

The Disillusionment of Time: Exploring The Grief of Memories in Conversation with Reception to Change in Nature Through the Drawing Process

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Abstract

The term nostalgia, a pained longing for the past, originated in the late 1600s, but the feeling has been described in literature as early as 750 BCE. Nostalgia, described as a longing for the past, and apprehension of change, are intrinsic to human society. This feeling has been found to help in times of stress or anxiety; people fall back on their memories as a way to cope with change. Time is a constant inconsistency that is, simultaneously, the result of nostalgia and the cause of its need in society. This is in contrast to what can be observed in nature, where the only constant is change. Loss, adaptation, and behavioral plasticity are what nature thrives on to survive. Animals and nature have a distinct ability to cope with the cycle of time, while many humans struggle to adapt. This research hinges on creating a conversation between the dichotomy of reception to change in nature and human society through drawing. Overall, exploring nostalgia through art as a coping mechanism for the grief of time passing and memory. Drawing is a way to capture a moment in time and attempt to hold it still. The use of graphite as the primary medium in this series allows for the evocation of memories in a person's mind, as it can be wiped away and distorted. Family photos, memories, and nostalgic items are drawn in tandem with the natural world. Through the drawing process, the artist is asked to sit with their own grief, working through it while creating

the image. The viewer is shown this grief in its final form, with nature embedded into the memory. The resulting body of work depicts the artist's grief and prompts viewers to sit with their own experiences of loss and how they cope with it.

Loss, Nostalgia, and How Nature Subverts Human Experience

The term nostalgia originated with Johannes Hofer in the late 1600s; it combines the Greek words *nostos* and *algos*, which mean returning home and pain. While the term was coined in the 17th century, the feeling of nostalgia had been described in literature as early as 750 BCE (Sedikides and Wildschut 2022). Throughout human history, people have had some form of apprehension for change and grief associated with it. In 2022, Dr. Erica Hepper investigated nostalgia in 29 cultures, where 68% of participants reported feeling nostalgic at least once a week, with the median being twice a week (Sedikides and Wildschut 2022).

Many studies observe nostalgia to be a social-building behavior, a shared connection between all humans: a need that allows us to relate to one another. Others report people looking to memories and experiencing nostalgia during difficult life events. It's a cathartic grief that helps people cope with change. In 2023, a study surveyed over 2,000 American participants regarding their experiences with nostalgia and memories. The researchers found that 77% of those surveyed look to nostalgic memories as a source of comfort, and 60% believed it offers a form of guidance in uncertainty (Routledge 2023).

Change can be anxiety-inducing for most people, but the feeling of yearning for the past allows people to connect with others and understand themselves better. Time is unpredictable and rapidly changing in a way that many people feel unable to cope with. This is in opposition to the way time, change, and loss are observed in the natural world. In nature, loss is commonplace; it seems that nature just revolves around and thrives in the changes that come to it. Birds migrate when the seasons change, plants die and grow back again; nature overcomes what humans struggle with. There's an ever-changing cycle to nature that seems to find freedom and rebirth in loss.

In an article concerning nature's ability to adapt to climate change and how that shifts over time, Professor Bob Wong discusses the idea of behavioral plasticity. While his article focuses on speculations on whether or not nature can continue to adapt given new forces such as global warming, his research showcases its ability to do so generally. Most animals can change and adapt during times of distress, such as natural disasters and during past climate crises as well. This is crucial in comparing human societies' reactions to change and nature's. Animals and nature as a resilience have varying degrees of response to a major change. In all of these cases, plasticity is the key factor; evolutionary adaptation cannot always meet the demands of constantly

changing environments. The rate of adaptability depends on the species and their environment. Most species can quickly adjust their behaviors to fit the circumstances they find themselves in, especially if they are accustomed to consistent change (Wong and Candolin 2015). This guided the beginning stages of finding a research question by asking: What can humans learn from studying the behavioral changes and adaptations of phenomena in nature? How can humans employ behavioral plasticity when met with loss?



"Reflection Around Your Corner," graphite on mixed media paper, 2024

Figure 1. One of the catalyst pieces in this body of work. This piece offered the idea of reflections on memories through showing the "viewer" as a part of the memory, as well as a reflection on and of the past experience.

Process

The drawings in this series are in the interest of exploring and understanding the artist's connection to nature and memory. Many works start by looking at family photo albums, places, or other imagery related to the past that evoke the feeling of pained nostalgia. Others are found through snapshots of memories written out and composed

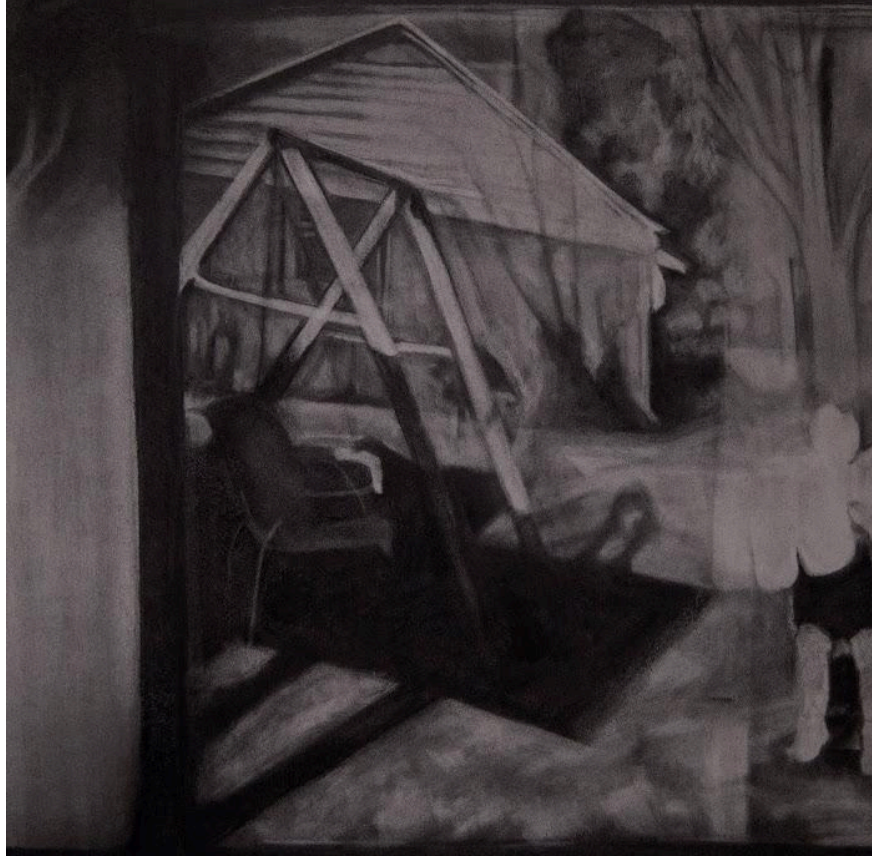
into a visual understanding of that vague memory. These personal interpretations are a springboard for working with natural subject matter, typically birds, roots, and trees. Birds are also often thought to be the souls of loved ones coming back to visit their families. Birds in flight are finite; they can never be replicated or repeated in the exact same way. Similarly, memory is constantly in motion; a person will never be able to reproduce it. Trees, roots, and branches all connect back to family lineage. They also display nature's ability to adapt, trees being some of the longest living and constant changing forces in nature. To further understand the fluidity of memories, experiments, and processes distort reference images. Glossy photos offer a reflective surface that allows for experimentation with composition. In utilizing reflections of light, as well as shadows or reflections of the artist, the image takes on a new life and meaning. Emulsion lifts are used to distort the reference as well. In separating the film negative from the paper backing, the image is fluid and malleable. When the separated negative is placed onto the final paper, they distort and warp in a way akin to memories over time. Another way of distorting and adding to a simple reference image is by using projected images over top of the original reference. This shows a reflection of the past and present simultaneously, projecting new ideas onto a past memory. Occasionally, all of these processes are combined: starting with the reference image and using reflections of light to create something new, then projecting other images on top, and finally making an emulsion lift from the projection. Other times, emulsion lifts are projected onto reference images. In combining the different ways of distorting a reference, the original memory becomes something entirely new, a way of processing the grief around it. Their ideas are trapped and distorted in one's mind; they're realized in the work through this transformation and connection with nature.

The primary medium of the works is graphite, which gives the pieces a soft, hazy feel, akin to how we recall past events. The capacity to move and blend graphite smoothly allows the ability to evoke a distorted view of memory; clarity can be found and lost again. Memory is fluid, things change and distort, some parts of a specific moment in time are stark, while others are soft and need to be searched for. This process takes time; details are fully drawn in and swiped away countless times before the final result is found. There are moments of 'reality' within the lost details. The creation of these pieces is an exploration of the memory and the emotions, ideas, and other memories that come from their conception.



"In the Shadow of a Family Tree," graphite on Arches hot-pressed watercolor paper

Figure 2. This piece offers the implementation of natural imagery as a representation of family, grief, and change. The tree's roots overtake the familiar space and cast a shadow on the two figures. It discusses both family ties as well as the way grief casts a shadow over one's memories and view of change.



"A Younger Sister Alone," graphite on Arches hot-pressed watercolor paper

Figure 3. When going through old photos, we stumble upon memories of our relatives' past. In this photo, I was exploring the distortion of memories we've only known through stories. My mother's childhood is something I don't have access to except through family photos and her own recollections. This piece tries to deal with distorted memories that aren't our own.



"Requiem for a Songbird," graphite on Arches hot-pressed watercolor paper

Figure 4. This piece was one of the first that I experimented with combining an emulsion lift and the idea of projections on the past. This photo of my late Mammaw was very special to me throughout this process, as it was the only physical memory I had of her. In creating an emulsion lift of the photo and projecting the hummingbird imagery on it, it creates a new story of her. My view of her, as a strong, free woman, is put into conversation with the distortion her loss caused.

Inspiration

The artist Amy Parrish explores her own loss and memory in the series *Check the Mail for Her Letter*. In order to “visualize fragmented recollections and decaying memories,” Parrish works on top of printed photographs with gouache and wax to obscure things (Parrish 2020). This body of work offered inspiration by utilizing the distortion of memories and time in a visual medium. Parrish holds some parts of these memories precious in the drawing while letting others fade, effectively moving in and out of time through the piece.



Figure 5. Amy Parrish, *Tony’s Bus*, 2020, part of *Check the Mail for Her Letter*



Figure 6. Amy Parrish, *Untitled*, 2020, part of *Check the Mail for Her Letter*

Another notable inspiration for these works is Jessie Shinn's series *The Transcendent Ordinary*. The artist's work showcases their background in photography. Shinn seeks to "access the space where [their] knowledge and language fail," in order to capture the "overlooked, ephemeral, and ordinary" (Shinn 2024). The artist also mentions the fluidity of time and space, as well as how visual confusion surrounds everyday objects. This is akin to seeking to capture a memory, the longing for something concrete in something abstract in one's mind. Shinn made the transition from photography back to drawing to "allow the parts of the image, the shapes and marks, to become both deeply familiar and deeply strange as [they] spend and extend time with them" (Shinn 2024). This resonates with the intimacy of capturing the transience of a lost moment in time.



Figure 7. Jessie Shinn, *The Too Bright Day*, 2024, part of *The Transcendent Ordinary*

Another artistic inspiration is Michael Kareken, whose work explores fragmented, overlapping spaces in the series *Shifting Visions*. They observe the world around them from an interior perspective, using reflections to showcase a work that "mirrors the experience of losing and regaining a memory, of forgetting and recalling" (Kareken 2024). This allows the artist to explore their sense of self in an unstable and evolving way. The artist's drawings are built up and torn down over time, things come into focus and then are removed or quieted back down. Over time, this develops into a work that seems to encapsulate the haziness and busyness of one's memory and the moments that bring them to where they are in the present. It connects viewers to the artist's

journey through the work and allows insight into the fluid haziness in the longing for something solid in one's recollection.



Figure 8. Michael Kareken, *Shadows and Reflections*, 2022-2024, part of *Shifting Visions*



Figure 9. Michael Kareken, *Winter Passage*, 2022-2024, part of *Shifting Visions*

Conclusion and Reflection

This research has created a means to explore the connection between grief, memories, and nature. In creating this body of work, the artist has found that the process of drawing out memories captured in family photographs is cathartic. Delving into the roots of one's nostalgia can be necessary to recover from the grief it is associated with. Exploring nostalgia and grief through this body of work has become a powerful coping mechanism that allows for connection to others, the audience. Observing the way that nature recovers and adapts to changes offers a hopeful example that could inform human society. The objective of this body of work is to place an emphasis on the dichotomy between grief, loss, and resilience in nature and the reactions and setbacks that can be found in humans. To visualize this dichotomy, the symbolism of specific kinds of birds and natural imagery aid in the visual narrative of grief, time, and memories. As this body of work has developed, so has the artist's own understanding of grief and memories. The drawings in this body of work offer a similar connection with those who see them. It offers viewers a way of confronting and comforting their losses and creates a space for that to be analyzed through a visual language.



Figure 10. For my gallery installation, I created an altar for my lost loved ones, including family momentos, photo albums, and a collection of poetry written for this body of work. The piece above the altar, “Before the Felling,” is an emulsion lift of a photo of the place where my mother, aunt, my grandfather, and I grew up. I projected this on top of a family photo to discuss the people who come and go from our lives, family grief and trauma, and the places and people we hold onto. Certain family members are highlighted while others remain obscured to discuss ties to places and the things from our past that we hold onto, and what we leave behind. The two pieces on either side of the family portrait are emulsion lift collages titled “Views From the Broken Window.” They utilize photos of my broken childhood bedroom window. I surround the windows with emulsion lifts of my family photos. The emulsion lift process allows photos to meld together, be torn, and overlap. They are both artworks to discuss the family lineage of memories, as well as a part of the altar of grief I dedicated to my passed loved ones.

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