

Delicious: A Solo Ceramic Exhibition

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Abstract

Nostalgia is often spoken about in a curious way as scientists do not yet know the exact cause of nostalgic episodes among each individual. What has been explored are factors that tend to be a common denominator when trying to evoke these memories. Throughout this paper explored are the ways that sight, smell, and taste can contribute to remembering times past, as well as how scientific requirements that may be missing from one's life can play a role. By weaving together the history, the science, and the way our brain perceives sight and taste came the inspiration to create a contemporary body of ceramic work. The work attempts to access those parts of the viewers brain, and to help them reflect and appreciate times past. The act of eating often creates this nostalgic experience as the sensory stimulus of food on the tongue paired with a visual aspect connects the present moment to past memories.

1: Nostalgia: An Introduction

As cultural critic, Dr. Rachel S. Hawley states in *Pie as Nostalgia: What One Food Symbolizes for Every Generation of Americans*, “the term nostalgia was first used to describe homesickness in Swiss mercenaries by psychologist Johannes Hofner in 1688.”¹ Homesickness was associated with a medical condition among the mercenaries that caused one to become melancholy, therefore provoking Nostalgic feelings. The Greek word *nostos* translates to “homecoming,” while *algos* meaning “pain” or “ache.”² Smell, taste, touch, music and weather are common triggers of days of the past when things seemed much better. Each of these sensory experiences triggers nostalgic memories in different ways. For example: Music and touch have been used to provoke memories in patients with early stages of dementia.³ In the movie version of Nicholas Sparks’, *The Notebook*, Ally is portrayed playing *Chopsticks* by memory on the piano, despite being in a nursing home due to advanced Alzheimer’s Disease; once she is persuaded to sit at the piano, her memory is triggered and she is able to remember the music. Weather, such as heavy rain, evokes a fond memory of visiting movie theaters with my dad, gorging ourselves with popcorn. Smells, such as fresh cut grass takes me back to my grandparents’ house on Saturdays when we all worked in the yard and then helped with dinner. According to Dr. Mercola, an osteopathic physician, smells are processed in the olfactory bulb of the brain which is located close to the amygdala and hippocampus, it is believed to be the reason for memory and emotion to come flooding back; this is also known as the Proust Phenomenon.⁴

While all of these factors play similar roles in the nostalgic experience, taste is one that stands out the most, and in many cases unifies these memories. As mentioned above, rain may trigger movie visits for me, however the taste and smell of popcorn, candy and a giant soda are central to the entire memory. Saturdays may have been a day to work in the yard, but afterward was always the same dinner: overcooked T-bone steaks, potatoes and some veggies, capped with ice cream for dessert.

Our senses all come together in the anticipation of food. Many cultures use the necessity that food represents to create community, organize the day, create rituals, and create culture itself. Food can often serve as a catalyst for a

nostalgic experience. The endearing memories associated with sweets as a child revert one's brain back to a time when things were simpler.

2: Food for Thought

Harvard University's, Dr. Scott Alexander Howard published an analysis entitled, *Nostalgia*, which identifies three characteristics of the nostalgic experience. Typically, at least one of these characteristics will be present when someone falls nostalgic over something: The poverty of the present, the Naiveté requirement, or the aforementioned Proustian Phenomenon. While these three requirements are similar, they each stem from inside the individual.⁵

2.1 Poverty of the present:

Dr. Howard states, "Nostalgia must be motivated by the felt deprivation of the older self: in some respect, nostalgia involves a judgement that the past was better...The idea that nostalgia essentially involves a negative evaluation of the present and a more positive evaluation of the past enjoys broad interdisciplinary consensus."⁶ This theory is perfectly summed up by a literary theorist mentioned in Howard's analysis, Linda Hutcheon, "The simple, pure, ordered, easy, beautiful, or harmonious past is constructed (and then experienced emotionally) in conjunction with the present—which, in turn, is constructed as complicated, contaminated, anarchic, difficult, ugly, and confrontational. Nostalgic distancing sanitizes as it selects, making the past feel complete, stable, coherent, [and] safe."⁷ In most cases, looking back into the past always seems to be an easier, fonder memory than the present, which often seems stressful and is questioned. Since we can't change what has happened in the past, it is more easily accepted.

The poverty of the present could be illustrated by the planning of my childhood birthday parties, which often consisted of my brother, sister, step-sister and myself all having a combined birthday party since our birthdays are so close together. In the planning my mom was constantly stressed and responsibilities for all of the details were placed solely on her; so in the middle of planning and executing a sizeable celebration would come the complicated, anarchic and difficult parts. However despite all of the stress, looking back at those birthday parties were the simple, pure, beautiful and harmonious moments that everyone who attended wishes they could get back.⁸

2.2 Naiveté Requirement:

Further into his journal, Dr. Howard states, "The naiveté requirement demands that there be a particular discrepancy in knowledge between the past and the present... It is true that expressions of nostalgia often describe gazing back across this particular epistemic gap. Likewise, episodes of nostalgia typically involve a perception of transience."⁹ Howard rightfully argues that when one acknowledges the surroundings and can plan for a future memory in which he/ she will be able to fall nostalgic on, then it is in fact not Nostalgia, but instead a cognitive memory. Nostalgic episodes are the opposite, and fall upon a person when he/ she least expects it through one of the senses.¹⁰

2.3 Proustian Nostalgia:

According to Gayil Nalls of psychologytoday, French novelist, critic and essayist Marcel Proust first coined the term involuntary nostalgia in his publication of *In Search of Lost Time* or *Remembrance of Things Past*. Involuntary nostalgia is a memory that falls over someone when they are least expecting it. To illustrate his point, Proust uses the example of eating French Madeleine cakes dipped in tea, an experience from his childhood he had forgotten about until tasting it again. Involuntary nostalgia can also be associated with fits of PTSD such as hearing a firework after coming home from war; something unexpected provoking a feeling.

Proustian Nostalgia is a characteristic most familiar to me; unless a topic of conversation, I never think about the smell of popcorn or freshly cut grass. However, when I walk into The Fine Arts theater and smell popcorn, or drive through a neighborhood on a Summer weekend while someone is landscaping, I am instantly hit with a feeling of longing to be able to experience those carefree days when I was little again, even if only for a few minutes.¹¹

3. Neurogastronomy and Binding

Coined by neuroscientist Gordon Shepard in 2006 and defined in his book *Neurogastronomy*, “Neurogastronomy is a fairly new discipline that studies flavor perception by the brain. Neurogastronomy also identifies the ways by which it affects cognition, sensation, and memory.”¹² Many people wonder why they enjoy the foods they do; neurogastronomy aims to answer these questions. The branch of science could quite possibly describe the reason for the nostalgic memories that present themselves when one eats a certain food by linking them with simultaneous sensations. In *Mouthfeel*, by Ole Mouritsen and Klavs Styrbaek, that reasoning is binding. “The way the brain links different sensory impressions and the way in which this is dependent on earlier experiences and memories are known to sensory physiologists as *binding*. What happens is that the brain bundles together several different sensory impressions—for example, a particular taste and smell that have been sensed simultaneously on a previous occasion. When we are exposed to the same smell in a completely different context, the brain can associate it with the original occurrence, conclude that the same smell is involved, and as a result link it to the particular taste with which it was originally associated.”¹³

The way senses bind together can sometimes create a trigger for nostalgic recollections. Mouritsen and Styrbaek go on to say, “[this binding] process causes smells and tastes to call forth memories that were thought to be long forgotten. Many cooks are aware of this phenomenon and use smell and taste to create a meal that awakens strong memories of happy times—for example, childhood. Many of us have a deep-seated nostalgia for our mother’s or grandmother’s food that we carry with us throughout our lives.”¹⁴ In the case of this paper, walking into an ice cream shop and smelling the waffle cones being prepared immediately reverts one’s brain back to childhood and the pure joy associated with that scent of sweetness, paired with the taste and mouthfeel of ice cream and favorite toppings.



Sara Burton, “*Take a Chomp*,” Ceramic, 2018

4: Delicious: A Solo Ceramic Exhibition

The aim of this research is to explore a way in which to trigger nostalgic memories visually by way of ceramics while in a gallery setting. When one walks into a gallery, suddenly they are completely separate from the outside world. The gallery is a formal setting with signs that say “do not touch” sit on the pedestals, people dress up, and whispers are often exchanged. In hopes to extinguish the feeling typically associated with this visitation, the body of ceramic work created as part of this research aims to encourage the viewer to revisit some of those fond childhood memories. While the connection of taste to smell are the main focus of this research, much of the show is not edible; this is where the

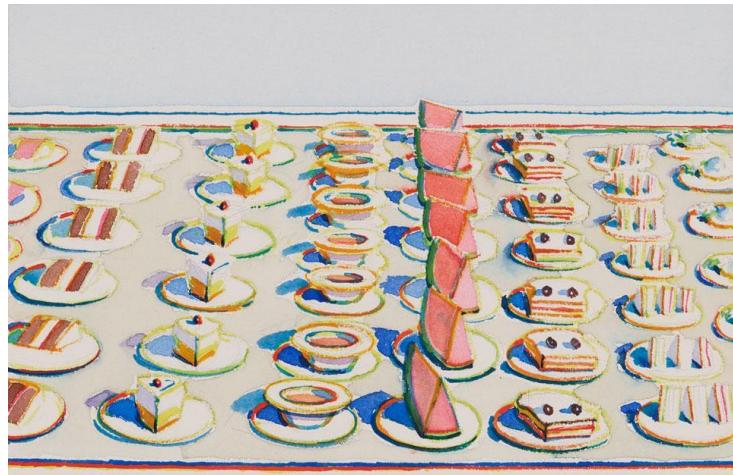
binding aspect comes into play. *Ice Cream Social* encourages one to visually bind the sight of these ceramic pastry and ice cream parlor staples, with the memory and experience of visiting the actual ice cream shop.

This is made possible by allowing the viewers to choose an ice cream bowl from one of ten shelves on the gallery wall; this action immediately eliminates the rule of “do not touch” and encourages the audience to use the piece for the reason it was intended. After the bowl is chosen he or she can go get the scoop of ice cream and proceed to a section where handmade serving vessels sit with different toppings for them to choose from. This ice cream social intends to create an experience to remember rather than just a typical browse through a gallery.

The decision to introduce an interactive element to the show was brought by the discovery of Neurogastronomy and how to correlate the binding taste with sight in a gallery setting. While each sculptural piece represents something special, the actual indulgence aspect was still missing. When I started experimenting with making small palm sized ice cream bowls there were several different clay bodies and alterations that I played around with before landing on the frothy white clay that is used for these pieces. The light, smooth clay allows for a sleek finish with easy underglaze and carving capabilities; each ice cream bowl is adorned with a motif of a small scoop of ice cream, and then carved around with a trimming tool.

Each of the one hundred fifty personalized ice cream bowls ended up sitting on ten shelves along one wall in the gallery. Each guest was invited to pay a small five-dollar donation if they were able, in exchange to pick out his or her own bowl in which they would then be served a scoop of ice cream. After receiving the flavor of choice, the viewer proceeded to the next wall in the gallery which held the titles and vessels of some favorite childhood ice cream toppings and were encouraged to decorate the scoop with whatever they desired.

Ice cream has continued to be a unifying factor between all members of my family since I can remember, which is why the social aspect of this show was so important as a unifying theme among each attendee. From birthday parties at local ice cream shops, dessert every night, celebrations for good grades, scraped knees, or late night boredom; ice cream was a snack, dessert, and an easy fix for anything that went wrong. Being an analytical child and growing up in a separated family, I took note of the daily rituals that either side of my family participated in without knowing that they were shared interests.



Lunch Table, 1964, by Wayne Thiebaud.
<https://www.toryburch.fr/blog-article/blog-post.html?bpid=415294>

5. Influences: Wayne Thiebaud

Admiring Wayne Thiebaud’s work since the first introduction, I have always been drawn to his use of color and the playfulness of content. When viewing all of the works alongside one another in the gallery, one would notice the utilization of repetition; this is made evident in technique, forms, and motifs. A common theme in many artists’ work, I drew much inspiration from Thiebaud. Artnet states that Thiebaud, “is an American painter best known for his still lifes of edible treats and everyday objects in his singular illustrative style... colorful cakes, slices of pie, candy pieces, and the winding

streets of San Francisco.”¹⁵ Prior to discovering Thiebaud, my work reflected some of the same subjects: Tall towers of treats such as bon bons, chocolates and hard candies, as well as several different slices of cakes consisting of different layers, toppings, ‘icings’ and colors. This discovery validated and fueled the repetitive process I was using while still putting a personal touch to each piece. In Thiebaud’s interview with Artnet he states, “A conscious decision to eliminate certain details and include selective bits of personal experiences or perceptual nuances, gives the painting more of a multi-dimension than when it is done directly as a visual recording.”¹⁶ The photo above is *Lunch table, Painted in 1964*.¹⁷

In one sense, repetition helps an artist to perfect his or her craft, while simultaneously providing a calm space for the maker’s mind to rest. This process is evident in the piece entitled *Hot Now*, which consists of 49 doughnuts decorated in different styles. Each doughnut was formed on the wheel where it was given a tall wall then folded over on itself and closed to form the torus shape. Once leather hard each was given final trimming to get rid of the excess clay, and then painted with underglaze or piped with slip to give each their own personality, allowing for each viewer to imagine the doughnut of their childhood dreams, perhaps the one that their parents said they couldn’t have. The pieces explore different bright colors and making methods that coincide with the nostalgic kitch that kids seem to be drawn to. *Hot Now* was inspired by trips to Krispy Kreme after birthdays, holidays, or trips to the movies.

As described by Delaney Nolan, a scholar at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop:

When my family first moved to Winston-Salem, my mother pacified us three kids with Krispy Kreme.

We’d been living in a small New England town for a decade, and now we were trundling south to Carolina, where suspiciously happy strangers asked after our church, where they didn’t have snowplows or a major league baseball team, where the lawns stayed greenish and bare into December. Jesus smiled benevolently down from billboards. Empty Skoal containers dotted the parking lot.

I was 15 and petulant. The Hot Now sign glowed off of Stratford Road.

Ushered inside, my brothers and I stood obedient in the palace of sweets. Solemnly, we placed the paper Krispy Kreme hats upon our heads.

Before us, clusters of doughy rings plopped into a shimmering bath of oil. They glowed under the fluorescence of the store. The rings floated along into the mechanical flipper, and on the other side, they came out golden, fried and beautiful. Like the gentle, corpulent attendants of a log flume ride, they bobbed drowsily forward until a metal rack lifted them out to dry land. They traveled along the belt, cooling, until they got to the heart of the process, the Kreme that followed the Krisping.

*The glaze waterfall: thick, white, uniform. It appeared soft and curiously quilt-like. The donuts disappeared into it, and appeared again blessed, baptized in frosting. They travelled a couple more yards, cooling further to optimum donut temperature, until an employee delicately lifted three donuts and placed them in polka dotted wax paper to hand to us kids, bewildered, transplanted, transfixed by sugar: we three devoured.*¹⁸

Although *Hot Now* is not a mirrored reflection of these plain glazed doughnuts, the title placed directly in the middle with seemingly red illuminated letters captures the idea of this Americanized childhood memory, while also giving the viewer an imaginative perspective and space to explore, all while mirroring Thiebaud’s use of repetition.

5.1 Christina Tosi

When considering this concept for a research topic, it made sense to look to culinary artists as a source of inspiration. Christina Tosi, a world renowned pastry chef focuses on curating her unique recipes specifically to evoke feelings of nostalgia among her customers. By taking grocery store trips to sift for inspiration in the cereal and snack isles, she tends to gravitate toward ingredients that remind her of growing up, and the sweet and salty snacks that she enjoyed as a child. Tosi owns Momofuku Milk Bar, a dessert bar that began in Brooklyn N.Y, and now has several locations

spanning over the U.S. and Canada. The Milk Bar staple is to steep cereal in milk to incorporate the flavor and then churning it to make ice cream. To eat this ice cream is like being back at the kitchen table before heading off to school, or a late night snack in the middle of studying, whatever one's mind associates cereal and milk with, tasting this ice cream will take you back to that place.



Sara Burton, *Heap*, Ceramic, 2018

Drawing inspiration from these events I enjoyed as a child brought back more memories of feasting on Little Debbie cakes along road trips, baking treats with my sister in our easy bake oven, and the bi- weekly trips to Dairy Queen for a blizzard and hot fudge milkshake with my dad before returning home to my mom's house.

Ice cream cones were one of the first objects that became a main subject of interest while developing future ideas. While my family generally enjoyed their ice cream out of bowls, ice cream cones capture the true essence of trips to the ice cream shops on hot days without a second thought of the sugary substance running down the side and splashing onto the sidewalk. Business Standard author Manavi Kapur recalls in *Nostalgia in an Ice Cream Cone* such an experience; "I accompanied my parents to collect my school report card with serious trepidation. As soon as I saw my final tally, I let out a sigh of relief: I was nowhere near the top of my class, but my score had made me eligible for a free scoop of ice cream and a congratulatory stamp on the report card at Nirula's. Most people who lived in Delhi in the 1980s, '90s and early 2000s have similar stories to share."¹⁹ In my family, all fours on report cards, meant a trip to Spoons ice cream parlor for the coveted award among myself and three other siblings.

The Little Debbie Series was created through a process of extruding clay into coil forms and then wrapping the strands around each other in a spiral fashion honeybuns and pecan rolls were born. Once bisque fired they were stained with Red Iron Oxide to give the crevices the stained cinnamon look and then painted over with a caramel or cotton white gloss glaze thus making the end product a platter of mixed plain and iced honey buns. Pecan rolls were stained and glazed with the same caramel glaze to represent the color and provide some cohesion between the two different snacks.

At the same time I began forming cosmic brownies on the slab roller. Rolling each slab to an equal thickness and then cutting multiples of the identical shape of cosmic brownies, each halfway cut mark was made to signify where the brownie would break in half and each little crunchy sprinkle was applied and colored. Once bisqued, the body of the brownies were covered with a fudge glaze to give the top a chocolaty sheen.

After making this mini-series, I felt the need to make many more. Then began the process of experimenting with colors and shapes and how to incorporate other aspects to give the series more variety. When forming the sweet treats I began taking bites out of each piece to emulate indulgence rather than a static object. The forms were glazed with a matte white, and in some cases gold luster or mother of pearl glazes were applied. These offered a new type of finish, giving the pieces a feeling of true value and importance.



Sara Burton, *Little Debbie Series*, Ceramic, 2018

6. Conclusion

Although nostalgia was originally a diagnosis of homesickness among the mercenaries, it was a tell-tale sign of what generations to come would be experiencing for the rest of their lives. Over time it has proven to be emotionally difficult to reflect on times passed that one cannot get back, yet action is still being taken to encourage the evocation of those memories especially among those who have medical conditions that inhibit them to do so. While the poverty of the present, naiveté and the Proustian phenomenon are all requirements that help to evoke the memories, those memories wouldn't surface without the binding of the senses as they come together with sight, smell and taste.

Through research and conscious experimentation in regards to the phenomena nostalgia, it becomes easy to understand that no matter the scientific reasoning behind the initial spark of nostalgic feelings, the outcome is always the same. In creating this ceramic exhibition, familiarized has been the experience of remembrance and loss over and over again; reliving times in life when things didn't just seem easier, but truly were.

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