A COLD FIREPLACE

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

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by

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

A COLD FIREPLACE

presented by Sophie Pickering,

a candidate for the degree of master of fine arts,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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A COLD FIREPLACE

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ABSTRACT

Many notable photographs of my father and I were taken in our family home in Philadelphia, the one where my Grandma lives and everyone gathers. This house represents a stable continuity and inspires a feeling of timelessness in my family, as the years become uniform in a concrete setting. After my grandfather's and later my father's death, our family group became smaller, and yet the house remained exactly the same. Because of these changes and consistencies, my Grandma's house has become a place where I deeply feel both the living and absent presence of my Dad. In *A Cold Fireplace,* I dream of a version of this house, one of broken chronology, where it is impossible to distinguish one year from another and time no longer separates the living from the dead.

The show and writing titled *A Cold Fireplace* is centered around the home's ability to exist outside of a linear timeline by holding disjointed emotions and memories in compressed space. Through pulp painted fragments of personal family photos taken within the rooms of my family home, I call attention to the ways in which these interiors both absorb and diminish tragedy. I identify the home as a setting in which chronological time is both broken and looped. I utilize handmade paper, wooden miniature furniture, and ceramic frames to create a materially-potent memory space of the home, one that is both swirling and unchanging.

fig. 1

Growing up, I had a fairly idyllic, non-traumatic existence.

My family was all living and I had hordes of cousins, uncles, and aunts returning to the family home from different points in the country twice a year.

The house holds for me a sense of my former self, a child interested in the rivulets of ants on the cracking sidewalks and my grandmother's eyeshadow palette in the upstairs bathroom. It holds memories of sliding down the staircase with my cousins and feeling the xylophone of my ribs.

fig. 2

But then my uncle sexually assaulted the neighbor, my cousin did too much cocaine in the eyeshadow bathroom and punched his father, my grandfather starved himself to death because he couldn't live with the discomfort of old age, and my own father with stage four cancer decided to take his life before the illness could.

The foundation of the house should have crumbled, taking the furniture and decorative knick-knacks with it, leaving only wisps of nostalgia and the stacks of family photo albums in the second floor bedroom. Instead, the couch got reupholstered, leaving the present-day me to sit in the living room playing solitaire in the exact position that I did when I was seven.

fig. 3

This sensation, not rooted in a linear timeline, is essential to the magic of a long-occupied home. The permanence of the interior layout of a family home plays a large role in evoking memories for visitors and occupants.[1] Years of routine and tradition go by and it becomes impossible to distinguish one year from another. The repetitive nature of my biannual visits had the strange effect of providing a temporal certainty as well as an utter lack of any sort of time-based memory. Everything was always Christmas or my grandfather's birthday.

fig. 4

[1] Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory,* trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 168-70.

I investigate this temporal unmooring I experience within the home through pulp painted scenes from different moments contained throughout the years in the photo albums. A crystal candlestick, a wine glass, cherry pies, and various decorative elements appear throughout the works, creating a closed memory space, allowing the viewer to experience moments of recall and recognition without being able to pinpoint a beginning, middle, or end. Puncturing linearity, grieving the loss of my father has brought up vivid memories in much of the same way as the house does. The year after his death was filled with memories of the sickness and the horrifying process of euthanasia. But this year, deeply buried recollections from childhood have begun to trickle in, allowing my father to actively touch my life in the present.

fig. 5

Materially, papermaking has embodied this matrix-like structure of time that grief has introduced into my life. Tendrils of paper are formed into a solid sheet in swirling water. The fibers connect in inimitable ways, creating a cloud of strength with no internal linear structure. Flax, my second favorite plant for paper, yields multicellular fibers. Each singular fiber can be separated into fibrils which can then be separated into fibrillae, which can then be separated into even smaller fibrillae.[2] It is an infinitely complex structure with no identifiable beginning or end. Additionally, the unsettling feeling of timelessness that I receive from the house

fig. 6

[2] Jesse Munn, "The Renaissance of Linen/Flax Paper," *Hand Papermaking*, (Spring 1986): 10

fig. 7

requires a lack of gravity that can only be depicted by something as light as paper. Wisps of pulp are weighed down with hand crafted frames, mimicking what the house has done to all of the discrete memories that I hold, memories that are mine, my fathers, and some that are most certainly invented through years of retelling.

Over time, a house weighs itself down, with gifts and purchases, objects that become incorporated into memories of the space. Was the living room ever the living room without the blue bookshelves? Did Christmas ever happen before the bowl of Hershey's kisses arrived on the stereo in the dining room? The loss of an item like this is devastating. Not because the stereo worked particularly well, but because with it, goes the potential for a vivid memory of a former

fig. 8

self. The white footstool keeps me company because I remember my cousin Alexis using it as a mountaintop for her matchbox car world. The bowl of candy makes me recall tucking handfuls underneath the tablecloth to squirrel them away after dinner into the second floor bathroom with my cousin James.

Poet Joseph Brodsky references the magic of the childhood home when he speaks about his strongest visual memory. He is five years old, sitting on his porch, wearing green boots, and gazing out at the rain. He says of this memory, "maybe I'm still there." Freud says that one's strongest visual memories are from early childhood[3] and sometimes I do feel like it is seven-year old James sitting next to me rather than 25-year old James. The vivid fragments of childhood memory come with a torrential force compared to the more rational memories of less than a decade past. These potent memories pummel the senses and access long forgotten crevasses of emotional intensity. Proust calls these involuntary memories, or *moments bienhereux.*[4] He believes these to be fertile ground for deep discoveries to be made about the past. It feels important to be able to emotionally access my childhood self, not for discovery purposes, but because being in two timelines is a form of necromancy. I yearn to lose myself amongst the memories of the house until time no longer separates the living from the dead.

fig. 9

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[3] Sigmund Freud. "Screen Memories." In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, (London: The Hogarth Press/ Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1899): 1955-74.

[4] Martin, Jay. *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 180-186.

I'm fascinated by Richard Nova Milne's layered video works that compile different moments of time onto the same space. Retroactively, he is able to capture collaborations with former selves.[5] In the potent memory space of the home, I am all ages at once. The house compresses and traps my memories, abstracted by time yet anchored by space.[6]

fig. 10

I represent this layered world of a time past with kozo, my first favorite plant for papermaking. Kozo is a fiber that is hand-beat with a mallet to preserve its long textural

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[5] Amelia Groom, "This is so Contemporary!" *Frieze*, September 30, 2012.

[6] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Beacon Press, 1994), 30.

strands. The resulting feather-like sheets can be layered, creating a multi-dimensional world of elusive, interconnected tendrils for the viewer to step into.[7]

Paper is not only a weightless companion in the suspension of time, but materially embodies the fragility of fleeting involuntary memories and relationships within a lifetime. In a 1990 interview about her installation *Earthskins,* Kathryn Lipke asserts that paper "can represent the fragility of what visually appears to be strong, sturdy, and forever lasting."[8] Paper can be a document for memories, a site of past occurrences, or an attempt to control the future memory of a current time. Handmade paper holds this same history but without the clinical sheen and whiteness of industrial paper. My handmade paper resists the notion of a fixed archive and allows the documentation to be more susceptible to wear and tear. This delicate medium is alterable in the way that memory is; it creases, rips, burns, dampens, disappears, and decomposes. Hand papermakers often note a somatic conversation between paper and humans. Artist Firelei Báez recognizes the ways in which paper acts as a "surrogate self" in its skin-like qualities and its archival purposes.[9] Materially, paper is supple and solid, and can often appear to be skin-like in the way it coats a surface and maintains a translucency in its opacity.

fig. 11

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[7] Joann Moser, "On Sarah Brayer: Paper's Inner Light," *Hand Papermaking*, (Summer 2022): 46.

[8] Kathryn Lipke, "Earthwork: Skins and Skeletons," *Hand Papermaking*, (Summer 1990): 4.

[9] Reál Christian, "A surrogate self, a site of memory: Firelei Báez," *Hand Papermaking*, (Winter 2021): 13.

When wet, paper pulp is very fickle, and controlling it is not an easy task. I am both delighted by this unpredictability and frustrated by my inability to wrangle the material. However, when replicating a photograph, it is the moments where I have successfully enacted control that actually feel the most lifeless. It's when I allow the medium to speak and the pulp to shift around that yield the most memory-like moments. This simultaneous exertion and release of control that I perform in paper is akin to the way we fabricate time within the home, redecorating to avoid involuntary memory, and decorating the same way at Christmas every year to ensure it.

fig. 12

But it's almost impossible to have an involuntary memory from childhood when I'm currently 995 miles away from the house. The closest I can get is by going through my box of photos. The fragile nature of photographs mirrors the tentative and fragile emotions experienced in a person's lifetime. Photographs allow us to step into a frozen, unalterable world, which, in a family photo album, is accentuated by their small scale.

When looking at small details, a viewer becomes immersed in a single object, becoming utterly still, holding their breath, and effectively stopping time for an instant.

fig. 13

One scientific study called the experience of examining a miniature a compressed time of interiority.[10] It's also paramount that I don't overemphasize the scenes depicted because it has been a huge comfort to remember that I am not the only person, this is not the only house, nor is my family the only family. To maintain this, I restrain the imagery so that it could still be shut away in one of the photo albums stacked in the bedroom on the second floor.

In 2010, there was an exhibition at the Yuzu Photo Museum in Japan consisting of daguerreotypes and portraits from Geoffrey Batchen's private collection. This exhibition didn't focus on the movement between times, but rather, the suspension of time, and was aptly titled *Suspending Time: Life- Photography- Death*. My interest in the sudden weightlessness experienced when examining a miniature is due to this temporal suspension. It's the way that the photographs wrench me from the confines of mortality in a temporary escape from the guillotine of time. Again, a type of necromancy.

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[10] Susan Stewart, *On Longing* (Duke University Press, 1992).

fig. 14

Two summers ago, I was helping my grandmother pull out the hammock and outdoor chairs to form a makeshift funerary circle in her front yard for my father when I was struck with a vivid memory of my mom reading to me on the grass. This year, when looking through my box for a reference photo, I found the exact image that I had previously believed to be pure memory.

Photos have an almost insidious capability to allow the viewer to live by proxy and alter one's experience of the world.[11] But sometimes I do want to alter my experience of the world. I would prefer to remove my lecherous uncle from photographs. I would like

[11] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 16.

to add my father back in. When I look at photographs of my father and me, my father and other family members, or my father when he was young, I feel a queasy detachment from the present moment. This could be attributed to a sort of temporal movement, a back and forth between the time of the photo and the present. Roland Barthes calls this a catastrophe. He feels punctured by an anterior future when looking at a photograph of his late mother, knowing that she is both dead and going to die.[12]

When dry, I cut into my compositions, implicating into the scene what is not there and visualizing the magical ability of both photographs and the domestic space to suspend us in a memory world where characters are both dead and still living. The removal of figures and objects in a room creates a shattered image, mirroring how the elusive involuntary memory appears in fragments. This act of editing narrows the chasm that exists between my box of photographs and the unmoored natural memories. By recreating and altering the photograph of my mother reading to me on the grass, I have created a new, more complicated, and more truthful memory that simply owning the photograph could allow for.

fig. 15

[12] Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida.* (Hill & Wang, 1982), 63-65.

An epigram from Carl Andre: “A hole in a thing is a thing in itself.”

fig. 16

The fragmentation of the image functions as an invitation to the viewer to locate a small site of delineated space and then expand beyond the borders of the image back into their own multi-layered past. I partially obscure the text for the same purpose. Through obfuscation and gaps in narrative I hope that there is no choice but to complicate the story and imbue it with details or experiences from the one’s own life. Critic Nancy Ungar explains that an artist imbues humanity into their work by just using letters, even if illegible.[13] In relation to this, I often think of an old short story in which Portuguese nuns weave linen cloth used for the royal bedsheets. Within the story, the textile acts as a record keeper of a conclusion never reached. One of the nuns says, “Who tells a finer tale than any of us? Silence does. And where does one

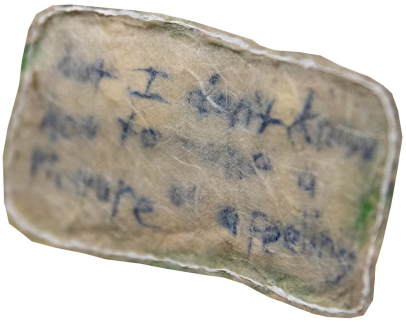

fig. 17

[13] Leslie Luebbers, “Medium as Metaphor – 1993 Paper Conference in Montreal,” *Hand Papermaking*, (Winter 1993): 25.

read a deeper tale than upon the most perfectly printed page of the most precious book? Upon the blank page."[14]

Like the aforementioned examination of a miniature, obscured narrative enforces a stillness in relation to the way we experience time. The text is an obstacle to easy reference; it demands that you stop. The words within the works actually come from a journal that I kept in the months before my father's death, when intense philosophical and pragmatic conversations were a daily occurrence.

Like Eija-Liisa Ahtila's video installation *Today* (1997), I tangentially depict a tragedy, but portray only fragments, leaving the viewer to come to terms with what they can parse out.[15] If the viewer dives into the compressed world of my home and childhood, they can absorb the surreality of the loss of my father. Pairing this text with often disjointed idyllic images from my childhood within the house is the sensation of hearing an old story around the dining room table until it becomes its own memory, the setting of the story itself melting away in favor of the room in which it was reiterated countless times.

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[14] Isak Dinesen, "The Blank Page." In *Last Tales* (London: Random House, 1957).

[15] Guy Cools, *Performing Mourning: Laments in Contemporary Art* (Valiz, 2021), 12.

This act of pairing the journal entry and image has been powerfully healing for me. It repositions the intensely painful memories that I hold of my father's sickness by forcing a sweet and unmoving scene to be remembered in tandem with the feeling that I was having when writing in the journal. The hours that I spend on each piece ensures this cementation in my mind. I suppose, in a way, I am also creating this work in preparation for the inevitable loss of the house. I am making a probably futile attempt at harnessing the elusive tendrils of involuntary memory by trying to uproot them from the house and force them into a miniature version of my childhood.

fig. 18

It wasn't until I started to explore the layers of importance the house holds for me that I realized the deep fear I have about losing it. It's been challenging to visit the house after my father's death because his absence in each room and from each holiday is crushing. However, this absence is a presence that I reach for, because only here can I feel his presence even though it makes me more painfully aware of his absence. Only in the house can I somatically exist within multiple timelines, feeling the magic of the fairly idyllic, non-traumatic existence I had while growing up.

fig. 19

this family

of ants fossilized

on the page you slam

the book shut look out

at the leafless trees

doused in red April rain

where none of us

are children long enough

to love it[16]

[16] Ocean Vuong, *Time is a Mother* (Penguin Random House, 2022), 19

Afterword

My Grandma died a week after finishing this paper, on February 15th. I don't really know yet what it will be like to live without physically visiting the absence of what I once had. Losing this house along with all of the potential involuntary memories of my deceased loved ones has made these pulp paintings even more emotionally potent for me. I now more than ever seek a permanence of memory, of a space that I have lost, pulling fragments to create something that exists outside of time and can therefore never die. I feel comforted by the fact that I can always go back to Philadelphia and spend time at my Aunt Cherie and Uncle Jason's house, a short drive from the old one (even though my Dad never went inside it because he was allergic to the cats). I can commune in the corner of the yard where he used to sit with his beer and wait to be delivered dinner from the kitchen. I just got back from my Grandma's memorial (done in a Quaker style just as my Dad's was) and spent time squirreling away little pieces of the house to take with me into my adult life that I suppose I cannot postpone any longer. I grabbed the Russian nesting doll with the large breasts that I was obsessed with as a child, the footstool Alexis used as a mountaintop for her matchbox cars, a bird my Dad drew in middle school, and the sticky deck of cards I played solitaire with. At the memorial, a woman stood up and spoke about my Grandma being a massive support when she left her long-standing home for an assisted living facility. The woman relayed her words to the circle: "this is how life works. Things change and we must move on." At this moment, I knew my Grandma was laughing at my fervent attempt to relocate the entire house into my one bedroom

apartment. The house must splinter and the objects will be dismembered from their long-held stations because that is how life works and we must move on.

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