

THE MEMORY OF FORGOTTEN THINGS

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis investigates my lack of childhood memories and documents how my artwork stands in as a substitute for that lost memory. The first part of the thesis analyzes my early life and influences; the second part analyzes my art making and process. The narrative style of writing is intentionally autobiographical to mimic the narrative style and structure of the thesis installation.

My upbringing, interests, creative process, access to materials, and inspiration are fully explored. The impact my early life has on my current work is evident. Real memory is combined with created memory in the thesis multi-media installation. I wish to transport the viewer into the dreamlike space I have constructed with found objects and multi-media materials by offering an immersive experience into my world.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

I have little to no memory of my childhood. I can only remember a handful of events. These memories are kept hidden somewhere in a tiny corner of my brain and only come to me in bits and pieces. It's like when you wake up from a dream and only know part of the story line, the characters and places, but not what they look like or any bit of detail. I don't remember birthdays, family vacations, friends, favorite outfits, teachers, my home, or even my sister living with me. What I do remember is creating.

**“TO INVENT, YOU NEED A GOOD IMAGINATION AND A PILE OF JUNK.” –  
THOMAS EDISON**

I have always made physical things and was somewhat of a child inventor. My mom is an interior designer and my dad owns a body shop. They have owned their own businesses and worked in the same place together for as long as I have lived. I had to go to the shop every day after school and keep myself occupied. Once the homework was done, I would still have hours of time on my hands; both of my parents worked late nights. I was always by myself because my sister is 11 years older than me, which forced me to use my imagination to entertain myself. I would use my dad's old parts, tools, and junk to build things. I would make strange elaborate tools and simple machines or modify and build on to ready-made machines and tools. Most of the time, the things I would make had no purpose. The process of building was the entertaining part for me not the end result. I would also use my mom's old wallpaper books, carpet samples, Formica samples, and any other materials I could find from her office to create. I made touch and feel books with interior scenes; a room with a saran wrap window, a floor with real carpet, wall paper for the walls, and I clothed the people who inhabited my spaces with fabric. I loved touch and feel books and pop-up books, especially the ones that had “windows” you could open to reveal other things. This musing reminds me of the Advent Calendars that I loved to get every year just because I could open a “window” every day of December until Christmas Day during Advent. Some family friend always gave these calendars to me every year, as I was brought up Catholic (I went to weekly catholic classes for 11 years). I would make simple flip books (i.e. a ball falling) and I remember specifically making a George Jetson flipbook of him in his car (I loved the Jetsons). Often times, to keep myself busy at my parents shop, I would find a picture, a logo, or a character to copy. I loved to draw and had not experienced painting at this point. I did



very detailed pencil drawings, attempting to make my drawings look as much like what I was referencing as possible. I copied things from my mom's calendars, logos off chip bags (I remember drawing the Cheetos man), and cars from my dad's car magazines. Having my parents both in creative fields lead to a creative life.

In high school, my art teachers encouraged us to make copies of famous works. We would look through art magazines (I believe they might have been *Art in America*). We looked at these magazines and chose any work that inspired us. We could reproduce the work in any medium we liked. I remember a few pieces I copied; a print of "Hands Holding Flowers" by Picasso, a reproduction of Van Gogh's "Sunflowers" with paint sticks and pastels, a color pencil drawing of "Kisses" by Romero Britto, a batik of a Japanese print, a painting of a still life on wood siding with gel medium, and mixed media face using wood/yarn/collage/and found objects. This is when I discovered Matisse, Picasso, Warhol, and Romero Britto. I was drawn to the graphic quality of their work; the bright colors, geometric shapes, black outlines, and stylized forms. I enjoyed the process of making copies because I could focus on the skill building and the process of creating (similar to a craftsman). I felt a sense of accomplishment knowing that I could copy these works and I was very good at it. I was among the best artists in my high school classes and won many awards.

I had often said to my parents and friends that I wanted to go to college to be a brain surgeon and was interested in the idea of cutting into someone's brain and seeing inside. This parallels my interest in social media that gives access to other people's lives and secrets, a metaphorical window into someone's life. This can be seen in my work from Fall 2010, *Secrets I* and *Secrets II*. I also think that I chose being a brain surgeon because it was something that you

had to be smart to do, which I was. Success was not an option, my mother always demanded A's; I got rewarded with money for good grades and was pushed to excel in academics. I was afraid of my mother. She did not want me to pursue art because it was a “waste of my intelligence.”



Figure 1: *Secrets I*, multimedia installation, 2010

I had my heart set on attending Rollins College at a very young age after having a great camp experience there. Circus class was one of my favorites, learning how to juggle and walk on stilts. I love to act and perform, so theatre class was another favorite. The campus was beautiful and my mom had always told me it was a very “prestigious school.” Actually, I think my mom probably wanted me to go to Rollins more than I did.

I had always loved paint as a media and enjoyed the physical process of working with paint; the thickness, texture, the array of colors that can be created, and the big bold brush strokes. I loved the energy that can be achieved through quick intuitive painting. Energy that can

be seen! I loved that it dried quickly, providing instant gratification. During my time at Rollins, I experimented with a variety of surfaces and materials. My focus was always on design and I was interested in painting shapes, creating texture, bold outlines, color, and text. I would add other media to my compositions such as, wood, metal, plexi-glass, collage, paper, gel medium, and texture paste. I always enjoyed expressive painting as opposed to realism. Realism was too boring and lacked the bright colors and stylized forms I loved the most. Not interested in details, I was, however, interested in painting real objects, but not in a realistic way.

During my second year of undergraduate studies, I decided to go against my mom's wishes, I declared my major in Studio Art. After making this decision, I dropped Calculus II and Physics (who knows why I was taking those anyway). My Physics professor turned the lights off and held a moment of silence for my leaving.

After I graduated, I created art to give as gifts or to sell. I sold my paintings at farmer's markets, hair salons, local art shows, and boutiques. I especially liked commissioned pieces, where I didn't have to make a decision. I could just take the commissioner's idea and run with it. I thought art was about making accessible things, things other people liked; I was working with images that were popular, light hearted, and trendy. The work was fun, easy, glittery, and quick! All of it could be described as commercial and kitsch.



Figure 2: Sample of paintings

I didn't plan to attend grad school, but as luck would have it, I ran into a former professor from Rollins College who told me about the UCF graduate program. I had previously taught elementary and high school and was interested in becoming a better artist, which might also help my role as an educator. Looking back, I did not know what art was and had a lack of contemporary, theoretical knowledge upon entering the program. I had a new awakening concerning the responsibility of the profession. The paintings I had created commercially were no longer acceptable in a graduate program. Consequently, I stopped painting entirely because I did not know how to transition out of the kitsch, commercial paintings.

**"WE ARE LEFT WITH OBJECTS THAT HAVE A HOLLOWNESS THAT WE CAN  
FILL WITH OUR OWN WONDER AND FANTASY..." – THOMAS MOORE**

I began pushing my materials further, piecing found objects together while using paint to make new things. I also experimented with video, photography, and installation. I noticed that I was creating environments and grouping all of my individual works together for showing. Each piece did not seem to exist individually, but as a whole. Found objects and other people's items, including letters, photos, and objects, peaked my interest. I would get these items from thrift stores, flea markets, friends, and dumpsters. I was also incorporating light into my constructed, object-laden boxes. Tiny battery operated LED lights were put in specific locations to emphasize certain aspects of the assemblage. As it turns out, I was making assemblages ("boxes") that resembled Joseph Cornell's assemblages, an artist who, I was completely unaware. Of course, the minute I saw his work, I loved it because I understood it, sympathized with it, and comprehended it's formal perfection. I, too, was grouping found objects; housing things in immaculately considered box structures.



Figure 3: Spring 2009 critique, installation view

The objects were grouped together formally also organized based on their implied content. Formal design elements were a very important aspect of my compositions. I was vastly more interested in shape, value, texture, form, color, and space than in explicit content at that time. Grouping found objects created narratives. I started with one element that I loved and paired another thing and then another with it focusing on texture, color, and composition. Stories formed as the piece evolved and relationships were revealed between the objects. My process is intuitive and never planned. I always would have all the objects laid out on the floor and I always knew which ones needed to fit together; I was like a child playing with toys. Nancy Doyle says it best when writing about Joseph Cornell, “The objects were chosen carefully, although many held no intrinsic value alone; only when combined did these objects reveal a deeper meaning.” The process was intuitive and lighthearted. Stories varied from person to person. I might see a story in a piece and another person might see a completely different story. As for many contemporary artists that I identify with, particularly Guerra de la Paz, “The primary focus of their work deals with transforming the found object. Inviting the viewer to experience the work at a more personal level through recollections conjured up by their association to the familiar recycled items” (Creative Thrift Shop). There was never a specific experience I hoped a viewer might have. The valuable experience of each piece is in the making of it. Once made, I didn’t look back. I was always on to the next thing! However, I can remember that for many people, the objects reminded them of past and childhood experiences, especially memories of parents or grandparents homes.



Figure 4: Sample of assemblages

I was encouraged to think “out of the box” (pun intended) and to work bigger. I took this idea and ran with it--creating sculptures of my favorite small objects or making multiples, repeating a favorite object. I held true to my love of color, shape, repetition, and design. The bigger works were essentially giant assemblages, bigger and better, but this time the whole room a box. These new works became installations and were enhanced with sound and lights to create an environment.



Figure 5: *Am I Bright Enough to Shine in Your Spaces*, mixed media installation, 2010

My new work differs greatly from my past assemblages. Scale is extremely important as I develop my current installation. In my assemblages, I am inviting a viewer to look in from the outside to experience a smaller world that they are not familiar with. This is similar to reading a book (or window-shopping). In *The Memory of Forgotten Things*, the viewer is actually placed in the assemblage within a room, similar to a large box. A viewer is no longer looking into a world, but is now a part of this new world. The objects are bigger than life and the viewpoint is that of a child. The sculptural elements with their simple forms and bright colors become giant toys in a room. The scale directly relates to the concept of the work in multiple ways. As my work has become closer to human scale, a more personal connection has surfaced.



**“AN IDEA IS A POINT OF DEPARTURE AND NO MORE. AS SOON AS YOU ELABORATE IT, IT BECOMES TRANSFORMED BY THOUGHT.” - PABLO PICASSO**

*The Memory of Forgotten Things* is comprised of 4 sections that make up the complete installation. Upon entering, on the left, is the first section. Please note that the sections are not to be viewed in any particular order, but as a whole. Sections are only broken up to examine the elements in more clarity and detail.

The entire wall of the first section is covered with artwork from my childhood. I stumbled upon this box of artworks in the attic of my mother’s house when I was hunting for my own “found objects” to use for the installation. Due to the fact that my memory of my childhood and this art had been essentially lost, this box contained found objects or more specifically, “found memories”. The myriad of drawings, letters, crafts, and creative concoctions are very telling of who I am and where I come from, but also act as an association for the viewer and their own childhood. In one of the letters on the wall, which could very well be one of my first “I’m sorry” notes to my mom, it is clear how much I aimed to please my parents and felt pressure to not fail them. The neighborhood made up of giant bright colored vinyl houses is my interpretation of what seemed to be a perfect childhood. The flaws in the vinyl and construction mock the flaws of this perfect childhood, in which the vinyl suggests a “plastic” or fake world.

The second section contains a giant whale. This whale was created and inspired from a small ceramic white toy whale. I had the desire to make a life size version of this whale that I loved so much. In Eric Ackroyd’s book, *A Dictionary of Dream Symbols* it is said that, “A whale may symbolize your mother...a dominant mother or a mother attachment that prevents you from developing as an independent person” (305). It also says that, “Being swallowed by a whale may

symbolize decent into the unconscious...the discovery of your true self' (Ackroyd 305). The whale is covered with the actual words, which make up the apologies taken from notes and cards I wrote to my mother. I remember always saying sorry for something. I found it easiest to communicate through writing. I know I was not a "bad" child, but every little mistake grew huge in my parent's eyes, and came with consequences. I never wanted to disappoint and felt very remorseful for any wrongdoing. Underneath these phrases are pages taken from the book *Who's Who Among American High School Students*, in which I was published proving to the world that I was, in fact, not disappointing. The juxtaposition of these two sets of text suggests the irony of my childhood situation.

**“BUT ALONGSIDE THE RECOGNIZABLE BITS AND PIECES PRIES AN UNSETTLING SENSE OF BREAKAGE, INTERRUPTION AND LOSS” - ALEID FORD**

The shrine in the corner of the room with Mary sitting atop a pile of found objects resembles a Mexican Retablo or Ex-Voto. According to Castro-Sethness (2004), “The word retablo comes from the Latin retro tabula ("behind the altar"). It was used in Spain and later in the Americas to describe the compendium of religious images, paintings and sculptures, unified by means of an architectural frame, that decorated the back of the main altar (altar mayor) and the subsidiary chapels (capillas menores) of churches and cathedrals” (21). Unlike the retablo’s traditional iconic imagery, ex-votos were paintings created by amateur artists a community, which showed a more personal scene relating to an individual’s life that it was created for (Castro-Sethness 21). I was raised in the Catholic traditions and remember attending bible study every week for years. When I was building this installation, I was also reminded of Saint Anthony, the Patron Saint of lost things. This shrine is a dedication to the memories these objects once had and a dedication to my lost childhood memories. All of the assemblages hanging on the wall above and close to Mary are an extension of this shrine, in which I have created stories with the found objects and they have been given new meaning and life. My early childhood influences, beginning with the act of creating in my mom and dad’s shop can be seen in the materials used in these assemblages; They are a more sophisticated creation comprised of the same materials- piece parts, junk, fabric, paper, nails, wire, etc., but nevertheless they are different, informed by new awareness.

In the final section, facing parallel to the other three sections, thirty white books hang on a blank wall. These books signify the thirty years of my life and are filled with blank white pages that symbolize my forgotten years. When I was younger, I would make journals with every

intention to keep a daily record of my life, but would write in them one day and forget to ever write in them again. Some of the books I didn't even write anything in. I am fortunate that my mother kept these books, which have inspired this portion of the installation. These blank books isolated from the rest of the installation, on a mobile wall, show the stark realization of my lack of memory.

**“THERE ARE LOTS OF PEOPLE WHO MISTAKE THEIR IMAGINATION FOR THEIR MEMORY” – JOSH BILLINGS**

My current work acts as a substitution for my lost childhood memories. Shirley Hopps said, “you didn’t look at the external world for your subject, the subject came from you,” and though she was specifically talking about the “legacy of Modernism,” I feel that this is especially true for my work. I have created an environment in which bits of my memory are combined with created memories. As the Encyclopedia Britannica states, dreams are a “series of thoughts, images, or emotions occurring during sleep...” I wish to transport the viewer into this dreamlike space by immersing them in my world.

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