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Three Practitioners-

- Frank Hurley
- Grayson Perry
- Christian Boltanski

Introduction: Memory, Imagery, and Layering in Art

This research report investigates the relationship between memory and imagery within the artworks of Grayson Perry, Frank Hurley and Christian Boltanski. These artists frequently employ layering in their work, a strategy that creates a reflective and temporal aspect, echoing the complexity of human memory. Layering imagery allows the viewer to perceive multiple emotional, temporal and symbolic elements simultaneously, reflecting the fragmented nature of remembered experience. By examining these practices through the lens of theoretical framework, this report explores how visual representation can evoke personal and collective memory and how imagery mediates the relationship between the past and present.

The theoretical framework for this research draws on the thoughts and ideas of John Berger, Allan Paivio, Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes and Henri Bergson amongst others. These thinkers provide critical perspectives on the interplay between memory, perception and imagery. They also highlight how photographs and layered visual media function as both an archive and catalyst for memory. This research considers not only the psychological and philosophical dimensions of memory but also its cultural and ritualistic significance, situating artistic practice within a broader social and historical context.

In the 1960's, Canadian psychologist Allan Paivio observed that individuals recall information more effectively when it is associated with mental imagery (Otis, 2020). Paivio proposed the dual coding theory, suggesting that memories are encoded through two complementary systems: verbal and visual. Concrete images are more readily remembered than abstract words, and comprehension is enhanced when linguistic information is accompanied by visual representation. John Berger, extends this argument in his analysis of perception, asserting that 'seeing comes before words' (Berger, 1972, p.7). Visual experience comes before language; words are used to describe what has already been understood through seeing. Together, these

perspectives emphasise the importance of imagery in memory formation and suggest that visual art is a powerful means of recalling and preserving memory.

Contemporary photography amplifies this principle. In 2025, an estimated 2.1 trillion photographs were taken worldwide (Growcoot, 2025), reflecting a collective desire to capture and preserve fleeting moments. Whereas diaries once served as repository of personal experience, photographs now function as portable, retrievable records of the past. Roland Barthes describes the experience of viewing a photograph as “I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe and I think” (Barthes, 2020, p.26). People have a visceral reaction to photographs; it is suggested that is how we store memories. The process of memory, temporality and material objects (photographs in this instance) are interwoven and have been since the beginning of man (‘The First of Us’, 2025).

Henri Bergson offers a complementary philosophical perspective, arguing that memories exist independently of the body and are not constrained by physical life (Livia, 2024, p.36). Memory, for Bergson, is actualised in the present; when we recall an image, it becomes tangible and real in that moment, rather than residing solely in the past (Bergson, 2018, p.73). Photographs, in this framework, can be considered libraries of potential present memories; by viewing them, individuals reactivate stored experiences, creating live moments of recollection. Bergson further proposes that memory functions as a bridge between the physical and the spiritual, allowing aspects of consciousness to persist beyond the limitations of physical existence, thus transcending death (Livia, 2024, p.37).

However, not all theorists agree. Sheringham (Hallam and Hockey, 2020, p.104) contests that memory can create links between the past and the present. He claims that to remember is to engage with the past of what or who once was, distinguishing the lived past from the present. This position resonates with Barthes’ reflections on his deceased mother, whose photographs provide both engagement and distress; he

was compelled to look, yet the images remained “always a place apart, reserved and preserved” (Barthes, 2020, p.78-79).

Barthes further observes that photographs confront viewers with “the defeat of time: that is dead and that is going to die” (Barthes, 2020, p.117), illustrating the simultaneous presence of past, present, and future with a single image. Susan Sontag reinforces this notion, noting that photographs “state the innocence, the vulnerability of lives heading towards their own destruction, and this link between photography and death haunts all photographs of people” (Sontag, 2008, p.70). Together, these perspectives suggest that memory and imagery are intertwined not only in the personal sphere but also in cultural and collective consciousness. Photographs and layered visual media allow individuals to experience multiple temporalities simultaneously, activating both personal recollection and awareness of shared historical, personal or social memory.

In conclusion, this report investigates how memory and imagery intersect in contemporary artistic practice, with a particular focus on layering as both a formal and conceptual strategy. By engaging with theoretical perspectives on perception, temporality, and the role of photographs in memory, the research explores the ways in which artists construct, manipulate, and evoke remembered experience. Through the work of Perry, Hurley, and Boltanski, this study illuminates the intricate relationship between visual representation and memory, highlighting the capacity of layered imagery to render memory tangible, immediate, and culturally resonant.

Grayson Perry: Ritual, Memory, and Layered Imagery

Grayson Perry is best known as a ceramicist whose work incorporates imagery and narrative, with a satirical twist. His practice frequently explores memory, ritual, and the layering of imagery and objects, creating artworks in which personal and collective memory are materialised and experienced.

During the documentary *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsmen* (2011), Perry spoke to a man from Tonga who presented artefacts from his own culture, describing them as holding power passed through generations. Perry responded, “but the power only exists in the people around it,” raising questions about whether significance exists in the object itself or in the act of engagement. The Tongan artefact had gained meaning because it has been repeatedly used in rituals over centuries, allowing emotional and cultural authority to build. Perry mentioned that he felt a little jealous and he would like his work to contain this level of respect and power.

Perry’s engagement with memory is particularly evident in his work surrounding the death of Jordan, a seventeen-year-old killed by a drunk driver. Jordan’s parents constructed a shrine composed of layered photographs and personal objects, which they used as a site for mourning and remembrance. Perry observed that this assemblage resembled the beginnings of a religion, providing structure and focus for intense grief (see figure1). This self-driven ritual reflects Bergson’s theory that memory acts as a bridge between the spiritual and physical. The layering of images and objects functions as a materialisation of memory, allowing Jordan to exist symbolically in the present.

Perry further extended this ritualised memory by creating a gilded frame containing Jordan’s image (figure 2), which accompanied the family on a pilgrimage to locations

significant to his life. The frame evoked a Medieval religious icon, and Perry noted, “you kiss the icon, it is the deity, it’s a potent thought” (‘Death’, 2018). Through layering imagery, carefully positioning objects, and embedding them within ritualised activity, the artwork transforms into a site of emotional and symbolic power, giving memory a tangible presence. Rituals surrounding death involve embodied practices and the careful manipulation of material forms, creating a dimension of memory that is both performed and experienced. From this perspective, memory operates as a lens through which social and cultural meanings emerge, highlighting the intricate interplay between past and present. The formation of memory, therefore, should not be understood solely through discrete objects or images but as a dynamic process shaped by the interaction of material culture, ritual, and human engagement (Hallam & Hockey, 2020, p.179). This creates the power within Perry’s artworks that Perry felt his work lacked.



Fig.1: Rites of Passage: Death (still from Channel 4 documentary, Grayson Perry.



Fig.2: Rites of Passage: Death (still from Channel 4 documentary, Grayson Perry.

John Berger’s observation that the rise of photography correlates with the decline of religion is relevant here (Berger, 2009, p.57). Through replacing traditional religious imagery with personal photographs, Perry positions the photograph as an object through which memory and reverence are enacted. Similarly, Roland Barthes’ reflection on his deceased mother illuminates the pursuit of what Perry achieves in his layered works; “My grief wanted a just image, an image that would be both justice and accuracy — justnesse: just an image, but a just image” (Barthes, 2020, p.83). Perry’s work mirrors Barthes’ quest, seeking images that do justice to lived

experience. His layered shrine, therefore, is not a static representation but an active site of memory, ritual, and emotional engagement.

Another significant example is Perry's work created for the documentary *Who Are You?* ('Modern Families', 2014), in which he created a portrait on a ceramic vase of Christopher and Veronica. Christopher had Alzheimer's, and his memory was rapidly deteriorating. Perry used the vase as both a functional object and a symbolic funeral urn, layering photographs and imagery to represent the erosion of Christopher's identity. The couple are depicted wrapped in a blanket, symbolising protection and love (figures 3 and 4), while the figure Perry called 'Altzy' (see figure 5) wields scissors to cut through the photographs, representing memory's fragmentation. Perry noted that much of Christopher's identity now resides more in the photograph albums and in Veronica's recollections than in Christopher himself.



Fig.3: 'Modern Families' [still from Channel 4 documentary], (Grayson Perry, 2014).



Fig.3: 'Modern Families' [still from Channel 4 documentary], (Grayson Perry, 2014).

Perry's work also emphasises the social and relational dimensions of memory. As Bergson notes, memory activates a present moment, while Barthes highlights the search for images that faithfully convey lived experience. Perry demonstrates that memory is communal; it is distributed across relationships and material objects rather than contained solely within an individual. His layered works materialise this philosophy, allowing past and present to converge, enabling viewers to engage empathetically with lived experience and reflect on the fragility and construction of memory itself.



Fig.5: Memory Jar (Grayson Perry, 2015)

Ultimately, Grayson Perry's practice demonstrates the transformative potential of layering imagery and objects to preserve and activate memory. Through integrating ritual, personal objects, and photographic images, he creates spaces in which memory is re-enacted, emotionally experienced, and preserved. Perry's work illustrates how memory can be both embodied and socially shared, highlighting the theories of Bergson, Paivio, Sontag, and Barthes. His layered imagery and ritualised objects function as more than visual records; they are active agents in forming, conveying, and sustaining memory, creating meaning and presence where memory might otherwise fade.

Frank Hurley: Memory, Layered Imagery, and the Construction of Truth

James Francis (Frank) Hurley was an Australian photographer and filmmaker who became a pioneer in the use of colour photography and composite imagery. He is best known for his photographs of the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition (1914–1917) led by Ernest Shackleton, and later for his controversial work as an official war photographer (University of Cambridge, 2026). Hurley's practice is particularly relevant to discussions of memory and layering imagery, as his use of composite photographs raises important questions about the relationship between truth, experience, and the ways in which images shape both personal and collective memory. His work highlights the tension between documentation and artistic interpretation, illustrating the ways in which photography can function simultaneously as historical record and as a medium for constructing lived experience.

Hurley first gained recognition for his documentation of Shackleton's expedition aboard *The Endurance*. When the ship became trapped and eventually crushed by Antarctic ice, Hurley's photographs came to symbolise endurance, leadership, and human perseverance ('Frank Hurley: The Man who made History', 2007). These images have played a significant role in shaping how this expedition is remembered. Without Hurley's visual record, the expedition might have existed primarily as a written account, lacking the visceral emotional impact created by seeing the men's faces, their surroundings, and the vast, hostile landscape. The compositional choices Hurley made in framing the men against the immense, frozen environment heightened the perception of isolation and struggle, emphasising human fragility within extreme natural conditions. Susan Sontag argues that the justification for contemporary photographers remains the higher purpose of revealing hidden truth and preserving a vanishing past (Sontag, 2008, p.56). Hurley's work aligns with this position; his images preserve experiences that would otherwise disappear, conveying a sense of lived reality that extends beyond the purely factual. Even during the Antarctic expedition, Hurley began experimenting with layering the negatives in his imagery, using composited elements to enhance scale and drama.

He started with taking photographs of cloud scapes and adding these to the otherwise drab backgrounds (as seen in Fig.6). This early practice demonstrates an awareness that photography can be a constructed medium, capable of shaping perception and memory rather than merely recording it. Such compositional choices foreshadow his later, more complex work during wartime, where the layering of negatives became central to capturing the intensity of human experience



Figure 6: 'Frank Hurley: The Man who Made History' [still from BBC4 documentary], (Hurley, 2008).

Following the Antarctic expedition, Hurley became the Australian Imperial Force's official war photographer. Confronted with the scale and chaos of modern warfare, he became increasingly frustrated with photography's limitations. Single negatives, he felt, failed to convey the full reality of battle; the movement, violence, and emotional intensity were flattened by a single snapshot. In response, Hurley began layering multiple negatives to create composite images that encapsulated his full experience of the chaos of war (Fig.7 shows the elements Hurley layered with previously captured negatives: Fig.8 shows the final altered image). He argued that only by combining separate moments could photography approximate the experience of a modern battle, capturing the simultaneity and magnitude that could not exist in a single exposure.



Figure 7: 'Frank Hurley: The Man who Made History' [still from BBC4 documentary], (Hurley, 2008).



Figure 8: Traumatic Photographs Captured by Frank Hurley Show the Horrors of Great War's Western Front [photograph] (Hurley, 2026).

Hurley's practice led to significant conflict with Charles Bean, Australia's official war historian, who believed photographs should serve as "sacred records" of historical truth (Wishart, 2025). Bean criticised Hurley's composites as misleading and accused him of falsifying history. From Bean's perspective, photographs are objects whose primary function is to preserve factual accuracy for posterity, providing a

reliable visual record for future generations ('Frank Hurley: The Man who made History', 2007). Hurley, however, prioritised emotional truth over literal accuracy, believing that layered imagery could better communicate the lived reality of war.

This debate reflects a broader tension between documentation and interpretation. Sontag notes that photographs are inherently linked to death and loss, freezing moments that would otherwise disappear. Hurley's composites attempt to resist this loss by reconstructing memory into a more powerful, emotionally resonant form. Similarly, Roland Barthes' concept of the "just image" is instructive again here; Hurley was looking for an image that would depict both justice and accuracy (Barthes, 2020, p.83). Hurley's dissatisfaction with single images echoes this desire; his composites were an attempt to create photographs that captured the truth of his experience in war, rather than being merely "just an image" (Barthes, 2020, p.83). Through layering multiple negatives, he sought to convey not simply visual events, but the emotional reality of battle, preserving the memory of moments as they were experienced. In this sense, his work operates more convincingly as art than as journalism, occupying a space between personal memory, collective understanding, and historical record.

Ultimately, Hurley's practice demonstrates how layered imagery can function as an extension of memory rather than a simple record of events. His photographs construct a collective memory shaped by emotion, experience, and interpretation. Whilst this challenges traditional notions of photographic truth, it underscores the powerful role images play in shaping how history is remembered and understood. Through engaging critically with both technical and conceptual layers, Hurley illustrates that photography is not a neutral medium but one capable of actively producing meaning, mediating memory, and sustaining the emotional resonance of human experience.

Christian Boltanski: Layering, Absence, and the Illusion of Memory

Christian Boltanski (1944–2021) was a French artist whose work is strongly associated with themes of memory, loss, absence, and mortality. Through the layering of imagery, lighting, found photographs, archival materials, and everyday objects, Boltanski constructed installations that invite viewers to reflect on remembrance while simultaneously questioning the reliability of memory itself. Rather than presenting fixed narratives, his work creates open structures in which meaning is formed through the viewer's own emotional and cultural associations (Gumpert, 1994).

Boltanski frequently used anonymous photographs sourced from flea markets, newspapers, and archives. These images are stripped of personal context, denying viewers access to factual biography while encouraging projection and interpretation. This strategy aligns with John Berger's distinction between private and public photographs. Berger argues that private photographs possess an ongoing continuity rooted in lived experience, whereas public photographs are severed from their original context and become "dead objects" open to arbitrary use (Berger, 2009, p.60). Sontag supports Berger's point when she says "a photograph is only a fragment, and with the passage of time its moorings become unstuck. It drifts away into an abstract pastness open to any kind of reading" (Sontag, 2008, p.71). Boltanski's practice deliberately exploits this condition, transforming anonymous images into vessels for imagined memory rather than authentic personal remembrance.

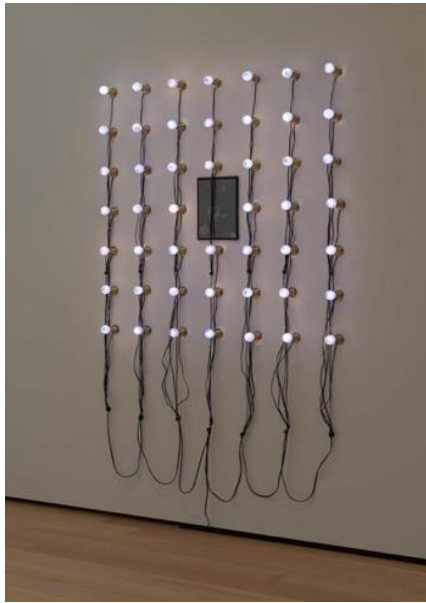


Figure 9: *Lumières (blue square- Sylvie)* [photograph] (Boltanski, 2000).



Figure 10: *Lumières (blue square- Sylvie)* [photograph] (Boltanski, 2000).

This approach is evident in Boltanski's work *Lumières (blue square – Sylvie)* in which a small photographic portrait of a child, sourced from a flea market, is illuminated by exposed bulbs resembling devotional candles (see figure 9 and figure 10). Boltanski had no knowledge of the child's identity, yet the presentation transforms the image into a memorial icon. The lighting evokes religious altarpieces and public acts of mourning, encouraging associations with loss, death, and historical trauma. Although no factual narrative is provided, viewers often project meanings related to the Holocaust, a recurring theme within Boltanski's work. Sontag argues that "the effectiveness of photography's statement of loss depends on its steadily enlarging the familiar iconography of mystery, mortality, transience" (Sontag, 2008, p.67). The emotional power of the piece emerges not from documented memory but from symbolic suggestion and cultural association of iconography.

Boltanski described his practice as being 'about making stories', highlighting his interest in narrative construction rather than historical accuracy. In *Lumières*, memory is not preserved but simulated. The artwork creates the illusion of memory, allowing viewers to imagine a life, a death, and a history that may never have

existed. This aligns with Henri Bergson's theory that memory is not stored materially but is continually reconstructed in the present. Boltanski's work does not retrieve memory from the past, instead, it prompts viewers to generate memory-like experiences in the present moment, blurring the boundary between remembrance and imagination.

The material degradation of imagery plays a crucial role in this process. Boltanski often photocopied images repeatedly until only the most basic facial features remained. He referred to this process as "a series of little deaths", describing the gradual erosion of individuality that occurs through forgetting (Lonely Palette, 2026). Each reproduction removes detail, mirroring how memories fade over time. This erosion reflects Berger's description of the photograph as it has been taken directly from the real; it is a trace or a death mask. As the image deteriorates, it becomes an embodiment of memory loss itself, no longer representing a person but the absence of one.

Boltanski's installation in the Tate Modern *The Reserve of Dead Swiss* consists of large quantities of photographs sourced from Swiss newspaper obituaries, displayed alongside aged boxes and materials (see figure 11). The faces depicted are ordinary and interchangeable, drawn from weddings, graduations, and official portraits. When the gallery curator mentioned that the sheets and the photographs would age, Boltanski said he could change the sheets for new ones and replace the photographs. Boltanski openly stated that "there are always more dead Swiss" (Boltanski, 1997, p.16). This statement underscores the work's focus on the idea of death and remembrance rather than personal biography as the individuals were unimportant.



Figure 11: The Reserve of the Dead Swiss [photograph] (Boltanski.1990)

Berger's concept of public photography is particularly relevant here. Detached from personal context, these images become objects rather than memories. Their arbitrary selection reinforces their anonymity, transforming human lives into visual units, memory becomes collective rather than personal, abstract rather than intimate (Berger, 2009). This strategy reflects Susan Sontag's assertion that photographs are inherently linked to death, serving as reminders of life's fragility and inevitable disappearance (Sontag, 2008). Boltanski's work confronts viewers with this reality by presenting photography not as preservation but as evidence of absence. Through layering, repetition, and decay, his installations reveal memory as unstable and constructed rather than fixed and reliable.

Ultimately, Boltanski's work demonstrates how layered imagery can fabricate the sensation of memory without preserving actual experience. By removing identity,

context, and factual narrative, he exposes the mechanisms through which memory is culturally produced. His practice transforms photographs into sites of reflection, where viewers are confronted not with who these people were, but with the act of remembering itself. In doing so, Boltanski positions memory as a fragile, collective illusion, one that exists only through continual reconstruction in the present.

Conclusion: Layering, Memory, and the Construction of Meaning

This report has examined how memory is shaped and activated through layered imagery, predominantly photographs, in the practices of Grayson Perry, Frank Hurley, and Christian Boltanski. Drawing on the theoretical perspectives of Berger, Paivio, Sontag, Barthes, Bergson, and Sheringham, it demonstrates that memory in visual art is not stable, but a dynamic process shaped by imagery, context, ritual, and viewer engagement. Layering functions conceptually, ultimately reflects the fragmented and temporal nature of memory.

Paivio's dual coding theory and Berger's assertion that "seeing comes before words" highlight why imagery is central to memory formation (Berger, 1972, p.7). Visual images operate alongside, and often prior to, language, enabling memory to be recalled with emotional immediacy. This principle is evident across the work of Perry, Hurley, and Boltanski. Through photographs, objects, or composites, each artist uses layering to activate memory beyond chronological or factual narrative, constructing meaning through accumulation and combination rather than single images.

Grayson Perry's practice highlights the human, ritualistic, and social dimensions of memory. He engages directly with individuals and lived experience, creating meanings that are highly personalised yet socially resonant. Perry incorporates ritualistic features and symbolism to add emotional and cultural depth, using imagery and photographs to capture memory as both past and present. In the works

discussed, memory is not only represented but performed. Jordan's pilgrimage with the icon and Christopher's future funeral urn demonstrate that memory is sustained through action, repetition, and communal participation. These performances reflect Bergson's notion that memory is activated in the present rather than stored in the past.

Perry's use of photographs as icon-like objects echoes Berger's observation that photography can assume roles traditionally associated with religion (Berger, 1972). Through ritualised engagement, personal photographs become sites of devotion, sustaining emotional presence despite loss. Memory in Perry's work is communal and relational, distributed across people, objects, and practices rather than contained within the individual. While grounded in real experience, his work also acknowledges absence and mortality, showing memory to be fragile yet sustained through care and shared meaning.

Frank Hurley approaches memory differently. He prioritises atmosphere, scale, and intensity in his scenery over personal intimacy. His layered composite photographs challenge the assumption that photography transparently records reality. Hurley embellishes the real to communicate a deeper emotional truth, aligning with Sontag's notion of photography revealing hidden truths and conserving a vanishing past, even when that truth is constructed rather than literal (Sontag, 2008).

Hurley's work engages collective memory, particularly of war and exploration. His composites convey simultaneity and chaos that single images cannot capture. In doing so, he seeks what Barthes describes as the "just image": one that does justice to lived experience rather than merely recording surface appearance (Barthes, 2020, p.83). Unlike Perry, whose layering extends into ritual and performance, Hurley's skill lies in the composition and placement of layered negatives. His narrative exists in

reality; his intervention reshapes it visually rather than conceptually. While constructed, his images remain anchored in real events.

Christian Boltanski examines memory's instability most critically. Unlike Perry and Hurley, he does not work from specific individuals or events. Instead, he creates the perception of memory through anonymous photographs, repetition, and material degradation. His work relies on the viewer to construct narrative and meaning, revealing how memory can be culturally produced rather than personally recalled. This aligns with Berger's concept of public photography, where images are detached from lived continuity and open to arbitrary interpretation (Berger, 2009).

Boltanski, like Perry, references iconography and ritual however, his emphasis is on absence rather than connection. Where Perry's rituals sustain presence, Boltanski's evoke mourning without resolution. His installations fabricate remembering, revealing memory as an illusion maintained by cultural symbols rather than factual knowledge. Sontag's claim that photographs drift into abstraction is made tangible in Boltanski's eroded images, which embody loss and mortality rather than lived experience (Sontag, 2008).

Across all three practices, layering operates as a metaphor for memory. Just as memory is built from fragments, emotions, and associations, layered imagery accumulates meaning through repetition, combination, and decay. Layering allows multiple temporalities to coexist, enabling viewers to experience past, present, and anticipated loss simultaneously. Barthes' observation that photographs confront us with both "that-has-been" and "that-will-die" is evident in each artist's work, expressed through presence, reconstruction, or absence (Barthes, 2020, p.95).

Importantly, this research has shown that while photographs do not automatically preserve the past, they can sustain memory in the present. As Bergson suggests, memory lives on through reactivation, and Sheringham argues that remembering does not merge past and present but makes the past accessible in the now (Bergson, 2018). Through Perry's rituals, Hurley's composites, or Boltanski's installations, memory persists through continual activation, interpretation, and engagement, allowing experiences and histories to endure.

In conclusion, Perry, Hurley, and Boltanski show that memory in visual art is not static but sustained through engagement. Perry humanises memory with ritual and empathy, Hurley reconstructs experience through layered composition, and Boltanski exposes its fragility, inviting the viewer to fill in gaps. Together, their work demonstrates that layered imagery allows memory to endure, reactivated and felt in the present, revealing its instability, communal nature, and ongoing life.

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List of Illustrations

Figure 1: Perry, G. (2018) *Death: Rites of Passage* [still from Channel 4 documentary]. Available at: [View Record: Grayson Perry: Rites of Passage · BoB](#) (Accessed: 18 November 2025).

Figure 2: Perry, G. (2018) *Death: Rites of Passage* [still from Channel 4 documentary]. Available at: [View Record: Grayson Perry: Rites of Passage · BoB](#) (Accessed: 18 November 2025).

Figure 3: Perry, G. (2014) *Modern Families: Who Are You?* [still from Channel 4 documentary]. Available at: [View Record: Grayson Perry: Who Are You? · BoB](#) (Accessed: 4 November 2025).

Figure 4: Perry, G. (2014) *Modern Families: Who Are You?* [still from Channel 4 documentary]. Available at: [View Record: Grayson Perry: Who Are You? · BoB](#) (Accessed: 4 November 2025).

Figure 5: Perry, G. (2015) *Memory Jar* [photo]. Available at: <https://fashionartsbeauty.wordpress.com/2015/02/21/grayson-perry-who-are-you/> (Accessed: 16 November 2025).

Figure 6: Hurley, F. (2008) *Frank Hurley: The Man who Made History* [still from BBC4 documentary]. Available at: <https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/ondemand/index.php/prog/004EB6F2?bcast=30567349> (Accessed 10 October 2025).

Figure 7: Hurley, F. (2008) *Frank Hurley: The Man who Made History* [still from BBC4 documentary]. Available at: <https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/ondemand/index.php/prog/004EB6F2?bcast=30567349> (Accessed 10 October 2025).

Figure 8: Hurley, F. (2026) *Traumatic Photographs Captured by Frank Hurley Show the Horrors of Great War's Western Front* [photograph]. Available at: <https://rarehistoricalphotos.com/western-front-photographs-frank-hurley/>. (Accessed: 23 November 2025).

Figure 9: Boltanski, C. (2000) *Lumieres (blue square- Sylvie)*. [photograph]. Available at: [Lumieres \(blue square - Sylvie\) – Works – Museum of Fine Arts, Boston](#) (Accessed: 16 November 2025).

Figure 10: Boltanski, C. (2000) *Lumieres (blue square- Sylvie)*. [photograph]. Available at: [Lumieres \(blue square - Sylvie\) – Works – Museum of Fine Arts, Boston](#) (Accessed: 16 November 2025).

Figure 11: Boltanski, C. (1990) *The Reserve of Dead Swiss* [photograph]. Available at: [‘The Reserve of Dead Swiss’, Christian Boltanski, 1990 | Tate](#) (Accessed: 15 November 2025).