

RECOLLECTIONS:
AN INTERNAL ANALYSIS OF MEMORY AND PERCEPTION

by

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ABSTRACT

I investigate the depths of memory, the entanglement of personal recollections with communal knowledge (learned semantic information from media and society such as facts and social norms) and the changing perceptions of environments over time. *Memories define us.* Throughout life we are exposed to vast quantities of imagery through a variety of media and personal experiences. Over time our firsthand experiences and what we witness in film, print, photography, and the internet become indistinguishable in our memory.

My work recreates consequential scenes from my past through technical drawings and blended imagery while exploring the possibilities provided by the interaction of common knowledge and the ambiguous nature of memory.

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my family, for all of the memories we have shared.

Most notably to my uncle, Ozzie Diaz.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

I frequently spend my days looking back on what once was, where I am now and how I got there. I fathom that the entire experience of my life has been, and will continue to be, perceived by my eyes and comprehended within my mind. However, whenever recollections occur, I experience them as episodes rather than a chronological and continuous flow of memory. Not only are these episodes fragmented, but they are often vague, and I remember them with variable details. Memories change constantly and are influenced by similar personal recollections as well as associated secondhand experiences that may be triggered by popular media (Greenberg and Verfaellie 749). An example of this conflation would be constantly watching a television series that features a living room setting that is similar in appearance to a personal living room from the viewer's childhood. While trying to recall the childhood living room, features from both living room scenes become confused with one another, resulting in a virtual living room with features from both settings. My work reconstructs particular scenes from my earliest memories through a variety of processes.

The consistent subject matter within my work is environments. Fleeting and ambiguous imagery occupies my mind when I recall certain memories. My movements, repetitive daily schedules and constant exposure to media, make it very difficult to remember visual information from specific moments accurately without a strong emotional connection. I see environments from my past as "settings" that represent a certain time of my life. I constantly experienced firsthand events within each of these settings even if from other periods. From

these environments I have accumulated vast quantities of associated recollections. Unlike the fleeting nature of people and small objects, these stationary settings were my everyday environments and have changed very little in my memories. This makes them the ideal subject matter to visually recreate my memories.

The strong and recurring presence of environments within my mind causes me to focus on how I perceive and recognize environments and how I can effectively illustrate that process of recognition within my artwork. While in an environment the mind analyzes and makes sense of its surroundings by identifying associated individual objects and details while gathering vague formal information (Wolfe, Vo, Evans and Green). For example, upon entering a kitchen, the inhabitant understands it is a kitchen by identifying associated objects such as a sink, oven and toaster. While recognizing those associated objects the mind concurrently gathers and analyzes formal qualities such as colors, shapes and spatial placement. In order to effectively illustrate nuances of time and the sporadic details provided by both perception and memory within my work, I incorporate visual strategies from the Cubists. Artists and critics embraced Cubism because its multiple perspectives convince us of the passage of time within a single composition. The fragmentary style of Cubism is comparable to my manipulation of blended imagery (*Recollections* and *Environment* series.) Not only does cubist work demonstrate the way the mind observes details in a scene, it also depicts the shift of details within an environment at different points in time.

The artwork in my thesis comes from my *Environments*, *Cognitive Blueprints*, and *Recollections* series. *Recollections* features photography that is not photographed by me but is

collected from sources such as the internet. Secondhand photography mirrors how the popular media could interfere and overlap with personal memories that contain associated imagery, situations and environments. *Environments* and *Recollections* are similar in appearance because they combine photography with cubist elements. *Environments* features my own photography and is more about perception than memory.

My Cognitive Blueprints work differs in appearance from my photographic works but still reconstructs my past environments through memory and perception. *My Cognitive Blueprints*, or “technical drawings,” depict the layouts of my past houses according to my perception and memories. While these blueprints avoid the direct visual influence of external media, they are still influenced by common knowledge and social norms that I have absorbed throughout my life from popular media.

The objective of my work is to acknowledge the desire to look back on our lives -- to experience past sentiments or to rationalize our present. Our memories are important because we are formed by our past experiences and environments. Yet at the same time, I realize that our memories are faulty and not an accurate snapshot of reality. *Our memories define us, but are constantly influenced and changed.* Experiences are constantly updated, distorted and overridden with each other within my mind. Over time these experiences become almost impossible to distinguish from one another. My work is a visual representation of this idea. I declare the reality of my past, yet simultaneously question its accuracy.

CHAPTER TWO: YEAR ONE (ENVIRONMENTS AND PERCEPTION)

Humans have a complex relationship with their environments. I wanted to understand how we perceive and analyze our environments. This is what my artwork in the first year of the program was dedicated to. I began a series named *Environments*, which consisted of composited photographs that illustrated visual shifts and moments in time to visually depict how we recognize an environment. My work exploited the passage of time, inferences drawn from my memory, and the creation of imagery in a large size to invoke the feeling of familiar experiences.

Environments

Life takes place in environments, and these environments shape attitudes (Speller 18). Built environments are the focus of my work. This category encompasses a vast spectrum of scenes such as houses, buildings, neighborhoods and cities (Lawrence & Low 454).

We may neglect the impact our surroundings have on us. Firsthand experiences, societal knowledge, and the physical characteristics of a perceived environment can incite a number of psychological responses. These firsthand phenomena can evoke ideas, emotions, and associated memories. Each scene can provoke a variety of reactions. Physical environments are universally experienced and are ideal subjects for a visual artist.



Figure 1: Environmental Study, 2011

Perception of Environments

Although the work of my first graduate year dealt with the perception of environments, I learned that making sense of my perceptions was impossible without memories. When we perceive an environment, we strive to recognize it and apply context to it. Applying context permits us to comprehend our surroundings and behave accordingly. The manner in which we comprehend our surroundings determines what ideas, emotions and memories will be provoked by it in us. Any information we recall, from personal experiences or popular media, is used to construct a context for that environment. Bluntly put, our memories make sense of our environments.

There are two main categories of long-term memory: declarative and non-declarative. Any memory of facts or personal episodes that are deliberately recollected are *Declarative*. Within this category are two sub-categories, Semantic and Episodic Memory. Semantic memory consists of the intentional retrospection of facts and widespread knowledge within a community (Tulving). Semantic Memory is activated while a scene is recognized, as described by Jeremy Wolfe, Melissa L. Vo, Karla Evans and Michelle Green of Harvard Medical School. “Semantic guidance includes knowledge of the probability of the presence of an object in a scene and its probable location in that scene given the layout of the space, as well as inter-object relations (e.g. knives tend to be near forks)” (80).

As a scene is analyzed, semantic thought employs a sequence of common “guidelines.” Any feature within an analyzed environment found outside the bounds of these semantic guidelines demands more attention to identify and can interfere with the perception of an environment (Wolfe, et al). An example of an infraction of these guidelines could be as simple as walking into a kitchen and seeing a bicycle instead of a fridge. The bicycle is not a common object in a kitchen and thus is not semantically acceptable.

While semantic memory involves common knowledge, episodic memory is more personal. Direct recollection of first-hand events is known as episodic memory. An inhabitant’s current environment may trigger the recollection of a previous experience. The context originating from this previous experience is retrieved and applied to the present (Tulving). Associations and information of a previously experienced environment can reveal details about that particular location through episodic recollection (Wolfe, et al). An example of episodic

guidance is not returning to a restaurant because the previous experience resulted in food poisoning. The first-hand recollection of becoming sick was associated with the restaurant and has resulted in not revisiting the establishment.

Both semantic memory and episodic memory are essential for perceiving and understanding environments. But they are not completely independent of each other as one might think (Greenberg, & Verfaellie). A variety of studies has shown that both types of memory interact while the mind forms context. It has been argued among members of the scientific community that semantic and episodic memories are not separate categories of memory at all, but opposite ends of the same spectrum. Both types of declarative memory have an interactive input, so that both communal knowledge along with personal experiences are applied while interpreting a scene. The idea of solely objective perception is impossible and the mind truly does construct any environments the eyes see (Sullivan).

The physical process of perception involves the eyes collecting visual data from an environment and the mind's translation of it. People strongly associate perception solely with the eyes, and while the eyes absorb visual information, the mind does plenty more behind the scenes to convert and comprehend that information. As light passes through the eyes it is received and converted into neural signals. These signals then move to the brain, where it interprets the signals through formal visual qualities and more detailed contextual analysis (Sullivan 120).

How our mind processes signals while perceiving a scene is a complicated yet rapid process. The brain gathers information on both contextual details and basic formal composition

to comprehend a scene. Each of these aspects passes through separate yet interacting processes known as “pathways”. The brain employs both pathways in part of the process of perceiving an environment, these pathways are called: Selective and Non-selective pathways (Wolfe, et al).

Using Objects to Perceive an Environment

Every environment has its own unique qualities. A bedroom will have a bed, a bathroom will have a shower, and a laundry room will have a washer. Within each environment there is an abundance of semantically associated objects to experience (such as beds, showers and washers). These objects provide visual clues through contextual associations within their surroundings to help a person identify his or her environment (Wolfe et al). Recognizing specific objects to construct an environmental realization is exactly what the selective pathway does during the process of perception.

Neuroscientist Moshe Bar 2004 in his article, *Visual Objects in Context* claims “Our experience with the world indicates our predictions about what other objects to expect in a scene, and their spatial configuration” (617). Dr. Bar is proposing that a person instantaneously analyzes and constructs a context upon initially entering an environment. While analyzing the environment the mind rapidly searches for objects that would commonly be associated with the scene. An example of this process would be a person walking into a room and seeing a toilet; the person would then likely expect to see a sink, mirrors, tiles, shower curtains, etc. After recognizing certain associated objects, the observer’s mind starts making rational predictions on what other objects would most likely be within the setting. While this object searching and identifying process occurs, the mind would simultaneously begin to form the idea of being in a bathroom.

Throughout life the human mind is exposed to hundreds, if not thousands, of different environments. Memory starts to accumulate an idea of what objects will be seen within a particular setting. This is an example of a prototypical context the mind forms into mental structures. The brain essentially references these structures and makes an educated presumption to identify surroundings. Moshe refers to these mental structures as “context frames” (618). Rudolf Arnheim, supports this idea within his book *Visual Thinking*, asserting that, “A viewer is said to simply apply to the present what he has learned about things in the past; or, as the contention has been worded sometimes, we see things as we do because of what we expect them to look like.” (80).

I was inspired by the writings of Moshe, Tulving, Wolfe and others and was eager to implement their theories in my work. My photographic piece, appropriately titled, *Bar* (figure 2), was the result of my research and the inspiration that I derived from it. The featured environment of this work was, of course, a bar scene. The objective was to illustrate how the mind uses semantic memory to associate objects with a particular environment, thus applying context to the environment. *Bar* is literally a visual illustration of how the selective pathway works while perceiving a scene.

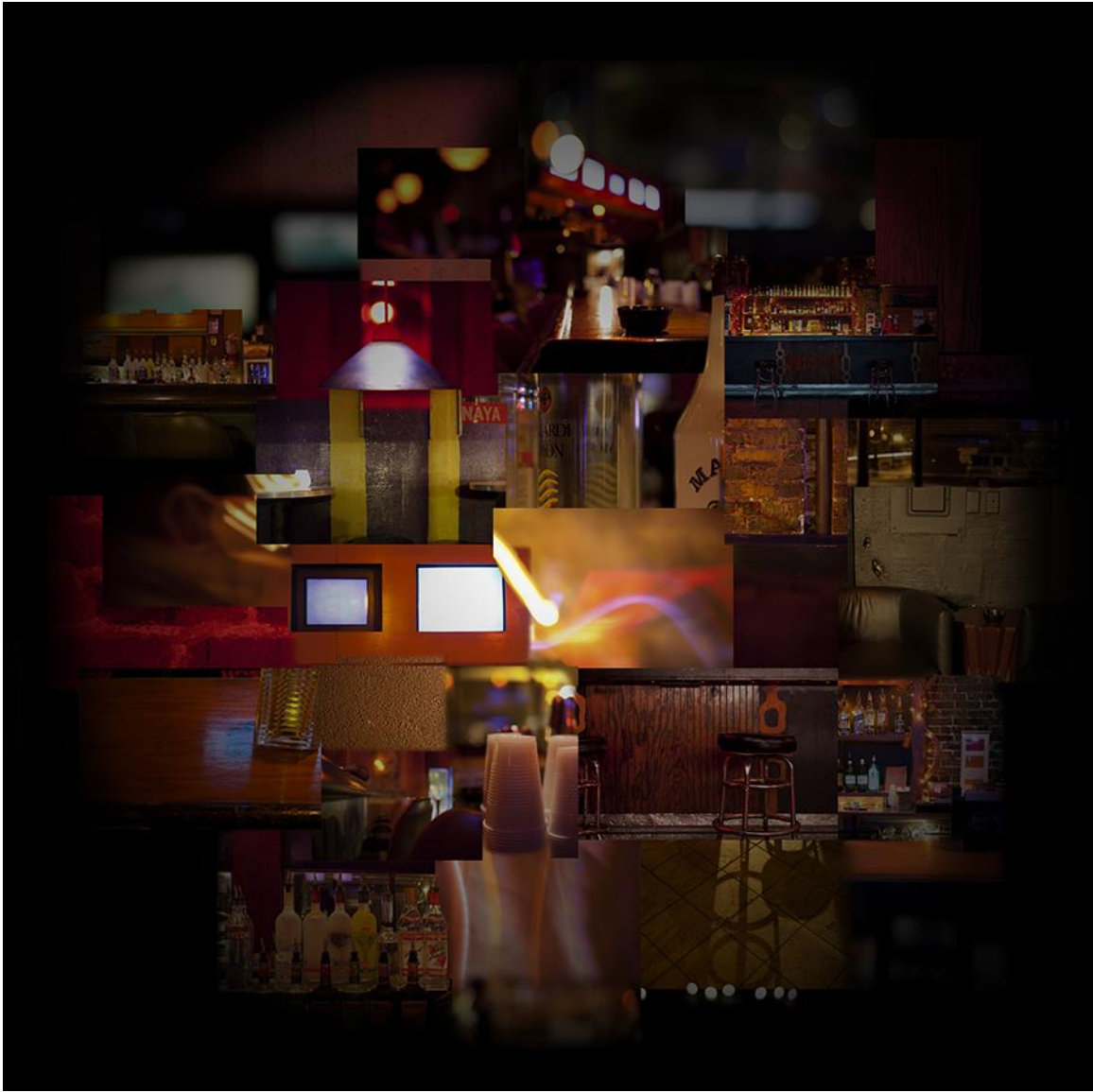


Figure 2: Bar, 2011, Ink Jet Print 40"x40"

The work consisted of a variety of photographs taken at a bar. Each photograph represents objects or details that are often related to the specific scene. Examples of bar artifact would be liquor bottles, bar stools, plastic cups and so on. These images were combined

and blended in a random spatial configuration so the viewer's mind can distinguish the scene while relying on more of a selective pathway process (object recognition and context) rather than non-selective pathway process (spatial relations and overall formal visual qualities). I was pleased with how the work turned out and I feel that it was generally successful. However, the color scheme of the photographs alone made *Bar* easy to distinguish as a bar or night club scene so that the viewer could still use the basic formal information to assess the scene regardless of my initial intention. The work was well received by my peers and graduate faculty; however, I wanted to shift my goals to encompass the *entire* process of perception within my work. I proceeded with deeper research on how the non-selective pathway (identifying formal visual qualities) assisted object recognition when identifying an environment.

Using Formal Visual Qualities to Identify an Environment

Establishing an environmental context through object recognition is an effective method, but it is not without limitations. There are debates in the scientific community on how exactly the selective pathway works. There is consensus that object searching reaches a threshold limit – a “bottleneck” – when it comes to how many objects may be recognized at one time. (Wolfe et al). There is an attempt to compensate for this bottleneck within the process of perception, an alternative process called the non-selective pathway. The non-selective pathway works simultaneously with the selective pathway to facilitate context even faster than either pathway could alone. As a person enters a scene, not only do the eyes notice

particular objects but the eye recognizes formal visual qualities. These “formal visual qualities” are known as the “gist” of a scene. The mind gathers the gist of a scene which comprises the most basic of formal features, such as color, spatial composition, size, orientation and shape (Wolfe et al). So an example of this would be seeing a large white rectangular shape positioned on what seems to be white surface. This specific shape, size and spatial relation helps narrow what that setting could be, such as a fridge in a kitchen or a white door in a hospital room. The major advantage to the non-selective pathway is that is extremely fast. This process is so fast that the mind actually processes gist information and uses it to facilitate the selective process more efficiently. In other words, the non-selective process helps our minds recognize and apply context objects faster (Bar).

Multiple Perspective and Cubism

I spent time studying the process of perception throughout my first year in graduate school. I was amazed how the human mind is able to complete such a complex task so rapidly after seeing an environment. Excited by the possibilities of my scientific investigation, I wanted a simple and effective way to illustrate the aesthetic qualities of the process within the photographic medium. Throughout my research I began to associate the Cubist aesthetic with my work. The fragmented substructures found in Cubist work not only represented different

objects but different perspectives as well. This motivated me to continue investigating the Cubist style.

Cubist work is easily recognized because of its rejection of traditional perspective and its explicit affirmation of the two-dimensional surface. The fragmented and disparate formal structure found in Cubist work is said to represent multiple viewpoints and perspective. This formal quality is often referred to as a defining characteristic of the Cubist style. Popular artists such as Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque come to my mind while thinking about the early modernist movement. However, it was not these artists who directly influenced the theory behind my style. It is Cubist artists Jean Metzinger and Albert Gleizes that piqued my interest in Cubism. These artists not only intrigued me for their visual styles but for the manipulation of time and perception within their work (Antliff 342).

Metzinger and Gleizes were the first to write a major comprehensive dissertation on Cubism. The text was titled *Du Cubisme* and was published in 1912. *Du Cubisme* featured an extensive systematic approach to the style of art. Metzinger mentions in his writing that conventional use of a single perspective within art as limited and not an ideal method of depicting a real subject in time. (Antliff, Leighton pg. 76) Multiple perspective, Metzinger argues, allows both, the artists and viewers to “move around the object, in order to give ... a concrete representation of it” (Richardson 133). Art historian, Christopher Gray goes even further by claiming that “multiple views allow both the artist and viewer to synthesize the object into a single image of the thing as it *is* rather than as it *appears*” (Antliff 342). *Du*

Cubisme referenced many writings, one of the most significant being the writings of French philosopher, Henri Bergson.

Bergson's writings were integral to the Cubist painters, Metzinger and Gleizes. Both of the artists clearly reference Bergson's writings of "Duration" and how it relates to Cubism's use of multiple perspective (Antliff; Green). Henri's writing proposed how we naturally perceive and measure time both mathematically and intuitively (Antliff). Christopher Green generalizes the French philosopher's "duration" theory of time within *Grove Art Online* as "life is experienced subjectively as a continual movement in the direction of time, with the past flowing into the present and the present merging into the future." (Green). Within Robert Antliff's article, *Bergson and Cubism: A Reassessment*, Christian Gray explains that the fragmented combination of multiple frames and perspectives within a composition of Metzinger's works illustrates an "accumulated experience" of the artist's subject matter over a duration (342). Generally speaking, each individual geometric fragment within a work is intended to represent a different moment in time. This idea was the objective of Metzinger and Gleizes' Cubist work, to be a visual representation of Bergson's theory of duration.

David Hockney's *Joiners* and Cubism

If there is one artist with whom I share strong stylistic similarities, it is David Hockney. His *Joiners* series interests me because it deals with perception, time and photography. His *Joiners* works were created from 1970 to 1986 (Hockney, Joyce), can be described as a scene reconstructed as a photo collage. The artist's photographic collages may be seen as an investigation of Cubism (Morgan 166). Art historian, Roger Hurlbert often associates Hockney with Cubism, due largely to his works' clear use multiple of perspective as an analog for the passage of time. Hurlbert shares his thoughts on the use of multiple perspective and its relation to perspective during his review of one of Hockney's shows in 1986:

"As a form of abstraction, cubism in painting brought about the destruction of a fixed way of looking. The eyes, after all, are moving constantly. We don't look when we stare, and that's what the human eye does when confronting a single-frame photograph. The eye cannot wander around it because of what Hockney considers "an inherent lack of time" (Sun Sentinel, April 20, 1986)

What Hurlbert claims is similar to the Bergism theory of duration within Cubist work.

The fragments within Hockney's compositions allow the viewer to search the scene and experience the subject matter in a variable time and space.

My Work in Relation to Perception and Time

By the time I had started my final piece of the first year, titled *Kitchen*, I had invested much time and research in the process of perception and Cubist art theory. As shown in figure 3 the work is by far the largest and most ambitious single work I have created during my time in the program. The 88" by 190" scale of *Kitchen* is approximately life sized when compared to a real kitchen. I chose the familiar scale to simulate the proportional relationship of the viewer to a kitchen in reality to evoke an immersive experience.



Figure 3: *Kitchen*, 2012, Ink Jet Print, 88"x190"



Figure 4: Kitchen (Detail), 2012, Ink Jet Print, 88"x 190"

The work is a composite of over 350 fragmented photographs that I captured from the kitchen in my apartment. The selective pathway process is referenced by the fragmented aesthetic and the emphasis on particular semantic objects within the work. The fragmented style represents time, and in this case, the brief moments necessary to objectively search and comprehend a scene. *Kitchen* also represents the non-selective pathway through the use of out-of-focus fragments, which bring the formal visual qualities such as shape, size, color, and spatial relation to the forefront. Another representation of time within my work is influenced by the Cubists and the Bergsonian theories of *duration*. The blended fragments represented my accumulated experience with the room by displaying subtle alterations in perspective and detail. My recollections of the literal kitchen have become an ambiguous aggregation of images due to my countless fleeting recollections of the kitchen.

The *environment* series I created during my first year within the program was an enlightening and fruitful experience. My artistic process was to build upon a scientific foundation addressing the process of perception. The influence of the Bergson-inspired Cubist scholarship revealed to me how people perceive time. This idea of duration will be applied within my practice using various methods.

CHAPTER THREE: YEAR TWO (MEMORIES)

During the summer before my second year of my MFA program my uncle died of pancreatic cancer. He was a wonderful man whom I rarely got to see after my family and I moved to Florida from Connecticut in 2000. I had spent my first twelve years in Connecticut, so my most significant memories of him were when I was a young boy.

My uncle left his car to my mother, and it was up to me and my family to fly to Connecticut to retrieve the vehicle. During my time in Connecticut I took it upon myself to revisit significant locations from my past. I looked at old neighborhoods, schools and local parks, to formulate an adult perspective about my younger days. Throughout the re-exploration I was overcome with nostalgia. Long suppressed memories of my early life seemed to surface at the same time. These places were filled with experiences I had as a boy. It was the culmination of these experiences that formed the man I am today.

However, there were moments in which I felt something other than nostalgia. I felt an intense disconnect. For the first time I had the realization that I did not belong there; it was an uncomfortable feeling. As I walked along the street, I stopped and noticed that I was already in front of my old house off of Huntington Avenue. It was just as I remembered it, except that it was no longer my home. It was a different place.

The next day I sat in a car in front of my first home waiting out a torrential downpour. I sat, staring through the car window at my first home. It had been my entire world for the first five years of my life. My first steps, first words, first memories – this home was where my life started, except that, what I was staring at was not my first home. I was staring at a building that I had never seen before. My first home on Harding Avenue was demolished in the late 1990's. The strangely familiar setting assured me that this was the same neighborhood I once knew. The sense of disconnect was again powerful, more so than the previous day. These feelings and memories I had once experienced were gone. They were not to be seen or felt again in what was now my reality. My mind contained the only means of viewing what I consider the foundations of my life. I hoped to reconstruct these earliest memories and rationalize the reiterations of them after all these years. My trip to Connecticut in the summer of 2012 inspired me to pursue a new perspective on my work, and perhaps, a new perspective on myself.

Past Environments

Memories are essential to defining who we are and how we view the world. They inform our perception of reality and how we view ourselves. As a result of my experiences in Connecticut, I made the choice to create work focused on the houses of my childhood. The artwork featured in my second series was now aimed at investigating how scenes are perceived and recreated in retrospect. This slight alteration of my previous work's subject drove me to examine my mind's ability to reconstruct environments from memory.

Memory Explained

As I outlined in the previous chapter, our declarative memory is made up of two sub-categories: semantic and episodic memory. If anything regarding common or factual knowledge is encoded, stored and retrieved by the mind, that encompasses semantic memory. To put that in simple terms, Endel Tulving describes semantic memory as a “mental thesaurus” in his 1972 text, *Episodic and Semantic Memory*. This “thesaurus” provides a variety of meanings for all things learned, involving societies and the world as a whole (385). Semantic memory provides us knowledge on how to interact with language, objects, and social situations. An example is when I read the word “dog” and instantly think of a small, furry animal with four legs, a tail, paws and whiskers, a sequence of thoughts that is semantic memory in action. From reading the word “dog,” I am able to produce the idea of that animal without that animal being there in the present. We learn the semantic meaning of the word from society to hold the symbolic idea of the four-legged animal. In the broadest sense, semantic memory enables us to understand the world and how to react to it (Tulving).

Episodic memory, on the other hand, encompasses all personal experiences that are encoded, stored and retrieved by the mind. Endel describes the use of episodic memory in his 1993 Article, *What is Episodic Memory?*

The owner of an episodic memory system is not only capable of remembering the temporal organization of otherwise unrelated events, but is also capable of mental time travel: Such a person can transport at will into the personal past ... a feat not possible for other kinds of memory (67).

I take Tulving's claim of "mental time travel" to be a perfect explanation of how episodic memory works. I often find myself reimagining events that either have just occurred or happened years ago. Within my mind I can recreate a space that my body once occupied, people I once interacted with, and I can even experience feelings I once felt. Episodic memory is extraordinary, as it allows us, at any time, to escape the present and temporarily relive the past.

Artist Works Involving Episodic Recollections

An artist whose work investigates the topic of episodic recollection is Traci Tullius. I was exposed to Tullius' work early in my graduate career. Her work deals with a variety of subjects involving both societal and personal issues. *Home*, is a single-channel video work that displays the demolition of her great-grandparent's home played in reverse ("Traci Tullius"). The end of the video pauses on a completely "rebuilt" house but appears as an old and decrepit shell of what it once was. Towards the end of the video the house becomes covered with a child-like drawing bringing back memories Traci possessed as a young girl. I found this work to be inspirational. It was personal, yet it was relatable to just about anyone who viewed it. After I saw *Home*, I recognized my longing to bring back what once was in my own life. Experiencing her video inspired me to translate my memories into art.

I was also exposed to William Christenberry early in my graduate career. Although Christenberry has engaged in painting and sculpture, he is best known for his photography. He was initially inspired by the documentary photography of Walker Evans, specifically his

coverage of the impoverished farm culture of the South during The Great Depression. His best known works are his photographs of Hale County, Alabama (Norris). The rural area of Alabama was meaningful to Christenberry as he spent a portion of his childhood there. Christenberry's work hints at a similar subject matter and frontal aesthetic as Evan's; however, it is more personal. While Christenberry appears to employ a documentary approach, his work makes constant references to time and memory. After graduating from the University of Alabama in 1958, Christenberry left his familiar life in Alabama to pursue a fine art career in New York and later in Washington D.C. Since the 1960's William has taken a pilgrimage to his native state to photograph various structures that either were a part of or representative of his childhood (Norris). His annual documentations have taken on a new narrative of the degradation of the South over time. I feel as if Christenberry's and Tullius' work are their way of remembering what once was in their lives.

Episodic recollection also applies to Marcel Proust, whose writings supported my thoughts on how my own recollections occurred. Marcel Proust was a late 19th century and early 20th century writer who produced many works but was most noted for his writings on memory. His most famous work, *In Search of Lost Time*, was produced in seven volumes from 1913-1922. The novel contains various remembered stories of his early life which he revisited as an adult through a series of associated sensory "triggers". The most famous example of a trigger is Marcel Proust enjoying a madeleine cookie that he dipped in tea. The combination of taste, smell and the specific situation eventually triggered a comparable memory of Marcel enjoying madeleine cookies and tea at his Aunt's house as a young child. Throughout the novel,

Marcel relived a series of episodes from his childhood by using various associated triggers such as the taste of a cookie and tea. Doctor Emily Troscianko of Oxford University claims in her 2013 article, *Cognitive realism and memory in Proust's madeleine episode*, that identical moments that share a common factor between past memories and the present moment can provide a cognitive connection. This connection makes it possible for a specific action, sense, or image in the present to be associated with a memory (442). Just as Marcel's experiences triggered associated memories, my experiences in Connecticut triggered recollections of my own past.

Cognitive Blueprints

While recreating environments from my past, I had difficulties. I found that my memories from early childhood were very sporadic and difficult to grasp in a solid reconstructed context. So I decided to start with what I could recall best – my childhood homes. Through a process of taking notes and making drawings I discovered that I was able to recreate my past homes from memory. I discovered that most memories I recovered were accessible due to either a strong emotional connection or an accumulation of repetitive memories. While some of these memories featured within my works were extremely prominent, other memories were hard to distinguish as reality or mental fabrication. It was through the creation of my *cognitive blueprint* works (figures 5 through 9) that I had the realization my memories were sparse and not completely accurate. I had struggled to remember *my own life*, and what I could remember most was a blur of disparate fragments of imagery. This troubled me. If I could not remember who I was and where I came from, nobody would. I eventually discovered during the process of creating my blueprints that, in a way, I was proclaiming my existence.

During my second year of graduate school, I utilized architectural interior blueprints to recreate my childhood homes. In general, technical drawings are thought to include factual notes and accurate measurements. However, my *cognitive blueprints* display an unsure narrative of hesitant recollections and impromptu commentary. As a viewer initially investigates my work they are given sterile appearances denoting strictly quantitative

information about a building. To communicate this sterile appearance my blueprints were created in reference to what I've seen contractors and architects utilize as schematics which reference how to precisely construct a building. Although my *Cognitive Blueprints* may appear conventional, my drawings from memory have revealed that my recollections are not entirely true. It is the dialectical relationship between quantitative fact (conventional blueprints) and qualitative information (memories) that my work exploits to offer a powerful statement about the accuracy of memory.

Date built: _____
Demolished: 1994 - 1996

JIMENEZ HOUSEHOLD • --- HARDING AVE • STRATFORD, CONN
1988 - 1993 • Samuel Jimenez Cognitive Blueprint #1 (Age: Born - 5) • Occupants: 5 (6 in 1993) • Page 1 of 1

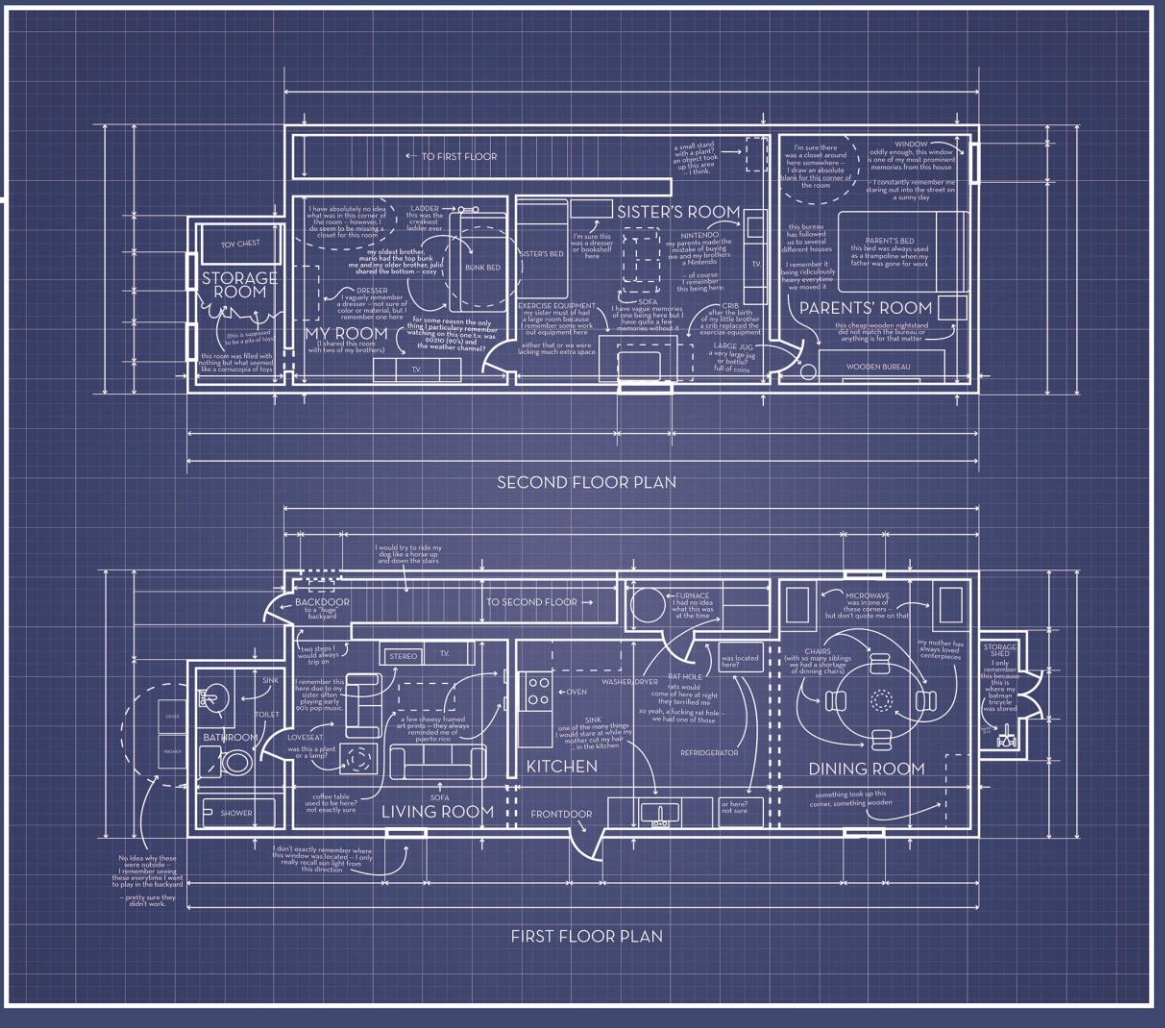


Figure 5: Harding Ave (First House), 2012, Ink Jet Print, 44"x52"

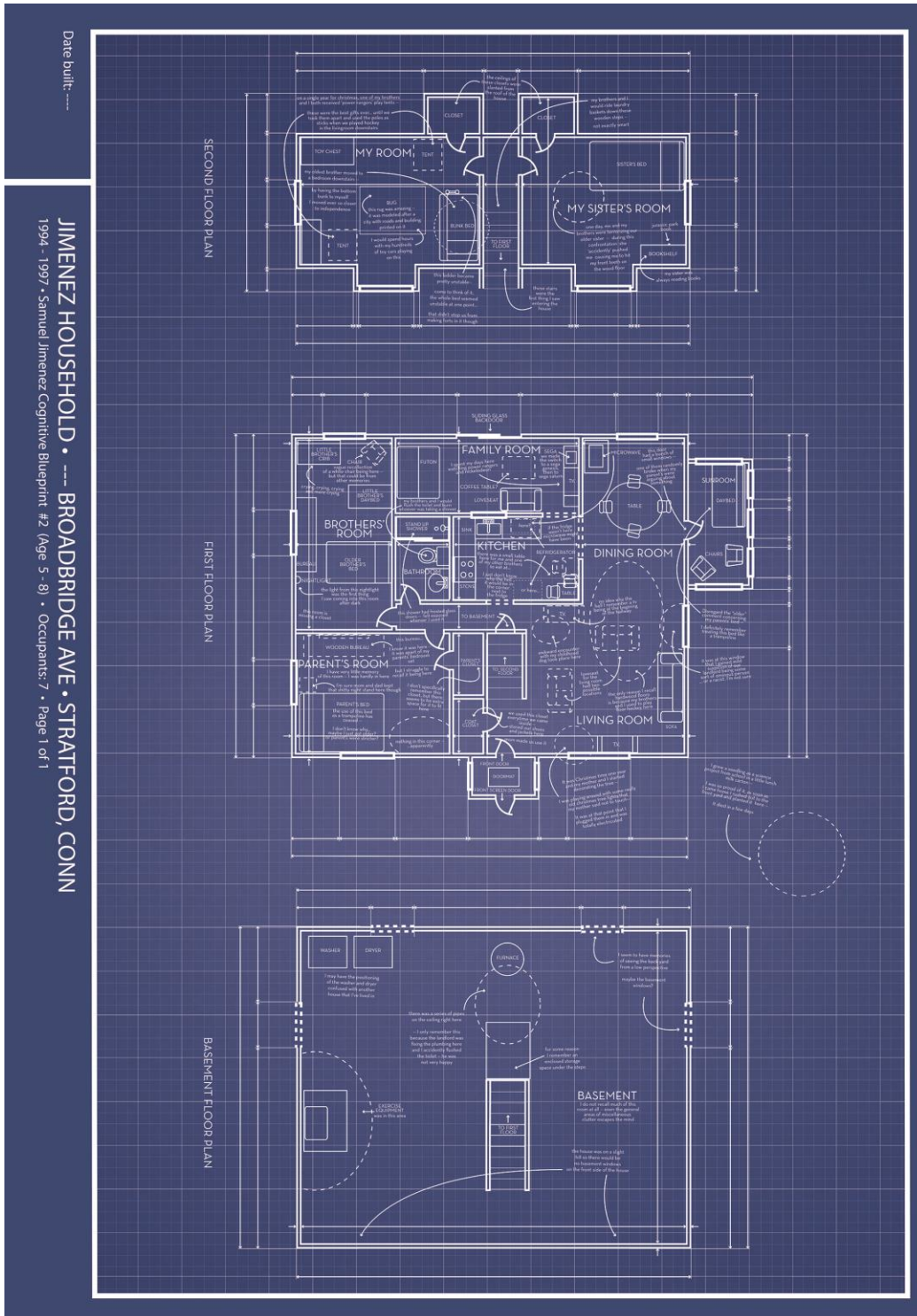


Figure 6: Broadbridge Ave (Second House), 2012, Ink Jet Print, 60"x44"

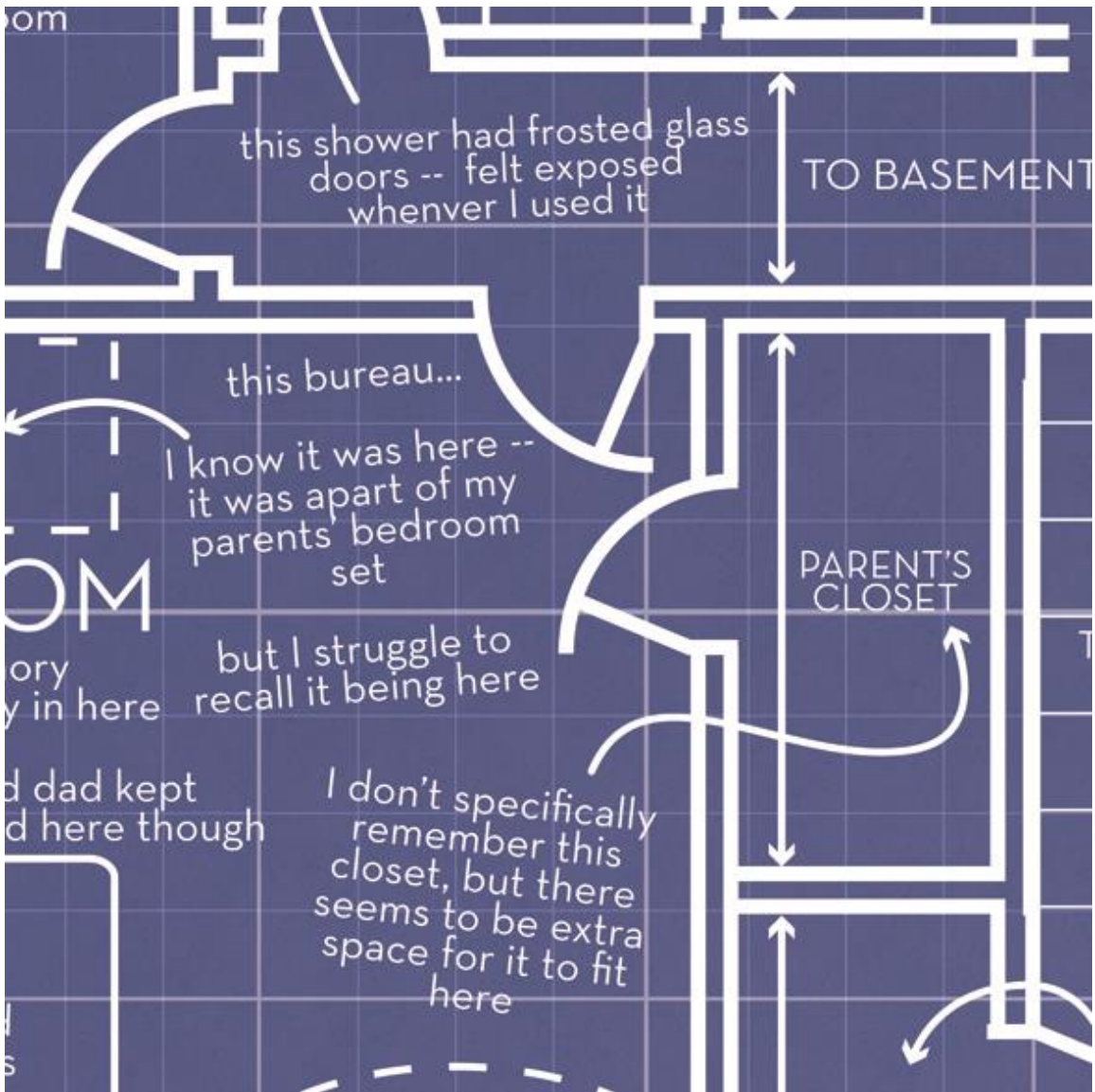


Figure 7: Broadbridge Ave (Second House) (Detail), 2012, Ink Jet Print, 44"x60"

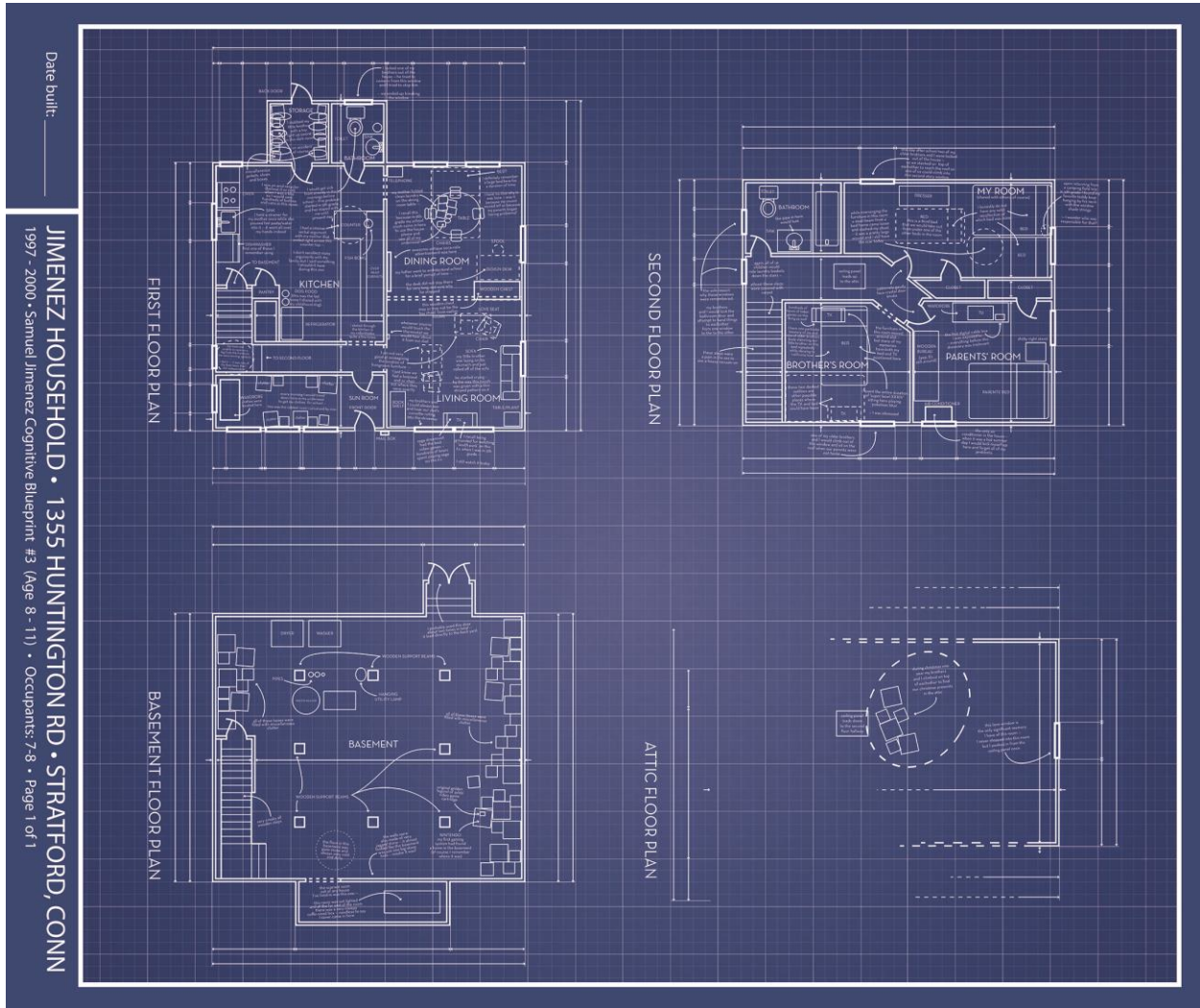


Figure 8: Huntington Rd (Third House), 2012, Ink Jet Print, 50"x44"

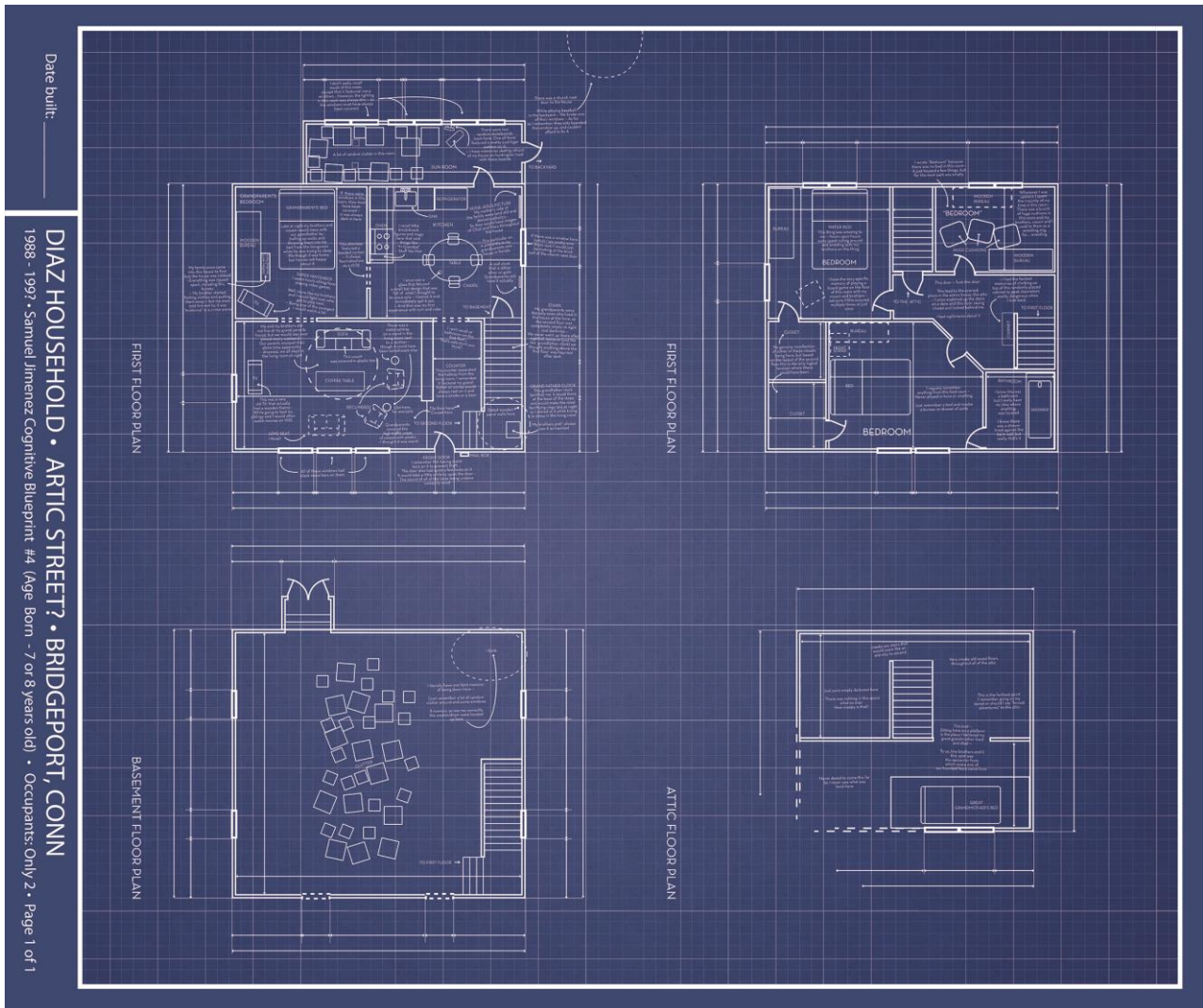


Figure 9: Artic Street (Grandparents' House), 2014, Ink Jet Print, 50"x44"

CHAPTER FOUR: YEAR THREE (RECOLLECTIONS)

Towards the summer of my third year in the graduate program my investigations of memory continued. Once I completed the first set of *Cognitive Blueprints* I became interested in finding a different and more representative aesthetic to recreate my memories. Once again, my focus was on the early childhood homes I had carefully drawn as blueprints. I looked back and began to mentally project myself into the spaces attempting to envision how everything had appeared. I made a variety of simple sketches to document my visualizations. However, reconstructing the environments in a more representational style proved extremely difficult. My drawings of each scene were mere skeletons of those past environments, consisting of only their most basic features. There was an obvious deficit, considering my initial expectations for detail. Even my most prominent memories were ambiguous descriptions of color, lighting, spatial composition and shape. The further back in time I explored, the more ambiguous and fleeting the visuals became. Certain recalled objects and details within a scene were only loosely formed by constantly changing details. Some of these changes were slight and others almost random. My mental reconstructions of these places were an amalgam of imagery that I could not completely account for. I was curious why so many memories I tried to recall were similarly lacking in concrete detail. I wanted to understand why I recalled such a distinct variety of visuals whenever I tried to recollect and reconstruct the environments of my past.

The Accuracy of Memory

As I continued to explore the inconsistencies of memory, I became increasingly influenced by the writings of many neuroscientists and psychologists. Some of the most prominent writings were those of Elizabeth Loftus from the University of Washington. In her research she mentions that memory alteration and deletion is possible and even common within memory. Memories either acquired recently or long ago are susceptible to alteration (Loftus; Pickrell). Our recollections are not completely isolated from one another. In reality our memories constantly distort each other and continuously cause “interference,” as Loftus calls it. This interference is brought on by the constant influx of new information and experiences that are encoded in the mind (Wichert, Wolf and Schwabe,; Loftus, Pickrell). New information is connected to existing memories through some sort of association. This association can be established through visual, contextual and emotional similarities (Troscianko). The intensity of interaction between existing memory and new information is dependent on the relevance of the new information. Generally speaking, the more relevant the information, the more likely that information becomes stored as a permanent memory. However, if the mind associates the new information with a similar existing memory there is a chance of interference between the two. In this process, memories that are overridden become “forgotten” memories (Wichert, Wolf and Schwabe, 331). The idea of “interference” also applies to complete or partial creation of fabricated memories. These false memories could be created through a wide variety of ways, such as the suggestion from a loved one about a shared past event or by witnessing the

personal past in old photographs (Loftus, Pickrell 1995; Garry, Gerrie 2005). Memories define who we are and dictate how we think, but, like us, memories are alive and constantly changing.

Artists' Works Involving the Accuracy of Memory

Heeseop Yoon is a South Korean artist whose work deals with the recollection of spaces through line drawings and installations. The spaces she worked from are cluttered and often feature a labyrinth of detail. Similar to David Hockney, Yoon explores an environment by direct observation and the use of photography. She later consults her memory and photographs in an attempt to recreate the original scene. Throughout her process she never erases "mistakes" in her work and instead continuously adapts to "fix" them (Yoon). Due to the nature of her process, the work results in an extremely detailed yet ambiguous description of the original space. Yoon's blending of imagery suggests a continuous movement throughout the space and provides an intuitive passage of time. I was introduced to Yoon in my second year of graduate school and was drawn to her style. Her work validated my attempts to seamlessly blend imagery to visually represent the ambiguous nature of memory. The work also displays her doubts concerning the accuracy of her recollections, which are similarly evident throughout my work.

Similar to Yoon, the artist Stephen Wiltshire makes use of his recollections as the subject of his work. Wiltshire is an autistic artist who possesses a "photographic memory." He is known for his ability to recreate complicated drawings of city scenes from memory ("Stephen Wiltshire

MBE”). Through only brief and fleeting exposures, Wiltshire consistently recollects and recreates a variety of city environments. His architectural landscapes resemble the original scenes so closely that he has been called “the human camera.” Despite the moniker, Wiltshire’s work differs greatly in appearance from any produced with the help of a mechanical device. Even with his astounding ability to recreate scenes, Wiltshire’s work admittedly contains errors of human memory. Dr. Oliver Sacks, author of *Anthropologist on Mars*, features Wiltshire’s work in his book, stating, “I thought how unlike a Xerox machine he was. His pictures in no sense resembled copies or photographs, something mechanical and impersonal - there were always additions, subtractions, revisions, and, of course, Stephen's unmistakable style” (qtd. in Kirby).

Recollections

With my second year in the graduate program coming to an end, I wanted to make a new series which recreated my memories in a new perspective. There was one particular scene that had never left my mind. As a young child I remembered a frightening old grandfather clock at the bottom of the stairwell inside of my grandparents’ home. The stairs led up to a vacant and dark second floor that made the scene more frightening to me. As the large, ominous clock lurked in the dark corner of the stairwell, it would chime with low, haunting tones at the turn of every hour. This sound was especially noticeable at night, when I slept only a few feet away

from it in my grandparents' living room. I hoped to recreate this image from my mind and was compelled to illustrate it. However, I found the lack of detail that I recalled to be frustrating. My mind could not define any *exact* details from the scene. The grandfather clock had become an ambiguous form within my mind that continuously changed features. These features consisted of clock faces, wood paneling and pendulums. Each of these details and objects were varied in appearance due to my many experiences with associated imagery over the years. For example, I have seen hundreds, if not thousands, of clock faces throughout my life. When I try to remember my grandfather's old clock, my visual recollection becomes distorted due to memory interference from other clock faces in my memory.

My studies on the accuracy of memory led me to some exciting possibilities to explore in my work. Unlike Yoon and Wiltshire, I decided to drop the idea of traditional drawing due to my elusive recollection of detail. For my new series, titled *Recollections*, I decided that the photographic medium and its immediate connotations of memory and imagery from popular media were the most useful for my intentions. The creation of *Grandfather's Clock* (as seen in figure 10) involved hours of surveying the internet for the names of objects and details I believed to have been in the original scene. For example, the word "clock face" was investigated online by me through a variety of search engines. Through search results of those words I was able to view thousands of images of what is considered to be a face of a clock. This is a direct reference to semantic memory and represents a consensus of what a clock face might look like. I repeated this process for every object I could recall from the scene. I strictly

managed each search result to feature only the most familiar visual representations according to my episodic memories.

The application of these found images aligned with the Bergson philosophy of duration that I applied in my earlier *Environment* works. Using fragments not only allowed for an intuitive narrative of time but also allowed me to explore the ambiguous nature of memory. My *Recollections* series (figures 10 through 16) combined fragmented images of several variants of an object into a single form. This unified, single form positioned the semantic *idea* of the object within a scene while still referencing my episodic memories.



Figure 10: Grandfather's Clock, 2013, Ink Jet Print, 30"x20"

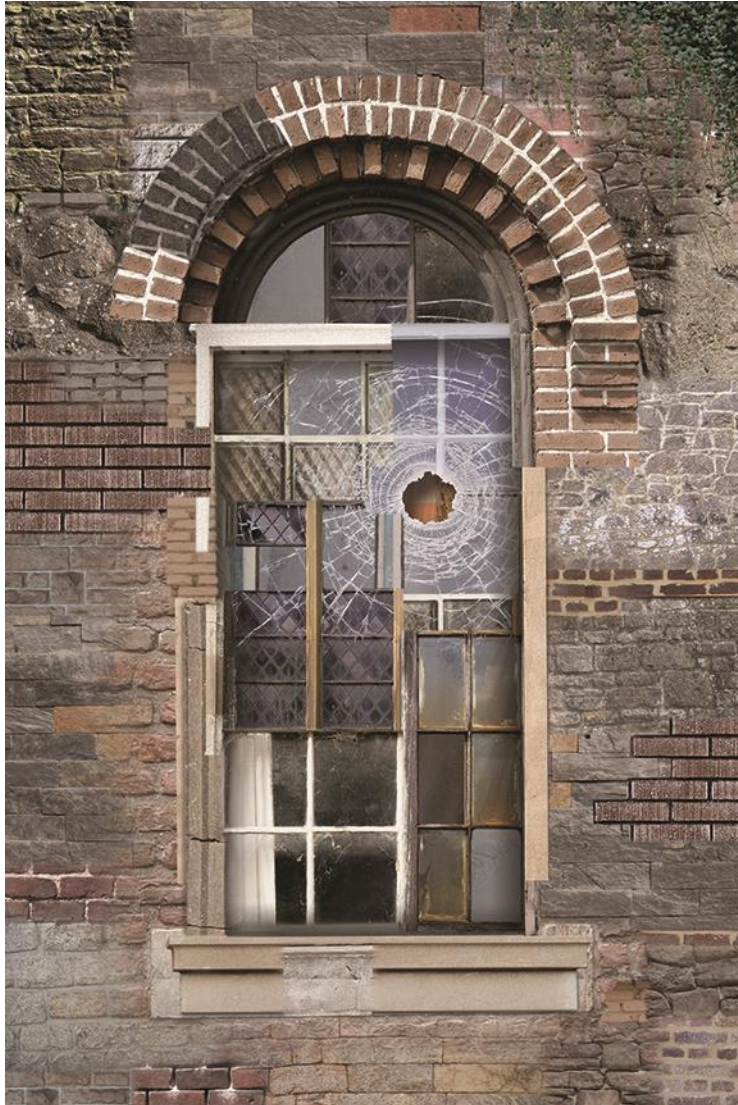


Figure 11: Backyard Baseball, 2013, Ink Jet Print, 30"x20"



Figure 12: Christmas Lights, 2013, Ink Jet Print, 30"x20"



Figure 13: First Plant, 2013, Ink Jet Print, 20"x30"



Figure 14: Attic, 2013, Ink Jet Print, 20"x30"

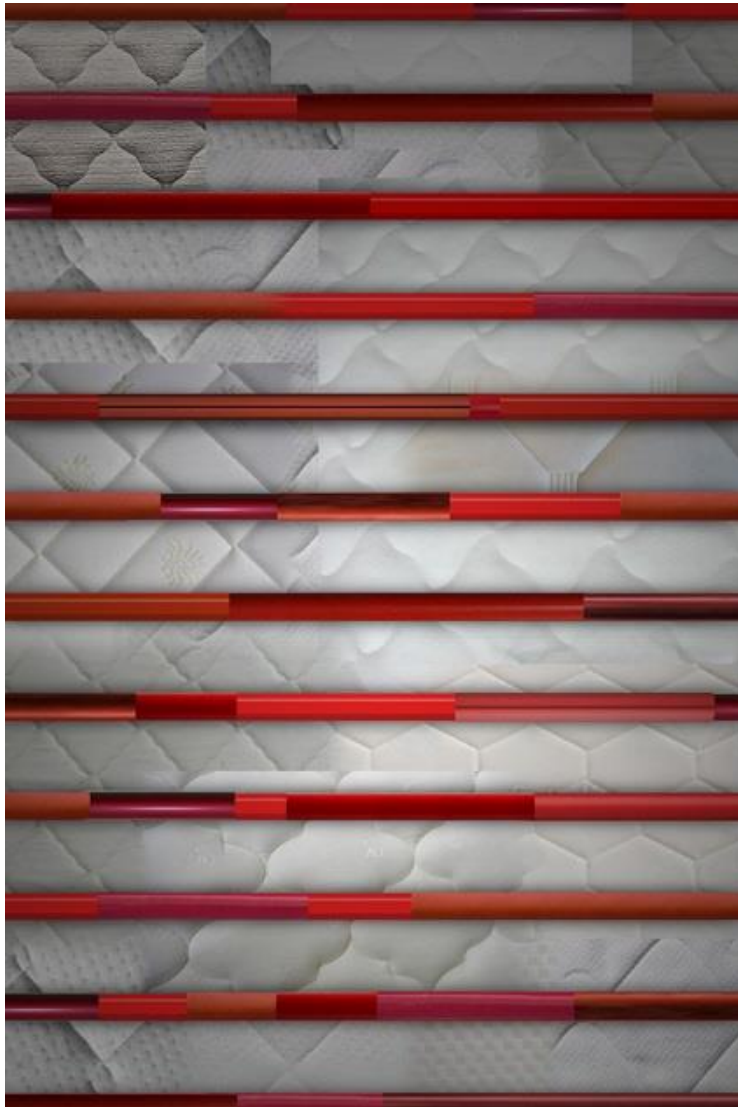


Figure 15: Bunkbed, 2013, Ink Jet Print, 30"x20"



Figure 16: Washer Dryer, 2014, Ink Jet Print, 30"x20"

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

The objective of my work has been to acknowledge the desire each of us has to create, relive, and cherish memories. Despite the realization that our memories are distorted and ever-changing, we still possess this desire. With our recollections we inform and provide context to the reality of the present. These memories define us, but I have realized that *we define our memories*.

The past three years in the MFA program have been a time of discovery, not only about myself and certain processes of psychology, but about how we are all so similar. Whenever I have the opportunity to talk about my work I am surprised by the response. People share with me the most genuine and personal stories from their childhoods. I feel that when people see my artwork, they project their own past into my drawings and images. Each person owns his or her own memories, both good and bad. Each of us has our own stories to tell.

With that in mind I intend to continue chronicling my past and, perhaps, the pasts of loved ones or even strangers. I have become fascinated when exploring the deepest and untouched areas of the mind. Just like the memories that I investigate, I will constantly update and alternate my practice to better emulate the experience of moments past.

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