Angular of repose

Toni Pepe

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Angle of Repose

By

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THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Imaging Arts

Rochester Institute of Technology

Angela Kelly, Committee Chair
Date

Clarence Sheffield, Committee Advisor
Date

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Angle of Repose

By

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Abstract

This thesis explores the notion of loss as an overarching theme for the examination of memory and the feminine as constructed tools for identity. Certain paradigms related to gendered roles, domesticity, femininity and the female psyche are investigated. The thesis also addresses ideas within Lacanian theory; concentrating on the male gaze, female representation and the artist as both photographer and subject. Absence and presence are also significant themes, as both narrative tools and as inherent photographic characteristics. The idea of loss is further emphasized by absence/presence within the photograph, calling to mind the relationship of the photograph to memory.
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Introduction

The series, Angle of Repose, is a group of images and objects, which explore the consequences of images on identity, personal history and memory. Although, photographs (specifically family snapshots) play an important role throughout this series, it was not a 2-dimensional object that began my interrogation of the image—but, instead another passion of mine, collecting. I have always collected stuff, beautiful, ugly and always old stuff. On some unconscious level, I probably understood this need to hoard, but it was my photographs that made me look beyond this activity as a simple impulse or hobby.

My images are littered with thrift store plates, estate sale linens, discontinued (thrown out) library books and eBay knick-knacks. I’ve read and heard from a variety of sources that my generation, the 20-somethings are enamored with the vintage—it’s some sort of trend. I am not sure, for the viewer’s sake, how much of this trendiness has spilled over onto my work—but my inclination toward the used goods world is certainly not derived from an Urban Outfitters storefront or the like. Instead, these objects bring to my images a sense of history, legacy and my own exploration of ancestry and identity. They are imprinted with the stains, scratches and other markings of a past—a narrative that extends outside of the photographic images they are placed within. They embody
the traces of time and entice the viewer to remember—triggering memories, certain smells, movies, familiar places, etc.

Each image works to reference the theme of loss as it relates to the idea of trace and memory. The ever-present atmosphere of melancholy sets the stage for the viewer, while the rich fabrics, layers of dust and shiny veneer-like surface of the image seduces the viewer to look. The variety of the scenarios depicted is often nonsensical and entirely based within the walls of the character’s mind:

In one image the character’s quick, measured breath sends a cloud of dust swirling into the darkness. Each object within the frame, including the row of birds depicted on the wall is in its place— in a mannered approach that references the artificial language often depicted within painting.

Fig. 1.1
The reference to painting, like the objects, is based upon the idea of legacy. In this sense, it is the artistic legacy—what has come before and how those representations exist within the contemporary world. The character is what grounds the work within the contemporary—her gestures, movement and presence all seek to problematize notions of the feminine (depicted throughout art history, advertising and today’s media):

In yet another image, the character balances on a step, releasing a plate defiantly into the air, the contents slipping from her fingertips. Her legs are bruised and twisted, and her feet are worn and cracked.

Throughout this series I am seeking to create a dialogue with what has come before me—disregarding any sort of hierarchical standard for influential materials. Whether it is a torn family snapshot, a Vermeer or the craft of needlepointing, all work together equally to convey a narrative. Within the images, the role of the character, objects and background, too carry the same conceptual weight.
engage the viewer’s desire to gaze. This paper, which is separated into three sections: *The Character, Memory and Photography*, and *Process and Materials*, seeks to address the role of the female protagonist as it relates to the feminist perspective, second-hand narratives, the family album and how they inform our identities. And finally, my perspective as artist---revealing to the reader/viewer the nuances of the materials and the work involved.

**Becoming Her: The Artist as Subject/The Photograph as Performance**

“One is not born, but rather becomes a woman.” Simone de Beauvoir

The character: she is a woman fabricated by a time that is entirely constructed within the performance of the photograph. Her actions and gestures are confined to the stage that is the frame, while her identity is contingent upon what is beyond those borders. As Judith Butler writes in *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*, “gender is in no way a stable identity…rather it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts.”

It is important to understand that the character is the result of both historical *and* contemporary notions of the feminine – she is gender as a learned—rather than as a natural—state. The appropriation of certain gestures and poses from contemporary as well as historical art, advertising, and literature allow for a reading of the feminine as something outside of the body, challenging the notion of essence and the intrinsic feminine. The character within these images is a strategically

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1 Butler, Judith *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and*
composed product of the feminine construct explored through certain visual and literary approaches.

Simone De Beauvoir writes in *The Second Sex*, “He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other.” These images present a woman—an individual situated somewhere between the familiar space of the domestic and the enigmatic walls of her own consciousness. There is a tension evident in the appropriation of female stereotypes and the discontent of the female character that seems to embody these historical characteristics of the feminine. The character’s rejection of her situation is compounded by her gestures. She presses her lips and uses the power of her breath to reveal the text that lies beneath a layer of dust. She grips the rough, wooden edges of a table and the weight of her body leans into it pushing the table out of the frame. The rushing cadence of the character’s movements is exhibited in the manner in which she commands her body over the objects, and the space of the frame. Each photograph conceals or truncates the character’s face and body, revealing only parts of her. This visual approach heightens the performance of the character’s gestures—the detail of her twisting forearm triggers associations with the character’s identity, qualities that may contradict the female norm. The correlation between the character’s gestures and her environment are in conflict with one another, making it difficult to compartmentalize the character’s identity into familiar—or feminine—paradigms. Furthermore, her unusually decorative environment emphasizes this incongruity between the character’s feminine appearance and her actions, which seem to challenge her essence.
The motive for employing feminine stereotypes—related to the character’s appearance and environment—is associated with the personal struggles of identity as a woman, one who must constantly confront an objectionable history. De Beauvoir wrote, “She is doomed to repetition, she sees in the future only a duplication of the past.” The direct connection De Beauvoir makes between a woman’s future and a past she never experienced, but somehow knows how to repeat, instigated my exploration into how this past is represented and thus learned. What exactly is this past that women are “doomed” to repeat? Can a woman embrace her ancestors and their situatedness without compromising her future? The protagonist of this series emanates the stereotype. She wears her red lipstick, satin and lace dresses, and situates herself within the home. At the same time, however, the character’s body language and actions challenge these notions of women. In *Performative Acts and Gender Constitutions*, Judith Butler asks that the reader “consider gender, for instance, as a corporeal style an ‘act,’ as it were, which is both intentional and performative.” This idea of the “act” is the motivation behind the character. Each photograph is a performance in which the character “compels the body to conform to an historical idea of ‘woman,’ to induce the body to become a cultural sign.” Although the character is unaware of her performance, I—as both subject and author—am in total control of this. I am attempting to simulate the feminine (revealing the performative nature of gender) and am prescribing an

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identity for this woman as something that is multifaceted and based within the
fiction and truth of the “self” as well as the social.

Artist as subject is another level of performance found within this series,
which utilizes the gaze and further challenges conventional ways of looking. The
act of looking has been deemed a typically male activity, where the female takes
on a more passive role as the subject. One of the most direct methods for
subverting the patriarchal gaze is to transform the female into both subject and
maker. The female subject sees herself and, in return, the viewer, whether male or
female, must recognize that the image is from the perspective of the female gaze.
Who is in control, however, is not necessarily clear. Is it the photographer as
image-maker, the artist as performer, the character herself or the viewer as
interpreter? This conflict of control is mainly inspired by Cindy Sherman’s series
*Untitled Film Stills*. As Jennifer Dalton notes in her article “Look At Me: Self Portrait
Photography After Cindy Sherman,” “each of [Sherman’s] photographs documents
an elaborate ritual of research, costuming, makeup and posing....her rituals take
place for an audience consisting entirely of herself”\(^6\) The performances in this
series, similar to Sherman’s, are conducted for an audience of one: the camera.
The work diverges from Sherman, however, on the fact that these images reference
one woman and the work depends on the interaction of the audience. The viewer’s
association of memory—both personal and public—with the character is important
to her development. In addition, the tension of these images rests on the idea that

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\(^6\) Dalton, Jennifer Look At Me: Self-Portrait Photography After Cindy Sherman
no one—artist, character, or viewer—is entirely in control. Each has to realize the contribution of the other and react accordingly—thus, the gaze is omnipresent.

The method of artist as subject is particularly important in understanding the identity and role of the character. Any singular origin of her does not exist and this is further emphasized when the viewer is aware of her as both subject and author. She, of course, is a piece of me, but what makes her whole? The character is in itself a dialogue about the transformative and performative nature of identity. She is a pastiche of literary and cinematic characters including, among others, Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway, William Shakespeare’s Lady Macbeth, Kate Chopin’s Edna Pontellier, Joan Crawford and Katherine Hepburn. She is also representative of the nameless faces in advertising ranging from the 1940s to today as well as of the faces I do not recognize in my own family snapshots. Much like a family photograph can only allude to a memory, she is always only a trace of someone, and is never whole.

Whether in cinema, literature, or personal affects, one must consider point of view. Due to the narrative structure of this series, focalization and the gaze were employed as devices for gathering information and to make sense of the ambiguous storyline. Focalization, term coined by French narrative theorist Gerard Genette, is a strategy within literature, which refers to the concept of a singular point of view. It is utilized within these photographs in order to force the viewer to perceive the world through the character and to discern his or her personal interpretations from the character’s.
This literary approach is transformed visually within these images through the manipulation of the gaze. Virginia Woolf’s novel *Mrs. Dalloway* is an essential source for understanding the role of the female character within this series. Woolf approached writing in an experiential manner and filtered information through the focalization of Clarissa Dalloway. The acquisition of knowledge is driven inward to the thoughts of Clarissa, rather than outward toward the overarching norms of a society. Similarly, the images within this series illustrate a world limited to the thoughts, experiences, and actions of the female character (or narrator). The character never leads the viewer to an end—closure is unattainable and any paradigm for truth is defined through the actions of the protagonist.

The character’s gaze is pushed inward and never bleeds outside of the frame, transforming the viewer into an uninvited and unacknowledged guest.

The information presented to the viewer is filtered through the logic and imagination of the character. The scope of understanding is seemingly defined by the actions of the protagonist—but what about the role of the viewer? Although there are specific visual cues—red lipstick, a satin dress and dirty fingernails, to name a few—to guide the viewer to a certain understanding of the character,
her identity is still truncated and it is up to the viewer to attempt to complete it. The environment is tightly compressed into the frame of the photograph, which represents the walls of the character’s psyche. Upon initial observation, a viewer may not be able to make any logical connections between the sweeping clouds of dust that permeate each image or the wallpaper backgrounds filled with images of peacocks, trees and flowers. The viewer’s means of interpretation rest on the gaze of the character. The viewer must then embody the character’s sensibilities. This act of becoming transforms the viewer into the protagonist and the character into a mirror, reflecting back memories, experiences, and associations experienced by the viewer. Understanding the transformative and collaborative nature of the viewer and the character’s gaze is significant to the narrative flow. This visual approach directly correlates to the literary device of focalization and forces the viewer to participate. It prompts him or her to interpret each image, not only as him or herself, but as the character as well. The act of looking truly becomes a performance, in which information is constantly exchanged between the viewer and the character.
Making Loss Tangible: Memory and Photography

“But it seems everything keeps us in the dark. Look, the trees are; the houses we live in still stand. We alone go past them like an exchange of vapors.

And things conspire to tell us nothing, half in shame, perhaps, half in unspoken hope.”

_Rilke, Second Elegy_

These objects that “conspire to tell us nothing” are all we have—the stack of faded photographs, a handkerchief that still smells of her perfume or the teal gloves found at a thrift store. Could these disparate objects conjure loss—could a memory never experienced be reconstructed within the performance of a photograph? As Marianne Hirsch points out in, _Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory_, “the photo, its status as relic, or trace, or fetish—its ‘direct’ connection with the material presence of the photographed person—that at once intensifies its status as harbinger of death and, at the same time and concomitantly, its capacity to signify life.”

How does the photograph of someone you never met, someone you could never mourn, then function? This series is an exploration of the function of memory and loss within the photograph, more specifically that of the familial photograph.

The family snapshot was used throughout this series as a source for pose, gesture, props and emotional motivation. This specific type of photograph, invokes

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ideas related to personal history and identity one can only approach from a distance. It is clear then, that the photograph’s “operation is that of the imprint, the register, the trace”\textsuperscript{9} The traces that familial photographs reveal are supported through the inherent connection photographs have with a moment past and the (once) physical existence of the subjects portrayed. This notion of the trace, however, also calls attention to that which is absent within the photograph: the real/the original/the thing itself. Although, the idea of the photograph as imprint and register links the medium with the concept of the document or record, these elements fall through when the narrative associated with the photograph, is lost. I hold in my hand a photograph of a woman I have never met, but I know the perfume she wore and that her wedding dress was blue. The experience of my grandmother is second hand and entirely constructed from other’s memories of her. The trace is all that is left, a suggestion of a time, a place, a person or a memory that may not even be familiar. This notion of the constructed memory, of how we identify and interpret the photographs of a time and of relationships we never experienced in actuality, is a significant part of understanding the role of images in our personal and familial history. What kind of information is lost or misunderstood through the reading of a photograph? In other words, what should our expectations of photographs be?

The role of the family photograph seems to come from what Baudrillard describes as our need for a “visible past, a visible continuum, a visible myth of

\textsuperscript{9} Krauss, Rosalind, Tracing Nadar, October, Vol. 5, Photography (Summer, 1978), 32.
origin to reassure us as to our ends.” 10 The character in this series, the world she lives in and imagines is a direct example of this need to “stockpile the past.” 11 In this situation, the expectations for the photograph are lofty and rely on the idea of the “hallucination of truth.” 12 While the photograph refers to truth and reality, it also relies on illusion. The photograph is a representation of the space between the past and the present. These images do not seek to separate what is true from what is false—nor do they operate as proliferators of nostalgic tales. Instead, this series involves a dialogue about the variable nature of identity and how the familial photograph guides us only to the spaces in between—emphasizing the unattainable condition of the origin. These ideas are carried out in the ambiguous quality of the narrative, which refuses to lead the viewer to any sort of answers or conclusions and forces the viewer to read between the lines. Furthermore, this series depicts environments and scenarios that are completely artificial and only attainable within the parameters of the photograph. The moment captured (a dust cloud hovering over head or kicked up by the breath of the character) can only be seen through the medium of photography—it is a moment too quick for the human eye to see and therefore resides in what could be called an “in between area” of what is seen and unseen.

Although, the family photograph does function as source material (a part of the process that occurs before the art image is taken) this role is not necessarily

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made clear to the viewer in the image itself. The familial photograph resides as a trace in this series. The aesthetic of each image is highly constructed, borrowing from such artists as Gregory Crewdson or Eileen Cowin, rather than the found snapshot. The images also reference painting (specifically the work of the Baroque period) an outwardly artificial mode of representation. The artificial language of painting is an aesthetic strategy that is often seen in the films of Peter Greenaway, a significant influence throughout this series. It grounds the work in an historical sense, an artistic legacy, but at the same time highlights its lack of concern for empirical truths or values. This contradictory aesthetic, which combines the artificial and the real, is used to emphasize the constructed nature of memory. My work is a memory assembled from a distorted mass of narratives, photographs, movies, etc.—all of which are second hand, devaluing the role of first hand experience. Through this work I attempt to make present that which is absent—the memory.

The set of ten embroidered napkins, which make up one short narrative appropriated from my mother’s childhood memories, illustrate the elevation of second hand. When I asked my mother if she remembered having a family album growing up her reply was:

“No, there were some pictures framed on the mantel (weddings, military, graduation)—
but there were also a pile of snapshots of family and friends in a desk drawer in the living room.”

The cursive style used to embroider is lifted from my mother’s parochial school handwriting--graceful, neat and precise; my paternal grandmother’s writing (fig. 1.3), for whom English was a second language. The crooked text and backward looped g’s lifted from the back of a family photograph, seem to reveal more to me than the latter side. These writing techniques along with my own were hand stitched into linen napkins. These napkins are an exercise in creating memory reworking my mother’s memory into a fictional narrative as a means for understanding the past and making the past tangible.

The dust material that runs throughout all of these images functions on a variety of metaphorical levels. Most importantly, though it is an indicator of the absence and presence of objects-- through movement, action and inaction. Walter Benjamin writes in *Dream Kitsch*, “The grey film of dust covering things has become their best part.”¹³ Dust creates a veil over the objects it coats, disguising them possibly even enticing us to wipe the coating away to see what can be revealed. But will the thing that lies just beneath that surface be as shiny and beautiful as we pictured it? This tension between what is revealed and concealed is a direct reference to the photograph and how its surface entices us, draws us in, but when unmasked, leaves us unsatisfied. Dust is the past decomposed, the simultaneous proof of existence and loss. In *An Artificial Kingdom*, Celeste

Olalquiaga writes, “dust constantly creeps into the sacred aura of private spaces as a reminder that there are no impermeable boundaries between life and death...Dust makes palpable the elusive passing of time.”14 In this series the character’s attempt to make loss tangible is exhibited by the invasion of dust-like material into her thoughts. The dust is the outcome of the character’s struggle for tangibility and possibly immortality. This conjured material further illustrates the fragmentary nature of her reality. The dust settles onto her world—creating a new surface, a surface that waits. Throughout the series this layer, much like stage direction in a play, indicates to the viewer the entrances and exits of the character (and possibly others). The ring on the yellow table left from a glass calls attention to the fact that someone has been there—it is a marker of something left behind, a legacy of sorts. Rilke wrote in The Second Elegy, “Does the space we dissolve into taste of us?”15 Dust is 70% human skin, hair and nails, it is proof of existence through its remains—it is the tangible dissolution of people into their spaces. Dust is also the enemy of the photographer—it is a material that we are constantly trying to wipe from our negatives, spot from our prints and protect our digital sensors from. However, I am relying on the photographic medium to capture the dust in a way that the human eye could never see. The relationship between the medium and the materials can be described as one that is ill-fated and destined for ruin of sorts.

The wallpaper in this series, much like the dust creates a layer—quite literally on the walls of the set as well as figuratively within the concepts behind

the work. The character lives in a hyper-decorative world akin to the Victorian and Baroque eras--this is emphasized by the abundant patterns and colors of the walls. Often, these walls refer directly to things found in nature—birds, leaves, flowers and fruit. These representations of the outside emphasize the notion that the character is choosing to delve within (whether it is inside her own mind, or the home). This idea of turning inward refers to the isolated and melancholy mood of the images brought on by the dark lighting and muted color palette. The tight edges of the frame (walls that close in) bring the viewer inward—into the space of the image. The wallpaper also refers to abundance and life, but this is contradicted by the isolated nature of the space depicted. The vibrant and rich representations layered on the walls are revealed as flat and empty—calling attention to the absence of things

Process and Materials

A stack of family photographs lifted from an old album, the black paper still peeling off the backs, are spread across the kitchen table. Each image is of an
event, a time, place or person that is previously unknown to me. My process for making these images is directly linked to this pile of family photographs I’ve collected from my parents and other relatives. These snapshots are specifically of women in my family, I have either never met, recently lost or never knew at the stage in their life depicted in the photo. While collecting these photographs over the course of a year I began to question: How does the photograph of someone you never met, someone you could never mourn, then function? And, the idea of “second hand” information became increasingly important in my interpretation of these photographs and the narratives I associated with them.

The notion of “second hand” takes on many forms in this series. One of the more literal interpretations is the use of second hand objects as props. Weekly, sometimes daily, trips to thrift stores, antique shops and eBay all to find the chair, table, plate or backdrop to set a scene. Each of the final images in this series began as a sketch, typically based off of one element---an object or gesture and then added onto with each reshoot. Additionally, with each new image a new layer of wallpaper is added onto the wall of the set. Although, the viewer may not be aware of this facet of the process, the layering of the backgrounds is yet another reference to the notion of trace. Each new image shot contains the
backgrounds of the images previously made, layered beneath, unseen to the viewer. Also, the wallpaper suggests a layering of information with each new image something new is added—similar to the construction of memory and the idea of legacy. The process of layering the wallpaper for each new image signifies, to a certain extent, the artist’s legacy—as an image-maker I am simply adding my own layer to the art historical dialogue that came before me. This mode of production keeps me mindful of not just the singular image, but also the connectedness of the entire process.

This idea of constructing a memory based off of the narratives and photographs of someone else is best described by Marianne Hirsch who coined the term, postmemory, in her book, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*\(^{16}\). Each image in this series directly references an object, gesture or specific object, gesture or environment was more intuitive than anything else. Typically, I would investigate each snapshot, breaking it down into “strips of information.

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\(^{16}\) Hirsch, Marianne. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Harvard University
"The term, "strips of information" refers to how I would visually break down an image based off of its composition, expression of the body or areas of interest. In fig 1.6, a photograph of my grandparents, shows them in the foreground, but the information that I drew from was located in the background. The right side of the frame leads the viewer away from the intended focus of the photograph (the couple) and into the bedroom where one finds a coat laid out on the bed and some small objects on the dresser. My concern with these snapshots was the narratives occurring outside of the frame of interest. Those telling objects or environments that were not necessarily ever meant to be heard.

Some of these photographs were in my possession for a brief period of time and were scanned in order to have a reference. Others, mainly those belonging to
my father were kept on set as I shot, to reference as not only representational
material, but as an object in itself. In other words, how the photographic object
looked, the worn edges, the texture of the glue on the backside, etc. This also refers
to a certain type of narrative that occurs outside of the image itself. It has very little
to do with the people being pictured and more to do with time. A snapshot builds
up a certain kind of patina as it ages, drawing attention to its surface’s age and
deterioration. This association with the photograph can be seen in the use of the
dust in this series and how that material emphasizes surface and the passing of
time.

Furthermore, because I am reinterpreting these family photos through a
highly constructed and performed image the role of the snapshot is not visually
apparent to the viewer. Instead, the role of the family photo resides as a trace. This
notion of trace is implied in Baudrillard’s discussion about “a visible past….to
reassure us to our own ends” 17 previously mentioned in this paper. The snapshots
are the impetus to this work because they refer back to the trace and the idea of a
visible past.

The napkins within this series function similarly with regard to constructed
memory. There is a short narrative embroidered onto the ten napkins, a story that
is lifted from my mother’s memories and written using her handwriting, my
grandmother’s and my own. The act of needlepointing is quite repetitive and has a
long history within women’s work and the domestic. It is something that I never did
before this project and although the concepts within the images and the napkins

17 Baudrillard, Jean. The Precession of Simulacra, Trans. Shelia Faria Glaser (University of Michigan
are similar, the process was very different. This part of the series began as a conversation between my mother and I—my images usually begin with visual or literary connections rarely through conversation. Embroidering each napkin was an activity I brought with me wherever I went—whether I was at home, school or somewhere else making the napkins totally occupied my attention. I could be in the middle of a crowded room and the repetitive action of needlepointing would make me unaware of my surroundings, it was almost meditative.

The process for making both the napkins and the images is closely tied to the experience of remembering and the role of memory within photography. *Angle of Repose* explores what a photograph reveals and what it conceals. As well as the function of second hand information—how the photographs and stories of others become our own history.

**Conclusion**

When I began this series I wanted these images to ask something in particular, *Can you make present something that is absent?* The ideas of absence/presence and trace all relate, for me, back to the family album and memory. Layering the wallpaper onto my apartment walls, filling my space with objects and often suffocating dust-material caused me to constantly live within the images I created. Making me more and more aware of how the photograph transforms—the materials, the subject and even the space the camera is placed in. This is certainly not a new finding, but it is telling to the work and speaks to the
associations the images attempt to make between narrative, memory, the snapshot and identity. Can a photograph and second hand stories of someone you never met formulate memories and experiences—or even take the place of the real? In other words, does origin even matter when it comes to the defining photographic characteristics of an experience—-is it even part of the experience of looking at a photograph? This series treats the notion of origin as a trace and it continues the conversation of the role of the family album (with all that it excludes from the viewer) as it relates to absence and presence.
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