

Research in Practice (ADAD5004/C)

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Research in Practice Proposal

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Word Count: 2543

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The creation of art can be a strange process, it can be described as a documentation of moments and experiences that are unique to the artist while simultaneously attempting to define and justify why they are so meaningful. Artworks can provide an exclusive experience not offered in traditional documentation: a look into the artist's own perception of the world, a glance into their reality (Anapur, 2016, <https://www.widewalls.ch/magazine/perception-in-art>). There is an air of proving to oneself and the public that what they are creating is great and important and needs to exist. This is not always a straightforward process; translating a thought into a visual is difficult, and even more so when the subject is in constant motion, unstable, and impermanent. That being said, these observations are not meant to add to the notion that the artistic process is some mystical strike of inspiration- it is interesting to consider the scientific side of this coin and bring to attention the inner mechanisms responsible for artistic creation. "As a neuroscientist, I found it astonishing that, because of a brain deficit, someone produced a new kind of art (Riedl, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/stories-53192821>)."

Placing an intangible concept onto a physical canvas has been one of the most common artistic undertakings for centuries (Hoakley, 2019, <https://eclecticlight.co/2019/07/07/painting-the-intangible-the-non-visual-cast-as-a-figure/>). The unique challenges offered by this endeavor require unique solutions, solutions that take on many different forms, techniques, and methods. All people perceive the world differently and it is these perceptions that influence what artists put down in paint or clay or any other medium. Even with the most direct translations there is already a disconnect between the perceived and the real, but when trying to capture something as ephemeral as a memory that disconnect grows exponentially. To reminisce about a moment is like having it being played on a small television inside a house while you watch outside through a window. No matter how personal, the memory will always be held at arm's length or just out of reach. Personal biases or a reluctance to remember negative details can warp memories into a hazy daydream- almost

becoming its own entity entirely separate from the actual event. Surprisingly the reverse of this is true as well.

Studies exist that show that memory can skew perceptions of reality. Optical illusions are proof that the human brain can't always interpret sensory information correctly and this usually occurs when discrepancies force the brain to fill in the gaps with its own stockpile of information.

We tested this possibility using a well-studied motion repulsion phenomenon in which perception of one direction of motion is distorted when another direction of motion is viewed simultaneously. We found that observers misperceived the actual direction of motion of a single motion stimulus if, while viewing that stimulus, they were holding a different motion direction in visual working memory.

(Blake *et al*, 2011, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/21713369/>)

Although this study was focused on the working memory function of the brain (small memories stored for a short period of time and used to execute tasks (Cowan, 2015, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4207727/#:~:text=Working%20memory%20is%20the%20retention,reasoning%2C%20and%20problem%2Dsolving>)), it is interesting to consider the potential impact of long-term memory on the artistic process. In the same way that our brains pull information from storage in order to make sense of optical illusions, a similar mechanism can be used for the artistic process. When artists are unable to fully recall a moment, they pull from their reservoir of memories to fill in the gaps. This changes their perception of the memory, and therefore their reality, as well as what they put down on the canvas.

Tania Hillion is a great example of an artist actively working with memory. She is a french figurative painter with a relatively short career, having only started painting in 2019. A unique aspect of Hillion's work comes from her rendering of realistic anatomy and figures and distorting them with abstract imagery and techniques, lending to the theme of fleeting or hazy memories (Carey, 2022,

<https://www.artworkarchive.com/blog/artist-spotlight-tania-hillion-s-paintings-capture-the-essence-of-memory>). The simultaneous use of this dichotomy creates an interesting conversation in her paintings between the figures themselves and what is actively happening to them. Hillion's works feel as though they are in motion; the viewer is watching these memories disintegrate, shift, and fade in real time. Hillion also uses techniques that lend themselves to both the abstract and the realistic, stating in an interview: "The superimpositions of layers of paint are reminiscent of nuances found in the skin, but above all, they echo the different stratum of experiences that shape the human being." By use of technique and purposefully welcoming mistakes, unfinished lines, and accidental shapes, Tania Hillion abstracts her lifelike and detailed subjects in an ephemeral space, forever capturing them in a moment fading seconds after it began.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

In contrast to the work of Tania Hillion, Peter Doig tends to avoid the direct manipulation of his subjects and instead focuses on the distortion of setting and atmosphere in which his subjects exist. One of the most famous examples of this is Doig's 1991 work *The Architect's Home In the Ravine*. By obscuring the focus of the painting from view, Doig is able to effectively create a distance between the viewer and the piece- the more distant the memory, the less the viewer is able to see it. This uncommon take on composition makes the audience consider themselves in the context of the work; they are outsiders looking in, hoping to get a glimpse of the home of the architect (Blythe, 2021, <https://hero-magazine.com/article/188642/peter-doig>). This unique dynamic allows for Doig to keep his works personal ; only he knows the intricate details of his subjects in the same way that only someone who lived through an event would have a proper memory of it, and no retelling would truly do it justice.



Fig. 3

In my early work I pretended to speak about my childhood, yet my real childhood had disappeared. I have lied about it so often that I no longer have a real memory of this time, and my childhood has become for me some kind of universal childhood, not a real one.

(Boltanski, 1996, pp. 12)

Boltanski's honesty about the perception of his own life can be applied to the work of both Hillion and Doig. Memories are fragile; they are constantly in a state of flux, with the hazier parts fading rapidly and the vibrant exaggerations only becoming more extreme. Feelings of happiness or embarrassment, the color of someone's jacket, the crowdedness of a room are all pushed to the forefront while the details of someone's face, their eyes or their laugh dissolve into near-nothingness in the background.

In *L'heure fugitive* (2021), Hillion purposefully crops out the subjects' faces; she remembers the body language, not the facial expressions- in *Résurgence* (2021) the opposite of this appears to be true. Peter Doig has made a point of saying that his pieces are not meant to be exact retellings of events or places and instead wishes to create "meditations on the concept of memory itself." As a result, many of Doig's works emit feelings of distance, existentialism, or otherworldliness- settling in between documentary and imaginary (Sotheby's, 2016, <https://www.sothebys.com/en/articles/peter-doigs-photographic-memory>). The architect's home distorted by a static of branches does an excellent job of recreating the feeling of a distant memory. Did the house, the trees, the pool ever exist? Most likely not like this, but this scene takes place in Doig's perception of reality, not the viewer's.

Distortion usually carries with it a dreamlike tone, removing the viewer from the rules of reality and bringing them into the artist's perspective. The magnification of features, the vibrancy of certain colors- this is what stood out to the artist in that specific moment. What an artist chooses to change or the rules they decide to break are all significant when it comes to the interpretation of a piece. As stated before, in *L'heure fugitive* (2021), Hillion purposefully crops the faces of her subjects from the canvas. This is Hillion's attempt to pull focus towards the body language, rather than allowing the audience to default to reading facial expressions. For Hillion, in that moment the facial cues did not matter because the gravity of the body language pulled her focus and for her it was important the audience regarded this as well (Carey, 2022, <https://www.artworkarchive.com/blog/artist-spotlight-tania-hillion-s-paintings-capture-the-essence-of-memory>).

Distortion can be a result of artistic intent or falsified memories, but there are also specific cases that provide an insight into how the human mind works and the details of the

artistic process. The tangled labyrinthine artworks of Carlotta expose her audience to a very unique point of view: one of someone afflicted with prosopagnosia. This is a neurological disorder that disrupts the ability to recognize faces, yet, despite this, Carlotta works almost exclusively in self-portraits. Her inability to recognize or remember her own face results in thousands of complex, layered drawings and etchings almost reminiscent of a Rorschach test. Multiple sets of eyes, faces layered on top of each other- these are the most prominent distortions of Carlotta's work, becoming a signature for the artist. In this way she is able to capture and hold onto these images that will never lay fixed in her mind. "I see it and I don't remember it, I reach for it and the next moment it disappears- it is an ongoing process that can never end" (Carlotta, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/stories-53192821>).



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

Why do artists strive to preserve a moment? Why accept the challenge of catching the fleetingness of memory on a still canvas? Some use it as a process to discover more about themselves, as Carlotta states, "My art is an inner necessity for me. I can't help but make art, to

feel my portraits and put them on paper again and again, and to keep going in search of my face, of what will escape my memory in the next second.” It could also be that it allows them to hold onto the significance of a piece of their life- bring into the spotlight all that they deem important enough to save. The idea that memories are as vital as they are fragile leads to a higher appreciation, and therefore celebration, of them and artists demonstrate this by creating artworks to immortalize them. What would it look like if memories were taken out of art- removed entirely from the stockpile of information held at the ready for an artist's employment?



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

William Utermohlen was an American artist who was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in 1995. His artistic career provides visuals for the creeping development of the disease as well as its capacity to devastate. As alluring as it is to let the artistic process lie in the realm of mystery and the unknown, there are scientific explanations for the creation of art

that are integral to understanding it. For example, consider the work and process of Carlotta: without prior knowledge of her condition she appears to be an ordinary abstract artist with a focus on portraiture. Her audience may take guesses as to why she depicts a face with six eyes in one piece but only three in another- maybe she was commenting on the perceptiveness of her subjects or maybe their intelligence, but in reality these sketches are her attempts to understand her own appearance. The same can be said for the work of Utermohlen; at face-value he is an artist developing his style and establishing himself in the genre of abstraction. By viewing his work as what it is, a descent into Alzheimer's disease, it simultaneously gives insight into the artistic process as well as furthering the knowledge and understanding of the effects of dementia. These diseases spread throughout the brain until they consume it entirely, leading to not just a loss of memory, but an annihilation of the sense of self.

"William Utermohlen- The Late Pictures 1990-2000," the head is drawn and erased at the same time- dismantled as it is being structured. It is if the artist has assimilated his drawings with his destiny- to subsist while disappearing.

(Polini, 2006,

https://journals.lww.com/neurotodayonline/fulltext/2006/12190/art_portrays_descent_into_dementia.8.aspx)

Oftentimes artworks are a reflection of whoever creates them- the artist's own perception of the world. This makes it an extremely personal process and result; revealing to others what they hold closest to them whether it be people, places, beliefs, basically anything of their choosing. To create an artwork is to hold that subject in personal reverence. To paint a memory is to establish it as significant, something the artist is unwilling to lose- in need of a better grasp of that moment. The distortion of details once seen clearly in the mind's eye can lead to desperate attempts to realign focus, making sure to take in as much of life as possible. Writing

things down, taking pictures, trying to be more present- all endeavors to try to trigger memories with a sharper clarity. It is impossible to imagine having something so personal, so deeply, inherently, and indisputably yours be taken away from you. When people are faced with this, why does this loss lead to creation?

“Mr. Utermohlen is a case in point. People express what they can despite their disease.”

(Miller, 2006,

https://journals.lww.com/neurotodayonline/fulltext/2006/12190/art_portrays_descent_into_dementia.8.aspx)

My practice has a heavy focus on memory for a couple of different reasons; I have a lot of difficulty remembering certain times in my life and using painting as a meditation on those moments allows me to appreciate them more fully- reflecting on the good as well as the bad. In the past much of my work would reference photos from my childhood. I didn't think about it too much then, but this helped me to remember those times with better clarity as well as giving me time to reflect on some of my most valued parts of life. Now, as my practice shifts from direct copies from photos, I've begun to experiment with the effects of time and age on our memories.

When I was seventeen my grandpa passed away from Alzheimer's disease. The strangest part about losing someone this way is that, even if you're watching all of it happen, there is never really a point where you actually get to say bye to them. There wasn't an exact line he crossed where it wasn't him anymore. It was slow and creeping but incredibly fast all at the same time. Our experiences, and in turn our memories, are what shape us as individuals and losing something that vital can absolutely ruin a person. Knowing that the creation of art can lend itself to a better understanding of these diseases makes demystifying the artistic

process entirely worth it in my eyes. It begs the question: what effects can neurodegenerative diseases have on artists and their process?

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