

THESIS

COLLECTING MY THOUGHTS

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## ABSTRACT

### COLLECTING MY THOUGHTS

This work is based upon the accumulation and slippage of memory in relation to loss. Through shifting line work and the layering of printed semi-transparent sheets of paper, I acknowledge the imperfection, selectivity and collection of thoughts and experiences that shape an individual. These relief prints are inspired by personal reflection on moments passed and relate to my life. My subject matter alludes to feelings of absence but also functions as a memory trigger, each object depicting a link to specific events. The viewer is allowed access to images related to my past but seen through the window of their own life experiences.

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## DEDICATION

This thesis body of work is dedicated to my mother, Anne Skelley Cain.

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The drive to create this body of work is based on exploration of memory and loss. I have never had an exceptional capacity to remember and the further I get from moments in the past the more concerned I become with losing them. Through the process of printmaking they can be recorded. I create for myself a concrete reminder--- like a string around your finger--- of previous events in my life.

Each of my prints triggers a memory. While some memories are very distinct, others are faded or represent a collection of similar events. The associations I make in my images are unique to me and my personal experiences and all the prints in this series are focused around events with the same person. While some memories are as sharp as though they occurred only yesterday, others become vague and elusive over time. Trying to recall them perfectly can be like grasping at smoke. However, I find the more time I spend working with and thinking about my prints the more details I am able to remember from the narratives they represent. The works themselves then become *aides-mémoires*.

The effect of experiencing loss is something I have always heard labeled as “feeling numb” but I would best describe it as feeling soft and hollow. The objects I draw upon are literal references to this sensation. They are the discarded shells or husks of living things. Zoe Leonard’s elegant installation *Strange Fruit* (fig.1) embodies the feeling I try to convey through my own work. After the death of her close friend she found an outlet for her grief through art. Leonard carefully sewed the skins of her breakfast fruit back together, making whole what had been consumed. The skins themselves remained hollow. They are works of *memento mori*, a reflection on the fleeting nature of life and inevitability of death. Even the skins themselves are

impermanent and will decompose in time. Over time the installation will become no more than a memory. I was first exposed to *Strange Fruit* in person during high school and it has remained with me and informs the way I think and work today. I am drawn to the idea that something which is absent can be equally important as that which is present. The most important part of *Strange Fruit* wasn't the skin itself but the void where the fruit had been.

Coming from a family of nature lovers my sisters and I spent our childhoods collecting shells, rocks, plants, and insects. Collecting and cataloging is a theme that has always been present in my work. We lived within close proximity to the Smithsonian and would often visit the Museum of Natural History, which had a profound impact on me. My favorite section displayed the complex skeletons of fish suspended in air and I would draw eels and catfish from all different angles. In college I began taking biology courses and it was through these classes that I was introduced to Colorado State University's vast collection of specimens. Organized (and often disorganized) assortments of egg shells, stuffed mammals, mollusks, carefully pinned arthropods, greasy looking jars of fish, ancient bird skins and skeletons all became available for study. For a couple of semesters I had the opportunity to work in the bird specimen collection room organizing, labeling and often identifying skins, eggs, feathers and wings.

My early body of work in grad school, such as *Skins* (fig. 2), *Echoes* (fig. 3) and *Specimens 1-25*(fig. 4), reflected my adoration of these little treasures born of the natural world and preserved through man's intervention. I see this practice as one born of a love of both of science and the organism being preserved. In my mind it is more closely associated with the mummification of loved ones preformed in Egypt and Peru than the self-aggrandizing stuffing

and mounting of hunted animals. Scientific specimens are things taken from nature that have been altered by the human hand in some way so as to extend their life. The difference is that importance is placed on the life and attributes of animal or insect, not the prowess of the human who captured it. During the late 1800s it became popular to collect specimens from the natural world for study and it was through this process of accumulation and observation that people grew to know more about life on our planet.

These early investigations inform what I do today. Our desire to preserve and document is fascinating; we take what is fleeting and temporary, and attempt to encapsulate it. This began my thinking about what else we deem worth preserving, such as significant moments in our lives captured through video and photo albums. It was this train of thought that led me to reflect on the seemingly inconsequential moments which live only in memory. These smaller moments are most influential in defining who I am as a person. My current body of work still draws on my experiences with organic, scientific specimens but they are collected from my mind and relate to my life and self-history.

My process echoes the idea of layered thoughts which build up over time to make a memory. I work reductively in relief, carving away areas of wood and repeatedly printing the same woodblock, building up layer after layer. Reductive prints are also called suicide prints because in order to print the next layer you must remove the current one, meaning the current layer can never be printed again and once you move forward there is no going back. Like time the block progresses in only one direction and decisions made early on impact the final result.



Each woodcut starts with a drawing. This will serve as my guide as I cut layers away. I work from life but the first marks are made from memory. It is important for me that I spend time looking at my subject matter, turning it over and becoming familiar with its form. Then I set it aside and use a loose ink wash to try to get at the general shape of my object without obsessing over precision. I like to start with an uncontrolled approach because it not only yields gestural, more expressive forms but it is also tied with how our minds work when recalling information. First thoughts are usually broad and non-specific but after focusing details begin to emerge over time. *It Was the Strangest Zoo You've Ever Seen* (fig. 5) is a good example of the aesthetic decisions I make during this process. The actual wasp hive from which I drew was particularly helpful by being of unstable construction to begin with. Papery pieces of it would flake off or crinkle and change while I was drawing.

The rest of the mark-making process is done from direct observation using pencil, black Sharpie marker and waterproof black India ink wash. Many of my drawings are clusters of the same object drawn from varying distances and angles. This was not necessary with *It Was the Strangest Zoo You've Ever Seen* because of my source material's shifting and fragile nature. *I Was Always Looking for Them* (fig. 6) and *Now I can Imagine Where You Live* (fig.7) are a few of the prints where I did employ this tactic, rotating and tilting my specimens so areas overlap and become confusing. This helps prevent me from being too controlling with my work and allows for an element of spontaneity and freedom. I am otherwise, to a fault, overly meticulous and become obsessed with precision. Through line work and washes I try to allow for shift and change that plays off the elusiveness of memory.

I visualize memory moving like water: shifting and changing, an area where accuracy is limited and the ripples from one event can affect the perception of another. I am influenced by the variety of line found in Leonard Baskin's woodcuts, by the turmoil and chaos from which his forms are constructed. *The Hanged Man* (fig. 8) and *The Strabismic Jew* (fig.9) illustrate this well. My own work is softer and more subdued but I feel a connection with his expression of confusion and disorientation contained within a figure. These emotions are closely linked to struggles with memory and expressions of grief and loss.

When printing a traditional reductive woodcut each successive layer would typically be printed on top of the preceding layer on the same sheet of paper. However, I choose to print each layer on a separate sheet of semi-transparent mulberry paper. From each layer I pull many prints, using a variety of colors and opacities because after I cut the next level I will not be able to go back and print that first layer again. Likewise, after a moment in time has passed it is gone and cannot be relived. Memory is a means of recreating it in your mind it but this is a completely different experience. This process of remembering events passed builds upon itself, creating multiple memories of the same event---all very similar but flavored ever so slightly by the moment and circumstance during which they are remembered. These variants of memory accumulate and build up over time. From these the mind constructs a coherent idea of how events unfolded, usually after some minor editing and embellishment where appropriate. Certain facets are pulled to the forefront of thought while others are repressed or fade. I reflect this process in my construction of each final work of art.

After the printing of all the different layers is completed I have a sizable collection of paper sheets, usually about 30 or so. It is from these that I select two or three to assemble into a final work of art. There are parallels between this process and my reoccurring theme of collection. I set my entire compendium out at once and go through each print, comparing, organizing and applying visual hierarchies until I find a grouping with which I am pleased. With *It Was the Strangest Zoo You've Ever Seen* I chose two prints and adjusted them, moving them up and down relative to one another until I found an alignment that was satisfactory. This laying out and systematic reconfiguration of my prints is not only connected to our own internal filtering of memory but also brings to mind the drawers of insects and bird skins from CSU's specimen collections: I have a large assemblage of similar items which must be organized.

Initially I planned to layer images four and five sheets deep but found the opacity of the paper interfered with the reading of prints further back in the assembly. To deal with this problem I began experimenting with combining some, but not all of the prints onto a single sheet. *It Was the Strangest Zoo You've Ever Seen* was created by first printing the second layer of the block in tint base (the first layer ended up being omitted). Parts of the fourth layer were printed overtop of this in transparent grey-brown with other sections of the fourth layer in dark grey. This was all done on the first sheet of paper. The second sheet selected to be shown behind was a solid black print of the third layer. This creates the illusion of layers and limits interference from numerous sheets of paper. By the time the image is resolved, the first layer has become only a ghost of its original form, distorted by additional printings over its surface and the combined layered print presented in conjunction with it. After assembly adjustments can be made, as with the aforementioned print an additional layer was added post assembly:

the dark grey center marking the entrance to the wasp hive. This manner of printing results in a confusion of form that plays off the viewer's perception and the slippage of memory.

Although I refer to my medium as woodcuts what I am actually printing with is particleboard. Particleboard does not have layers the way plywood does; the surface is indistinguishable from the interior. It is dense and has an even, predictable consistency. That being said some boards differ slightly from others, being dryer and more powdery when cut. I find these boards to be easier to cut but less absorbent when inking. Unlike plywood which is typically used for woodcuts, particleboard does not have layers of wood. While plywood has a tendency to splinter, particleboard does not. Therefore, a more fluid line can be achieved with the latter and this is especially important when carving swaths of fragile washes.

My palette is comprised of delicate whites and soft earthy greys, colors I associate with the fogginess of memory. When mixing ink I use a lot of tint base--- usually at least 75%. This thins the ink and makes it more transparent. Some layers are printed using 100% tint base. I find this high percentage not only leads to transparent ink but also causes the mulberry paper itself to become translucent in printed areas. This is more apparent with thinner paper. I print with mulberry rather than other types of paper not only for this translucent effect but also because of the softness of the surface. This in addition to the delicacy of the paper itself complements associations with memory as being fragile and insubstantial. Our internal record of events can become distorted with time or even deteriorate. Reliefs printed on mulberry paper visually embody this ethereal quality.

The printing of layers on separate sheets of delicate mulberry paper is an idea based on how I visualize what it would be like to peer through time. Looking through the semi-transparent layers of paper, the prints further back become distorted by those in the foreground. Similarly, the mind is an organ capable of cataloguing a vast amount of information, but it is not a perfect machine, things change and shift, always in a constant state of flux. Some memories are lost over time or altered, new ones are added, and all are seen through the lens of the present. I am drawn to nature; I find it a constant source of inspiration both in the past and the present. This thesis is a continuation of my exploration of the natural world and the organisms that inhabit it.

## FIGURES



Figure 1: Zoe Leonard, *Strange Fruit (For David)*. fruit peel, thread. 1992-97.



Figure 2: *Skins*. 6.75" x 7.75".2011.



Figure 3: *Echoes I*, Rives BFK paper embossed with hand cut copper sheet. 11" x 8.5". 2011.





Figure 4: *Specimens 1-25*. copper sheet, Mylar, rivets, paper, string. 2011.



Figure 5: *It Was the Strangest Zoo You've Ever Seen*. woodcut. 42"x 24". 2012.



Figure 6: *I Was Always Looking for Them*. woodcut. 42"x 24". 2012.



Figure 7: *Now I can Imagine Where You Live.* woodcut. 42"x 24". 2012.



Figure 8: Leonard Baskin. *The Hanged Man*, woodcut. 67" x 23". 1955.

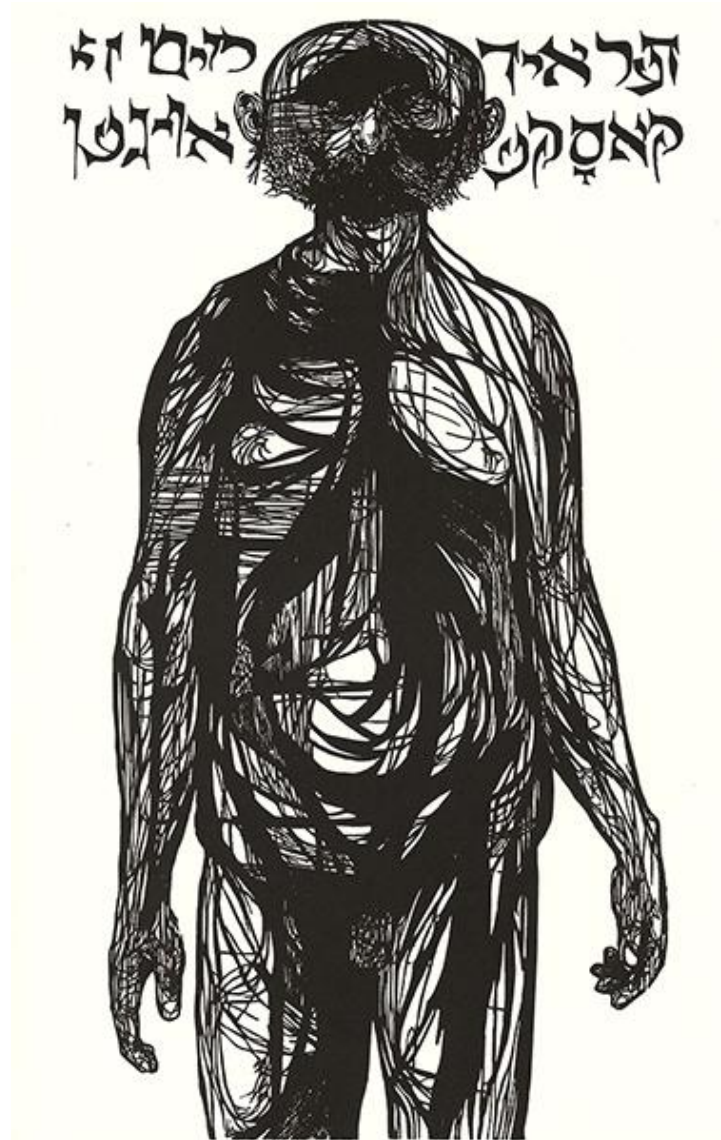


Figure 9: Leonard Baskin. *The Strabismic Jew*, woodcut. 41"x23". 1955.



Figure 10: *Julie's Bird Nest Soup*. woodcut. 42"x 24". 2012.



Figure 11: *Winter Fruit*. woodcut. 42"x 24" . 2012.





Figure 12: *Picking Out the Insides at Grandma's Coffee Table*. woodcut. 42"x 24". 2012.



Figure 13: *Will You Carry This for Me?* woodcut. 42"x 24". 2012.



Figure 14: *Your Sister has Already Collected Two Pailfuls by the Backdoor.* woodcut. 42"x 24". 2012.