on in the flesh.

My love for photography seemed to have shown through to some, as my maternal Grandmother, Vivian, bought me my first camera around the age of 7. It was nothing remarkable: a Polaroid 3000 point-and-shoot camera (Fig. 2), but I still have it to this day and use it for walk-about snapshots. As a child, though, it did not receive much use. After I shot the initial two rolls that were gifted to me with it, I was never given film for this camera again, only disposable cameras if we were to go on a trip, which were few and far between.

(Fig. 2)
Despite and perhaps partially due to this inability to continually create new images, I began pouring over all of the family albums, mentally combining them with my own photos and creating stories. I have realized that this was my first step into the idea of constructing one's own fictionalized history, which, unbeknownst to me, was something I would spend most of my life thus far unraveling from the twisted and knotted fictions my blood family has continued to perpetuate.

This was an archive full of secrets and lies, incomplete by design. Without even understanding what I was doing, my supplementation and combining, forming new narratives, and recontextualizing others were my first steps into unraveling many fictions and understanding the importance of my memory.

At this time, I have realized, I began creating these sort of "hologram" versions of people in my mind. I had the photographs and the versions of them spoken about to me, and I began forming a version of them in my psyche. My maternal great-grandmother, gone before my birth, became a local feminist icon (not that far from reality), and my maternal great-uncle, who died in a car accident due to his narcolepsy, became a repeating moving image of his death in my mind. While I had these chunked pieces of information, the versions of these people I felt I knew were wholly fictionalized and constructed. I was not working with the real McCoy, but the conceptual residue they left behind: sparse images and questionable oral histories.

I struggle to put into words much of this work, not because I do not have the language for it, but because it can feel like the en vogue dirty concept of "trauma dumping." I push back against this assertion, embracing and asserting that humans require this release to speak to their lived experiences, whether joyful or traumatic. Pain more
often leaves a more lasting residue. It is not that making work about joy is not exciting or valid, but simply that happiness is often an uneventful subject. Further, one cannot maintain mental well-being and stability without finding a way to release this pressure. Audre Lorde put this most succinctly when she wrote, "If I cannot air out this pain and alter it, I will surely die of it. That's the beginning of social protest." If we cannot open ourselves fully to the world, we cannot make change. We stagnate and grow cold and are unable to see ourselves within others.

Though I did not yet have this language of residue for it, I began working with these ideas of familial fictions and archival photos during my final year of my undergraduate degree. In a body of work titled Family (un)Ties, I began exploring the stories and lies from my relatives' tales and unpacking my own traumas and biases against these people. As someone who spent so many years of my childhood and teenage years pushing against and denying my familial connections, I was now starting to dig into them and unpack their many layers. What surprised me the most about this practice was my newfound interest in uncovering these histories and how they affected me emotionally. I had operated for so long, attempting to separate myself from family as a defense mechanism, out of fear of abuse and, during my childhood, an early understanding of my queerness and the danger that put me in.

"History is made and preserved by and for particular classes of people. A camera in some hands can preserve an alternate history."2

1 Audre Lorde and Joan Wylie Hall. 2004. Conversations with Audre Lorde. Jackson (Miss.): University Press Of Mississippi.

As I dug deeper into these narratives, I began to find the cracks. As I examined those cracks, I began seeing hints and glimpses of queerness, of violence, of stories that, while my family may desire to forget and deny, open up new understandings for those of us who have come after them. There are clear connections between Family (un)Ties and my thesis work, How To Forget; both deal with family, and both make use of alternative photographic methods, but where (un)Ties plays in ideas of uncontrollable disasters, such as old photos recovered from a flooded basement (Fig. 3) and leans heavily into the theatrical objectness of the items I created (literal family tree entries, by encasing family photos in beeswax, on cedar tree cross-sections. (Fig. 4)), How To Forget is far more quiet and anchored in the image, the photograph as a printed object.
III. Mud as Memory

As I approached the end of my first year at VCU and our degree candidacy, I began to ponder the direction my thesis work would take. While I felt my candidacy work was conceptually solid, it left me with a sense of confusion. However, one aspect that resonated with me was the use of red clay mud slip as a printing medium, a unique and intriguing choice that I was eager to explore further.

I am deeply drawn to the photographic image and consider it my primary medium. However, I have only been able to accept my work as complete if I have had a hand, in the most literal, physical sense, in the making or manipulation of the final result. As previously illustrated, this manifested in my prior work in more intensely theatrical uses of alternative processes. With this thesis work, I wanted to present something quieter and something that showed the evolution and growth my work has gone through over my 13-year practice, post undergrad. The desire to get my hands dirty has always been, and I am sure, will always be present.

The initial work created with this red clay mud was the first self-portrait taken during my time at VCU. Having already identified memory as the subject I am most interested in working with at this time, and deeply and personally, my challenges with my eidetic memory (most intensely, my feelings of fighting against redundant “backup” copies of my mind from different points in my life), I began experimenting with the doubling of image. This first photo (Fig. 5), a silkscreened photograph on inherited, familial textiles, began to form my initial ideas of using this red mud as the binding agent for memory.
"I'm sick to death of this particular self. I want another."³

The red clay mud slip I am using is explicitly not just any mud but the earth I have collected, cleaned, and processed from the land I grew up on. There is a need for such specificity, not simply for this mud’s formal elements, its deep iron color, its location in my home state of North Carolina, and its connection to agriculture there, but this mud, on this land, which theoretically holds trace chemical amounts of myself and those who have embedded themselves into my memory. The concept of ‘psychic residue’ is crucial here, referring to the lingering emotional and psychological imprints left by past experiences. The mud becomes the physical manifestation of this memory residue as a link to the psychic residue. The earth never forgets and becomes a proxy to store memory.

This silkscreening takes on different connotations based on how it is applied. In the piece, Inverse Pietà (Fig. 6), the clay is applied as a doubling of the image of my sister and me, acting as a literal inverse, in addition to the conceptual inversion. The etymology of the word pietà means pity or compassion, and in this work represents this; two children of aging parents, working together to find solutions and trying to have infinite compassion for the situation they have found themselves in. This work is not just a representation but a reflection of our emotional journey, our shared compassion, and our struggle to find solutions.

Alternatively, the piece Rot (Fig. 7) uses the mud in a far more violent manner. Where Inverse Pietà is additive, doubling the image, Rot removes the image of one of the two children present, my father, and reprints him on the surface in clay, reducing him to only a residue on the photograph’s surface.
Combining clay with photography through screenprinting further complicates the already tenuous relationship I maintain with photography and the expected standards of archivability. I have never been an artist to deny a medium's viability based on its ability to survive into seeming eternity. However, my time at VCU has pushed me further than ever away from the desire to create within a box of "archivability." Throughout my artistic career, I have used mediums and processes that many conservators would consider a collections nightmare: beeswax, mud, unfixable anthotypes, and toner prints on unfixed silver gelatin papers where the photo exists in the act of being and is constantly fading.

The mud represents archivability in a more challenging fashion, however. While its chemical makeup may not make for an exceptionally safe medium to apply to the surface of an inkjet print, my interest lies in the lifespan of the clay vs the ink. The generally expected life span based on the industry-leading ink producers of prints is anywhere between 75-800 years, dependent on the print's care and exposure to UV light. This is, undoubtedly, far longer than any of us will live, but it is merely a drop in the bucket of time and nothing compared to the world's oldest known art.

The Lascaux Caves in France contain some of the oldest known cave paintings, dating back 17,000 years. Many of these paintings are primarily made of iron oxide, the main component of Ultisol, the main soil order encountered in the southern United States. While the inkjet images they are attached to may fade away, the theoretical lifespan of these clay-based photos could be thousands of years. While I played with the

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lifespan of a print in micro terms with my unfixed gelatin prints, these clay prints are an experiment in the macro. One day, the only thing that may remain of them is the residue.

“They say nothing lasts forever, but they’re just scared it will last longer than they can love it.”

IV. Marks Left

The photograph has always held power. It has started wars and ended them. It has ended child labor in the US, freed painting from its box of naturalism, and democratized visual culture. In my own life, I can name a handful of images that have fundamentally changed me as a person, both globally circulated and personal. However, there is one photograph that so fundamentally altered the trajectory of my life that I do not know what type of person I would be if its creation and consequences had not occurred.

In 1991, my mother had a portrait produced of my two cousins, Nelottie and Chauvet, my older brother Justin, and myself (Fig. 8). This image was a very traditional, formal child portrait from the ’90s; each of us placed together in a balanced frame before a cloudy, almost galactically abstracted backdrop. The photo, though unremarkable, is aesthetically pleasing. My mother had large prints made and framed and sent them to various family members. Several weeks later, an event occurred that is so thoroughly burnt into my memory that rarely does a day go by that I do not recall it.
Though I cannot recall the exact date, it occurred in the latter quarter of the year. As it was still 1991, though nearly finished, the house my parents had been slowly building for the last six years sat empty, and we still lived in the trailer where I spent the first four years of my life. My brother would have been attending kindergarten at this time, so the only two people to witness this were my mother and I. Lying on my parent’s bed in the back of our home and looking through my most treasured possession, a copy of Harold and the Purple Crayon, I heard the phone ring; my mother picked up the receiver, and almost immediately, everything changed forever. She had sent one of the copies of this photo to my maternal grandfather. Up until this point, I had never met this man, nor did I even have a comprehension of who he may be. My other grandfather had died before my birth; I was a child of grandmothers and strong women.

As their conversation progressed, my mother began to cry. She argued with him, but I could only occasionally hear his side of the conversation when he raised his voice loud enough for it to come through the receiver. My concept of time was not yet established, so while I remember the events vividly, I cannot say for just how long this conversation went on. However, I know that by the time it had ended, my mother had made it very clear that he would not see her children.

The point of this call was so that this man could express his disgust with my cousins due to their being biracial. The reason this call, this photograph, and these events so radically changed my life trajectory is that it was my first understanding of bigotry, and had it not occurred and had this man come into my life, I may never have embraced the mixed heritage of my family, nor dug so deeply as to discover his own mixed heritage.
The portrait taken has pulled my attention for so long and so strongly that I have been paralyzed from working with it in any way. Finally, as I sorted through decades of family archives, I found the only image I felt I could pair it with: a portrait of my uncle, Jeff, and aunt, Tavia. Though their relationship ended, the resulting residue of their feelings for each other continues to ripple through many of our lives.
In 2019 and 2020, my family’s relationship with memory radically shifted. My maternal grandmother, Celine, began showing early signs of dementia. Before this disease could rob her of her capacity to make informed choices on her own, she asked my mother to move her into my childhood home to live with her. During this time, my father, Clarke, also experienced several small strokes, as well as brain clots, damaging his memory and slightly affecting his verbal and motor skills.

Already, memory had been on my mind outside these diseases and incidents. I had identified an insidious pattern emerging through the years, most intensely with my father and brother: a taking of other people’s lived experiences and grafting it onto their own, usually for the sake of self-aggrandizing or seeking pity, but always for the purposes of manipulation.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic hit, separating so many of us from those we love and care for. Like most of us, I was separated by roughly 60 miles from my family. This was not at all an untravelable distance but far enough to keep me away, knowing that due to their age, most of them were of the most susceptible population.

During this time, I worked at Elsewhere Museum, an artist residency and experiential space in Greensboro, NC. As an arts non-profit, the work here was never easy. However, between a violent restructuring of staff, the ongoing pandemic, and my temporary shift to a 40-hour-a-week employee due to PPP Loan requirements, I was under more stress than I had ever been in my adult life.

For the first time, this stress began to affect my memory. While I did not lose my long-term knowledge or the ability to locate things spatially within my mind, my day-to-day processing was highly affected.
Things only got worse as events progressed at Elsewhere. The new directors, Matthew Giddings and April Parker, continued to push agendas under the guise of equity while abusing the workers. Eventually, the organization reached a point where I was the only staff member left under them. It was during this time, and in the presence of a residency group, that Parker sexually assaulted me. This resurfaced prior incidents within my memory and caused me to begin to shut down. After 11 months of abuse and assault, I left the organization, leaving behind two artworks intended only for myself. 1. An updated self-portrait on our staff directory (Fig. 10), depicting a literal and figurative fading away from the organization I had damaged myself to protect, and 2. A small handmade book describing all the events that had transpired (Fig. 11). This book is made entirely of collection. Elsewhere describes everything that was part of Sylvia Gray's thrift store before her death as The Collection. In theory, no new items are meant to enter Elsewhere, and no items to leave. Knowing this, I pulped collection paper and fabric, re-formed it into new sheets, and used them to write my story. If I could not be vocal about what had happened to me, I did not want the space to forget about me. The book remains at Elsewhere, hidden.
“You lost the remembrance of pain through inflicting it.”

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the cheap music halls.

The French nation has contributed the ideas of fraternity and equality to the world. Jefferson, to whom is largely due the democratic nature of our institutions, was a deep student of French thought. France is to-day the artistic leader of the nations. Artists from all countries study in her studios. In the manufacture of every thing that contributes to the adornment of life, she leads all Europe—France, Italy, Spain—share a deep feeling for the beauty of line and color.

The Teutonic nations have given the idea of personal liberty, and, in law, trial by jury, that is tried by one peer. Of these nations, Germany is the leader to-day in scientific investigation and the application of science to industry and commerce. Her inventions and discoveries in the field of applied science have placed her within the foremost of commercial nations. Her philosophic thinkers have profoundly influenced modern thought. Her rail system, especially in its industrial phases, is being studied and imitated or adapted in every commercial nation.

Perhaps her greatest contribution to the present is the idea of efficiency as the key to progress.

England has given to the world the doctrines of the rights of man, his civil rights, and of fair play. She has always stood for civil liberty. In government she has a great genius for administration. All modern governments, and especially all colonial administration, are largely based upon the English. In the material most of the great inventions which have revolutionized industry such as the power loom, carding machine, spinning frame, puddling furnace, crucible, Bessemer converter, open hearth, steam hammers, rolling mill, hydraulic press, steam engine and turbine have been of English origin. English literature

(Fig. 11)
V. Collapsing Time

Upon entering VCU’s program, I felt truly lost. Having just removed myself from such a volatile situation and in the middle of a body of work surrounding my feelings of loss of bodily and mental autonomy, I was told I needed to make something new, to move on from that work and explore new ideas. I was at a loss. All I could do was keep replaying those events and re-experiencing what had happened to me. As these events replayed, joined by others, I realized that my mind was collapsing the time between them. In Forget Photography, Andrew Dewdney states, “The visual in Western culture contains a paradox in which human seeing is both an evolutionary property of the eye and brain as well as something humans collectively construct.”¹⁰ The mental properties of sight not only allow but force this kind of temporal compression in our brains. As synapses are bound through repetitive thought, we collapse the distance between image and thought and may begin to displace the real-world meaning of the original form.

What, then, does it mean for me to instill meaning onto people and images that I have no tangible connection to? Is there a difference between my constructed narratives and the familial fictions passed down to my generation? I argue that I 1. have as much of a right to make these assertions as any within my bloodline, 2. I am working with real-world information to uncover and dispel these “family curses,” and that 3. it is my responsibility to my ancestors to seek their true stories and communicate and share their existence. To allow bigotry, racism, and queerphobia to erase entire people from history is not only a disservice to them but to my being.

I have long been fearful of saying many of these things out loud, facing the consequences of my theories with my family, and most likely being ostracised and removed from our family history for speaking out. It is not lost to me that many of the things I have spoken openly about in this paper and this work put me in a position where I may face the same fate as those I have tried to give a fuller history. With William’s Jacket (Fig. 12), I examine my paternal grandfather’s possible queerness. Though I inherited stories of his life, he is, for the most part, a blank slate to me. In uncovering since destroyed, hand-written queer texts in his possession, collecting stories from other queer relatives who knew him, and making connections from photographic archives, I have constructed a narrative of queerness for him. Using his US Army-issued jacket, a loaded item in and of itself, through an unfinished embroidery of queer literature, I have given his story space to contain this possible part of him.
You two had a nice friendship.

You’re too smart to not know
how special what you two had was.

You were special, what you two had was
more myself than I am.

He’s more myself than I am.

He was great and you were both lucky
to be.
In the novel *Call Me By Your Name*, André Aciman quotes another piece of literature, *Heptameron* by Marguerite de Navarre d'Angouleme, “Is it better to speak or die?” In the context of *Call Me By Your Name*, Aciman is taking this French tale about a Knight and Princess who harbor a secret love for each other and queering it. I, too, question whether my queering of familial history is appropriate. Is it my right to out someone who I have only a block connection to but was gone before my birth?

In making selections for my thesis work, I chose images that fell under three categories: archival photos that I was present for, that I retained some memory of the event depicted, archival photographs where the physical object of the photo itself is the memory and newly taken photographs of my own. The presentation itself, bringing all of these images together, is a compression of time. I further play with these notions through the silk screening of disparate images or the destruction or manipulation of narrative through the removal/addition of elements to the piece. What does it mean then to collapse time between these subjects? What does it mean to bring together people or elements that have never been in proximity in real life? What does it mean to remove someone from the narrative? I do not have concrete answers to any of these questions. However, if my experience of sifting through these many images and familial stories tells me anything, it is that regardless of any story I may tell through the materials I have collected, interpretation is in the eye of the beholder.

What I choose not to manipulate plays just as important a role as what I have. In making these image selections, I was working with mostly print images. While the

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negatives for many still exist, someone, at some point, chose to consolidate all of our thousands of photos into unsorted and unmarked banker boxes and move all these photos’ negatives into a handful of gallon-sized ziplock bags. The task of matching these images to their negatives became a massive feat, and the more I engaged with the prints themselves, the less I was interested in it. Like the clay I would silk screen onto them, these small prints came with their own residue. Time has left many of them stained, scratched, and pot-marked. Once digitized, I considered attempting to repair their surfaces, but the longer I sat with them, the more I began to appreciate these marks as lives lived. There is an object-ness that they retain, through still transformed. Like the human body, they show their scars, a testament to the authenticity of the lived experiences they represent.
VI. How To Forget

“A paradox, as it is unfolded by Augustine the rhetorician: how can we speak of forgetting except in terms of the memory of forgetting, as this is authorized and sanctioned by the return and the recognition of the ‘thing’ forgotten?”

My first year leading to candidacy at VCU was very much a time of rediscovery for me. Having only just removed myself from an abusive situation months before, I was still processing the depths to which this trauma had reached. I was confused, exhausted, and angry. There were so many things that I still don’t have words for. I became enamored with the idea of self-obliteration. I wanted to wipe myself clean begin again. I found myself constantly pulled back to the work of one of my biggest artistic influences, David Wojnarowicz, in particular, this quote from his memoir, Close to the Knives, “I wanted to be physically erased and start over again. I didn’t want to be here. I didn’t want to be there. I guess I wanted to be nowhere, I wanted to listen to my brain talk inside of nothingness. I wanted to be untouchable and have no need.”

I began experimenting with ways to examine this idea of self-obliteration through materials. I wanted to take an image and to make it into more than just an image. I wanted to deface the image, destroy it, but not really. I wanted it to still be there, be a thing. What I understand now is that I wanted to manufacture a residue. I wanted to create that thing that would be left behind, to sit in the place of what was once there.


Initially, this manifested through the cutting of photography. Not just cutting an image randomly and chunking it into shapes for a collage but specific, small, controlled cuts. I wanted to take away the image's legibility but retain just an edge of it. I wanted to control the viewer's ability to read the image through the distance at which they encountered it. The work within my candidacy show achieved this through two differing approaches. In (Fig. 13), my self-portrait is meticulously sliced into thin ribbons, retaining the mass of the fabric but transforming it. In (Fig. 14), a more additive approach is taken through the action of embroidery. I encased certain figures in textile cages. Both processes achieved the same effect. When viewed from up close, the image is obscured. Too many cuts or threads hide the image from the viewer's eye, but the images become clear as soon as some distance is given.
Though the cutting proved to be effective, I also felt that, for the moment, it had run its course in my work. In searching for a way to print in large format on fabric at VCU, however, it connected me to Brooke Inman and the screen printing department. Considering the history between printmaking and photography, I had long been interested in incorporating the process into my practice. Screen printing opened up many possibilities for alternative mediums in my work, leading to the use of this specific red clay mud.

I have previously explained my draw toward this mud for its ability to challenge archival expectations. However, on a more personal level, I wanted to use this material because it is so utterly a part of me. The clay slip I have used throughout this process was all gathered and processed by myself from my familial land, the land I grew up on and one of the few places, despite and because of the pain tied to it, that I can call home. This clay has known me and those I love and have loved and holds trace amounts of us in its chemical makeup. It is the only material that could make the connection I was seeking. It allowed me to fracture an image and leave a residue that meant something, not something simply formal and beautiful, but something tangible.

If Memory Serves (Fig. 15) and (Fig. 16) is the key piece of my thesis work. It is an installation piece that uses this red clay mud slip to print archival family photos on the gallery floor. By walking through and experiencing the exhibition, the audience steps on these photographs and, over time, walks them away. This became the framework for How to Forget. While I cannot forget, the mud can act as my proxy, and the audience can forget through the destruction of their movement.
During the winter of 2023, my family situation took a hard turn for the worse. My mother, who had fallen multiple times during the year, had reached a point of being unable to walk, and upon visiting her primary care doctor, we discovered that she had unchecked diabetes, which had wasted away much of her usable muscle mass. In addition to this, due to a prior injury in her 20s, which caused her to favor her right leg when walking, she had severely damaged her meniscus. Though my parents are still legally married and live together, no romantic or physical relationship exists. My father has proven himself time and time again to be untrustworthy and abusive and took advantage of my mother’s vulnerable state, sexually assaulting her. As my sister and I scrambled, looking for solutions to the destructive situation we now found ourselves locked in, my father’s cruelty continued. As I returned to VCU, directly after teaching the first day of classes of my final semester, I received the information from my sister back home that my father had now sexually assaulted our grandmother, his mother-in-law, a woman deep in the throws of dementia. To say I was surprised would be inaccurate, but I was disgusted nonetheless. My final semester at VCU was now so utterly tainted, and my mind so scrambled, that I very nearly stepped away, abandoning my MFA and returning home. It was only for the grace of my sister Meghann and her partner Walt that I could remain.

Due to these events, any fear I had regarding airing out family secrets and lies became superfluous. I had reached my breaking point of self-preservation of any family name. Nothing mattered anymore. Is it better to speak, or to die? I would speak this to the world, damned be the consequences.
My approach shifted. I still wanted to communicate feeling and emotion with this work, but it no longer became important to me to find a way to give the audience all of the information. I was working with such twisted lived experience now that I could not expect a viewer to be able to meet me where I was. So much of this work is interior, stuffed with information that is opaque and inaccessible to a viewer uninformed of my life. Though I am unable to locate an official source, there is a quote attributed to Kara Walker, which I open each new notebook I begin with: “I don't think that my work is actually effectively dealing with history. I think of my work as subsumed by history or consumed by history”, I do not believe any of us can make work that effectively deals with history, certainly our own. We are too close to it. We cannot be objective. What we can do is tell the world who we are because of all of our experiences and hope that someone out there will listen. I cannot forget. I may want to, more than anything, but I cannot. All I can do is keep telling others who I am.
I want to speak to a specific work to close. Mouth Full of Blood (Fig. 17) is a self-portrait taken in the forest of the land I grew up on. Like all self-portraits in this body of work, the image denies the viewer the gaze. This has been my way of extracting myself from these archives and seeking a divorce from this family narrative. As with the rest of my thesis work, it is framed in black walnut wood, sourced from lumber that my parents were given over 40 years ago. Due to its age and the conditions in which it was kept, some rot has occurred. I did not want to remove this erosion but embrace it. This is also why I chose not to stain these frames but to leave them raw. As a container for the work, I view them as important as the work itself.

Silk-screened over this self-portrait is a digital manipulation of the vines of a Trifoliate Orange. Native to Korea and China, these were not things I expected to discover in my mother’s woods. I was immediately drawn to them due to their dangerous appearance, but even more so once I had identified and researched them. The Trifoliate Orange is unique due to its heartiness. These plants are often used as rootstock for the grafting and hybridizing of other citrus plants due to their resistance to cold, the tristeza virus, and root rot. This plant, one that should not have been where it was, that resisted these many dangers, and that, though appearing dangerous, was only trying to protect itself, felt like the perfect metaphor to enshroud myself in.

“Let no one mistake us for the fruit of violence - but that violence, having passed through the fruit, failed to spoil it.”15

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When I began this body of work, I did not believe it was about my family, only that I was using myself and my family as a device to communicate something about memory, the loss of memory, and how and why we forget. What it became was a deeply personal project, desperately created at a time when I questioned my ability to move forward in any direction.

It gave me the answer. Move forward, no matter what.
The truth is, I lied. I lied when I said it was alright. I lied when I said we had to be more. I lied to myself when I told myself I was okay with just being there. I thought I could forget, I thought I could forget it all.

I remember that touch and how your touch was still there. I said it was always there, but it was gone now. I said it was okay. I've spent so long trying to convince myself that I don't have to remember anymore. I can't forget it now. I've lied because telling the truth made things worse. I've lied because telling the truth would hurt me more than trying to hide my feelings. I'm tired of lying, I'm tired of protecting. I can't catch up. I can't think. I can't forget. I want to write, but I don't know how. I don't know how to express it. I don't know how to say it. I don't know how to feel it. I don't know how to live it. I don't know how to forget. I don't know how to move on. I don't know how to be.
(Fig. 24)
You two had a nice friendship.

You're too smart to not know how special what you two had was.

He's more myself than I am.

He was good, and you were both lucky to have him.
Work Cited


  https://www.britannica.com/place/Lascaux.


