A natural history

Jessica Marquez

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A Natural History

by Jessica Marquez

Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Imaging Arts

Rochester Institute of Technology

Dr. Therese Mulligan, Chair

Date

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Date

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Abstract

*A Natural History* is an installation that creates the atmosphere of a miniature museum and has as its focus familial, autobiographical content. This “museum” appropriates its format from the ethnographic museum and cabinets of curiosities, which provide an institutional gaze and appeal to a sensibility of imagination and wonder. Major themes addressed include the public and private collection, art and science, and systems of ordering. Exploring these themes offers a means to visualize concepts of identity and memory.

To make tangible that which is ephemeral, such as the past, identity and memory, I use objects, images and words as mimetic stand-ins and memory triggers. These form the contents and “collections” of the semi-fictional, autobiographical “museum”—*A Natural History*. The central collection of the exhibition, the *Silhouettes*, consists of a group of photographic silhouettes of family and loved ones. It is these individuals from whom I have collected, in addition to their images, the above-mentioned objects and words, which appear along side my own, throughout the installation. The objects—family heirlooms, photographs, baby teeth, hair clippings, etc.—are private souvenirs of great personal value. The words are memories handwritten on library cards, and stored in a library card catalog. Displayed within a public context, these personal items represent interior models of intimacy and illustrate the complexities that arise between the public and private collection.

The thesis paper follows the format of the installation to provide the reader not only art historical background, conceptual intent, and influences upon the work, but to build a more complete sense of the specifics of the installation. *A Natural History* consists of five numbered, distinct “collections”—*Silhouettes, Sampler, Card Catalog, Bloodlines*, and *Vitrines*—and an accompanying catalogue *A Key to A Natural History*. 
The catalogue adopts the format of a museum catalogue, including didactic text, introduction, a floor plan, and descriptive illustrations to simulate an authentic museum experience. A chapter on the museum as muse and medium prefaces the chapters discussing the five collections of the installation. Each collection is addressed within the thesis paper individually, in their originally exhibited order, in accordance with how a viewer was intended to experience the installation.
Acknowledgements

Thank you to my thesis committee: Therese Mulligan, chair, and committee advisors, Jessica Lieberman, Tim Engström and Lesley Krane. I am truly grateful for everyone’s contributions to this work. Therese, you have been a source of continual support, encouragement and thoughtful guidance. Jessica, thank you for your enthusiasm—meeting with you always left me eager to work. Tim, thank you for stepping into the committee late in the process and for your invaluable expertise, direction and advice. I was so happy to have you be part of the committee. And to Lesley, all the way on the West Coast, thank you for seeing me through both my undergraduate and graduate work. You inspired me to pursue my MFA, and having you be part of this process meant a great deal to me, thank you.

Throughout the making process many individuals have collaborated and assisted me. Many thanks to Myra Greene for her role in the development of my work. Thank you to Dr. Dina Newman and Andrea Braganza, research assistant, in the Biological Sciences department. I also wish to extend my appreciation to Bill DuBois, Administrative Chair of Photographic Arts, Dylan Tate, tattoo artist, Russell Ward at Laird Plastics, James McNabb, wood artist, Kory Gunnarse and Booksmart Studio, Tony Zanni, graphic designer, and Matt Harper, entomologist.

I am so grateful for the support, advice, assistance and friendship of Toni Pepe, Nicola Kountoupes, Jayson Bimber, Matt Gehring, Katrina D’Autremont, Vicky Huang, Emily Winton and my RIT community.

This thesis was made in collaboration with my family. Without their contributions this work would not exist. Warmest appreciation to my family, and most especially my parents, to whom I dedicate this thesis.
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Prior to *A Natural History* I created a series of photographic images. For one image I used a 1840s daguerreotype entitled, *The Butterfly Collector* as a guide and reference (Fig. 1). I substituted a collection of butterflies for my collection of familial silhouettes. This proved to be a pivotal impetus for my thesis work (Fig 2). For the first time I began thinking about collecting and collections. Beyond the silhouettes, in what other visual and physical ways could I “collect” my family? The idea of multiple collections necessitated an institutional body. *A Natural History* functions as both the repository of the resulting collections, a miniature museum, and the medium itself.

The museum as concept, medium and muse reoccurs as a thematic source of inspiration for many artists. Works by Marcel Duchamp (*La Boîte-en-Valise*, Box in a Suitcase, 1935 – 1941) Marcel Broodthaers and Mark Dion, to mention a few, have explored museological themes, often subverting or questioning the intrinsic power of the collecting institution. In construction and concept, contemporary artist David Wilson’s *Museum of Jurassic Technology* (MJT), located in Culver City, California, has been one of the greatest influences in the development of my thesis work. The institution simultaneously functions as both an educational body and a piece of art in itself. The collections of the MJT reflect the curious, strange and unbelievable, often blurring distinctions between the real and the imaginary, like the exhibited horn of a human being (Fig. 3). The exhibition space is dimly lit and the evocative, finely crafted installations include vitrines, complex projections and optical devices. Art and science converge, evoking the fascination and wonder experienced in early museums and the Wunderkammern, or cabinet of curiosities.
The MJT is successful in creating an atmosphere that encourages exploration and questioning. Its humble, unmarked external facade reveals nothing of its vast collections and is seamlessly incorporated into the public sphere. This setting in combination with a mix of museological, scientific and wondrous content allows for varied interpretations of the museum, which can be perceived as a piece of art in itself, performance art, and a critique of museums or of scientific principles. I enjoy the multiplicity of meanings that are implied, which relates to the ability of an institution to frame viewer perception and understanding.

My thesis work shares sympathetic interests with the MJT. Mainly, the desire to create wonder, to explore the language of the museum and to use the museum as a medium. Like Wilson, I reference historical and contemporary museum practices. However, unlike the MJT, which “is dedicated to the advancement of knowledge and the public appreciation of the Lower Jurassic,” represented by strange and curious objects and technologies, *A Natural History* focuses on the construction of a personal mythology and history.\(^1\) The installation appropriates its format from the ethnographic museum and cabinet of curiosities to create an institutional gaze, to appeal to a viewer’s sense of imagination and wonder, as well as to explore a process of orienting oneself into a “visible past, a visible continuum, a visible myth of origin.”\(^2\) By institutional gaze I am referring, in general, to the politics of looking between viewer and object, and in particular, the control a museum has over objects—how they are “framed.” For example, which objects are chosen to be collected/preserved, how objects are exhibited, and what information or context is provided all effect viewer perception.

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The museum context creates a new aesthetic structure for the collections of *A Natural History*, recontextualizing the personal and private, making familiar topics, particularly the familial, anew. In this way, the museum acts as a framing device, blurring the distinctions between public and private, subjective and objective. It provides the sense of authority, dictating the importance and value of its collections and the necessity to preserve these items for posterity. For example, the vitrine case has the transformative power to elevate ordinary objects into wholly new objects. Within the vitrine case objects are stripped from their original context, appearing unique and visually appealing. As a whole, the museum acts similarly to the vitrine case by suspending its venerated objects in a fixed and untouchable state, safe from any functional use and slowing the natural process of decay.

This state creates the objective gaze of the museum, criticized for its inability to reflect the subjective life of its objects and instigating a loss of identity. It is the idea, discussed in greater detail on pps. 23-25, that the museum strips an object of its specific history, including ownership, use, location, etc. By inserting the personal, private collection into a public “museum” space, *A Natural History* problematizes the identity of its objects. The goal is to create a tension between an objective and subjective perspective. The museological frame provides the “lens” with which to examine the familial object and image, recalling both a familiar nostalgia and the intimate pursuit of scientific knowledge. I want the collections to be given “their due,” as Walter Benjamin states in *Illuminations*, which can only happen in the private collection because “the phenomenon of collecting loses its meaning as it loses its personal owner. Even though public collections may be less objectionable socially and more useful academically than
private collections, the objects get their due only in the latter.”  

This has everything to do, again, with the ability of objects to have a relationship with their original history, first-hand owners and use.

To create the sensibility of a museum, I appropriated contemporary and historic museum practices—catalogue with didactic text, use of vitrine cases, an ordering system for the collections and the inclusion of public seating. The catalogue is essential to establish the installation as museum, as it provides an “authoritative structure,” particularly seen in the mapping of the exhibition space and text. The catalogue itself is small, hand-held and contains image and text addressing each element of the installation, including an introductory statement. A map locates the five collections of the installation with numerical points (See catalogue, p. 8). Each collection is correspondingly labeled within the installation with small, circular gold numbered plaques. This provides an organizing system for the collections and guides the viewers through the installation.

Along the same lines public seating is also provided with antique wooden collapsible chairs and red velvet lined benches (Fig. 4). This seating provides a sense of formality, reminiscent of a Victorian parlor room, a very private type of space within a public setting. The addition of seating also highlights the museum as a form of entertainment.

Although it is customarily seen as solely a scholarly institution, the museum’s history has roots in education and entertainment.

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4 A Natural History Catalogue included in thesis
5 For example, the first American museum, created by Charles Wilson Peale in Philadelphia served as a model for similar institutions. Peale sought to both educate and entertain through “rational amusement.” (Contributions from the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Information, The Museum of Jurassic Technology: Jubilee Catalogue, (Society for the Diffusion of Useful Information Press, West Covina, California, 2002) p.15-16.
The central collection of *A Natural History* is comprised of sixty-one silhouette images of family and loved ones. They reflect a spirit of melancholy, of familial longing and remembrance. Yet because of its use in ethnographic study and pseudo sciences, like physiognomy and phrenology as a tool of typing and stereotyping, the profile view is also tied to a notorious past. I was interested in the dichotomy of these two historically opposed traditions—framing the subjective and objective. Unlike the silhouette images of pre-photographic history, these images are highly photographic, but rendered with subtle detail. Although the images are made through contemporary digital technologies, the images themselves, at first glance, appear to be flat fields of black, very much like traditional paper cut silhouettes. However, it was essential that they be rendered photographically. Close inspection reveals the photographic quality of the images, faint but present, and depicts what Roland Barthes called the punctum, found within the shadowy “detail” (Fig. 5). 6 It is this detail, provided by the photographic that is specific to the individual depicted, an “authentic and accurate” stand-in.

Historically silhouette portraits were regarded as true representations. Unlike the hand of an artist, fallible in its subjectivity and level of skill, a shadow produced an unbiased image. To achieve the most exact silhouettes, Johann Casper Lavater, the most well known advocate of the “science” of physiognomy during the late 18th century, constructed a silhouette chair to hold the sitter in place (Fig. 6). 7 I equate the use of the chair as an exacting device, an exact, even detached gaze, to my use of the photographic.

Lavater believed, in accordance with the principles of physiognomy, that beauty correlated with virtue and immorality with ugliness. Like the lines of a story, a profile, an exterior view, could be read to reveal an individual’s internal character (Fig. 7).

Book paper is used as the substrate for the silhouette images to emphasize the idea of the silhouette as souvenir and readable information. Each silhouette is printed on a unique sheet of paper torn from old books. In many cases, text (in one case an image) is present on the reverse: a title, chapter heading, dedication, or owner’s signature including a date. Inclusion of text is both a playful addition, and thoughtful analogy, as the titles are chosen with purpose. By chance I’d find book pages with names, titles or dedications to specific individuals. For example, I found pages with the text “Father” and “Natalie,” which now bear the images of my father and cousin Natalie. A chapter from a primer on archeology reads “VI Space and Time”, the title page from Ants Indians and Little Dinosaurs is used (a collection of essays from Natural History Magazine), as well as chapter headings like, “The Forest and the Sea,” “Young’un”, and “Book I.” One of my favorites is the back of my mother’s image, which reads A Book About A Thousand Things. While this text may be unnoticed, others are visible through the paper, adding an additional layer of information.

The age and wear associated with the use and neglect of these books are apparent in the nuances of each page: the smell of mold, watermarks, and torn or folded edges. A book is an object to be held, touched, even cradled, as one spends time reading and internalizing the words of each page. This bears a great similarity to traditional souvenir images, like silhouettes, daguerreotypes, carte-de-visites, scrapbook and photo album images. In her book On Longing, Susan Stewart addresses this similarity. She writes that “…such souvenirs often appropriate certain aspects of the book in general; we might note
especially the way in which an exterior of little material value envelops a great ‘interior
significance,’ and the way both souvenir and book transcend their particular contexts.”

While the display and substrate of the silhouettes alludes to this idea of reading,
or better, the idea of extracting meaning, it is not about following a linear logic of
specific placement, or for example, the rise and fall of the lines of a generational family
tree (Fig. 8). Rather, the organic pattern situates these individuals as one group and the
constellation-like display weaves a map that is imaged into a collective identity. It is
unmistakable that while each image is unique, through uniformity in pose, relative
positioning and formal qualities (paper type, appearance, pinning to the wall), the
silhouettes have been collected and organized into a single “object.” It is this collective
act that I wish to highlight, of collecting and organizing knowledge, which recurs
throughout the installation. Identity is not registered individually through singular
images, but through a communal, overall reading.

In this collection, it is hard to ignore the ethnographic quality and history of this
type of imaging. Ethnographic photographers exploited photography during the late 19th
century as a colonizing tool, concurrent with the emergence of the so-called sciences of
phrenology and physiognomy. Photography’s role here was not to create aesthetic
portraits, but to document and to collect data. The mug-shot-like profile pose, considered
“rigorously exact,” and the photograph, considered as a “process of certainty,” provided
measurable exact data, supported by the use of a ruler in many of these kinds of images.9

To allude to an ethnographic tradition, I mimicked the format of a trail guide. The
silhouettes in Fig. 9 create a characteristic type, a stand-in for a species. We are able to

8 Susan Stewart, On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the
Collection, p. 139
9 Robert A. Sobieszek, Ghost in the Shell: Photography and the Human Soul, 1850-2000
(The MIT Press, 1999) p. 107-110
recognize the general forms as “bird,” but only through a system of numerical classification can we “see” the individual identities. I appropriated this format for the catalogue’s display of the silhouettes to simultaneously reference an ethnographic photographic document and the silhouette’s ability to type, creating both a stand-in and collective identity (Fig. 10).

It is this profile view that Kara Walker employs for her narrative installations depicting the horrors of slavery in The United States of America, acted out by life-size, cut paper silhouettes. Often Walker’s work is criticized as perpetuating stereotypes. Yet it is this history of typing and stereotyping that Walker emphasizes in her work. She appropriates imagery of discrimination and racial profiling associated with the profile view and Lavater’s physiognomy. In accordance with the gravity of the subject matter, the viewer watches as silhouetted characters perform violent, sadistic and sexual acts. When Walker places the silhouettes within a cyclorama, the viewer is engulfed in the gruesome drama, creating a cinematic experience (Fig. 11).\(^{10}\) Reminiscent of the shadow theater, the use of the cyclorama is an historic example of entertainment within the museum involving the silhouette (Fig. 12). An important distinction between my *A Natural History* and both Walker’s and Lavater’s use of the silhouette as a cast shadow, or the removal of the body, is my interest in giving presence to an actual body.

The medium of photography allowed for a new means of collecting as mentioned above with ethnographic photography, but was not limited to this genre. Photography was closely associated with the sciences of archeology, botany, phrenology, physiognomy, forensics and medicine. The photograph provided the ability to document and preserve,

\(^{10}\) A cyclorama is a 360-degree pictorial view represented circularly so that the image surrounds the viewer. Cycloramas were intended to provide the viewer with the sensation that they were part of the image, at its very center. Popular in the 19th century cycloramas were a pre-cinematic form of entertainment. See figure 11.
identify and catalogue. While a photograph was seen as providing objective information, it was also regarded as a type of memorial to the fragment preserved. The *Silhouettes* are meant to create a tension between the photographic object as both document and memorial, in both cases exhibiting a distinct aura of object-relic.
In his photographic series *Genetic Self-Portrait*, Gary Schneider reveals internal structures, imaging what appears intangible, even invisible. Through the use of electron-scanning microscopes and X-rays, he records chromosomes, genes, DNA, and essential parts of his internal makeup (Fig. 13). This work strips Schneider’s identity to a depth of elemental basics, turning the portrait literally inside out, as the series’ title indicates. Similarly, the concept for the *Sampler* in my thesis exhibition began with the desire to visualize an ephemeral, internal form, similar to a portrait without identifying characteristics.

As with Schneider’s work, the *Sampler* was made possible through the assistance of the scientific community. To begin I contacted individuals within the science community at RIT with a general idea to visualize the internal (genes, DNA, etc.) I met Dr. Dina Newman of the Biological Sciences Department, whose research involved Mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA). Unlike nuclear DNA, which is inherited from both parents through a process called recombination, mtDNA is inherited only through the maternal line. This means, besides slight mutations, one’s mtDNA is the same throughout one’s female ancestral line. For this reason, and because of its high rate of mutation, Mitochondrial DNA is an excellent tool for examining human evolution. A specific section of mtDNA, the control region, is used for this type of research, because this short part is representative of the whole and full of mutations. Mutations are important in that through their variety they are able to show developments over time.\[11\] It is this section that I sequenced. These basic principles of mtDNA were all extremely intriguing.

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fact that mtDNA was maternally inherited also aligned with my intent to embroider the code into a sampler, a traditional craft performed by women.

Based on their unique maternal lines, I chose five individuals from whom I collected mtDNA samples. These included my grandmother, grandfather, father, an aunt who had been adopted, and my mother, although she was of the same maternal line as my grandmother and myself. Dr. Newman and her research assistant, Andrea Braganza generously walked me through laboratory work, providing information on how to collect samples, extract DNA and prepare the samples for DNA sequencing. From mouthwash samples, check cells and then DNA were extracted. At the end of this process, I had mtDNA codes form each of my participants, resulting in the alphabetic pattern on the Sampler (Fig15). The four letters of the code—A, T, G, and C stand for the nucleotides Adenine, Thymine, Guanine and Cytosine—form the structure of DNA (Fig. 14).

While the Sampler has the most specifically science-related content of the exhibited works, due to the use of a laboratory process, its format directly connects to the past. The long and narrow shape is borrowed from traditional 17th century band samplers (Fig. 16). Band samplers contained complex stitching in the form of patterns, utilizing the alphabet, numerals and/or simple phrases. The act of embroidering was employed as a tool of didactic instruction. Through repetition, the intricate work of embroidery could be internalized, as was intended by combining text, to encourage literacy among young women. Knowledge became accessible through the repetitive act of embroidery and this informed my interpretation of a band sampler.

Like a binary code, the code of my family’s mtDNA appears random, but contains an immense amount of precise information. Most pertinent is mtDNA as a tool for tracing lineage. To accentuate this point, the scale of the Sampler is exaggerated, referencing

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12 Carol Humphery, Samplers (Cambridge University Press, 1997)
both a metaphoric timeline and a physical distance to the past. While the information within the code is physically accessible, providing clues to my lineage, the sheer scale of the Sampler and the length of the code make the practice of embroidering it a Sisyphean task. Because of my inability to complete the act of embroidering, the Sampler is not complete and is perpetually in the process of being learned. Thus the text is not comprehendible. It is instead ripe with information, a code decoded, but accessible only through tremendous labor, focus and time (Fig. 17).
The third collection of *A Natural History* is the *Card Catalog*, a forty-five-drawer vintage library card catalog, housing many objects and cards with handwritten memories. The catalog is a remnant of an antiquated ordering structure—the Dewey Decimal System—and is completely self-contained. This ordering system and the tactile quality of the card catalog made it the choice object to create a metaphor for memory as storehouse. This storehouse functions like a cabinet of curiosities, a world in miniature, my own alphabet of the universe.

The card catalog contains various objects rich with associative relationships to memory. The objects, including stones, sea glass, acorns, bees, hair, photographs, many drawers of dead butterflies, and similar objects are placed randomly within the various card catalog drawers. Most of the objects belong to me, but some belong to the individuals depicted in the silhouettes. In this case the drawer’s objects are protected by plexiglass. Yet, most objects are accessible to the viewer to touch. In *A Natural History*, this collection is the most interactive and invites a sensory experience for the viewer. Senses are engaged through touch, smell (objects like the tobacco pipes and butterflies have a distinct aroma) and sight (seeing the various objects and reading the handwritten text) (Fig. 18). The intent of the text, handwritten on traditional yellow library cards, is to have the many individuals present in the *Silhouettes*, including myself, contribute their “memories”. This represents a collective memory and a great range of experience. Some cards are detailed narratives and feel like excerpts from a diary, while others are brief, some only a word or date, stripped of their context and open to a variety of interpretations (Fig. 19).
functions as a source of collective memory. Within the Card Catalog there is no order for its contents, no labeling system. It denies the desire for ordering found in systems like the library’s use of the Dewey Decimal System. Rather, objects and cards appear at random, which allows for associative relationships to develop through the arbitrary, the chance occurrence, and the randomness of interactive play. This experience is similar to a library card catalog in its original context, in which pulling a drawer and rifling through a catalog’s cards would reveal a vast array of topics, authors and information, not directly relational to each other. This experience, like memory itself, is nuanced and random. While we fight to order memory into a chronological structure through photographs, albums, diaries and so forth, memory, by its very nature, is not chronological.

Instead of fighting the “natural” order of memory, collected objects and accumulated experiences (cards) are exhibited without the use of a labeling system, creating imaginative possibility and encouraging exploration by the viewer. This thesis expands the definition of the collection proper, allowing for the inclusion of accumulation as an identifiable form of collecting. I argue that while we might not consider ourselves collectors, through the unavoidable process of accumulating a personal history through physical objects, knowledge and memories, in actuality over time we are collecting. I am suggesting that collecting, much like memory, is biologically informed.

The model for the Card Catalog was based upon curiosity cabinets or Wunderkammer of the 16th through 19th century. The Wunderkammer was famous for housing vast collections of wondrous objects—a fusion of art and science—and for their ability to evoke imagination and scholarship. Those who possessed a sizeable Wunderkammer created large-scale rooms to hold their prolific collections of natural
specimens and curiosities. The intent was to promote knowledge through the acquisition of objects worthy of both study and wonder.  

These private collections were not always available to the general public, but toward the end of the evolution of curiosity cabinets many were absorbed into public institutions of universities and museums. Levinus Vincent’s Wunderkammer, 1715 is a wonderful example of a collector’s intense passion for both acquisition and display. His Wunderkammer, considered one of the most famous of the 18th century, was available to the public. In Fig. 20, we see the product of one man’s obsessive pursuit, illustrating the breadth and scope of his acquisitions. At the top right of the image, a curtain is pulled back as if to reveal a stage and Vincent’s Wunderkammer is transformed into a “theater of the universe.” On this stage we are witnesses to how a collection of objects might function as a microcosm—a symbolic possession of the world in a small scale. Through the acquisition, possession, display and study of these rare, new and curious objects, the world was seen in miniature, and objects compartmentalized experience, thus providing a greater sense of the unknown. The Wunderkammer provided a rare glimpse into the unexpected and unfamiliar, offering visitors and collectors new knowledge, experience and a sense of power through possession.

Artist Joseph Cornell’s work bears a great resemblance to the Wunderkammer. His box constructions similarly represent a world in miniature, as each enclosure represents a unique time and space, and creates an atmosphere of wonder. Each of his boxes function as a contained object where many smaller and seemingly disparate objects relate to one another through connotation. Cornell was a collector of everyday materials—bits of ephemera, photographs and natural specimens occupied in his box

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14 Ibid. p. 149
assemblages as aids in the visualization of personal mythologies. For example, *Untitled (Museum)*, c. 1940-1950 contains twenty-eight small glass vials, sealed with bright red wax in a dark wooden box (Fig. 21). This miniature museum requires physical interaction to view the vials, as each must be lifted from the wooden case to see into the glass. Each vial contains a unique specimen of the natural world or bits from Cornell’s personal collection, like a shell in sand, a piece of a map of constellations or a newsprint image of a house. In general, Cornell’s work revisits themes—popular science, visual experiments, discovery and entertainment—and objects—natural specimens and curious items of personal interest—which are also often referenced in curiosity cabinets like *Levinus Vincent’s Wunderkammer* and in my *Card Catalog*.

The collections housed within the *Card Catalog* present a systematic approach to the chaos of memory, with an overabundance of accumulated objects. Each drawer presents the viewer with possibilities and encourages an interactive exploration of the varied contents. The visual and physical pleasure of opening drawers and discovering their contents is intended to stimulate the viewer’s imagination and recollections. Notions of discovery, the known and unknown, wonder and memory are all addressed with the *Card Catalog*. It is my hope it can function as a metaphoric storehouse for the internal world of memory and all its accumulated objects.
Chapter 5 Bloodlines

The most contemporary collection of *A Natural History* is *Bloodlines*. Within the installation, it mirrors the *Silhouettes* and *Sampler* and contain elements of both of these collections, including the familial image and blood as a representation of lineage. Along with the role of blood in heritage it is also important to note its symbolic power not only as a vital fluid, but also its rich social, historical and symbolic importance. The *Bloodlines* are a series of eight, small inkjet images of my parent’s silhouettes cut into my skin by a tattoo artist. The cuts were allowed to scab, scar and heal so that the silhouettes became latent images etched into my skin (Fig 22). The photographs document a performance. They were made periodically throughout the healing process of my skin to record the transformation of the silhouettes. A bloodline, a term used in tattooing, describes a temporary outline, used in combination with shading, to denote an image. When an outline is necessary, but a permanent outline is undesirable, a bloodline can be used; a needle passes through the skin lubricated only with water, leaving a temporary blood-red mark on the skin.

My bloodline tattoos are of the facing silhouettes of my mother and father. The shapes are simple, void of shading or detail. This allows for an iconographic interpretation of the silhouette shapes—male and female, mother and father. In addition, an oval frame, like the frame of a souvenir image, is placed around the silhouettes. This formal element grounds the otherwise floating silhouettes. The oval frame and its placement on the chest also specifically reference a locket (Fig. 23). A locket, another self-contained tactile object, represents an intimate gesture and fuses private and public space. Worn on the body and easily touched, the locket and the image it contains become
an extension of the wearer’s body. Although a locket is for private viewing, its visible placement ensures the public display of personal relationships.

To “wear” these images, the physical visage of my parents, speaks to the visualization of intimacy. Like a metaphorical locket, these images are both joined to the body and become of the body. Carved into the skin, the images appear to be revealed from within and eventually return inward as they heal. Skin becomes canvas, blood ink. Catherine Opie uses a similar approach in _Self Portrait, 1993_ (Fig. 24). Opie sits centrally in the frame in a three-quarter bust view although her back faces the camera/viewer in a refusal of her physical identity. She is softly lit and in front of a richly colored, decorative teal backdrop, which in combination directly reference elements of formal portraiture. Carved onto her back is a crude, child-like image of a house, clouds, sun, flying birds and two female stick figures holding hands. The thick, rudimentary lines of the image—most likely made from a razor blade not a tattooing needle—bleed, emphasizing the sensation of pain and physical violence. While she follows the schema of traditional portraiture with studio lighting and a formal backdrop, the norms of gender and sexual identity are problematized. _Self Portrait, 1993_ speaks to Opie’s self-image as a lesbian and to the complexity of sexual identity, a subject that is visually underrepresented in mainstream visual culture. _Self Portrait, 1993_, as well as _Bloodlines_, create images that reveal an internal longing, where the suggested act of cutting into the skin releases more than just blood, but also a presence of longing, desire and remembrance.

Working along similar lines, Zhang Huan’s _Family Tree, 2000_ depicts a photographic performance in which text is written on the artist’s face (Fig 25). Over nine photographs Huan’s face is progressively covered in traditional Chinese calligraphy. Family names and text from Chinese folklore are “written” across the artist’s face until his features are completely covered in black ink. Here with skin as canvas, Huan
autobiographically marks references to culture, personal history and genetic lineage. 

*Family Tree* suggests the function of language as code, externalizing the salient information that forms the make-up of an individual’s sense of identity. The structure of this code becomes indistinguishable from the physicality of the individual and, by the end of the photographic sequence, overwhelms its subject. Similarly, *Bloodlines* follows a time-based sequence viewed across eight panels in which the performative act is representative of the marking of time and the physical markings of familial identity.

More than just healing, *Bloodlines* also represents a process dependent upon time. In their display it was important for the process of healing to be seen not only through the images, but also within the physical exhibition space as well. Images were placed according to the time they were created, with the first images at the center and subsequent images placed on the outside of the central/first images, so that the last images made are placed on the end of the timeline. Where the *Sampler* records a genetic lineage through time, the *Bloodlines* emphasizes the relationship of time and experience as salient elements in the construction of familial bonds. Intimacy is not born through relation, but is the by-product of an inheritance dependent upon time and experience.
Chapter 6 Vitrines

The fifth and final collection of *A Natural History* is *Vitrines*, two cases fabricated from vintage dresser drawers (Fig. 26). Each vitrine case was constructed from two drawers placed back-to-back to form each case. To recreate the appearance of a more authentic vitrine, the backs were removed, sides cut down, table legs were attached and, finally, a plexiglass display top added. The contents of this collection, like the contents of the card catalog, are the belongings of the individuals seen in the *Silhouettes*, including my own. The display of objects again form a collective entity, as they are presented as a single collection and appear as if they were the actual contents of a single owner’s dresser.

In function and display, *Vitrines* illustrate an ethnographic approach to objects—in acquisition, display and cataloguing. For example, the objects within *Vitrines* are numbered and indexed within the catalogue *A Key to A Natural History*. Information within the catalogue, which corresponds to the numbered objects, is included with the intent to provide an additional layer of access to the objects (See Catalogue, p. 16). Furthermore, the challenge of access is explored through the inversion of public and private, highlighted in the use of repurposed dresser drawers. While the drawer suggests a private space for personal use and objects, the vitrine places these items in the public domain. Because these are personal souvenirs/memorials, embedded with sentimental value versus an historical/monetary value, it is rare to see these types of objects included within a public collection (exceptions include the collections of historic homes, etc.). The inclusion of the drawer pulls adds to the physical sensation of pulling a drawer open and implies a voyeuristic examination into a private space.
The drawer references the literal place where some of these objects may be found in their owner’s homes, but also acts as a metaphor for intimacy. In his book *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard attributes the drawer as “…[a] model of intimacy. They are hybrid objects, subject objects. Like us, through us and for us, they have a quality of intimacy.”\(^{15}\) Drawers represent an inner space that does not open for everyone. Here inside and outside, inner space and external environment are collapsed as the drawer of the vitrine case is always open and the private is made public. Bachelard also alludes to a drawer like a “little casket” which equates these souvenir/memorial objects with the status of relics.\(^ {16}\)

Inspired by childhood visits to ethnographic and historical museums, artist Christian Boltanski constructed the series *Reference Vitrines*, 1969-70 (Fig. 27). The *Reference Vitrines* recycled earlier works incorporating parts of his mail art projects, small fabricated objects, pages from his books and reproduced snapshots, expressing strong autobiographical and self-mythological content.\(^ {17}\) Boltanski’s *Vitrine*, 1970 displays personal ephemera and earlier artworks with crude labeling within wooden vitrine cases in an attempt to “…prevent forgetfulness, stopping the disappearance of things and beings, seemed to me a noble goal, but I quickly realized that this ambition was bound to fail, for as soon as we try to preserve something we fix it. We can preserve things only by stopping life’s course”\(^ {18}\). Boltanski suggests these objects have lost their identity, because the objects are now void of use, function, and, most importantly, their associative relationship to memory and history.

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\(^{16}\) Ibid., p. 84
Baudrillard expounds on this idea in his 1981 book *Simulacra and Simulation* stating, “For ethnology to live, its objects must die.”¹⁹ This metaphoric and literal death follows from the object’s dislocation from its own history, a specific time and place of origin, which “ensure(s) their slow extermination.”²⁰ According to Baudrillard what preys upon objects is not so much the effects of time, but our own insatiable need to possess the past in a process including discovery, exhumation/colonization, accumulation and display. To possess these objects is then, in a sense, also to destroy them, making death ever-present within the collection. The many drawers of the card catalog filled with colorful dead butterflies, pungent with the aroma of death, are illustrative of this idea. I also allude to this concept by pinning the silhouettes to the wall, as if they were a collection of lifeless specimens. We also see this concept of capture and destruction in photography, in the death of the moment.

The irony is that this process of possession and extermination described by Baudrillard is simultaneously fulfilled and refused within the collection of the *Vitrines*. First, the objects within the *Vitrines* (and *Card Catalog*) will be returned to their owners. The objects will return to their place of origin, to the ones who possess first-hand knowledge of their symbolic and personal histories. Only photographic documents will remain of the exhibition. Secondly, I constructed the *Vitrines* after a reliquary and consider them to function like a reliquaries. Vitrines first appeared in churches, which were constructed for the protection and worship of relics.²¹ Relics as objects are imbued with a unique status as both living and dead, because they possess talismanic qualities, an aura and palpable life force. Relics can be inanimate objects, but more often, a relic is

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²⁰ Ibid., p. 10
some part of the body, as is often the case in Christian worship. This perhaps explains why my Catholic grandmother collected the teeth of her children and grandchildren for over sixty years in a small jar (exhibited as *Teeth Jar* in *Vitrines*, see Fig. 28). This is by far my favorite object within the collection. It is a beautiful example of how a relic may function. To be close to the life of those that we long for, to possess some part of their life force involves close interaction with gruesome aspects of death and decay. To collect such types of objects is an attempt to possess and preserve, not the object itself, but the intangible, frail ties we have to the referent through remembrance.
Process

From its inception, *A Natural History* has been an intuitive, highly conceptual, and collaborative process, building on one idea to the next. I began with a simple urge to make silhouettes of my parents with readable, but minimal detail. The outcome was a seductive vacillation between iconic image and unique representation. I was reminded of two historically opposed traditions involving the image of an individual in profile. The first, associated with colonial power, was the ethnographic tradition of documenting types, and the second, a romantic tradition of remembrance and longing, cut paper or drawn silhouettes as mementos.

Embracing these oppositional points provided the momentum to pursue the silhouettes further—I would create a map of my family. Playing with both historical traditions, the silhouettes could simultaneously evoke an analytical detachment and sentimental kitsch. This exciting realization helped direct my many aesthetic and content decisions. The main idea was to choose forms that could depict the inherent dichotomies associated within science and art (objectivity versus subjectivity) in relation to exploring and visualizing ephemeral forms (identity and memory) related to familial themes.

One of the earliest decisions was to create the silhouettes as part of a collection. The process of photographing my family (and later collecting objects and other materials from them) in such a specific and calculated manner, one that required a checklist, long drives and frequent appointments (not visits so much as scheduled appointments) were reminiscent of the collector’s pursuit. Passion mixed with pragmatism, a desired object rarified, made precious and then ordered with other similar, yet unique examples. This collection would need a system of organization and display, an autobiographical fictional museum, and with that, other collections.
To create the varied collections I needed the resources and expertise of a variety of individuals. Throughout the process I’ve worked collaboratively with my family, a tattoo artist, an entomologist and geneticist (not to mention, framers, printers and fabricators). I asked much from my family—their time, blood (I also took stick samples with a glucose tester, which I ultimately decided not to use in the exhibition), words, images, and trust. On a plane from Los Angeles to Rochester, I transported their most precious objects and DNA samples in the largest carry-on bag I could find; I would not risk having this piece of luggage lost and prayed that my bag would not be inspected. How was I to explain a jar of teeth, my cousin’s three childrens’ dried, raisin-looking umbilical stumps or the five duct-taped mouthwash bottles that contained cheek cells from which I would later extract DNA?

During the process of making, the pieces of each collection—the bloodline tattoos, familial objects, card catalog and mtDNA sequence—lived as separate components, never fully realizing my conceptual vision for them until their installation into the gallery space. Because my work is conceptually driven and the installation contained many distinct, laborious tasks that needed daily attention, the work only felt like one whole entity when installed, even as the parts simultaneously inhabited my workspace. I believe this to be one of the most frustrating and fulfilling parts of the creative process.
Conclusion

Susan Stewart writes in *On Longing*, “…while the point of the souvenir may be remembering, or at least the intention of memory, the point of the collection is forgetting…”\(^{22}\) While this idea may seem contradictory to the intentions of *A Natural History*, it alludes specifically to context. Stewart continues by noting that the collection performs a removal “of the narrative of history with the narrative of the individual subject- that is, the collector himself.”\(^{23}\) I imagine the exhibition as a whole to be an image, an image of my family, closest friends and myself, which I hold up for the viewer’s examination. When I began this project I was interested in hearing my family’s stories, reuniting with distant relatives, and, in one case, meeting with an estranged family member. I wanted to learn about them in an altogether unique and collaborative process. I was investigating my own identity by creating a personal ethnology, and mapping out an intricate web of experience, history and lineage.

The installation and its component parts serve a memorial function. The creation of this “image” for the viewer calls to attention the act of remembrance. This act speaks to the process of affirming one’s own identity within an elaborate network of social relationships, time and space. This metaphor of holding an image for another’s gaze references the 19th century tradition of being photographed while looking at an image, offering an image to the viewer, or even simply holding a closed daguerreotype case (Fig. 29). Here, images are stand-ins for the missed and absent individual, and the final image photographic documentation of the desire to evoke their presence, “the desire to

\(^{22}\) Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, p. 152

\(^{23}\) Ibid., p. 156
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I had a pet chicken when I was 9 years old. Don’t remember how I got him... His name was Jasper. He had a bad leg. I loved him. He was a good pet. I think he loved me, that’s how I knew he... I do not know. He died and I was so sad... but why... I don’t know why.

I didn’t understand how much emotional investment I had in my job until the day I retired. That day was by myself on the train, sitting on my return filled “Happy Retirement” balloon with tears running down my face.

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