

THESIS

ERROR! CONTACT NOT FOUND!

Submitted by

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Department of Art

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Spring 2009

COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

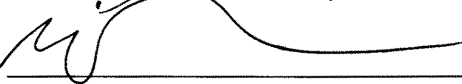
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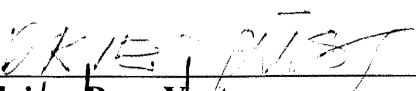

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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My current work, as a painter, is interactive and personal. Patterns of communication, relationships, and personalities are represented through family portraits. I am interested in dissecting characteristics and connecting them visually. Rather than nostalgia, memory serves as a visual history. The portraits become metaphors for maps describing time, place and linear movement.

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According to The American Century Dictionary, “memory is an organism's mental ability to store, retain and recall information.”¹ It is through memory that we are able to retell stories, complete tasks given by educational institutions and do mundane tasks. For most people, memory serves as fact. Memory serves as fact for most people. What they remember from an event is what they believe is true. In an April 11, 2008 interview with Binh Dahn, he discussed his work and views on memory. Binh Dahn, born in Vietnam and currently living in California, examines memory of the Cambodian genocide by printing photographic negatives on palm leaves (Fig. 1).² With an interview Binh Dahn explained that memory was false, it was not real or one's reality.³ That statement shocked me and stuck with me through out all of my work. How could memory be a lie? Each person might remember a situation entirely differently, yet that memory is still true for each. Suddenly I began to question the truthfulness of my own memory and how it coincided with actual events. Through my work I am questioning this theory and investigating the personal nature and truthfulness of memory.

Before the age of eighteen I moved twenty distinct times: twenty separate living arrangements. When I looked at family photographs, I questioned at which house the picture was taken and who was living there at that time. I had a hard time remembering who was where. I started to research and investigate the timeline of my childhood, based on houses in which I had lived. I spent a summer driving from house to house taking

¹ Urdang, Laurance. *American Century Dictionary* (New York: Warner Books, 1997), 359.

² Cheryl Haines, Haines Gallery, (San Francisco: Bin Dahn Exhibition, 2009) available from http://www.hainesgallery.com/mainpages/Exhib_Current/Exhib_Current.html.

³ Interview with Bin Dahn, Visiting Artist at Colorado State University, 11 April 2008.

pictures and speaking to relatives about what they remember of our constant migrations. I organized that information into timelines depicted through drawings, grids and writings.

My interest in depicting timelines and memories moved from diagrams to family portraits. The portrait became my metaphor for a map. I looked in to the works of Christian Boltanski (b. 1944), a French artist of many mediums who said that he “began his quest for remnants of his own past through selected artworks.”⁴ Boltanski, a survivor of World War II, explained that he “used portraits of those who had died in the war to refer to our social, cultural, ethnic, and personal histories (Fig. 2).”⁵ Each portrait was installed on the wall with a light attached, creating a personal altar for that given person. The black and white portraits put a face to those who had died, that they might never be forgotten.

Researching Christian Boltanski’s work had a direct impact on my own art. Boltanski blew up the images of actual photographs so large they appeared blurry to the viewer. The blurriness gave the portrait more emotion, like it was as much memory as portrait. I was drawn to this aesthetic and it influenced my own work. I moved from strictly contour lines to positive and negative shapes. My process changed. Instead of just photocopying the images on transparencies, I darkened them first, shredding almost all detail. This process allows the light to produce a strong contrast, abstracting the figures into positive and negative shapes. At times the images are so abstract they become pure shapes, altogether removing identity from the figures. This is evident in my

⁴ Ask Art, *Christian Boltanski*. [on-line], Ask Art, The Artist’s Bluebook, 2008, (available from http://www.askart.com/AskART/B/christian_boltanski/christian_boltanski.aspx).

⁵ Ask Art. *Christian Boltanski*. [on-line], (available from http://www.askart.com/AskART/B/christian_boltanski/christian_boltanski.aspx).

painting titled, She Was Always Afraid (Fig. 3). Though the painting unmistakably is about a young girl, her face is abstracted, removing detail. This ambiguity allows the viewer to decide who the person is and how it might relate to someone in their own world. Like Boltanski's portraits, my paintings take on an emotional feeling; they are the lingering memory of time and place.

I use this inconclusiveness with my subject matter as well which is demonstrated in, Please, Go Sit Next to Your Father (Fig. 4). In this painting, a table is set for four but the setting is unknown. The four figures that would presumably sit at the table are absent as well. The viewer is left to decide who the occupants might be and where they might sit. Again, the ambiguity of the memory removes nostalgia and allows the viewer to come up with his or her own conclusions. In Ryan and Dan, uncertainty is emphasized by placement of figures and lack of color (Fig. 5). The two prominent figures are placed left of the painting implying more must be going on to the right and in the painting. There are four other figures present, but not completely obvious to the viewer. The figures on the right side of the painting are painted with mars black layered on top of black gesso. Initially, they are not noticeable, but as the viewer navigates the piece or changes point of view they appear. Again, this sense of mystery is extremely important. It emphasizes different memories that may occur, stimulated by one situation.

In the 1960s, Andy Warhol (1928-1987) used similar social issues to transfer his paintings from photos to canvas. His work was a social commentary on America's consumer culture. He expressed these views by repeating images in various colors, serving to overwhelm the viewer, such as his Campbell's Soup Cans and One Hundred Dollar Bills (Fig. 6-7). Andy Warhol, an American artist and a central figure in the

movement known as Pop Art, explored transferring photographs onto various surfaces.⁶

Warhol's work expressed his obsessive-compulsive personality, and he became known as a machine of mass productions.⁷ Warhol traced or silk-screened images onto surfaces and then, additionally, painted loud colors to add detail.

Like Warhol, I have chosen to repeat the images to create a time line. Mimicking a Polaroid, each painting is on black gessoed paper with a two-inch border (Fig. 3-5). Because of its fragile, impermanent nature, paper is essential to this series. The handling and storing of the paper becomes a metaphor for how the memories are carried and stored. How the paintings are viewed is equally important to the concept. Traditionally, works on paper are framed behind glass, becoming a significant object or work of art. For this series sequence is essential. They are a collection of memories, almost like a photo album. They are not one individual idea and therefore they are hung directly on the wall. This intimacy allows the viewer to get more involved with the fragile nature of each piece while still receiving them as a series.

I choose to use synthetic colors to create tension and discomfort within each piece. Since a great deal of detail is removed, color becomes extremely important. It expresses or produces a feeling that something is wrong and forces the viewer to ask, "What happened?" For example in, Sisters, three young girls and a street sign stand before a synthetic, unnerving yellow sky (Fig. 8). I have combined two photographs and overlapped them to put a place to the time of the photo. The two central figures emerge

⁶ Pop art is a visual art movement that emerged in the mid 1950s in Britain and in parallel in the late 1950s in the United States.

⁷ Philippe Tretiack, *Andy Warhol: Universe of Art* (New York: Universe Publishing, 1997), 4.

from the sky with their ghost-like appearance and transparent clothing. The colors and application of paint used in this painting signify tension, familial tension. In I Never Liked Him, reddish-copper tones were used to depict the first layer of a very old all-boys school photo (Fig. 8). Then a photo of a group of men was painted in a cream color, at times transparent, creating a second layer. The layering process is very important for the memory. There are many complexities to a memory and the transparent washes demonstrate that. I wanted to create a fiery first layer with the young boys, almost like they are a haunting memory of the older gentlemen.

When looking at a photograph, so many memories arise, not all of which are necessarily about the photograph. One memory can lead to another, ending far from where one has begun. My aim was to capture the complexity of memory through ambiguity, color and layering. I am brought back to Binh Dahn's statement, "memories are not truths, they are lies," and I cannot help but disagree. Though one memory of an event may differ from another person's, it is an individual perception of what had taken place and so it is their truth. Events happen in time while memories exist in the present, perceived of as truth by each individual.

Images



Fig. 1, Binh Dahn, Iridescence of life #6, 2008, chlorophyll print, butterfly specimen & resin, 14"x11"x2", Haines Gallery.

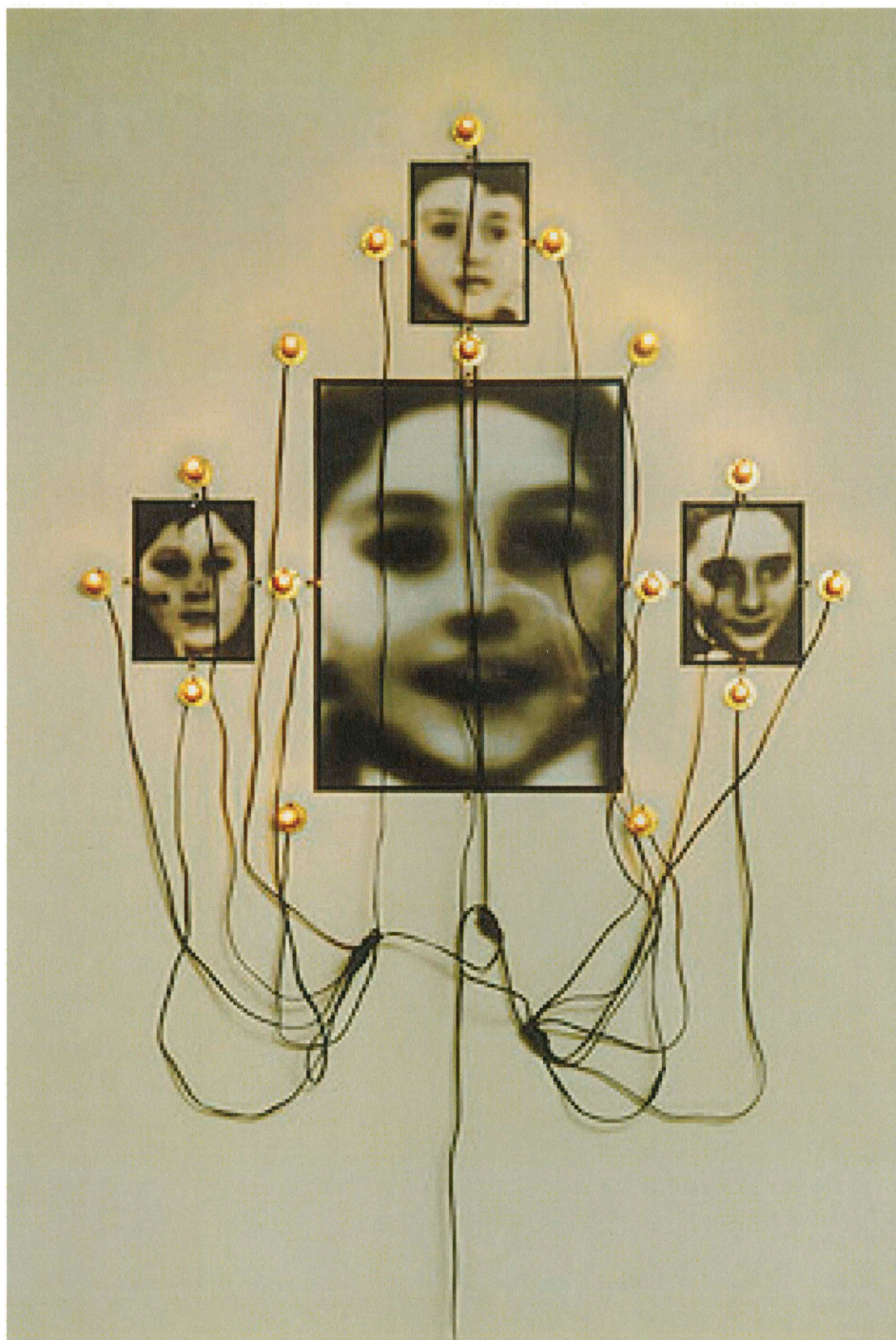


Fig. 2, Christian Boltanski, Monument - Odessa, 1990, lights, wires, photos, 86"x41.3", Spencer Museum of Art.



Fig. 3, Meghan McGrath, She Was Always Afraid, 2008, acrylic and oil pastel on paper, 80"x60".



Fig. 4, Meghan McGrath, Please, Go Sit Next To Your Father, 2008, acrylic and oil pastel on paper, 50"x58".



Fig. 5, Meghan McGrath, Ryan and Dan, 2008, acrylic and colored pencil on paper, 80"x60".



Fig. 6, Andy Warhol, 200 Campbell Soup Cans, 1962, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 72"x100", The Collection of John and Kimiko Powers, New York.

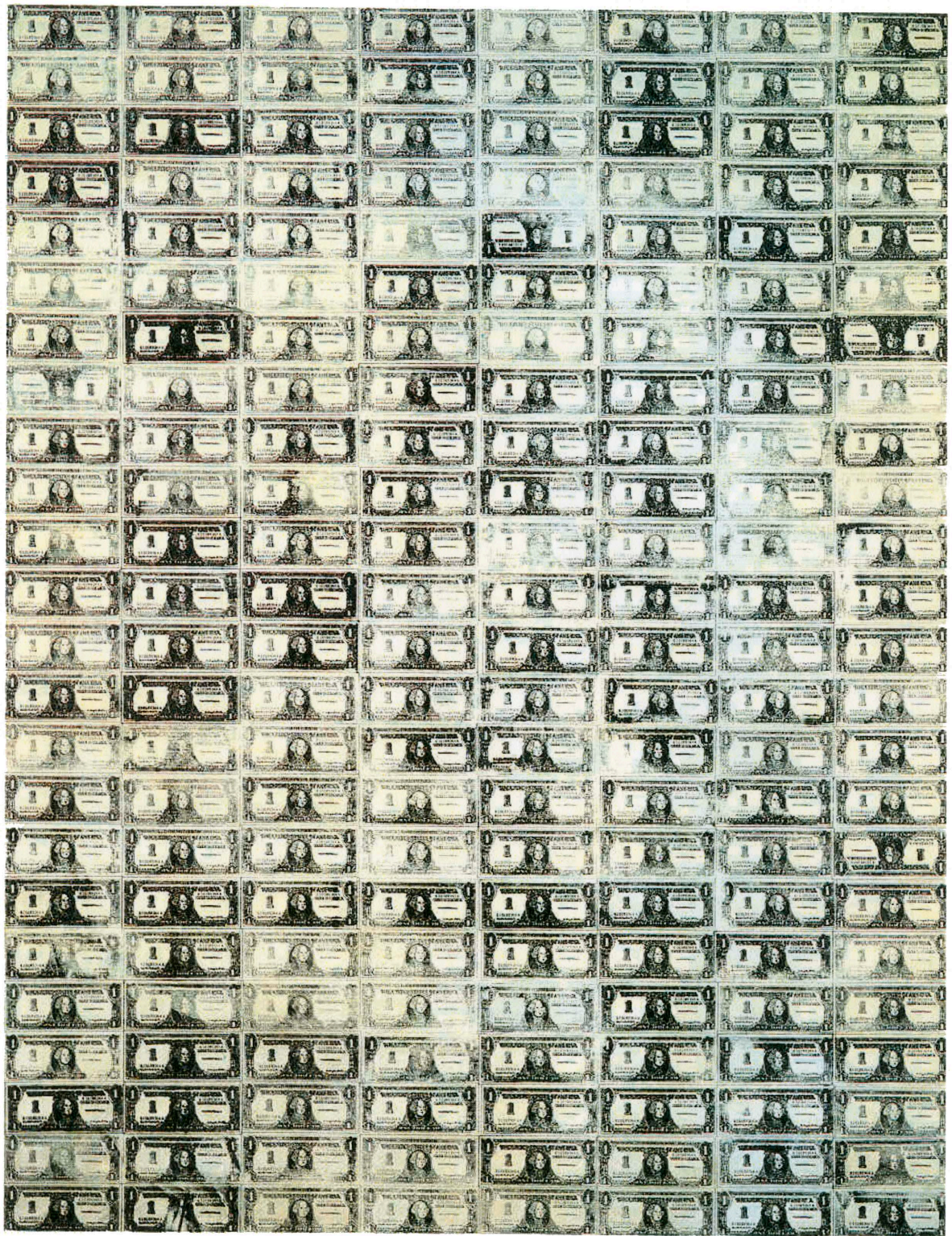


Fig. 7, Andy Warhol, 192 One Hundred Dollar Bills, 1962, synthetic polymer paint and silkscreen on canvas, 90"x70.1", The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, New York.



Fig. 8, Meghan McGrath, Sisters, 2008, acrylic and oil pastel on paper, 48"x50".



Fig. 9, Meghan McGrath, I Never Liked Him, 2008, acrylic and oil pastel on paper, 50"x72".

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