

ARTIFACTS and FANTASY

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Master of Fine Arts

by

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ARTIFACT AND FANTASY

presented by Paula Kientzel,

a candidate for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

hereby certify that in their opinions worthy of acceptance.

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DEDICATION

to my Grandmothers Evelyn and Willemina

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

with deep appreciation to everyone who shared in
the experience

advisors and friends

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
LIST OF WORKS	iv
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. Memory, Loss and Trauma	4
III. Memory, Nostalgia, Sentimentality and Irony	8
IV. The Paintings: Memory, Nostalgia and Sentimentality	10
V. Irony and Nostalgia	13
VI. Employing Nostalgia and Irony	16
VII. The Paintings: Trauma, Loss and Resolution	19
VIII. Sublime	23
IX. Conclusion	27
REFERENCES	28
ILLUSTRATIONS	30

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure		Page
1.	<i>Auguries of Innocence</i>	30
2.	<i>Lost-Sound</i>	31
3.	<i>Sound</i>	32
4.	<i>Mummer Love</i>	33
5.	<i>Departure</i>	34
6.	<i>Nevermind</i>	35
7.	<i>Fairytale</i>	36
8.	<i>Goodbye and Farewell</i>	37
9.	<i>Remembered in the Wilderness</i>	38
10.	<i>Remembered in the Wilderness II</i>	39

I. Introduction

Memory has been a potent source of inspiration for artists throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This attention to memory is prompted by a desire to explore the nature of conflict and loss, in addition to the need to understand and preserve the past.

Visual artist Amy Stacey Curtis (2005) in her book, *Women, Trauma and Visual Expression* explains:

All art, no matter the media or the content, contains the artist's life experiences – at least suggestions of who, why, what, where, and how. For artists whose life experiences include trauma, these events and their aftereffects may enter these artists' work intentionally or unintentionally. (p. 21)

In contemporary culture artists seek new ways of depicting memory. Memory has been utilized in modern and contemporary art throughout revolutionary movements and recurring themes in various media, including painting, sculpture, photography, video, installation and performance art. Throughout these various fields, specific forms and strategies have provided a way to give the past a place in the present. In her book *Emphatic Vision: Affect, Trauma and Contemporary Art*, Jill Bennett (2005) illustrates that within these fields there has been “. . . a long tradition of engagement with affect and immediate experience, not just as sources of inspiration or objects of representation, but as fundamental components of a dynamic between the artwork and the spectator” (p. 23).

The paintings in this thesis show, *Artifacts and Fantasy*, creates that bridge between the possibility of transcendence and the necessity of remembrance, where the human spirit strives for resolution, comfort, hope, or simply humorous relief from stress or pain.

For the purpose of this thesis it is my intention to contextualize my paintings in the areas of art history, memory, trauma, loss and resolution. These paintings are an articulation of memory and resolution after trauma and loss. This stems from how the experience of memory breaks down over time, and the ways in which past perceptions, feelings, and emotions are actually revised in the act of remembering. As a way of coping, individuals who have experienced loss search for resolution and/or comfort. In trying to find a more serene state or peace of mind, they use humor, irony or sentimentality to cope.

In the first section of this thesis I have narrowed my focus to contemporary artists whose works evoke memory, loss and trauma. I investigate how their work operates on both a personal and collective level, and how they communicate through various means of representation. In the second section I develop a connection between memory, nostalgia, sentimentality and irony within modern and contemporary art. The third section explains how in my early paintings nostalgia and sentimentality elicit memory in order to establish an emotional connection between past and present. In the fourth section I examine how contemporary artists employ certain themes and methods to develop nostalgia and irony and the connection between the two, while the fifth section develops how I employ similar concepts in my own work. The sixth section describes the paintings in terms of

trauma, loss and resolution. Then in the seventh section I illustrate how historical precedents in terms of Surrealism, Dada, Abstract Expressionist and Romantic Landscape painting have further influenced my exploration of these strategies in my later work.

II. Memory, Loss and Trauma

Memories, like emotions, cannot be experienced in the past but only in the present. Jill Bennett (2005) states “Emotions are felt only as they are experienced in the present; as remembered events they become representation” (p. 30). Since reliving memories can only be experienced in the present, works of art have the capacity of reviving emotions.

Artists often draw upon their past to understand, recall and reflect upon their own experiences. Louise Bourgeois uses her memories as a motivation to work through feelings of fear and abandonment to a place of restoration and reconciliation. Bourgeois explains, “...I try to reconstruct it...sudden recollections that are awakened by the senses tell you more than emotions that are too vague or too overwhelming or too intractable” (Newman, 2004, para. 2004). Thus Bourgeois creates a physical unease in the viewer by jolting subconscious feelings and memories. In her installation *No Exit, 1989* Bourgeois creates a theatrical environment using deep wooden staircases that lead nowhere. Heavy metal screens partition the installation. There are secret compartments underneath the staircase. As documentary producer Paul Gardner (1994) describes, “In front of *No Exit* two wooden balls – insinuating hoary and riddled with cracks- guard the stair case like master accomplices in power” (p102-3). The wooden balls represent guardians that protect secrets stored within the subconscious. An individual does not remember sorrow or joy, but by recalling a situation that produces those feelings a new set of feelings can be experienced. In this sense representation can serve as a catalyst to recall and reflect upon things from the past.

There is a long tradition of artists who draw on personal trauma as a potent source of creative inspiration. Such personal histories are explored through the connection between representation and remembrance. Art through representation becomes an external agent that draws a particular memory to the surface.

In her installation, *Fairy Tales 1998*, Petah Coyne uses childhood memories as the inspiration for her piece. *Fairy Tales* is based on bereavement at losing her brother to cancer. Through her installation, Coyne is “. . . intent on communicating in a public fashion the particular circumstances of her grief . . .” but establishes a desire to shift beyond her own grief and move into a more “. . . universalizing, attitude toward grief . . .” (Goodman p.69-70). Through Coyne’s artistic gesture she makes a connection to acknowledging personal grief in a wider cultural context. The ambition to communicate in a public fashion often comes out of an artists desire to make their story or feelings known. Kevin Newmark (1995), author and instructor at Boston College, explains that the desire to communicate, particularly to communicate effectively, becomes the means “. . . to make these obsessive reflections intelligible to others. . .” (p. 24).

As in all artwork, meaning is made concrete through the use of material. In this case of Coyne’s *Fairy Tales*, the sense of trauma and longing is made manifest into an installation consisting of twelve mixed-media pieces with elaborate skeins of horsehair interwoven together. Taxidermy animals are wrapped and entangled within the hair. Author Johnathon Goodman (1999) explains, “Coyne’s choice of materials – hair and dead crea-

tures – emphasizes a general feeling of organic entrapment.” (p. 70). In this environment hair and dead animals become distilled animations representing the paradox of living and breathing animals. Goodman (1999) further explains that Coyne understands “. . . that the experience of loss is first a physically determined trauma; her art looks to the spiritual as a realm fully in keeping with the expression of the physical-one literally incorporates the other” (p. 70).

Both Bourgeois and Coyne use personal memories as an inspiration for their artwork. Through representation and remembrance their art becomes the tangible means which draw forth a certain reality, giving the past a place in the present. Their work compels the viewer to recall and reflect upon similar feelings and sympathetic responses. It also inspires an empathetic response through the use of intimate materials and objects.

Overwhelming documentation of tragic events opens the door to overwhelming sensation but it does not create an empathetic response. It overpowers the viewer’s senses, emotions and body. Compelling violent images intrigue but desensitize the viewer. Both Bourgeois and Coyne inspire an empathetic response. Culturally, individuals are bombarded with overwhelming images that are simply shocking through mass media, journalism and art. This has created an emotional distancing and immunity to difficult emotions that theorist Linda Hutcheon (1998) explains: “We have not lacked for critics who lament the decline of historical memory in our postmodern times, often blaming the storage of memory in data banks for our cultural amnesia, our inability to engage in active remem-

brance” (p. 4). To engage active remembrance can be the impetus to employ a historical memory on a personal, cultural and collective level. Bennet explains that to look towards art’s “. . . relationship to experience and subjectivity. . . .” and to the possible ways in which “. . . conceptualizing the politics of experience might actually be derived from the manner in which a visual art medium can . . . register and embody affect” (p. 4).

Memory has a direct link to how an individual evaluates the past as well as how the present is experienced. Trauma, turmoil and loss challenge how an individual remembers the past. In this thesis show, *Artifact and Fantasy*, I am not interested in reconstructing a past but gaining insight into how overwhelming circumstance forces an individual to uncover difficult emotions and seek relief. In these paintings it is my aim to activate memory, to remember the source of memory that provides the past a place in the present. The process of excavating buried emotions is an important process in understanding ambiguous emotions and memories to help understand the nature of human trauma, tragedy and loss. My work acts as a bridge connecting the possibility of transcendence with the necessity of remembrance, a psychological and/or spiritual realm in which the human spirit seeks resolution, comfort, hope or simply relief from stress or pain through humor.

III. Memory, Nostalgia, Sentimentality and Irony

Memory, though constructed in the present, can be rooted in a nostalgic perspective.

Nostalgia, memory and sentimentality are inexorably linked. Although nostalgia is rooted in the past, sentimentality can be connected to either present or past situations. In her article, “Irony, Nostalgia and the Postmodern,” literary theorist Linda Hutcheon (1998) explains that nostalgia “. . . is the past imagined, as idealized through memory and desire” (p. 3). Nostalgia has a selective and fragmented nature like memory because it draws hope and comfort from the past in order to enrich the present; however a nostalgic perspective creates a disconnect toward the present and a tendency towards resolution and idealization.

Nostalgia and sentimentality are employed in many ways in contemporary contexts. In Alexandria Novina’s (2006) article, “A Swell of Sentiment”, she explains that the surge of sentiment is evident in the “. . . broader cultural landscape: in pop psychology, pop culture, fashion and design, and literature” (p. 1). In a recent exhibition at the Decordova Museum, *Pretty Sweet: The Sentimental Image in Contemporary Art* many artists represent imagery that evokes nostalgia. These artists employ nostalgia in various ways: to celebrate emotions, evoke memory and to provoke an ironic political agenda.

During the Modernist era, the nostalgic and sentimental image was considered irrational, excessive and bourgeois. Sentimentality and nostalgia were discounted in serious intel-

lectual discourse. Novina (2006) explains in her article that sentiment was reintroduced in the 1970's with Feminist and Postmodernist Movements because these artists "... were seeking relief from the arcane austerities and inaccessibility of Post-minimalism and Conceptualism and the lack of personal, emotional content in art" (p. 2). The ironic use of sentimentality by artist in the eighties and nineties, such as Jeff Koons, Kara Walker, John Currin, Faith Ringgold and Mike Kelly has more recently opened a door allowing the sincere use of similar material.

In my paintings, sentimentality and nostalgia are employed specifically to invoke memory. Sentimentality has the tendency to indulge or over-romanticize emotions which translates into feelings of nostalgia. Sentimental and nostalgic objects are artifacts imbued with meaning from the past. Such artifacts are part of a personally constructed narrative designed to engage the viewer and to challenge his or her notions of sentimentality and nostalgia, thus necessitating a revision of the past.

IV. The Paintings: Memory, Nostalgia and Sentimentality

In early works I implemented nostalgic elements to establish a connection between past and present. In his article, “The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia”, Christopher Shaw (1998) states, “. . . nostalgia requires the availability of the evidence of the past. . .” (Hutcheon p. 4). I use nostalgic elements, for example, a doll, pearl necklace, and a teddy bear to provoke a sentimental reaction with real objects that are things that someone might cherish. For instance in *Auguries of Innocence* (Figure 1) in the lower left hand corner a vintage Santa Claus evokes memories of Christmas. More vintage toys reinforce the nature of nostalgic visions of childhood: a doll, a toy reindeer, dominos and blocks.

I use nostalgic elements in my paintings to establish an emotional connection between past and present and define memory in terms of its disconnect with the present and tendency toward the idealization of resolution. I often use childhood objects that evoke the cute, cuddly, innocent, and playful in order to introduce connotations of innocence and corruption, memory and nostalgia, joy and mourning. Hutcheon (1998) explains that “Nostalgic distancing sanitizes as it selects, making the past feel complete, stable and coherent . . .” (p. 7). I am not interested in creating this kind of emotional distancing; instead I invite the spectator’s memory to critique nostalgia. Not seeing these familiar objects as sentimental but rather I use them to evoke memory, which is often a less secure view of the past. Objects are occasionally hidden, concealed beneath sheets of paper or fabric that disrupts the spectators view. It obscures the object lying beneath the surface and signifies, that which remains hidden in the subconscious.

Memory, nostalgia and sentimentality play an important role in my work. Memory directly connects to thoughts and feelings regarding past events and experiences. Memory is unstable and imperfect due to the fact that it can be altered by the passage of time.

Memories that are tied to tragedy and trauma are often repressed and forgotten. Tragedy refers to an actual event while trauma refers to the psychological effect of the occurrence. Trauma changes a person's consciousness that, in turn, disturbs the ordinary functions relating to feelings, experiences and memories. Despite the mind's natural ability to suppress overwhelming thoughts and feelings, human pain has a way of slowly working its way toward the surface and into consciousness. For many people, conscious thoughts and feelings, or memories about an overwhelming circumstance often emerge overtime. In her book Trauma and Recovery, Judith Herman explains that Pierre Janet "described normal memory as the action of telling a story" and by contrast she clarifies "traumatic memory as wordless and static" (175).

My work articulates the processes of both ordinary and traumatic memory. Through my choice of materials ordinary memory is portrayed as active and traumatic memory as static. The static element exists through the obscuring of objects using the collage technique where paper, paint and fabric restrict access to the layers below. The active element is present in areas where objects are revealed through the tearing away of layers allowing access to the components hidden below. The viewer's attempt at excavating hidden elements contributes to an emerging dialogue where "[o]ut of fragmented components of

frozen imagery and sensation . . .” can come an “. . . organized, detailed, verbal account . . .” that is oriented in time and history (Herman 177).

In the heavily collaged areas of my paintings, there is an accumulation of objects, beads, hair, flowers, toys, paper and lace embedded in paint and glue. The collage areas depict a dramatic breakdown of these objects through detritus and debris. This serves as a metaphor for the way memories break down, become fragmented and worn with time. The metaphor becomes a significant aspect of these works both in terms of subject matter and in the way the viewer can draw meaning from them. The building of layer upon layer results in a unique three-dimensional sign representing the passage of time.

This work serves to create that bridge among the possibilities of transcendence and the necessity of remembrance where the human spirits seeks resolution. These paintings relate directly to the cumulative recollection of an individual’s life. Layers of experiences and memories, both physical and psychological, are engaged in contradiction, or dispute over the clarification of a lost and recovered memory.

V. Irony and Nostalgia

There is a wide spectrum of contemporary artists employing the ironic gesture in various ways; Jeff Koons, Mike Kelley and Annette Messenger are good examples of the various ways irony is utilized. These artists use irony and humor and default sentimentality to address cultural values toward family, religion, art history and education that are often embedded in nostalgia. For instance Jeff Koon's sculptures employ commercial imagery, borrowed from cheap kitsch and everyday objects, which critiques that default sentimentality by showcasing it at a scale and in venues that highlight it's lack of thought and ostentation. Where Mike Kelley includes non-art objects, he evokes aspects of nostalgia, the grotesque and the uncanny that create a black humor or negative aesthetic. Kelley helped me understand the notion of irony through his representation of nostalgia, the grotesque and the uncanny, where he manipulates elements of innocence to provoke a response as a relief from pain and stress. Kelley's unusual, difficult, even disturbing juxtapositions of objects create situations where ". . . terms are confused and divisions between categories start to slip and that produces a sublime effect or produces humor."

(Sollins, *Memory*)

Annette Messenger mixes personal story and history where her images often menace each other in theatrical installations that challenge the traditions of both painting and sculpture. Messenger's combination of personal story and history helped me to gain insight into how irony and sentimentality can reference the violent connotations between innocence

and corruption. In many of her installations, Messenger uses stuffed animals and dolls that usually evoke sentimentality; paradoxically, however, by using “. . . innocuous objects or materials. . .” she often intensifies the disturbing qualities as the viewer sees the “. . . familiar being made to represent evil. . .” (Messenger, ¶ 4). Messenger’s work functions on multiple levels, it creates distance yet engages, it intensifies yet softens.

Artists use unexpected juxtapositions to invert the visual, formal and symbolic meaning of their work. Contemporary artists Jeff Koons, Mike Kelley and Annette Messenger use both irony and contradiction to address social issues in their work. Dada and Surrealist artists used both irony and the incongruous use of objects and materials prominently in the early twentieth century. Dada and Surrealist movements produced works that rebelled or reflected an ironic attitude toward social values; the unorthodox use of materials and images was instrumental in this rebellion. At the same time, their work was absurd and playful, emotive and intuitive. The objects were not meant to simply stimulate the viewer’s imagination, but provided both a literal and metaphorical basis with which to redefine the object. As Edward Powers (2004) explains in his article, “Bodies at Rest-or, The Object of Surrealism”, the object is “a provocatively double –physical-as-conceptual-conveyance” (p. 228). Powers further explains that

by radicalizing our understanding of the traditional media of sculpture, as well as the extent of its three dimensionality, these playful objects might be best characterized as acting in the ‘gap’ between art and life, as Robert Rauschenberg has described his own artistic practice. (p. 227)

By acting in the gap between art and life, everyday objects become temporal vehicles imbued with meanings that are figurative and invented, literal and symbolic. This is the case with Meret Oppenheim's well-known fur lined teacup, saucer and spoon. The juxtaposition of fur and an everyday household object has unexpected sexual connotations.

The use of irony is specifically effective when the elements and artifacts that compose the work have specifically innocent or innocuous associations, like those associated with the innocence of romance or childhood, for example. Such an invocation of nostalgic feeling in an uncomfortable context has particular resonance with my own work, as I explain further below.

VI. Employing Nostalgia and Irony

I juxtapose objects and materials in a surrealist manner, evoking the unexpected in order to excavate their qualities as signifiers of multiple and layered meaning. Objects that have an immediate relationship to the past and the present correspond to the idea of memory; they project a sense of sentimentality and irony that highlights and interrogates the nostalgic idealization of the past. I am interested in portraying contradictions but also complimenting polarities by using nostalgic elements such as toys, quilts, lace and linens, hair and artificial flowers, along with grass, twigs and other organic debris. This interplay structures memory in a particular place in time where the physical objects become internal signifiers, figurative constructs of real world events and people. Through the use of material objects that are often keepsakes, ordinarily discarded and rediscovered objects that were previously forgotten and transitory are provided with a new meaning.

The Surrealists constructed disjunctive images because they wanted to challenge the constricting beliefs of the everyday world and create new and poetic meanings. In my paintings I often use familiar objects to produce disjunctions between the uncanny and mundane. For instance In *Lost-Sound* (Figure 2) and *Sound* (Figure 3), the unexpected positions of the posts create a disjunction between their place in a domestic interior and an architectural role. These familiar objects create odd juxtapositions where structurally their size and scale presents a strange passageway establishing their duality as if they were great Greek columns.

While the interplay of objects structure memory in a particular place in time I portray the polarities between innocence and corruption, fascination and repulsion, mourning and celebration. These polarities are another important aspect in my paintings. As in all artwork meaning is made concrete through the use of material. For instance the use of hair in many of my paintings creates a sense of both attraction and repulsion. In *Mummer Love* (Figure 4) the integration of hair with a broken teacup and artificial flowers implies the presence of a distinct individual among the mass produced objects. Mass produced objects last longer than the people who owned them, and as a result the objects become imbued with their presence. For instance, in *Departure* (Figure 5) pearl beads and flowers are entwined and matted into hair in order to suggest the presence of someone, or a part of someone that has been left behind. In *Never Mind* (Figure 6), curly doll hair covers three quarters of the right side perimeter of the painting and overflows over the edge. The hair becomes part of the painting entangled in dripping paint with the accumulation of sticks, grass and twigs. The hair carries the eye into actual space wherein the portrayed fantasy space and reality space become confused.

In my work I am interested in the process of attraction and repulsion. For instance in my painting *Fairytale* (Figure 7), the viewer is confronted with a dramatically collaged surface where paper covers the perimeter of the rectangular surface. Again, areas have been torn back to reveal an enmeshed accumulation of artificial flowers, hair, netting and debris. Reminiscent of a wedding white lace is collaged over sections of the paper. Flowers and ribbons represent those from a bride's bouquet. Pearl beads are strewn into

dark areas of the painting. In some areas these objects are enmeshed in a web of hair and organic debris, where glue and paint ooze beneath the surface reflecting puss and bodily fluids. Paint and glue create a sense of repulsion that reflects a sense of these articles building up into discarded materials. The interplay of the objects is reminiscent of a wedding. Weddings are seen as moments of transcendent happiness and eternal love, the debris and the paint point to the difficulty of pain and love, its failures and struggles as well as moments of healing and reconciliation.

Similar feelings of unease are portrayed in the fairytale environments in my paintings such as *Good-bye and Farewell* (Figure 8), in which some of the objects are broken. Some appear to have been have been smashed, suggesting violence or trauma. In the upper left hand corner there is a teddy bear with the head removed from the body. It is next to a doll with the head removed. There is white wash over part of the doll and bear's head with a heavy white drip extending down over both objects. The paint becomes a signifier that plays between the polarities of innocence and corruption. The paint becomes an added gesture acting as a clue that more is taking place. In several areas, grass and debris from the forest floor, leaves, twigs, and pebbles are embedded in layers of paint, creating a rough surface with a tactile quality. Often this organic material is not easily recognizable; it is my aim to create feelings of ambiguity in the viewer. The overall effect of the organic matter obscuring the objects is like a decayed corpse losing its form and even its identity while becoming another element of the forest floor.

VII. The Paintings: Trauma, Loss and Resolution

The dichotomy between a traumatic experience and the assimilation of the experience creates a disruption within consciousness. Kevin Newmark (1995) explains, “The disruption that is produced within consciousness by the explosive collision of two irreducible infinities . . .” which is the traumatic experience and the intellectualization of the trauma, can become “. . . an obsessive distraction for the consciousness that tries perpetually to reflect on it from the outside . . .” (p. 243). I see these two “irreducible infinities” as the impact of memory and belief. Memory is the way an individual remembers an event. However, the memory of uncomfortable or difficult experiences is altered over time. The feelings associated with the memory of an event often differ from the original experience. Because of the disruption of the original memory a new reality is constructed to bring a sense of hope and/or comfort. The psychological effects of trauma necessitate an altering of memory and the disruption of one’s belief system: one’s faith and conviction in the ways in which they understand life’s meaning and their place within it. This reflection is both a result of the experience and a necessity for the individual, as Newmark (1995) explains, “. . . to order, assimilate, and ultimately understand, such proliferation of disruptions . . .” (p. 243).

The disruption between trauma and the intellectualization of an event is another aspect that is important in the dramatic depictions of early paintings. Where my paintings evoke the psychological effects of trauma, turmoil and loss, they also simultaneously ad-

dress the hope for transformation and renewal. My intention is that the viewer experiences the psychological effects of these contradictory emotions. The space between turmoil and serenity is where belief and perception break down and reality becomes confused, chaotic and anxious. In some works resolution is created as a safe space or a fantastical haven. While these are illusory states borne of a need to create comfort, there is also contradictory implication that escapism is not necessarily a real or lasting resolution. This contradiction is created by the unease the paintings create in the viewer.

When an individual endures an overwhelming experience, often the tendency is to create a private world, a safe haven within which to retreat. It is my intention to invite the viewer into this created world, which acts as a metaphor for a space of hope, comfort, or peace of mind. In my paintings, I establish contradictions by contrasting the collage areas with an idealized painted symbology. In *Auguries of Innocence, Fairytale and Good-bye and Farewell* (Figures 1,7,8), the collage area encompasses the perimeter of the picture plane and frames the mid-section like a window into a metaphorical reality. In this painted/illusory space there are bulbous heart-like shapes, offering a sense of hope, renewal or transformation. Sometimes they are breast-like, and invoke the feminine to imply a sense of nurturing or caring. They are stylized in a way reminiscent of fantasy and fairytale; some of the forms look like little buds while others look like hearts or butterflies. The heart shapes reference an idea of love and compassion, while the buds bring to light a sense of beginning or a potential, a growing into a new form or evolution. Butterflies act as a sign of freedom or something connected to nature. The fact that all these objects are

painted in a fairytale like way depicts a longing for these things but without the reality of them. A sense of longing develops in the illusory parts of the painting, love and compassion, a new beginning, freedom. Fairytales are read to us as children. We are innocent when we hear them. Spurring our imagination they become a fantasy fairytale space - a place of retreat. They provide an escape a fresh sweet place untouched by the realities of life. The painted/illusory space contrasts the collage areas by emphasizing the contradictions that exist between the act of remembering and the need for resolution. The illusory part of the painting creates a space to retreat towards. It does not serve as a ploy simply to engage the viewer but functions both literally and metaphorically. While views into the landscape areas (collage spaces) followed by remote areas (illusory spaces) the viewer's eyes continually shift focus thereby emphasizing these contrasting realms.

The shifting of focus reinforces these contrasting realities in diverse ways to create specific effects in the paintings. For instance in *Lost-Sound* (Figure 2) the viewer is confronted with the immediacy of objects and media in the foreground, but as the eye travels into the background, it is drawn into an opening into the sky. The viewer is led toward the opening. However, in *Sound* (Figure 3) while the ground operates in a similar manner a contrast is created by the solid pink hue of the sky, suggesting a sense that although this world appears to be near it is at the same time, very distant. Through metaphor this represents the disconnect between memory and resolution. Another similar disconnect is portrayed in *Never Mind* (Figure 6) where the opening of the vignette is abruptly obscured. The viewer can look at but not into the opening, once again visualizing con-

tradition between the ability to see and not being able to see. A shiny pastel pink hue restricts access of the view into the interior. The pink hue is reminiscent of childhood and innocence where the paint becomes emblematic and takes on a figurative component that makes this space more actualized.

VIII. Sublime

In later paintings I utilize more of a sense of irony by referencing Romantic Landscape painting and Abstract Expressionism to invoke concepts of the sublime and beautiful. Notions of the sublime suggest the search for a spiritual experience, even justification to existence. This is an intentionally ironic reference to the paradoxical ways in which such aspirations can seem both noble and absurd. In these works paint takes on figurative constructs emblematic of both Romantic Landscape painting and Abstract Expressionism. For instance in *Remembered in the Wilderness I* (Figure 9) the sky is left unpainted with a gesso ground while a trace of the rising or setting of the sun tentatively suggests hope or transformation.

Remembered in the Wilderness evokes the sense of the sublime similar to that in Thomas Coles's *The Cross in the Wilderness* (1845). Both paintings are circular compositions within a square format, which metaphorically represents eternity within a numinous space. Cole's painting is imbued with a mood of solitude and profound spiritual experience. In my *Remembered in the Wilderness*, artificial lavender flowers, vines, and tall grasses frame the circular canvas. In the front section of the painting, there is an assemblage of hair, a kitschy figurine of the Virgin Mary, a bronze angel pin, a broach, netting from an elderly women's hat, detritus, and natural debris. The accumulation of objects and material suggest the remains of an individual, and thus becoming potent sacred material. This painting has the sense that someone has died and remnants have been discard-

ed. On the left hand side, sticks, natural fibers, flowers, seeds and pods create a textural surface that evokes the forest as a spiritual experience that commemorates a death.

Cole's painting suggests the overcoming of earthly life and the elevation of the spirit of god through wilderness as a sacred space of spiritual communion and perhaps renewal.

Theodore Rosseau's *Avenue of Trees, Forest of I' Isle* (1849) depicts an Arcadian forest as a serene and simple place not yet destroyed by civilization. This painting inspired me to create this sense of a dense forest in *Remembered in the Wilderness II* (Figure 10), by using actual twigs and branches, as well as suspended birds. There is a sense of accretion in the collaged areas that is denser than in other paintings. I wanted the effect of a thick forest. The branches and twigs are also attached to the outside area of the picture frame and slightly hide the rectangular format. White paint gesso and netting obscure part of the objects: birds are hidden within the branches, and a little girl's old boot rests down toward the bottom right hand of the painting. The blue sky in the distance is a space that the viewer has to travel towards.

This ironic play of the sublime is similar to Peter Rostovsky's *Epiphany Model 2* (2001) which is a romantic landscape that Barry Shwabsky explains is a

striking vista worthy of Caspar David Friedrich with ridiculously minute figures on pedestals positioned as awed spectators. Undercutting the sublime and sentimental effect of the painting with a simple, humorous, sculptural gesture, Ros-

tofsky demonstrates how lofty aspirations, aesthetic and otherwise, are forever held in check by the banal realities of the human condition. (p. 284)

While ironic parallels exist between Rostovsky's work and mine, obvious variations are also present. Where Rostovsky's uses irony, almost sarcasm to undercut the sublime and sentimental effects of painting it is my aim that the viewer experience contradictions associated with the human condition in a sublime way. For example in my paintings *Lost-Sound and Sound* (Figures 2,3) inspired by Alexandre Desgoffe's *Palet Prayers* (1849), is an Arcadian setting, a rural paradise where people imagine enjoying a perfect life of simplicity. The panoramic view in *Palet Prayers* is a common compositional device used in romantic landscape paintings. The panorama allows a wanderer to capture the sublime grandeur of nature and free the soul from earthly worries and pain. In my painting *Lost-Sound*, the harmony of nature inspires feelings of serenity that assimilate a romantic and sentimental sensibility. Yet, the effect is bittersweet, because of an ironic gesture with the use of the post, a man's hat and pieces of a little girl's dress, which may suggest a relationship between an elderly man and young girl. A rope straddles the length of the right post and splits into two sections. The hat, pieces of a dress and the splitting of the rope imply the passing of a relationship without revealing the exact nature of the relationship. The viewer is left with a sense of uncertainty. In *Sound* an ironic gesture of the sky painted close to a flat pink hue, gives the impression that, within this illusionist setting far from infinite, the universe has strict boundaries. In *Remembered in the Wilderness II* (Figure 10), the concurrent need to recognize the boot while being drawn intuitively toward

the blue sky thereby living in the sensory world while simultaneously looking toward a segment of blue sky signifies the remembering of one's youth or idealized past yet pausing for reflection, and search for meaning. The search through complicated and difficult emotions is not straightforward yet there is a beauty in their complexity. Sometimes that beauty must be excavated and sifted through in order to see all the hidden meanings in the intricacy of life.

IX. Conclusion

Artists often draw upon the past to understand, process, and reflect upon their experiences. Such personal history is explored through the connection between representation and remembrance, which provides the tangible means to construct a certain reality that gives the past immediate relevance to the present. Memory acts directly upon an individual's conceptualization of the past, irrevocably binding it to the present.

My paintings work on multiple levels with multiple readings. The use of heavy collage brings to question the nature of the painting. Is the work really a painting or an object? The paintings act in real space as well as illusory space. In this series nostalgia, sentimentality and irony establish the emotional connection between past and present in order to communicate the nature of memory in terms of its disconnect with the present and its tendency towards idealization for resolution, rather than a reckoning of the traumatic event. Cathy Caruth (1995), author of *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, explains the nature of trauma, "I am interested not so much in further defining trauma, that is, than in attempting to understand its surprising impact: to examine how trauma unsettles and forces us to rethink our notions of experience..." (p. 4). This body of work invites introspection even escapism to reflect upon the past, however, not with the intention to reclaim it but to make amends to rethink the past and not dwell in nostalgia. It is not my intention to articulate the nature of trauma but provide a cathartic experience to digest and assimilate the proliferation of traumatic and tragic loss.

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Figure 1. *Anguries of Innocence*. 48" x 48", Acrylic and Mixed Media on Canvas, 2007.



Figure 2. Lost Sound. 48" x 60", Acrylic and Mixed Media on Canvas, 2006.

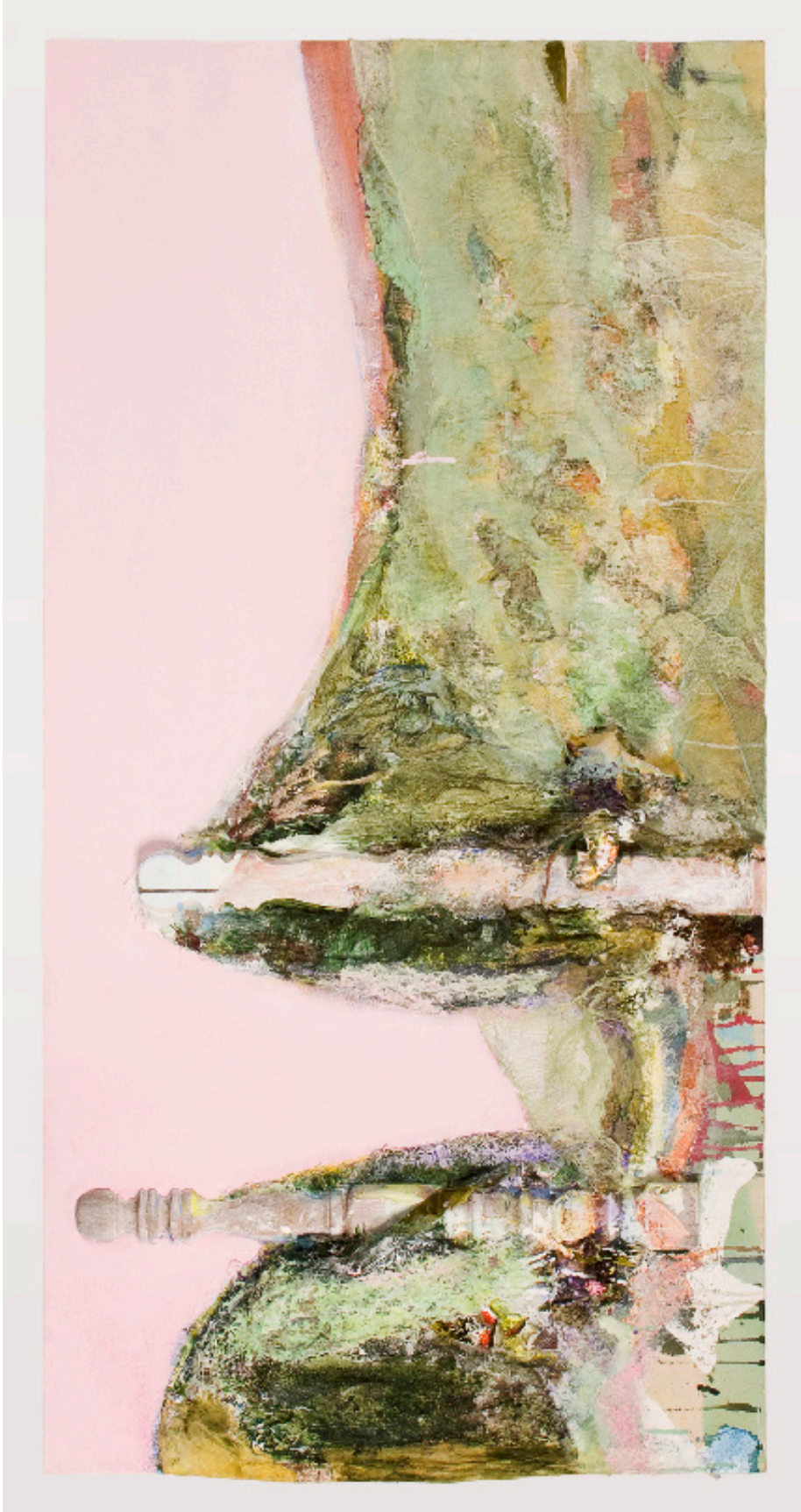


Figure 3. *Sound*. 30" x 60" Acrylic and Mixed Media on Canvas, 2007.



Figure 4. *Mummer Love*. 48'' x 48'', Acrylic and Mixed Media on Canvas, 2006.



Figure 5. *Departure*, 48" x 60", Acrylic and Mixed Media on Canvas, 2007.

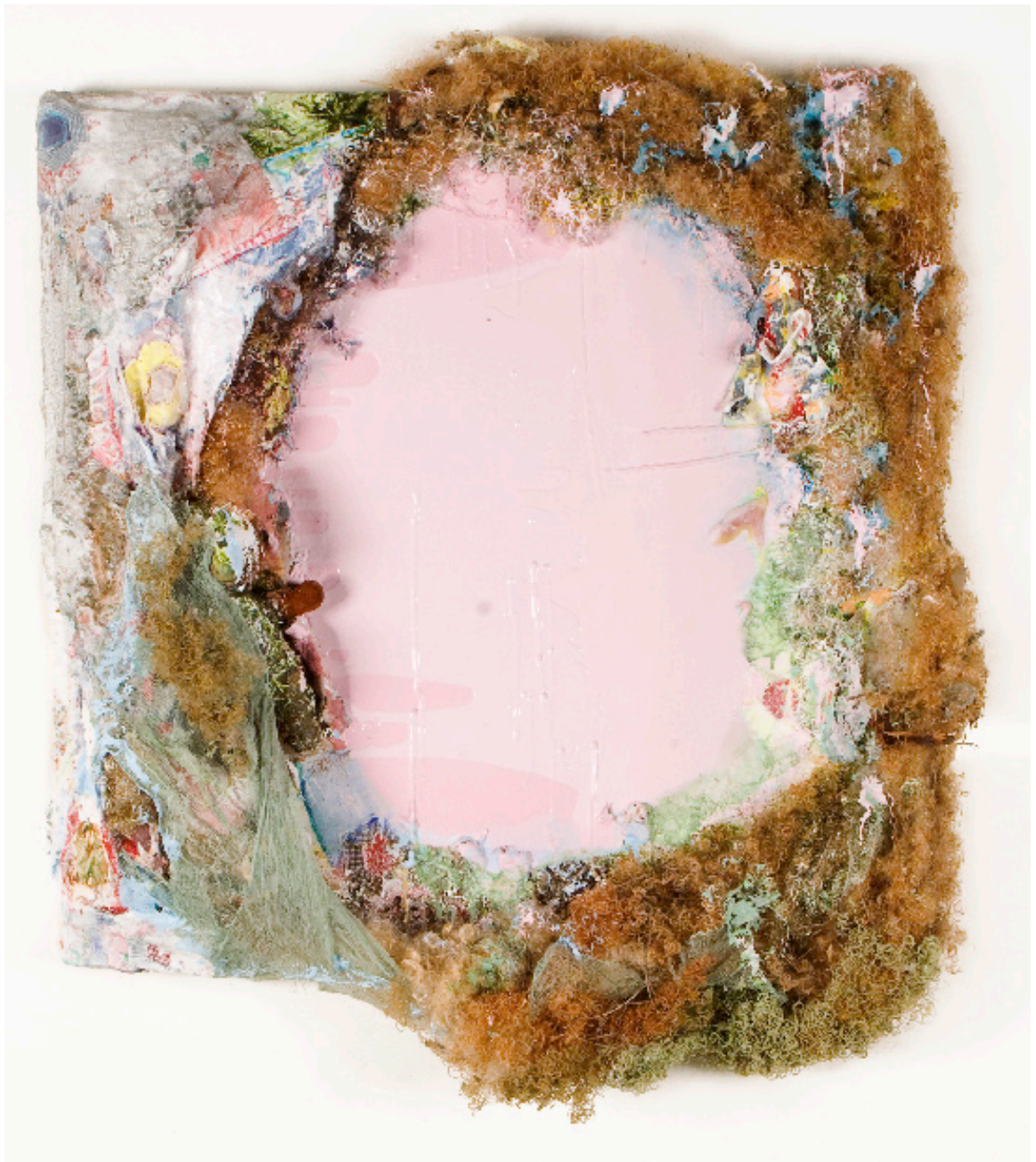


Figure 6. *Nevermind*. 37" x 43", Acrylic and Mixed Media on Canvas, 2007.



Figure 7. *Fairytale*. 36" x 72", Acrylic and Mixed Media on Canvas, 2006.



Figure 8. *Goodbye and Farewell*. 48" x 60", Acrylic and Mixed Media on Canvas, 2006.



Figure 9. *Remembered in the Wilderness*. 36" x 36", Acrylic and Mixed Media on Canvas, 2007.



Figure 10. *Remembered in the Wilderness II*, 41" x 48" Acrylic and Mixed Media on Canvas, 2007.