

The Process of Recollection: Using Contemporary Drawing to Explore the Fragility of Memory

Austin Cathey
Department of Art and Art History
The University of North Carolina at Asheville
One University Heights
Asheville, North Carolina 28804 USA

Faculty Advisors: Tamie Beldue, Eric Tomberlin, Brent Skidmore, Jackson Martin,
Virginia Derryberry

Abstract

Memory, the process of creating, interpreting, and recalling information, has always been essential for the human experience. However, for a tool of such significance, our memories are notoriously unreliable. It is this faulty nature that provided the driving force for *Re-collection Immemorial*. After discovering a study from Northwest University that found that the simple act of recalling alters memories to fit the present context, the artist produced a series of large scale drawings to reflect this idea. The fluidity of the materials used in these drawings, ink mixed with water, serves as a metaphor for making and recording memories. When the ink wash is pooled on the drawing surface it immediately stains, leaving a record, a memory, of its existence. As the water slowly evaporates, only ink reticulations are left behind; always lighter and less vibrant than their original state. Thus time, ink, and water collaborate to create a visual metaphor for experience and memory. After the water has evaporated, the process is repeated over and over again. Just as time passes and humans record more and more information to pile on top of the old, so does each drawing repeat the idea of layer on top of layer of information. Since every individual has different experiences, interpretations, and memories, the drawings use abstract forms that convey balance and complexity. This exploration into abstraction was influenced by contemporary non-representational artists such as Seana Reilly and Val Britton, as well as abstract expressionist such as Jackson Pollock. In synthesizing these works with the research, the series provided a sense of acceptance for the innate faulty nature of making and recalling memories.

1. Introduction

This series of drawings, *Re-collected Immemorial*, addresses the unreliable nature of memory due to the passage of time, the process of recollection, and the constant accumulation of memories. What sparked this idea is my own personal lack of memory. Regardless of how hard I try, I can barely remember any specific events preceding the age of around 14. I have relatively better memory in regards to the years spanning 14 through 21, but even those memories are fuzzy, as well as few and far between. Even the memory of the past few years that I am trying to maintain is frustratingly unreliable. Since my short-term memory, i.e. memory as a tool for test taking and task making, is fine, I am not interested in the entire concept of memory. That idea is far too vast for a single project. Nor am I interested in exploring my own personal memories, since the concept revolves around the fragile nature of memories, as well as the lack of them. The time-based work I do in drawing visualizes the brain's ability to create, record, and maintain memories as abstract pieces of information. Furthermore, I am driven by the hope that exploring this idea through my art will allow me to accept my own fragile memory and free myself from the accompanying sense of loss.

Memory is one of the many intangibles of the human condition, and one that humanity tends to have a complex relationship with. In my experience it is possible to say that memory isn't quite as obsessively analyzed as its relatives; death, the meaning of life, and the nature of human existence. Yet it is only our ability to retain such complex and abstract concepts that allows such topics to be explored in depth. Additionally it is worth noting that both the artist and the audience, as human beings, are the inheritors of thousands of years of collaborative events and memories.¹ In light of such a vast concept, it becomes even more essential to differentiate the specific use of memory that relates to the work. As opposed to the entire idea of memory, these drawings, in part, focus on the intangible process of creating and recalling memories.

2. Conceptual Context

One of the major roles of art has always been the exploration into the nature of the human condition.¹ Although this vast idea relates to an immense variety of ideas, the retention of a sense of self and the power of the individual experience have always been topics of interest. Yet a sense of identity isn't just spontaneously born, it is shaped over time from the accumulation of a myriad of memories that are stored within the mind. Physiologically, our memories reside within the area of our brain that is referred to as gray matter, due to its appearance.² Gray matter is also associated with some of the brain's most important functions, including motor control, sensory perceptions, and memory.³ Since human beings constantly observe and record the world around them, memory is one of the most complex processes that contribute to an individual's sense of self and survival. As a person grows and develops over time, the collection of memories grows so vast that the memories must be organized and reorganized an infinite number of times. The processes of retrieving and reorganizing, which happens differently for each person, usually results in a hierarchy of memories in order of their significance, as well as the loss of non-essential experiences. These memories are then used as building blocks to construct identity.⁴



Figure 1. Austin Cathey. *Lethe: The Endless Washing of Remnants*. 2015. Ink. 24" x 36"

The recollection of complex memories is one of the most important factors that differentiate humanity from our animal counterparts. The ability to retain and recall our experiences is essential in constructing identity and a sense of self. What are the implications for an individual with a severely fractured and incomplete memory? To make things even more complicated, a recent study from Northwestern University that was published in the Journal of Neuroscience claims that the act of recalling a memory inevitably changes that memory.⁵ Lead author postdoctoral fellow Donna Bridge found that recollections are constantly updated in order to account for the owner's current emotional and mental state. This makes sense given that after an event happens, it leaves reality—the present moment—and enters the realm of abstraction in the gray matter of the mind. Thus memories become subjective, retaining only traces of their previous reality. As such, the very nature of the process of recording and recalling memories

renders them faulty. Through this research into the nature of memories, it is reasonable to conclude that memories are only tangible the exact moment they occur. However, this thought is complicated due to the inevitability of a memory altering a person's future thoughts, feelings, or actions. From the moment they are created, memories slip through human hands like water.

Time Immemorial displays the use of abstraction to visually represent the intangible processes of recording and recalling memories. To do this I use time-based mediums, purposeful layering, process-based art making, and mindfulness ideology to seek a sense of balance to nullify the tension and uneasiness that accompanies such a mental sense of incompleteness. Since this research has shown the content of a memory cannot be freely trusted, the work in my series focuses on a process of art making that refers to the process of making memory. As is true with much artwork created in contemporary America, the basis of this series is rooted in personal exploration. The resulting works create expressive forms in order to communicate with the viewer, allowing him or her to have a conversation and an experience with each piece. By balancing opposing forces such as control and the lack of control, delicacy and heaviness, simplicity and complexity, this series aims to suggest a sense of the balance and completion they bring to me.



Figure 2. Austin Cathey, *Hold Your Head High Above the Unfamiliarity of it All*. 2015. Ink, Paper, Draft Film. 10'x12'x2'.

The culmination of these ideas can be seen in the work shown in figure 2. Although it is difficult to see in a small 2D frame, the drawing is a 3D collage that is composed of many individual abstract forms. Although the final tangible whole is significant, the work's processes and experiences are the true focus of the series. The allusion to memory making can be seen in the thousands of ink reticulations on the various forms. However, the many individual drawings failed to produce significant artistic power, just as individual unattached memories. The drawings were then re-visualized by being cut free from the traditionally rectangular frame of reference. Though this process helped to stabilize the hectic nature of the forms, the individual drawings remained incomplete. Inspired by the brain's ability to effectively categorize memories, the process resulted in taking the complexity of layering to a new level by physically collaging the many organic forms together to exemplify the significance of collaboration.



Figure 3: Hanging Detail

The final creation resulted in combining dozens of the earliest experimental drawings, many of which were created and finalized at the same time. Just as with memory, many separate but related individual aspects are collected into a pseudo-single whole. The sheer size of this piece is one of the most significant and striking properties, a trait that relates to the overwhelming and barely controllable responsibility of memory. This piece also showcases the heaviest use of hanging in *Re-collection Immortal*, a presentation technique, which became crucial for giving the abstract forms context and purpose. The hanging forms also literally move based on the state of the space around them, visually changing based on their immediate experience. By breaking away from the wall and intertwining the space between the work and the audience, the cohesive whole is given a contemporary context. In doing so, the work stands as a contrast between past and present and a celebration of the experience and experimentation that was crucial to its completion.



Figure 4. Austin Cathey. From *Recalled Fragility: There's got to be Some Stability Left For Us*, 2015.
Ink on Draft Film



Figure 5. Backlit detail of *Recalled Fragility*

The piece seen in figures 4 and 5 exhibits the same foundational process, but on a different surface and with varying results. The piece is composed of four individual sheets of frosted vellum that feature layer upon layer of ink wash reticulations. Since the vellum absorbs neither liquid, the water must evaporate entirely to leave any traces of ink behind; giving each surface countless hours of experience recorded. Visually, the draft film allows for more

subtlety and depth. While each individual form on vellum possesses deep variety and complexity, the time restrictions of the material force the process to stay away from the edges, else the liquid will escape the surface before evaporation. As such, each vellum drawing made in this way is limited by this technical shortcoming. As if to compensate, the frosted material is mostly transparent, allowing for two simultaneous drawing surfaces. This piece features the first four of these drawings hung up about 4 inches apart. The piece is hung freely, allowing the viewer 360 degree view as the piece fights between acting as a whole and existing as four individual sheets. This idea relates to the tension of compiling individual complex memories into a cohesive and seamless whole.

Our minds are hardwired to observe and record, a trait which helps humanity utilize complex external concepts. Yet the complexity of day-to-day consciousness borders on the absurd in contemporary America, where images, information, and misinformation constantly barrage us on a daily basis. As an exploration of contemporary American art, these drawings are influenced by the tensions I experience in modern society: control versus the uncontrollable, the interior versus the exterior and order versus chaos. This series utilizes an idea that was particularly popular with abstract expressionists like Jackson Pollock, the idea of allowing artwork to be created through the artist in a natural and intuitive way.⁶ Pollock's drip paintings were also influential to the experimental processes used in my drawings, such as working on a piece on the floor as opposed to the wall. *Full Fathom Five*, seen in figure 6, is one of Pollock's best paintings in my opinion. Not only does this nonrepresentational imagery display incredible depth, balance and energy, but also a great deal of powerful expressiveness. His paintings provide an example of purposeful resolution through intuitive abstraction. Like Pollock, I am interested in focusing on the organic creation of artwork, rather than beginning with a goal and forcing the piece to achieve it. This idea can be seen not only in the nature of the mark making, but also in the nonrepresentational quality of the works. While this is true of the works



Figure 6. Jackson Pollock, *Full Fathom Five*. 1947, Paint, Mixed Media. 30 1/8" x 50 7/8"

that have inspired me, I also applied this mindset to my work. The ultimate aim of this series was to create work that created a conversation within each viewer.

Meditation is an idea that was crucial for the completion of the drawings. The essence of mindfulness meditation means to shut your mind off distractions, the most powerful of which are the past and the future, and focus both mind and body on the present moment. The idea that the only true reality exists within the present moment is a concept that is essential to mindfulness, a practice with roots in Buddhist meditations, which is a personal doctrine of the artist. Additionally, mindfulness requires the participant to experience each moment, emotion, and action without judgment or preconceived connotations. I brought both of these mindsets into every drawing within the series. By allowing the drawings the freedom to develop in an organic and spontaneous way, the work is infused with energy and its own one-of-a-kind experience.

3. Influences

The evolution of the making process for this series is a culmination of a wide variety of factors and experiences. Due to an interest in lofty and intangible ideas, such as spirituality and the nature of humanity, I became fascinated

by abstraction. In creating the art that proceeded *Re-collection Immemorial*, my drawings attempted to explore such topics with traditional tools; mostly graphite and charcoal. In having such limited control in the face of the daunting concepts that I am interested in, my drawings proved to be confusing or too literal. After seeing the work of contemporary abstract artists such as Seana Reilly and Val Britton, I sought a way to limit my direct control in the art making process to aid in breaking away from representational imagery.

Visually and conceptually, Seana Reilly was one of the most significant influences that drove me to relinquish complete control in my drawings. Reilly's *Thermal Rise*, seen in figure 7, is a perfect example of her experimental pourings that utilize liquid graphite on Dibond to "acknowledge present day geo-environmental realities while recapturing some aspect of the complex emotional reaction that we have when we encounter nature."⁷ Since I myself was using traditional graphite, I was drawn to her work on a visual level from the moment I saw it. Particularly in *Thermal Rise*, the work poses depth of composition, balance of values, and complex imagery to command a conversation with the viewer. I have always been impressed by Reilly's ability to create work that "leads the viewer to more questions than answers."⁸ Reilly's artwork also presents an exceptional example of the synthesis of execution and ideology. In *Thermal Rise*, one can clearly visualize the "gravity, fluid dynamics, and erosion" that Reilly's artist statement refers to in the shaping of her imagery.⁹ Although her works choose to use interpretable abstraction, she is able to articulate the immutable forces present in her artwork. Without representational imagery, she is able to explore grandiose, complex concepts that "produce art that calls for serious contemplation."¹⁰ Reilly's work commanded an artistic challenge to me. Particularly visible in *Thermal Rise*, her pouring technique creates compositions of rich value contrast that would be mind-numbingly meticulous to create with pencil graphite. From such rich forms, Reilly's works are also compositions that create a defined space within the frame of reference. By creating a "geo-environmental" space within each piece, the viewer is invited to meditate within the graphite.¹¹ Reilly's abstract imagery not only creates questions for the viewer, but also provides the space to seek them.

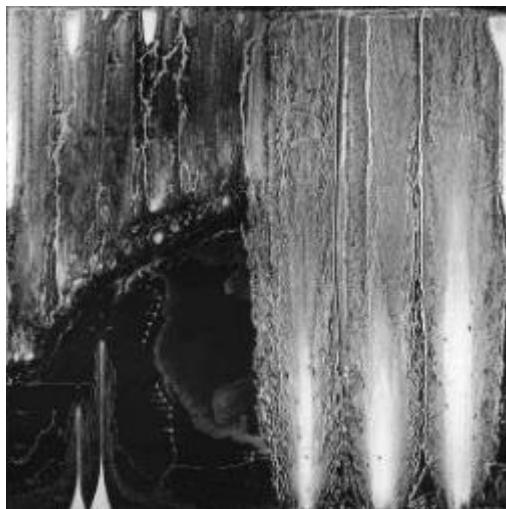


Figure 7, *Seana Reilly. Thermal Rise. 2012. Graphite on Dibond. 12"x12"*

Val Britton has also played a role in my exploration of breaking away from traditional drawing techniques. Britton's piece *Tracks*, visible in figure 8, displays her powerful style of abstract cut paper and collage art making. Being accustomed to the stereotypical idea of magazine collage, Britton's use of ink, paint, abstraction, and cutting is visually invigorating. On a purely aesthetic level, I naturally respond to the subtle complexity of the painted forms that Britton uses as an underpainting of sorts. By superimposing the hard-cut shapes, her works create depthless spaces that feature tension, balance, and complexity. As with Reilly, Val Britton is also an artist with well-articulated writing that only serves to reinforce and validate the artwork. First and foremost, Britton's statement establishes that she is creating art for personal fulfillment; an idea which shaped my own concept. Britton then describes how her art uses mapmaking to "push the language of abstraction in order to create a visceral sense of movement through space and an emotional impact."¹² The synthesis of purpose and production shows in *Tracks* as we can see not only the cut forms that resemble mapped territory lines, but also the complex liveliness of the entire piece. Britton's use of a relatively large physical space, 52" by 52", to explore an immense and intangible concept

led me to explore creating artwork on a larger scale. Britton's exploration of emotional and physiological complexity in abstract spaces allows her to create work that demands the viewer navigate the artwork.



Figure 8. Val Britton, *Tracks*, 2013, Mixed Media, 52" x52 "

4. Methodology

4.1. Creation of Memory

The desire for unpredictability led to experimentation in the use of abstraction and the power of the nonrepresentational forms. This deviation from traditional drawing methods led to the development of a technique of pouring liquids. This method of drawing not only allows for chance and spontaneity, but also allows for time, gravity, and other natural influences to take hand in the creation of artwork. For this body of work, the technique has been evolved to pouring ink mixed with water—referred to as ink wash. The drawing surface is laid on the floor. A small amount of India ink, usually black, is added to a much larger amount of water, which is left pooled on the drawing surface in no specific pattern. By allowing the ink wash to move naturally, the sense of an external, uncontrollable other is established. Immediately after the ink wash has been applied, the pools are distributed in broad sweeping strokes. As time passes, gravity redistributes the liquid into concentrated pools. This process is repeated any number of times – depending on the composition that is coming to life – creating a multi-layered form. The ink wash is then left to pool and puddle, although with much less liquid than the original pour. Through the reticulated forms



Figure 9: Austin Cathey, Process photo, 2014, pooled ink on paper and draft film

left behind, both time and experience is not only visibly represented, but also metaphorically recorded. Each interaction of the ink wash changes what it touches instantly and irrevocably. As the water evaporates, the ink is slowly left behind to mark the passing of time via traces that are much lighter in value than the original pools. Through the connection with the passing of time, this concept uses the ink wash as a metaphor for the creation of memories. Like the ink wash, memories are flashes of reality that truly exist on a very limited time frame before becoming intangible traces. Exploring the relationship between the past and the present is one of the core themes of this body of work. As the past fades to make way for the present moment, we are left with remnants that we cling to desperately; memories. The inclusion of elements that speak to a previous, stronger presence is essential to this body of work. However, with the passage of time, the creation of identity, and the sheer depth of living, it seems inevitable that the contemporary human mind must cope with the weight of innumerable memories.

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus famously stated “a man can never step in the same river twice.”¹³ Referencing this idea the aforementioned process is reapplied to the drawings multiple times, stacking layer upon layer of the ink traces. As the ink wash passes over previous layers, they are irrevocably and organically changed. Not only does this process refer to the accumulation of new memories, but also to the inevitability of memory alteration.¹⁴ The process is also repeated until a successful composition is revealed or until a drawing reaches its limit. This could be a technical limit, such as the durability of the paper or an aesthetic limit, such as adding too much ink that visually overwhelms the composition. Since the series, like memory, is a complex collaboration that utilizes every experience, drawings that result as being visually “busy” are not always necessarily rejected. Balance, movement, and visual interest are the most important elements in determining the success of the drawings. Regardless, the resulting image is a complex matrix of shape, line, value shifts, and ink reticulation.



Figure 10. Austin Cathey, Process Photo, 2014, ink on frosted draft film

To provide different elements that contribute to the concept, as well as the body of work, both paper and frosted drafting film are used. Paper, being the more fragile of the two, speaks more to a sense of psyche. Just as the mind can only adequately cope with so much memory, paper can only hold against so much water. As with recording memories, pouring ink wash on paper has immediate irrevocable power. Even with the addition of gesso for added durability, the paper is in constant conflict with the water as it attempts buckle and distort. However, the fragility of paper has its benefits—it puddles the ink wash in a very unique way, allowing for beautiful and unique ink traces. Paper will absorb and record the ink as soon as it stains the surface, alluding to the immediate integration of experience into memory. Conversely, frosted film is much more solid than paper, being made of a plastic material. As such, it does not absorb the water at all, forcing a very long process of evaporation. However the extended time allows the ink to retain more freedom and complexity in the marks that are made. The film is smoky and semi-transparent in design, allowing the viewer to simultaneously experience both sides of the medium as well as a sense of what is behind the film.

The focus of this stage became creating and exploring these abstract forms on different surfaces. Not only did I experiment on different brands of draft film, but also on a variety of paper – from higher quality Stonehenge to cheap poster board. As such, the majority of this work was done early and with much experimentation that yielded a large pool of ink drawings. In this stage of the process, I often start one very large piece while simultaneously creat-

ing many smaller pieces. This resulted in over a dozen drawings and laid the foundation for the series. It immediately became clear that these processes merely served as the first step in recreating the complexity of making unreliable memories.

4.2. Re-collecting the Memories

If the use of ink wash references the creation of memories, then this secondary aspect of the art making process – which I refer to as “Reminisce” – was inspired by the concept of recalling memories. As such, Reminisce also directly responds to the Northwestern study that claims each recollection changes our memory. Once an event has had its initial impact, it moves into the past as it is absorbed into the mind and stored. In doing so, the mind gives context and shape to the memories. In continuing the exploration of memory, I likewise sought to give shape and context to the many unique ink drawings. In seeking to make the drawings more aesthetically successful, composition, form, and balance were key elements taken into consideration. While the ink forms exhibited interesting depth of space and beautiful atmospheric complexity, the drawings themselves were too busy in the cramped rectangular frames. Since the true nature of memory is subject to personal interpretation, the Reminisce stage continues to focus on the development of the nonrepresentational beauty of the interacting layers creating abstract forms.

In order to facilitate this idea, I contemplated and meditated on the drawings collectively and individually. Specifically, the purpose of this meditation was to take the time to separate myself from the creation process in order to objectively critique the quality and composition of the works. By doing so, I sought a refreshed perspective to explore the best direction for the works. By interrupting any sort of automatic flow, I gave the forms the opportunity to inform me of strengths and weaknesses of the drawings. Beyond just paying close attention, this mindfulness or meditative state consists of clearing the mind from distractions in order to fully participate in the present moment. In order to continue to push my artistic limits, as well as those of the work, it became clear that variety and experimentation would be essential. In combining the two ideas, meditating on the drawings consisted of not only mindfully contemplating how to evolve them, but also implementing those thoughts. In assessing the forms with a focused mind, I use intuition to make sense of the complexly layered forms. Once again, the relationship and the conversation between the artist and the work is a crucial element. Only by exploring the subtle interactions between the layers of ink do the compositions appear.



Figure 11. Austin Cathey, (drawn detail), 2014, ink, graphite, charcoal on paper

The earliest experimentation into giving the ink drawings context was to draw into the abstract forms with pen, graphite, and charcoal. To balance the complex and nonrepresentational nature of the ink, these marks were generally reduced to simple line work. By working with the interactions already present, I sought to give the works new layers of complexity with more direct involvement. In this connection between line and presence, the lines provide direction and guidance. For several of the drawings these lines resemble pathways, not only alluding to the idea of

brain mapping, but also relates to my search for direction. In loosely using the concept of map-making to inspire line work, the viewer is also invited to navigate the space within and around the drawing. However line proved inadequate in pushing the boundaries of the drawings.

At this point, it became clear that the use of layers was the strongest way to imply metaphor for the idea of compiling memories. Once again, drawings were meditated on within the studio. In light of the importance of complex layering, as well as the need to free the semi-chaotic forms from their cramped states, experimentation began in cutting the paper. Subsequently, all of these early drawings were dissected, yielding multiple new individual forms from each. By separating the compositions from the traditional frame of reference, the pieces became expressive, individual, and gained a revitalized context within its new environment. Investing in a process as irreparable as cutting also strongly references the changeable and unreliable nature of memory. In all of these elements, this process relates to the process of assigning significance to certain memories, thereby reshaping them to fit a new purpose. Much the same as a new shape is separated from its previous context; a selected memory is torn from the past context and fit into the circumstances of the moment. By literally cutting the abstracted form away, the process mirrors the total alteration that a memory is subject to due to recollection.



Figure 12. Austin Cathey, *No Memory in Mind, No Further from the Past*, 2015. Ink, Vellum, Paper, Collage. 40"x52"

After breaking up the abstract forms into separate entities, it became obvious that they needed to be cohesively re-collected, just like memories. Building on the metaphoric power of layering, the cut drawings were collaged back together to bring presence and physicality to the series. In giving the works physical depth, the viewer is simultaneously encouraged and denied the opportunity to dig through the memories. Just as memories are recalled into the present tense, so too were the forms re-contextualized into new collaborative pieces. Visually, this also adds to the complexity of the layers by binding them together while simultaneously highlighting their fractured recollection. Additionally, the paper and Mylar drawings were also re-collected into cohesive pieces, as seen in figure 12. In keeping with the exploratory nature of the work, collage was used in a three-dimensional sense, as shown in the works discussed in section 2. As visible in figure 12, as well as all pieces with hanging elements, the use of shadow also became an important element. Not only do the cast shadows give the works greater depth and more complex layering, they also add to the physicality that allows the drawings to coincide with the space of the viewer. Additionally, the use of shadow also relates to the duality of the hidden and the revealed in memory. In shining the light of recollection onto a memory, other memories must then be cast into shadow. While the use of hanging was greatly considered in studio experimentation, the majority of these compositional decisions were finalized during the hanging of the show. In doing so, the metaphoric memories were reconstructed in the most immediate and contemporary sense possible, just as memories are.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, *Re-collection Immemorial* utilized experimentation through ink, layering, and opaque/translucent surfaces to explore the unreliable nature of creating and recalling memories. Through the combination of research and studio art making, I was able to make revelations about the true nature of memory and how it relates to my space in the contemporary world. While the Northwestern study provided the logic, the metaphoric power of the process-based series allowed me to accept that mankind is not chained to the past. Just as a drawing is not defined by the first ink stain, my identity is not bound to concrete memories that I may or may not maintain. By doing the best with what we are given and mindfully participating in the present moment with respect to the past, we can find beauty and fulfillment. On an artistic level, *Re-collection Immemorial* also provided the freedom to explore my ability to use abstraction and to create successful drawings. This exploration into nonrepresentational imagery will have a very powerful effect on the future of my art making. Specifically, I hold great anticipation at the thought of combining expressive, organic abstract forms with naturalistic, representational drawings. In doing so, I hope to further explore the intangible aspects of humanity that we perceive as defining us, concepts that collective and individual memory allow us to continually scrutinize.

6. Acknowledgements

The author would like to express his appreciation to the Art and Art History faculty of the University of North Carolina at Asheville for providing the invaluable tools necessary for pursuing this project; particularly Eric Tomberlin, Brent Skidmore, Jackson Martin, and Robert Dunning. He would also like to thank his faculty research advisor, Virginia Derryberry, for her crucial guidance, feedback, and support throughout the process. Additionally, he wishes to thank his general advisor Tamie Beldue for providing the freedom and the foundation that led to *Re-collection Immemorial*.

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