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Glancing Out The Back: Artist's Memories and Research.

Abstract

When storying memory we bring from ourselves aspects of dreams, images from our human psyche and glances out the back as windows to our worlds. This paper describes and analyses the role memory can play in describing the process of review and reflection that engages us as we go about the business of being artists.

We create ourselves through memory. I have been taken by the role of memory in the processes of biography, autobiography and notions of portraiture. These methods are critical aspects that enable us as artist researchers to describe our experiences of the world as we see them. As Narcissus Quagliata¹ argues, "the object of creating artwork is primarily twofold: to create a dialogue between ... self and life via the medium (a philosophical activity) and to communicate". This is the way we work when we are involved in sharing our perceptions of what it is to be an artist, and I argue that we can do this very effectively by wanting "to make portraits of individual lives."² Central to this way of working, and to all aspects of research that involves storying people's lives, is the role and the articulation of memory. In the belief that investigation is the business of everyone, especially artists, I argue that we need to recognise and tap our autobiographical memory as a rich inner resource of memory for people, objects, places, events, feelings, all of those details that enable us to probe into the story of our lives.

Each of the visual and verbal narratives of praxis used to illuminate and illustrate issues raised in this paper draw on the work of Shelagh Morgan³, however due to the nature of the materials sourced, page numbers will not be indicated.

Biography

Robyn Stewart is Associate Professor in the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Southern Queensland. She is responsible for the co-ordination of the Visual Arts Honours and Masters courses and teaches in the field of aesthetics, art theory and visual research methods. Robyn's research explores issues of practitioner-based research praxis as well as the construct of Neonarratives. Her publications include 2 book chapters, and a number of papers in refereed journals in Australia and UK. She has presented more than 60 papers at national and international conferences and in 1999 was Chair of the Organising Committee for the highly successful 1999 30th InSEA World Congress in Brisbane. Robyn is currently Associate Director of Research in the Faculty of Arts, Acting Head of Visual Arts and serves as an elected member of the USQ Council.

Glancing Out The Back: Artist's Memories and Research.

Memory: reflection and seepage.

It is not everyday that you can see your own shadow on top of a cloud.

Emma Chamberlaine, 2000.

The artist Narcissus Quagliata⁴ believes that central to his process of working is bringing "the richness of your emotional and intellectual life, your fear of death, your hidden or obvious lust, your most tender moments, or any one of these in full, can you then begin". He tells us later

I find it absolutely crucial to express what makes me feel alive here, today, in any possible way. Even before I am an artist be it a painter, maker of glass, mime, or teacher, I feel, I smell, I dream. I am excited or terribly sad, I see, and I am moved. Then for some mysterious reason I wish to vibrate, to move, to alter, to express, to transform⁵.

Memory revises itself over and over during the course of a lifetime.

As Quagliata⁶ explains

I must constantly go back to myself and even further back to that area of "informed chaos" inside of which all the diverse activities are truly meshed and one, and emerge time and time again a different person. ... Confronting myself, my life in its totality, I have found my posture as an artist isolated and ineffectual. I find that one's own inner perception of the richness of life is only the beginning of a meaningful contribution. ... As I am coming out of a shell of self-perception and am connecting with society, I am confronted with a reality complex and full of problems, tensions, possibilities; consciously or unconsciously, I must decide what role

I will take in the scheme of things. To me to exist and to be sensitive is simultaneously a total political and poetic act. ... I am a maker of images who wishes to introduce his work in light of existing literature and references.

Quagliata is describing the process of reflection and review that engages us as we go about the business of being artists. In looking at the work of Shelagh Morgan we can see a way that this process of reflection can be illuminated both visually and through the reflective writing of the artist researcher. Morgan contextualises the conceptual background to her project as

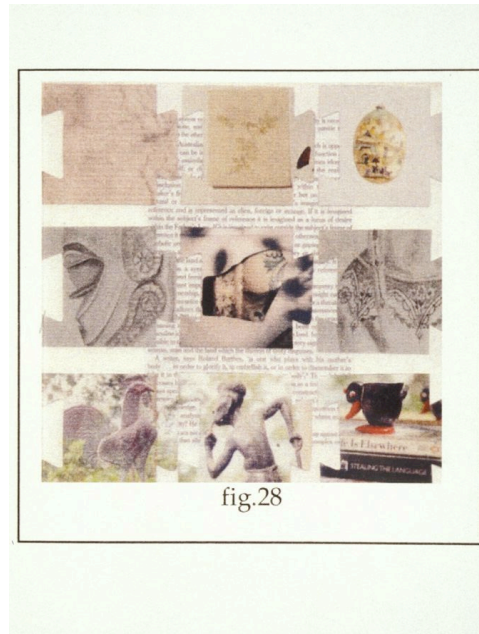
Based on my childhood memories ... my history locates me as the product of a colonial ideology. Throughout the work I look at my cultural identity in a series of visual autobiographical works. My intention was to produce a visual account of the process of negotiation between self and place that is phrased within the context of post-coloniality.



The interpretation of culture.

Yet despite these kinds of negotiations, memory is liable to err and may not always reflect accurately the events and experiences of our lives. Over time, memory becomes our truths and constructs the myths that inform our existence. In a process of reconstructing self we constantly re-fashion or refresh our memories. For example, we have each had the experience of hearing a familiar and distant event described by someone else who was present at the time, only to feel cheated because their story does not fit our memory. Shelagh Morgan is clearly aware of this issue and explores these adaptations as fictions,

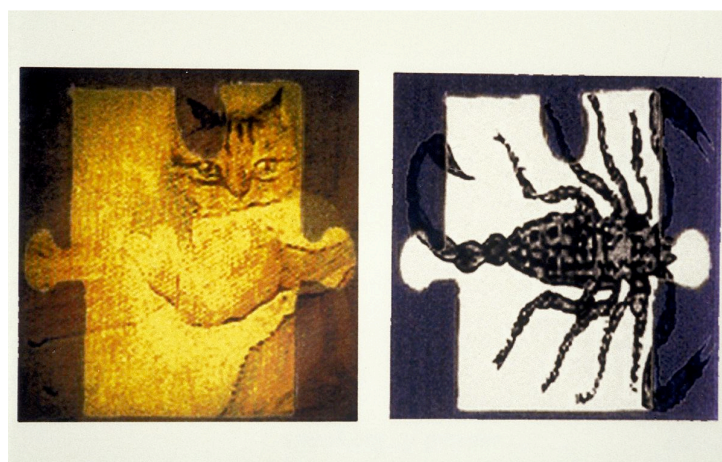
The set of images I have put together established visual reference points to memory and experience. ... The gap between memory and fictions that were used to reconstruct the subject is a predominant theme through the work. I visually play with the dual experience and the conflicting sites of memory ... I am interested in the secondary narrative that emerges in this gap, it might be seen to trace, however lightly, the third or hybrid self of the invisible child who listens and watches in the spaces in between ... I have positioned myself as both the observed and the observer ... the space between [these] becomes the critical ground within which clues to my sense of place and identity are found.



Memory Objects: Telling Ground.

However, that critical ground can be slippery. For instance, I clearly remember walking to my car one evening many years ago with my husband and another staff-member. It was winter and the air was promising another freezing night and to the west was the most spectacular sunset raging across the sky. I stopped and drew my companions' attention to the spectacle, remarking on the colours and how the blue turned green on the horizon. To my surprise the staff-member suggested that he had never really noticed sunsets before and thanked me for stopping to talk about it. A number of times since I have head my husband retell the story, and his reconstruction places him central to the story and I no longer figure in the scene of his memory. Effectively my voice has been silenced and my story appropriated by his memory, and nothing I say will convince him that I was there. Or is it simply that "In families my memory seeps into you and your memory seeps into mine, and after a while it becomes impossible to separate the sources".⁷ Interestingly, Shelagh Morgan depicts herself as a child negotiating this space of hybridity,

The child shuttles between the abstract sites of stories, which word upon word, are supposed to construct an affection for the landscape and its manners, and tangible environment in which they are told. These conflicting points of experience become, over time, one memory so that it is difficult to separate the inside and the outside spaces.

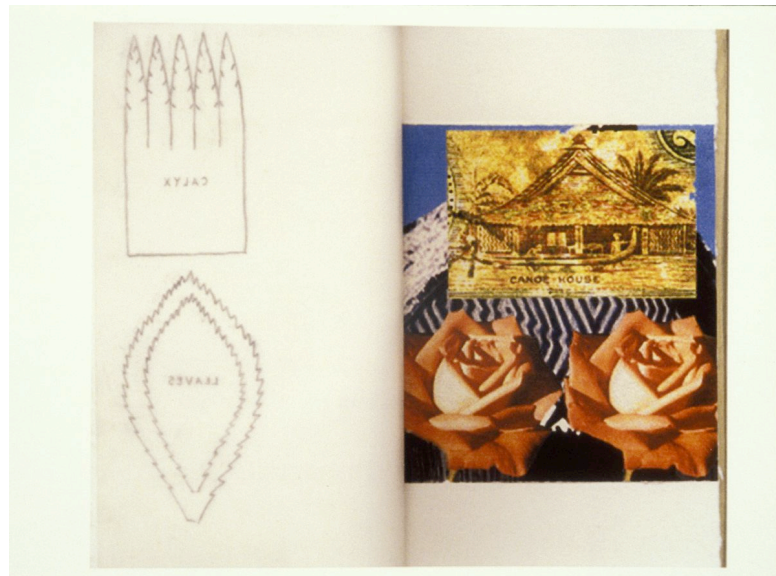


Memory Observed.

Making memories meaningful

Memory is the storied nature of human thought used in a process of meaning making. Remembering evokes the social context out of which memories arise. Stories of memories are ways used to create narrative truth, through which we can invite the viewer in, to say 'you do the seeing', to bridge differing points of view. Visually we can add to this process by using images of familiar objects to cue our rememberings as Shelagh Morgan demonstrates,

The dozen plastic roses sat in their bronze vase on the government-issue sideboard, dusted and washed in warm soapy water. That they stand for the real thing goes without saying. For me they represent the elsewhere of everything. The roses keep place at bay.



Local Knowledge.

When storying memory we bring from ourselves aspects of dreams, images from the human psyche, glances out and back, as windows on our worlds. People are rememberers and perceivers who learn these skills and styles in the social settings of childhood. "Autobiographical memory presumes the existence of a conceptual self, of the very *me* whose experiences are being remembered."⁸ However, self knowledge is essentially multimodal in that we can always directly hear, see and feel where we are and what we are doing, that is our present state of being. This is a process that combines remembering self with self-narrative, and situates their functions and believability within a socially and individually determined scene.

Memory creates maps that help us to find our way in the world. We recover memories through retrieval cues that are context dependent and use the past to contextualize the present. We use powers of recall to respond to the need to understand certain aspects of current events by recreating or re-imaging past experiences. As Reiser, Black & Kalamaridis tell us, "Remembering an experience involves reunderstanding that experience"⁹. The re-imaging process makes what is happening now relevant by paying attention to images of the character and appearances of past objects and events. In so doing we revisit in some way the experience that was once important, making associations to link present and past by harnessing experience to help make sense of our world. For Shelagh Morgan the reunderstanding process involved a process of tracing some remembered spaces between self and other, and [the resulting book] alludes to the slippage of meanings that are the result of the dualities of a child's experiences.



A System of Difference: Local Interpretations.

Collective memory is the glue that binds us together, underpinning our identity and affecting the way we represent ourselves. According to Becker¹⁰, Susan Sontag sees collective memory as stipulative and directive, a system of collective instruction that is triggered through instruction. The phenomenon of collective memory draws on stories that connect us by representing memories that identify themes and cement bonds of intimacy by defining our traits and depicting our ethnic, religious and social values.

The primary force behind the preservation of identity is myth ... (it) creates heroes, heroines and villains. It gives concrete image to abstract meaning, clarity to good and evil, archetypal resonance to isolated incidents.¹¹

Autobiographical memory blends when and what. It involves the historical self-remembering of actual past events, perceptions of experiencing the events within a perception of self at the time, the act of remembering at a later time and how the self is constructed at the later time of remembering. Autobiographical memory gives us direct access to the past by drawing on the ribbon of memory that runs through our lives. The threads of the ribbon are organised using a kind of hierarchical system. As autobiographer we need to recognise that as controller of that memory system we are not only a consequence of that hierarchy but also create of the meaning that flows through it.

Autobiographical memories necessarily follow personal pathways, pathways constituted in the very act of self- construction. Even as we forge notions of our "selves", we shape and frame the nature of our latest recollections. Our identities and memories are two sides of the same coin.¹²

In developing a way of talking about this process Shelagh Morgan observes the role that adults play in mediating childhood memories through their ways of documenting what the child is doing. She remarks,

It is surprising as an adult, to find that there is an almost complete absence of photos of any of them [nannies, cooks, and members of the household staff] in the family albums. The significance here is that my childhood memories are not documented, but in fact consciously excluded by the person recording the events surrounding the family. This book is, to an extent, an act of salvage; an insistence on visually reconstructing that part of a personal history that has become absent, or rendered silent.



Territories of Desire.

The remembered self

According to Fivush¹³ not all narratives are true and what is remembered may be not what really happened. People exist through time and remember (and reconstruct) what happens to them across time, using memories of past events to influence the present. These reconstructions rely upon episodic memory that is a process of distinguishing the actual event, the experienced event, and the subsequent memories of it as the remembered version of the event. If the remembered events act significantly on someone's life they create key ideas that become autobiographical memory and may form part of a life narrative and a significant way to define self. However, studies of narratives have shown that these key ideas are not fixed or static; rather they change with every retelling.¹⁴ Life narratives may be a basis for personal identity and self-understanding, however their trustworthiness depends on powers of personal experience, perception, conceptualisation and narrative.

Edwards and Potter¹⁵ remind us that memories cannot be checked against reality but reality is established by the memories themselves. "Everyday conversation remembering often has this as its primary concern - the attempt to construct an acceptable, agreed, or communicatively successful version of what really happened". So we should not presume to read memory as truth. Memories can be fabricated, broken, repressed or affected by time. Images and memories are always constructs shaped by the need to establish a satisfactory story or explanation. Neisser¹⁶ suggests that autobiographical memory should be taken with a grain of salt. "The self that is remembered today is not the historical self of yesterday, but only a reconstructed version. A different version - a remembered self - may be reconstructed tomorrow".

In exploring how her memories have been established Morgan observes aspects of the cultural processes involved in the politics of display evident within her family records,

The person who takes the photo of the child edits out that which is not desirable, sanitising the experience ... The child who looks for records against which to reference memory, finds that it is missing and wonders why the people who coloured the days are not a part of the photographic documents of their lives.



Speaking of Gender.

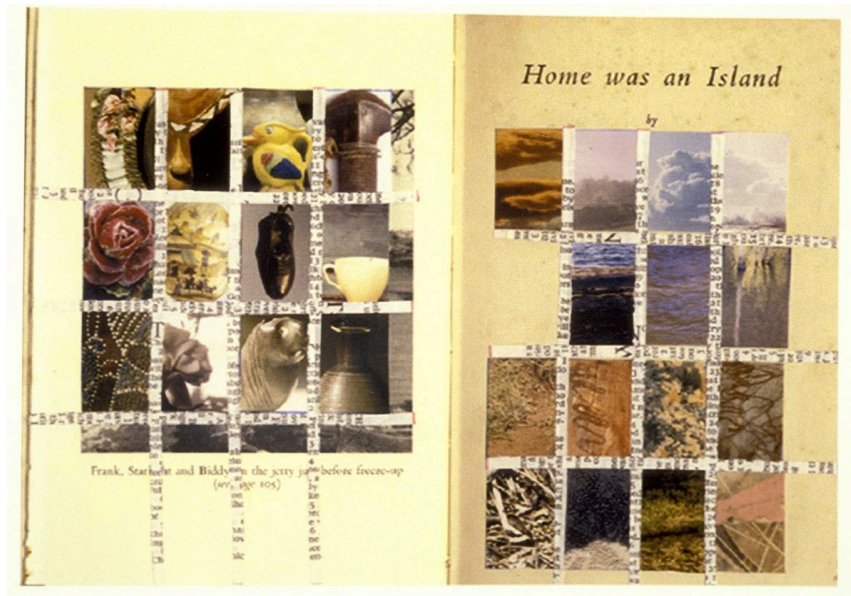
Remembering is a dualistic process where we remember things as the remembering self. Reed¹⁷ describes autobiographical memory as the separation of two selves, the me-experiencing-now (the 'I') becoming aware of a prior- me-experiencing its (prior) environment (the 'me'). In narrative form, the 'I' becomes the doer, the remembering actor or speaker and the 'me' is the socially generated, invented or constructed representation of self. Consequently, when we story that process we create self-narrative.

For Jerome Bruner¹⁸ the process of self-narrative is ambiguity, constructed more like thinking than memory and shaped by theories of how best to tell a story rather than the track of memory-as-actually-remembered. We remember a multiplicity of selves, and vary our stories according to the occasion, audience and mood. In the process we address crucial turning points, key events and the effects of the choices we make within our social contexts. Barclay¹⁹ argues that autobiographical memory is more like skilful improvisation than direct retrieval, where we make selves in the making, protoselves, "new on every occasion, innovatively adapted to the present circumstances and emotional needs of the individual".

Mapping personal landmarks

Shelagh Morgan maps personal landmarks within her social context by retrieving and collating fragments of memory as they are recorded among available visual archives. She explains,

This is a slim book made up of fragments of images that isolate memory as islands of experience. The connections between them are contingent upon the space within which they are viewed. The photograph sutures forgetting.



Home was an Island.

Memory's real interest is to create meaning about the self. By using techniques of chunking, as Morgan does, we can map personal landmarks to help make sense of our memories. This process involves grouping the data around key reference points made up of context clues. These context clues are evidenced where unique or significant events are used to monitor memory time, the what and when of the event. In this way chunks of pieces of memory are arranged into meaningful patterns to organise and reduce the burden of memory.

Generic, or collective, memories act like scripts or schemas that enable us to ground social and cultural contexts. For instance when parents tell their personal histories to their children they are constructing collective memory by passing on the family character, meaning and history. They also provide opportunities for the formation of new memories and reshaping of old recollections. Specific memory is situational, personally significant and often well maintained, and provides the base for detailed remembering of vividly significant events or incidents.



Maps of Meaning: Front Cover.

For Shelagh Morgan.

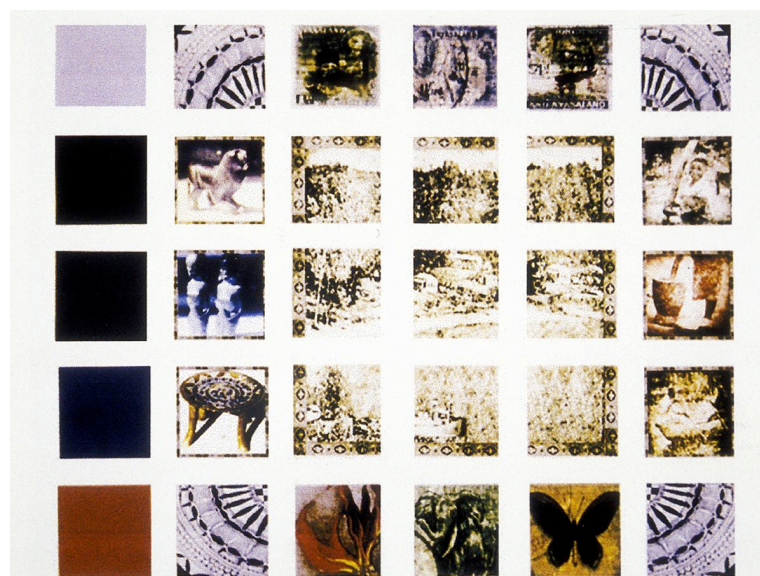
The memory of ice-cream in cardboard, the smell of it mingles with diesel fumes. I am seasick again as I look at the shipping labels used in this work.

This work illustrates how specific memory may be triggered by unusual events that provide tags for meaning. We all have instances of this in our lives that we remember vividly; starting a new job, the loss of something special, hearing bad news, winning an award, or losing a friend. We will always visualise where we were when we 'saw' September 11. Similarly, my generation can tell graphic tales describing where they heard of the death of JFK. These instances reflect a process of consequentiality that makes meaning vivid and often involves emotion.

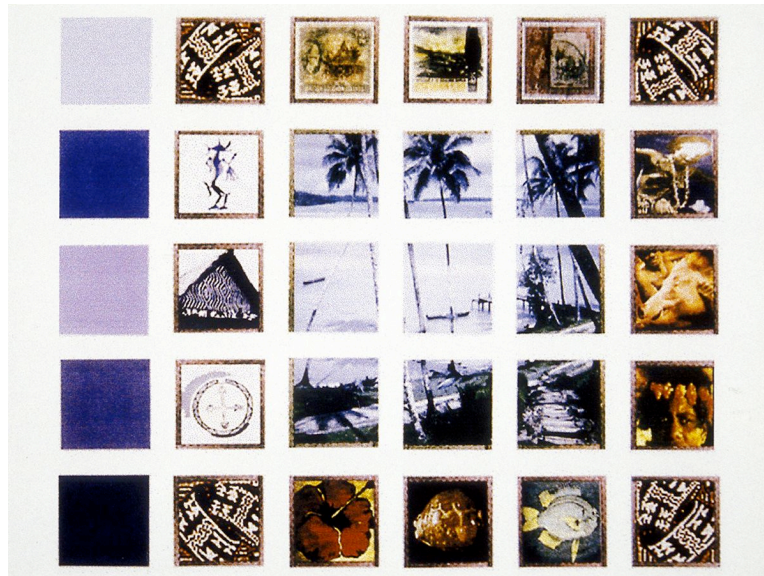
Remembering requires us to call back information using images, events, feelings, in a process that focuses attention. These cues may be emotional or historical and act as a flashback to light up the system. Flashbacks or 'flashbulb memory' as Rubin²⁰ calls it, serve to make 'vivid memories vivid', by being able to recollect significant events clearly and in detail. Recall can also appear as a daze or blur when remembering experiences involving fear or stress. In the process of reliving a specific phenomenal episode our revived feelings and responses can narrow the focus of attention and result in vivid memories or it, or can blur or blind us to the details. This kind of symbolism is often marked by turning points or cataclysmic events. This is where a single event can stand for a major theme in life that then stands for clusters of meaning.

Self-defining memories give shape to, and are shaped by, our lives. They reflect the remembered self and involve selective memory retrieval, consistency and associations with shared values and storying in a process of self conception and self construction. We remember our successes, defeats, love etc. as conceptual structures or categorising systems in a narrative process of thinking self. These repeatedly influence our manner of intimacy and pursuit of associations with others where we judge our reactions to be like other peoples' in similar circumstances. They answer the question of who we are and constitute core incidents. Shelagh Morgan has curated core incidents in her study taxonomically,

Remembering where I was before is a process of recollecting place through a series of images which are sorted and categorised in relation to the specific geographical sites that my memories and stories are attached to ... The border is made up of the artefacts of memory that inform the personal context associated with place ... the choices here [of images] are determined by my experiences and memories.



A Taxonomy of Remembering: I remember where I was before I.



A Taxonomy of Remembering: I remember where I was before 2.

In the process of researching memory and as we select our key memories we might ask ourselves why each is so vivid? Is it prompted by a novel experience, consequentiality, historical or emotional responses? And are these memories significant or symbolic? In this way we can sort and categorise them into a personal taxonomy. By engaging such a process for performative looking we can explore and question our personal ways of seeing.

I watching me

The system works as an I watching me

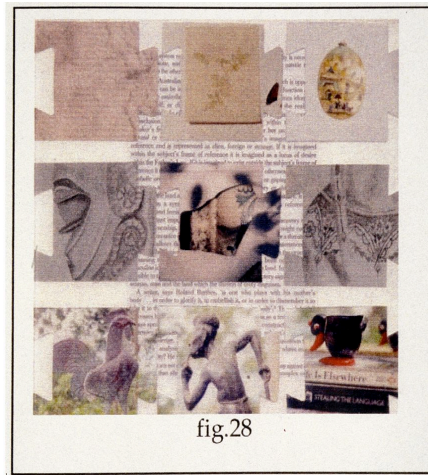
The remembering watching the remembered self.

I watching me provides situational attributes, the outer circumstances, to explain behaviour. For instance if we fail we tend to blame someone or something else 'it was too hard, she didn't make it make sense to me'. However people watching the failure of others tend to make 'dispositional attributes' by looking at personal issues, the inner traits, and concluding that the person is too stupid, or lazy or clumsy.

I watching me also involves time through a process of self-reflection where we approach recollection like watching a play. We can see this when we justify our actions using dispositional attributes to speak as an outside observer 'I was tired'. It is interesting that we tend to recall older memories using more out-of-body perspectives and dispositional shifts.

Adulthood and memory works "like artists continually painting over the portrait of ourselves that we first made in adolescence".²¹ In the process of recall, adults use selective memory to change, alter and repeat instances. Characteristics of this include memory's repentances, where we change our mind about what happened (what was on the canvas) or by painting one lifestyle over another. We can alter the past to make it similar to the present like when we colour childhood memories with our understandings of the world now. It is interesting that adulthood memories are generally guided by presumption of continuity that relate the then and now and here and there of our lives. The use of 'always' and 'never' are signals that such a generic memory is being used.

Continuity in memory recall is a process of rationalisation where we try to organise experience. During the course of explaining we establish continuity and permanence for a new self. In this process of self depiction we often employ contrast to establish distance by telescoping the past and present as indicators of change over time (how we are now different). Shelagh Morgan illuminates the processes of visuality that she has developed to talk about the powerful and meaningful experiences that shape her memories and praxis.



The Artifices we Employ to gather the World Around Us.

The research approach I have taken is based on the idea of utilising personal visual material as or like it is a primary research material. Through an interdisciplinary approach I have explored the potential of the artistic process of making as a form of autobiographical extension.

However our memory patterns change over time. It is generally held that as twenty year olds we concentrate on recent vivid memories with few memories of the distant past. By the time we reach thirty we experience similar forgetting curves but fewer vivid memories to those in their twenties. Yet fifty to seventy year olds are able to recall more early year memories of personal significance, especially about events in their twenties and thirties. As Rabbitt and Winthrop²² say "remote events may be more often rehearsed in memory as the theatre of the mind becomes the only show in town".

In the end we become characters in the story of our lives.

Life narratives represent significant ways of defining the self, and autobiographical memory may form part of a life narrative. Tom Barone²³ assures us that memory is the glue that holds meaning together so that we can shape and relate a life story. It allows us to use a seemingly unrelated series of events to transform a plot to create a coherent consistent version of self. In the process of reconstructing memory we learn to accommodate tales of our situated selves as characters in the stories of our lives. And in the process we become biographers as we collect and bring the stories of others into our stories. For example, Shelagh Morgan draws together seemingly unrelated objects from her image collection to bring her memories to life;

The images of this series reconstruct and to some extent authenticate my memories. They provide a reference to the texture of memory and the process of negotiation between self and place in the present.



Memory Needs Objects: Stranded Objects.

Neisser²⁴ sees perception, conceptualisation, personal experience and narrative as the base for self-knowledge. While recognizing that autobiographical memory is fragile, we might approach our research by investigating the role and articulation of memory as a rich inner resource that shapes our praxis. As with all powerful experiences there is a chasm between what one sees and what one can articulate, and as Shelagh Morgan's process of intertextuality shows us, we can develop personal and powerful ways of talking about these. This might involve the exploration of the ways we select our memories, the kinds of cultural processes involved in doing this, and how experience is affected in the process of becoming memory. It is through these processes that we can upgrade our reflexive practices to enrich the prisms of our stories while adding issues of memory to the contemporary tapestry of practitioner research in the arts.



Fig. 57.

Shelagh Morgan sums up in describing her process of (what might be called) 'performative looking',

The work I have produced over the last twelve years has moved from a reasonably objective position to a conscious subjectivity. This could be described as a shift from approaching the subject from a supposedly universal reference point to using self to approach the determining forces of such reference points. The invention of the first moment of memory starts here with the beginning of Unpacking my library.

¹ Quagliata, Narcisus, 1976, *Stained Glass From Mind to Light, An inquiry into the nature of the medium*, San Francisco: Mattole Press, p.6.

² Kotre, John, 1995, *White Gloves*, New York: Free Press, p.4.

³ Morgan, Shelagh, 2000, *Unpacking my Library. Stories of how we understand the world*, PhD Dissertation, Lismore: Southern Cross University.

⁴ Quagliata, 1976, p.58.

⁵ Quagliata, 1976, p.94.

⁶ Quagliata, 1976, pp.94-6.

⁷ Kotre, (1995), p.230.

⁸ Neisser, Ulrich and Fivush, Robyn (eds.), 1994, *The Remembering Self: Construction and accuracy in the self narrative*, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, p.12.

⁹ Reiser, B., Black, J. & Kalamaridis, P. 1989, Strategic memory search processes, in D.C. Rubin *Everyday Cognition in Adulthood and Late Life*, New York: Cambridge University Press, p.119.

¹⁰ Becker, Karin, 2003, Opening Address, Research Congress, *Navigating New Waters*, InSEA on Sea 6th European Regional Congress, Stockholm, 2nd August, np.

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- ¹¹ Kotre, John, 1995, P.239.
- ¹² Neimeyer, G. & Metzler, A. 1994, Personal identity and autobiographical recall, in U. Neisser and R. Fivush (eds.), *The Remembering Self: Construction and accuracy in the self narrative*, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, P.105.
- ¹³ Neisser and Fivush, 1994, pp.1-2.
- ¹⁴ Neiser and Fivush, 1994, vii.
- ¹⁵ Edwards, D. and Potter, J. 1992, The Chancellor's Memory: Rhetoric and truth in discursive remembering, *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 6, p.211.
- ¹⁶ Neiser and Fivush, 1994, p.8.
- ¹⁷ Reed, Edward, 1994, Perception is to self as memory is to selves, in U. Neisser and R. Fivush (eds.), *The Remembering Self : Construction and accuracy in the self narrative*, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, p.290.
- ¹⁸ Bruner, Jerome, 1994, The 'remembered self', in U. Neisser and Fivush, R. (eds.), *The Remembering Self: Construction and accuracy in the self narrative*, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, pp.41-54.
- ¹⁹ Barclay, Craig, 1994, Composing protoselves through improvisation, in U. Neisser and R. Fivush (eds.), *The Remembering Self Construction and accuracy in the self narrative*, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, p56.
- ²⁰ Rubin, D. 1995, *Memory in oral Traditions: The cognitive psychology of epic ballads and counting out rhymes*, New York: Oxford University Press, p.55.
- ²¹ Kotre, 1995, pp.161-2.
- ²² Rabbitt, P. and Winthrop, A. 1988, What do old people remember? The Galton paradigm reconsidered. In M. Gruneberg, P. Morris & R. Sykes (eds.), *Practical aspects of memory: current research and issues*, (Vol. 1, pp.301-307). Chichester, UK: Wiley. P.302.
- ²³ Barone, Tom, 2001, *Touching Eternity: The enduring outcomes of teaching*, New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, pp.165-7.
- ²⁴ Neisser and Fivush, 1994.