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Pages From My Library

Elizabeth Handley Motlow

Candidate for the Master of Fine Arts in the School of  
Photographic Arts and Sciences in the Rochester  
Institute of Technology

July, 1985

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Owen Butler, Chairman  
School of Photographic Arts  
and Sciences  
Rochester Institute of Technology

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Neil Croom  
School of Photographic Arts  
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Stan McKenzie  
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*Liberal Arts*

I prefer to be contacted each time a request for reproduction of "Pages From my Library" is made. I can be reached at the following address.

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When you do a thesis and write your explanation in a few months, it is sensible to stress what your thoughts were during those months. It's a neat way to do it, and probably the most expressive. For me, it has been four years since I had my photographic exhibit, and six years since I began the process. I could not pretend to still be actively involved with what I was thinking, seeing, and doing at that time, but I am. The only real change of it all lies in the maturity of my personality as I grow older.

It is gratifying that the process of memory still interests me. It is also just as puzzling. Whenever you communicate with words, and particularly written ones, it is best to stick to facts. Many things are more clear after six years, but a memory can never be sure of what's factual or not. That leaves me with history to deal with. A small history of short duration.

Thesis Proposal for the Master of Fine Arts Degree.

College of Graphic Arts and Photography  
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences  
Rochester Institute of Technology

Submitted by: Elizabeth Handley Motlow

May 1980

Thesis Board: Owen Butler  
Assistant Professor  
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences  
Rochester Institute of Technology

Neil Croom  
Professor  
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences  
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Stan McKenzie  
Professor  
College of General Studies  
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## Background and Scope of Thesis-

"Why, for all of us, out of all that we have heard, seen, felt, in a lifetime, do certain images recur, charged with emotion, rather than others? The song of one bird, the leap of one fish, at a particular place and time, the scent of one flower, and old woman on a German mountain path, six ruffians seen through an open window playing cards at night at a small French railway junction where there was a water mill: such memories may have symbolic value, but of what we cannot tell, for they come to represent the depths of feeling into which we cannot peer."<sup>1</sup>

While T. S. Eliot, was able to describe so vividly the occurrence of a memory, he resigned too soon his interest in understanding how it occurs. To look closely at how memory affects my photography is a study I would like to undertake.

The feelings and thoughts I have while photographing often center around a memory. Sometimes it is a conscious recollection, often it is more vague: a feeling of reaching back for something specific, but not knowing just what that is.

Looking at my pictures, I see my attraction to portraiture and to objects. Both of these are durable, yet offer the possibility of change. Thus, I will photograph a wall being wrecked, and then repaired, a poinsettia as it changed with each day, a child being nursed by her mother.

1. T. S. Eliot, The Use of Poetry and The Use of Criticism

(Faber and Faber Ltd., London, 1933) p. 148.

Combining a sense of durability with the idea of constant change is an examination of the effects of memory.

#### Procedures-

The photographs will be made with an 8X10 camera, primarily in the summer and early fall of 1980. Black and white contact prints will make up the majority, if not all, of the work. The final showing will consist of twenty to thirty prints.

From the present date through the time of the thesis sharing, I will keep a journal of thoughts and influences.

#### Definition of Memory-

The faculty of the mind by which it retains the knowledge of previous thoughts, impressions, or event. The actual and distinct retention and recognition of past ideas in the mind.

Synonym - Memory, Remembrance, Recollection, Reminiscence.

Memory is the generic term, denoting the power by which we reproduce past impressions. Remembrance is an exercise of that power when things occur spontaneously to our thoughts. In recollection, we make a distinct effort to collect again, or call back, what we know has been formerly in the mind. Reminiscence is the intermediate between remembrance and recollection, being a conscious process of recalling past occurrences, but without that full and varied reference to particular things which characterizes recollection.<sup>2</sup>

2. N. Webster, Webster's International Dictionary of the English Language (G. and C. Merriam Co. Springfield, MA, 1900)p.911



## Purpose of the Thesis-

I will explore ideas of permanence and change and set down the facts of memory as they occur. I will make a study of how memory recurs in my photography. I will notice how photography retains a sense of the existent world, and how I change my view into images. Through a written explanation of what I find in my photography, I will better understand my thoughts, feelings, and reasons for working.

PAGES FROM MY LIBRARY

Looking at photographic work I did a few years ago, I have the advantage of having done more work since. Therefore I can be somewhat detached from the emotional involvements, and critical of the actual quality of my work. After three to six years I can look at my pictures and know where they lie in my own estimation.

Perhaps it is appropriate that I wait such time before writing a thesis. My original proposal was a vague, wordy thing about memory. Although the written proposal was not very precise, the important role of memory in my work was, and is, still apparent.

For I find that I live much of my life in a dream world. Many of my dreams, both nocturnal and day, revolve around those experiences which I do not forget. Often I feel that I photograph a moment of recognition, something a little more than *deja vu*. But very little of my work strikes me as coming from nowhere, or from a sudden inspiration.

When I photograph it is a highly emotional experience for me. I do not usually pause to think of what outpourings are occurring. I am excited but I have also learned to be careful. It is much more clear five years later why I photographed a leaf nestled in an abalone shell in a garden in Rochester, New York. The leaf was home, the home was unlikely, though beautiful, and the leaf would be leaving, for it did not really belong there. This was much the same as my own life in Rochester. Shells are something I associate with the southern beaches I visit and leaves have always attracted me in autumn. I still want to

acknowledge them, to see them individually.

A great deal of the work for my thesis was done in my neighborhood in Rochester. The house next door, 9 Prince Street, particularly attracted me. It is a peculiar place, but what fascinated me was the wall separating the properties, and the remnants of the gardens. Even though the architecture is very different from what I associate with home, I can see that it was the sense of change which attracted me.

As I have watched, and still do, my family's land undergo tremendous change, I observed the destruction and pathetic rejuvenation of the 9 Prince wall. This was accompanied by the detachment of the old guard in the neighborhood. It was all too appealing to me, for it was much the same as what I have seen in Tennessee.

As trees in Rochester, are extremely beautiful. Standing under a huge old Beech is as thrilling as being near the Magnolia Grandiflora. Beautiful trees can always bring out a photographic response in me. Unfortunately, I have not always done them justice. The trees in my thesis photographs were in many ways disappointing, and there are problems not yet resolved by me. But as I mature, I find that my trees have grown lovelier. Since I prefer the very old ones perhaps I will be very good at photographing them when I am very old.

Some of the more obvious memory connections in my work are the photographs I made around my grandmother's house and farm in Tennessee. She died while I was writing my proposal, and I struggled with making her presence in my life remain real and

tangible. These are the photographs of the tobacco stakes (which also made me think of Indian teepees), the wagon and ropes in a barn, and an abandoned photograph of a relative whose name is no longer known.

The most successful of this group was the picture of my sister nursing her new baby. The old fashioned wallpaper, bed, and eternal intimacy, contrast with the fact that this woman is far from happy. This is my life and its complications. This is the way I mingle my emotions.

Before I began photographing with intent I studied painting and drawing. I never found either painting or drawing as satisfying as photography, but I did learn about composition. To this day I am still strongly attracted to photograph in what I consider a pleasing arrangement of form, line, and color.

This gives rise to photographs such as the stones lying around in lovely dark places, the saplings emerging from a retaining wall, one lone branch coming through a partially destroyed wall, and the series I did on a lovely white poinsettia. Good composition is so ingrained in me that I find it impossible to ignore, and so I try to present all of my photographs in a sense of visual wholeness. Very little of my work deals with a partial view.

Professor Butler pointed out to me that I make medallions in my work. I was very much taken with this description, for I found it to be accurate concerning the central placement of a light figure in a dark background. The statement also evoked the idea of something beautiful, something to be worn, and for me,

something to cherish.

The value of possessions is important for me to understand. A possession is often held carelessly in one's esteem. Most of us find that we have far too many. But there are a few, some we may have, many we will never have, which carry with them a spirit of life, a sense of accomplishment, and a fulness of being. When I photograph an object with great care, then it simply does become mine in a lovely photograph.

In this same way, I approach portrait photography. When I photograph someone, I do it for me. I do not think of trying to please the sitter.

No other person can ever see you the way you see yourself. My experience of being totally surprised at the way other people see me is a common one. Therefore, if I try to photograph someone to reinforce the way they see themselves, the results may well be disastrous. If I approach their portrait with honesty, kindness, and a genuine recognition of their worth, I may be very pleased with the photograph. Usually, the other person is pleased as well.

Each person and every thing I photograph becomes a part of the library I keep in my mind. In this sense, they are all related to one another, and I rely on my existing pictures for making new ones.

In the story "Tamina's Death," by Milan Kundera, he wrote, "The first step in liquidating a people... is to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history. Then have somebody write new books, manufacture a new culture, invent a new

history. Before long the nation will forget what it is and what it was. The world around it will forget even faster.”<sup>3</sup>

The preservation of an individual's personal sense of history and culture is as difficult as that of a nation. For we always have our own choice to make whether we will remember or forget. Many people choose to search constantly for something new, while discounting past experiences. There is comfort to be found in keeping your memory impersonal and foreign. It is far less painful.

For me it is much more satisfying to observe the continuity in my life. I prefer to consider the events, the dreams, and the memories as equal balances in the everyday living of my life.

3 Milan Kundera, "Tamina's Death," The New Yorker, Sept 22, 1980, pp 38-46

NOTES FROM MY JOURNAL

1979

The first entry in my journal is revealing - for it is:

Wynn Bullock's Amidol Paper Developer

water..... 1/2 gal. potassium bromide.10cc(10%)solution

sodium sulfite.. 3 tbsp. B.B. solution.....10cc

amidol..... 2 tsp. citric acid.....1/2 tsp.

10% solution: dissolve 10g. in 90cc.

Add water to make 100cc.<sup>4</sup>

The second entry was:

Bellows Factor

length of bellows

divided by length of lens

But I finally did begin to write out some thoughts:

I want to know what I really see and feel here, so that when I leave, I can still see what is, through my photographs.

The human space... the perspective sense as the center of man... is denied today by photographers who want to flatten out their space.

4. Wynn Bullock, "Photograph as Symbol," in Darkroom, ed.

by Eleanor Lewis (Lustrum Press, 1977), p. 10.



I have always been intrigued with stories. A strong physical presence is brought to mind when I read a good book. What I find in the world seems to be particularly colored by tales, conversations, and myths of creation.

1980

What I think about is love, living, dying, being depressed (and wondering why), having grown old in my head, being happy (rarely wondering why-but more so lately), flying airplanes, settling another planet, the way I look, and what there is to eat.

It's not enough for something to be beautiful. What must happen is involved thought extends itself to beautiful objects, and then I make a picture.

I've often been angered by the celebration of the mundane in photography. What you should do instead is realize the power in your own existence, and use it to transform everyday objects into manifestations of God.

Most of my pictures are of things of people I live with. I've seen them all before; few, if any, strangers here.

Why is it so much harder to photograph or see the hope of life (Eugene Smith's "Paradise Garden"<sup>5</sup>, Joseph Sudek's "Contrasts, Saint Vitus Cathedral"<sup>6</sup>) than the despair? Is hope fleeting and depression longing? Individuals decide. The preoccupation with all that is dying is not the way to live one's life, even if it is the way you must see it. Real moral courage is not becoming bitter when you have every reason to.

It doesn't pay to photograph according to the ground glass. The rope didn't look like much there, but to my eye it was exquisite.

The loveliness of my pictures is often outstanding. When I work, I don't think of being lonely, but it sure comes through.

Sometimes when I photograph people that are very important I can stand beside my emotions and let all the love and feeling fly through the air directly from me to them. This is possible because of the third person and allows for the kind of intimacy felt only in a crowd. The third person, of course, is my camera and it literally takes on the role of chaperone.

5. W. Eugene Smith, W. Eugene Smith, (New York:Aperture, Inc., 1969) p.16

6. Sonja Bullaty, Sudek, (New York:Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1978), plate 8

It does temper those strong, uncertain and perhaps sexual feelings into a vision.

The camera is a chaperone. It keeps me out of trouble, or it shows me where to find it.

Is truth the difference between intention and appearance? In photography, I think it often is. If I could be so astute as to always bring together my intentions and the final print.

I've been trying to print all week, and finally today I realized that I am afraid to. Is it because it is so important to me? It seems I often lose my confidence when it comes to printing, and as much as I may love my picture, I feel there are secrets hidden because of my lack of expertise in the darkroom.

I have never made two prints that were exactly alike, but I think that is how it should be. Not to strive for uniqueness, but just recognize that it exists in some situations, (like printing). I want my prints to be beautiful. They are the final revision of an idea or inspiration. They are the flaming glory of a star that's passed.

Many things I photograph are physically broken. I don't look for decay, death, and chaos, but sometimes I spot a

beautiful, dignified element in the midst of such destruction. All of my young life was spent around older and very old people, and they had physical infirmities. But I was never taught, and have never decided, that because they weren't just right, they could not be beautiful.

The dignity persons or objects carry with them has very little to do with surface appearances. It does reflect some amount of care they have received over the years. That is why old things that have survived through someone caring about them attract me so. They are so dignified.

All experience shifts back and forth in the time of one life. Relevant one day, useless the next. Is this why so many photographers make the same picture over and over?

The feeling left with you after any experience occur again in another form. Memories are built on the flow of experience, not so much the single event.

1981

Memory is a flowing thing which causes us to notice. To stop our swimming and float for awhile.

At the thesis sharing, Owen (Butler) cautioned me about letting style become the veil, and reminded me that what was

important was what I do next. If I do not continue to work and grow, the thesis exhibit would prove to be false.

I am excited about the possibilities of the next few years.

## TECHNICAL INFORMATION

The reason I chose to apply to the Rochester Institute Technology graduate school was simple. I had been out of college three or four years, and I felt that I had gone as far as possible on my own in pursuit of photography. I already had a B.F.A. degree in art and art history, and did not want to attend any more art schools.

Upon looking around, it seemed that R. I. T. was exactly what I wanted. I came to learn photography, the craft and technique of which seemed absolutely essential to successful emotional expression.

Here I found not only what I was looking for, but a wonderful bonus. I had an instructor who carefully pointed out to me that I did not know as much as I thought I did, and who took the time to teach me as much as he could. I would never have believed that photography could be such a powerful force in my life without the sincere teaching of Owen Butler.

All of the photographs in this exhibit were made with a Deardorff 8X10 camera. The lenses were Kodak Commercial Ektars - 10", 12" and 14". The film I used was Kodak Tri-X, and the film developer was Edwal FG7.

I developed each sheet of film individually in a special tray developed by Professor Butler. I inspected each one with a dim green light so that I could stop development at exactly the right moment.

When it came to final prints, I used anything I could to

achieve the look I wanted in my photographs. I often cut masks for burning and dodging. I am certainly no stranger to the wonderful effects of potassium ferricyanide, which is used in a greatly diluted form to bring out highlights that are not quite light enough. Sometimes, but now always, I used Kodak Rapid Selenium Toner greatly diluted to help make blacks look richer.

I used a bare bulb for printing. On enlarging papers I used 7 1/2 watts to 15 watts. On contac papers I used bulbs between 15 watts and 100 watts.

My paper development times ranged from two minutes to forty minutes. Forty minutes in a paper developer diluted about 1:20, with very little agitation, gives a lovely, silvery chemical fog.

The paper developers I used were Edwal Platnum, Edwal Super III, and homemade Amidol. I used Kodak Polycontrast, Kodak AZ0, Oriental Seagull, Ilfobrom, and Ilford Galerie. Of all the papers, I find Polycontrast hard to beat because it will take unusual treatment. The same is true for Edwal Super III paper developer.

I prefer single weight papers, because I feel they have a luminous quality which is lost in double weight papers. I wash them carefully, and air dry.

I never consider a picture finished until I have dry mounted it. I like the smoothness obtainable only with dry mounting.

The prints in this exhibit were also matted and framed.

This gives a very formal look to photographs, which is nice for hanging on the walls of a gallery. It does, however, take away the quiet intimacy of holding a photograph in your hand.



Layout of Photographs in Thesis Exhibition

All frames were 14" X 17".

The bottom of a single vertical was 46" from the floor.

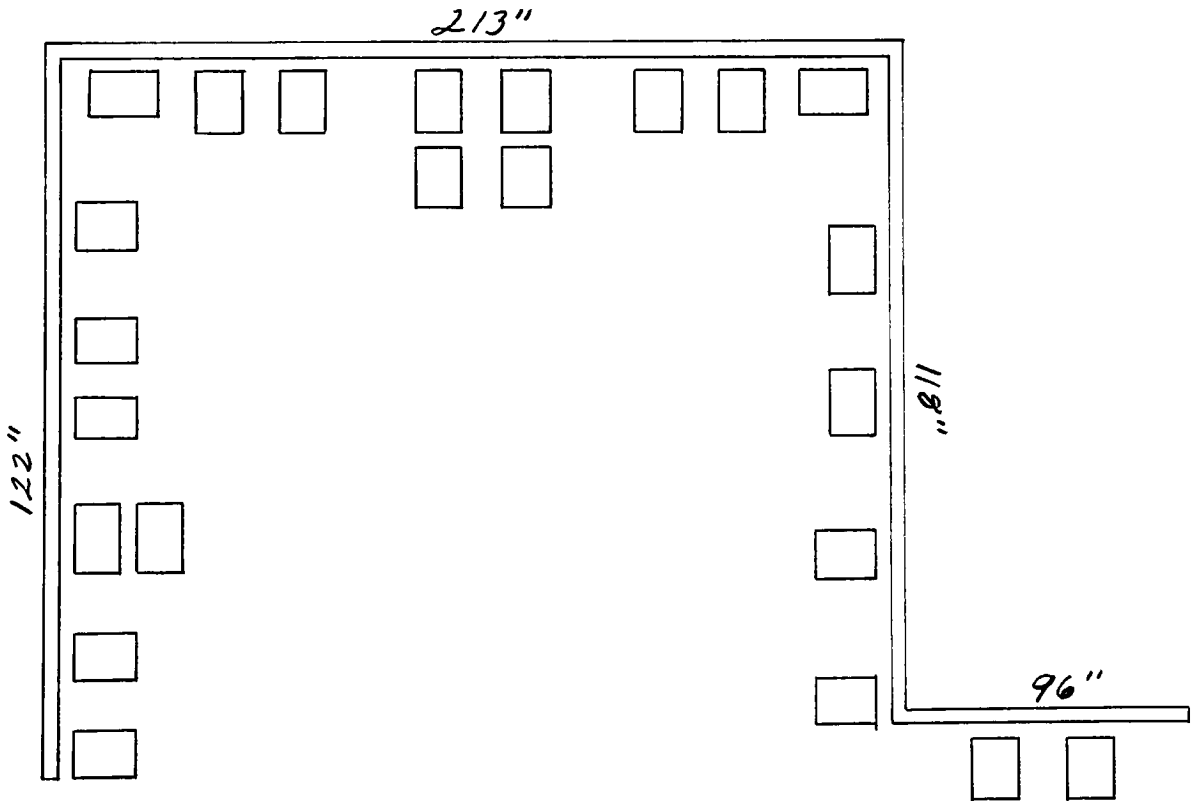
The bottoms of double verticals were 37 1/2" from the floor.

The bottom of a single horizontal was 47 3/4" from the floor.

The bottoms of double horizontals were 39 1/4" from the floor.

The walls were painted a deep shade of gray.

The photographs were hung in the 30 30 gallery of the School of Photographic Arts and Sciences, R. I. T. from March 28-April 3, 1981.



## Statement Presented with Thesis Exhibition

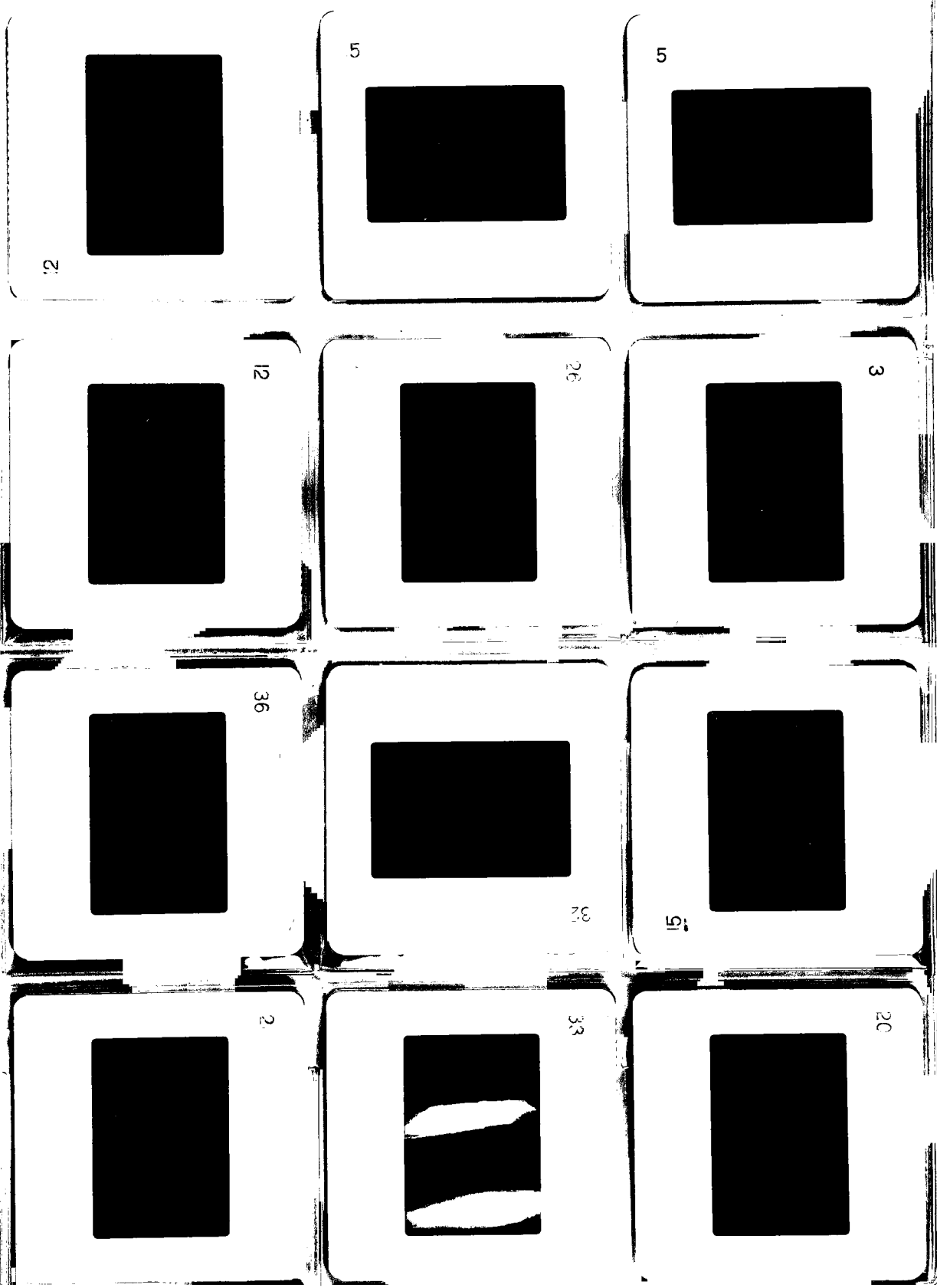
There was a treasure chest in Avon which was huge, rusted, unlocked. I wanted to open it, but the lock wouldn't budge. Then I made the picture of a fairy tale turned Pandora's Box, a sudden recognition of a memory that had changed.

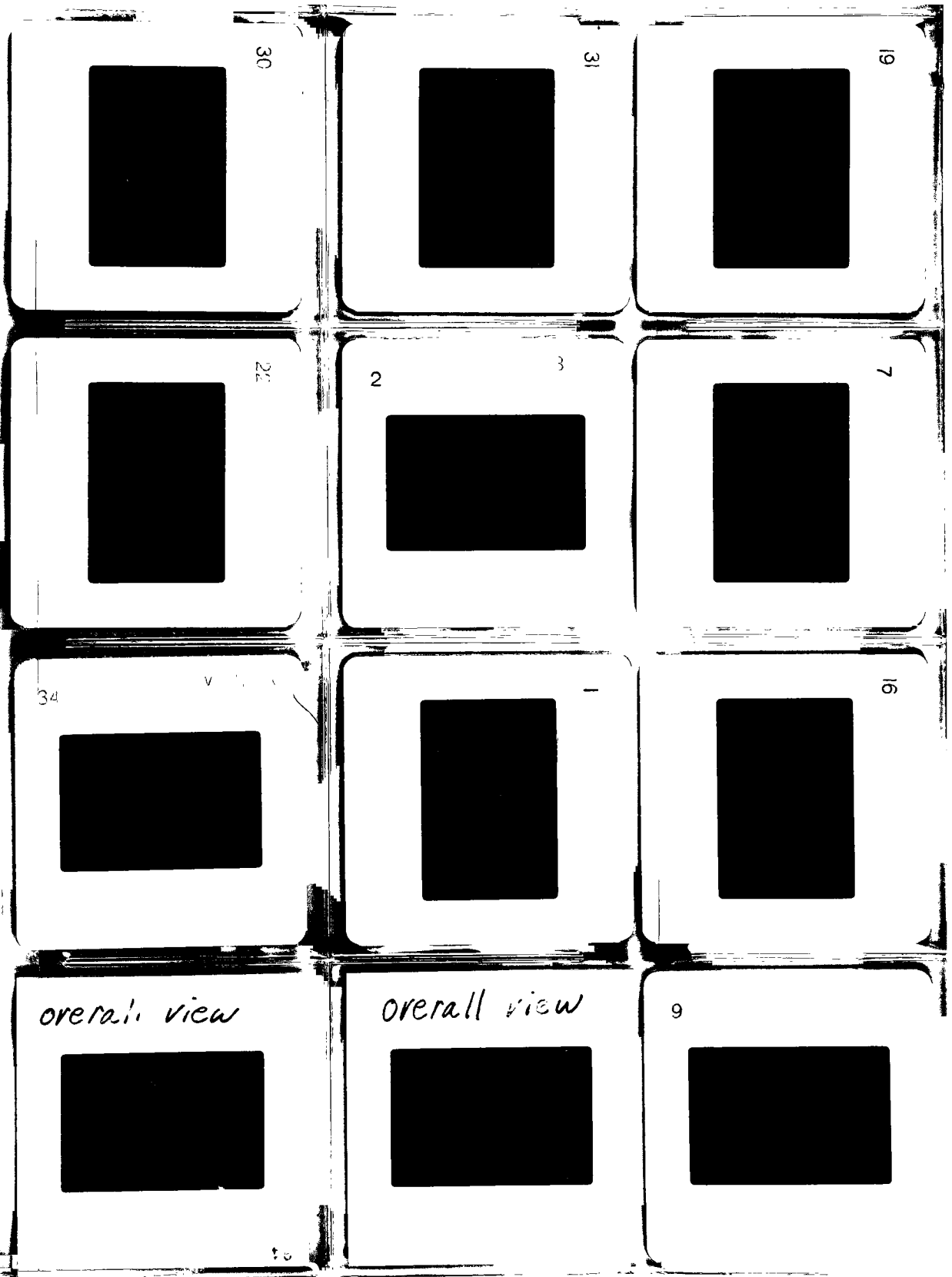
It hasn't been so important that I do original work at this time. What is important is that I learn all I can about my craft, and feel my sense of history. It is worthwhile to work hard understanding ideas which other people have formulated through experience and their own intelligence. Original thoughts are better when they are mature, and original thinking is most likely to occur with a strong current of memory.

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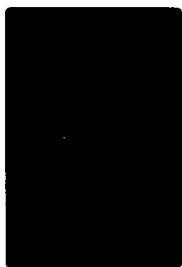
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overall view

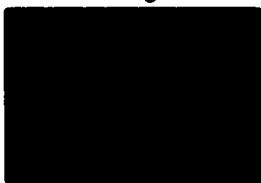
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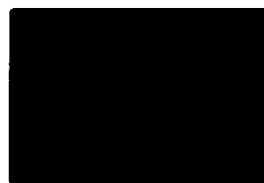
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to right



22



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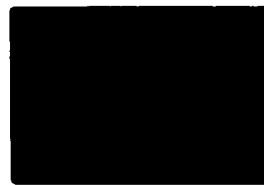
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statements

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