 Constructed memories

Biffy Borg

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.rit.edu/theses

Recommended Citation

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Thesis/Dissertation Collections at RIT Scholar Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses by an authorized administrator of RIT Scholar Works. For more information, please contact ritscholarworks@rit.edu.
constructed memories

by

BIFFY BORG

Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Art in Imaging Arts

Rochester Institute of Technology

Angela Kelly, Chair

Therese Mulligan, Ph.D., Committee Member

Amy Van Dussen, Committee Member

Date
I understand that I must submit a print copy of my thesis or dissertation to the RIT Archives, per current RIT guidelines for the completion of my degree. I hereby grant to the Rochester Institute of Technology and its agents the non-exclusive license to archive and make accessible my thesis or dissertation in whole or in part in all forms of media in perpetuity. I retain all other ownership rights to the copyright of the thesis or dissertation. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of this thesis or dissertation.

Print Reproduction Permission Granted:

I, ________________________, hereby grant permission to the Rochester Institute Technology to reproduce my print thesis or dissertation in whole or in part. Any reproduction will not be for commercial use or profit.

Signature of Author: ________________________ Date: ________________________

Elizabeth Borg

Print Reproduction Permission Denied:

I, ________________________, hereby deny permission to the RIT Library of the Rochester Institute of Technology to reproduce my print thesis or dissertation in whole or in part.

Signature of Author: ________________________ Date: ________________________
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my gratitude to Angela Kelly, my thesis chair, as well as my other committee members, Therese Mulligan and Amy Van Dussen. Without their support and encouragement I could not have completed this work.

I am also greatly indebted to my father, Seth Borg, for allowing me the use of his negatives and family photographs. He has provided me with wonderful memories and photographs that elicit them, and has given me an opportunity to build on his visions.

I also would like to thank my mother, Roberta Borg, for her belief in me and endless love, as well as her memory contributions.

Lastly, I thank Steve, Izzy, and Charlotte for all their understanding and love, and for all the memories that we have and will continue to create together.
ABSTRACT

Memories, like the gelatin that coats our photographs, affix themselves to precious family images. These photographs provide us with stories either remembered or retold. However, similar to the actual memories, the photographs only provide a partial story. A moment in time captured on film. Once the shutter clicks, once the moment takes place, it is gone, and those within the borders of the frame no longer exist. Once the moment is over, it begins to recede into memory. The preciseness of detail begins to mutate. Therefore, both the memory and image are suspect.

Through my thesis work, I explore this relationship between childhood memory and photography. I examine the capacity for distortion that is inherent in both. Through the use of my own childhood images, cropped and manipulated, as well as dolls and other childhood toys, I create new photographs and objects that are meant to question the “truth” in photography and in our memories.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>List of Figures</th>
<th>v</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter I: Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter II: Memory and Photography</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter III: Re-photographs - The Family Album</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter IV: Constructing a Childhood</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter V: Memories Lost/Memories Regained</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter VI: Artful Influences</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter VII: Memories Transformed</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter VIII: Conclusion</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Chanukah, Seth Borg 6
Figure 2: Untitled, Seth Borg 9
Figure 3: A Harvest of Death, Timothy O'Sullivan 9
Figure 4: Untitled [Shrinky Dink Series: scream] 10
Figure 5: Untitled [Shrinky Dink Series: holding hands] 11
Figure 6: Untitled [Shrinky Dink Series: covering face] 11
Figure 7: Untitled [Shrinky Dink Series: hands in lap] 11
Figure 8: Untitled [Shrinky Dink Series: falling] 12
Figure 9: Untitled [Shrinky Dink Series: holding hands] 12
Figure 10: Birthday Party 15
Figure 11: Billy and Ashby 15
Figure 12: Scouting 15
Figure 13: Sledging 15
Figure 14: Christmas 16
Figure 15: Isobel in front of Christmas Tree 18
Figure 16: Isobel as Kitty Cat 18
Figure 17: Christmas 19
Figure 18: Halloween 19
Figure 19: Doll Arms, Detail View 22
Figure 20: Untitled [Arena Series], Mike Kelley 23
Figure 21: More Love Hours Than Can Ever be Repaid, Mike Kelley 24
Figure 22: The Boarders at Rest, Annette Messager 25
Figure 23: Nameless Ones, Annette Messager 25
Figure 24: Altars to the Chases High School, Christian Boltanski 26
Figure 25: Monuments: The Children of Dijon, Christian Boltanski 26
Figure 26: Title Wall, Installation View 28
Figure 27: Shrinky Dinks, Installation View 29
Figure 28: Shrinky Dinks, Installation View 29
Figure 29: Shrinky Dinks, Installation View 29
Figure 30: Installation View 30
Figure 31: Doll Arms, Installation View 30
Figure 32: View-Master, Installation View 30
Figure 33: View-Master, Installation View 31
Figure 34: View-Master, Installation View 31
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Memories, like the gelatin that coats our photographs, affix themselves to precious family images. These photographs provide us with stories either remembered or retold. However, similar to the actual memories, the photographs only provide a partial story. A moment in time captured on film. Once the shutter clicks, the moment is gone, and those within the borders of the frame no longer exist. Once the moment is over, it begins to recede into memory. The preciseness of detail begins to mutate. Therefore, both the memory and image are suspect.

Looking at my childhood pictures I am struck by the faces staring back at me. While they appear familiar, these people are all strangers. Yet, they have entered my life as a link with the past. When I look at the pictures of my child-self, the memories they evoke provide me with a connection with what once was, while also giving me the knowledge and understanding of who I am at present. The yellowing, curling, cracking, and faded black and white and color pictures that have been stored in albums, boxes, and framed on the walls, give me clues to my past self and my family. However, the “truth” to these photographs, as well as the memories attached to them, remains elusive.

Through my thesis work, Constructed Memories, I explore this relationship between childhood memory and photography. I examine the capacity for distortion that is inherent in both. Using my own childhood images, cropped and manipulated, as well as dolls and other childhood toys, I create new photographs and objects that are meant to question the “truth” in photography and in our memories.
CHAPTER II: MEMORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY

Since the creation of photography, the camera has been understood to be a scientific tool recording the real. It is ingrained in our consciousness and in our culture that the photograph is a true documentation of an event that occurred. Photographs are the proof to us that these events have taken place – providing detailed evidence as to the clothing worn and who was in attendance. These photographs contribute to the memories of the events and fill in the gaps of moments we may have missed.

This link connecting photography and memory has long been examined. Many writers and artists such as Roland Barthes, Christian Boltanski, Marianne Hirsch, Jo Spence, and others have used the photograph to point out photography’s inherent malleability. In his book, Camera Lucida, Roland Barthes writes, “The photograph does not necessarily say what is no longer, but only and for certain what has been.”

Even though he is saying that the photograph is documentation of a real event, he goes on to state,

...For the photograph’s immobility is somehow the result of a perverse confusion between two concepts: the Real and the Live: by attesting that the object has been real, the photograph surreptitiously induces belief that it is alive, because of that delusion which makes us attribute to Reality and absolute superior, somehow eternal value; but by shifting this reality to the past ("this-has-been"), the photograph suggests that it is already dead.

---

2 ibid, 79.
According to Barthes, the photographed moment has occurred, but upon the click of the shutter, the moment is dead. The people within the frame no longer exist.

Artist Christian Boltanski capitalizes on this concept through much of his artwork. In his piece *The 62 Members of the Mickey Mouse Club in 1955* (1972), he appropriates Mouseketeers' portraits from a children's magazine, re-photographing them and displaying them in a grid-like manner.

According to Lynn Gumpert in her book entitled *Christian Boltanski*,

His interest ...was not so much in portraying childhood

*per se* [sic] or in triggering collective memories, but rather in using photography's connection to death to dramatize that the children pictured in 1955 no longer existed.... They underscore the disturbing realization that the children we once were are also no more.3

Photographs are documentation of death. The person who was is gone – the moment that occurs has ended.

Not only does family photography entwine itself with death, it also collaborates with memory to give us a false sense of who we are. According to Marianne Hirsch in *Family Frames*, “...photography quickly became the family's primary instrument of self-knowledge and representation – the means by which family memory would be continued and perpetuated....”4 She goes on to state, “As photography immobilizes the flow of family life into a series of snapshots, it perpetuates familial myths, while seeming merely to record actual moments in

---

family history". We rely on family photographs to provide us with an understanding of our histories and our lives leading up to the present. However, they are also used to promote myths about our families and ourselves. Patricia Holland and Jo Spence discuss this idea in their collaborative work entitled *Family Snaps: The Meanings of Domestic Photography*. They write,

> Our memory is never fully ‘ours’, nor are the pictures ever unmediated representations of our past. Looking at them we both construct a fantastic past and set out on a detective trail to find other versions of a ‘real’ one.6

Family photographs do represent our family histories, yet they are merely one retelling out of many possibilities. Through my thesis work I embarked on my own detective trail – searching for my own version of the real.

---

5Ibid, 7.

MEMORY:
We are preparing for the Jewish holiday of Chanukah. We are dressed in our party dresses – posing in front of the fireplace. The mantel is piled high with brightly wrapped gifts. A sign “HAPPY CHANUKAH” is strung across the mantel, book-ended by Stars of David. My mother is holding my baby brother. My dad has jumped into the picture after setting the self-timer on his camera. I am leaning over and giving a kiss on my older sister’s cheek. We look so happy.

During the spring quarter of my first year at Rochester Institute of Technology, I enrolled in Angela Kelly’s “Beyond the Family Album” class. Through this class we explored the way visual images influence our understanding of ourselves, culture, and history. It was during this class that I began investigating the connection of memory and photography and its direct link to my own family story.

In one class we were asked to describe a childhood family photograph from memory. The above memory is what I had written in my journal. The photograph seemed so vivid in my mind. I looked at this photograph throughout my childhood – brought it with me to college – took it with me on my various journeys throughout my young adult life. Each time I would look at it I relived the excitement I felt at age four – anticipating the bounty to come.
Once I began examining my father's negatives and prints for my thesis work, I uncovered this photograph I had described.

Figure 1

The details were as I remembered. The presents, the sign, the clothes, and the composition were all true to my memory. However, on the far left of the print I am not kissing my sister. It is my sister leaning down and giving me a kiss on the cheek. My memory for some reason changed myself from receiver to actor. Why? Was this change in my memory significant in the meaning and understanding of my past and of my relationship with my sister? Was the fact that I had a photograph as tangible proof that the event occurred in this manner more important than the memory itself? Perhaps moments before or after the shutter clicked I pressed my lips against her cheek. However, the only documentation I have says otherwise. Is it my memory that is flawed or is it the photograph?

As a child I loved to pose for my father's camera. This changed as I entered my awkward adolescence. However, prior to my self-consciousness, I
would jump at the chance to stand by a tree – in the backyard – on the swing-set – at a museum – to pose for his camera.

**MEMORY:**

I am wearing a white cable knit sweater. I am about nine or ten. My hair is cut in the popular Dorothy Hamill mushroom bob. I have yet to get braces and my teeth seem too large for my mouth. My dad has taken me to George Eastman House, and when no one is watching he ushers me under the ropes that are there to keep people out. I pose by a window, or a photograph, or a mantel. I am complicit with my father in his act of disobedience. He shoots quickly as I lean against the wall. We then bend back under the ropes to safety.

Although I never found this particular image, my memory of the moment and of the bond I had with my father on that day of disregarding the rules is strong. While writing my personal essay for entrance into RIT I wrote about this memory and its connection with my budding love of photography. Upon reading my essay my mother said that I had to delete this part since it never happened. I was shocked at her insistence that this event in my life never occurred. It was not as though this was a family secret to preserve or a traumatic event that needed to be erased. It was a speck in my life with my father. She was adamant that I change it. Perhaps the public announcement of insubordination shamed her in some way. Perhaps she believed this could not have occurred in my life because she was not there to bear witness. Even with her denial and without the “proof” of the photograph I knew that it had happened. Later, this memory was confirmed by my father. He remains proud of his illicit photography, and I too feel pride at my collusion.
Through these experiences my desire to explore my own personal narrative, illustrated by my father's photographs, became a focal point for my thesis work. Initially I began studying his negatives trying to uncover parts of my childhood that were lost – eroded from my memory. I printed out contact sheets of all the black and white negatives I could find – knowing that these were a small collection of his work since he also shot color slide film (perhaps this will be the next project since these slides have begun to disintegrate much like the memories themselves). What struck me most was that there were hundreds of images in celluloid that I had never seen in print. My childhood lay before my eyes in strips, yet only a handful had been printed and put into the family albums or hung framed on the walls.

One image that illustrates this absence (the only image in my thesis show that I did not crop or manipulate) is of three children lying on the ground – only legs and bodies in black and white. Most likely my father had caught my sister, brother, and me rolling down the grassy hill behind our house. In its stillness, however, the bodies lie on the ground like corpses. This photograph of my father's, so eerie and beautiful, is one of the strongest I found amongst his negatives. When I questioned him about it later, he said it was a mistake, and he would never have printed it because it was too disturbing. It is exactly this feeling to which I am drawn.
Although it was not my father's intention, as an artist I see this photograph to be an accidental homage to Timothy O'Sullivan’s “A Harvest of Death”.

In both images bodies are splayed motionless on the ground. Death and loss of innocence are exposed by the camera.

I was intrigued that my father’s photographs, many of which displayed my own childhood, were only a partial retelling. His perspective was captured through his camera and later edited by his choices of what he deemed worthy of printing. While his photography did push the boundaries of the typical “happy
family” portraits, it still remains obvious through the images my dad printed that he was selecting the photographs that projected his ideal of familial contentment.

After searching and examining his negatives, I began cropping and manipulating them. Although I was not the original photographer, I began to appropriate his images and make them into my own. Like many postmodern artists before me such as Andy Warhol, Barbara Kruger, Christian Boltanski, and Rick Hock, I too intentionally appropriated images in order to change the meaning of the originals. I isolated moments and movements from my father’s images and in doing so changed their associations from the somewhat simplified illustration of a carefree and happy childhood into an exploration of detail. A shot of us with our hands on my brother turned more sinister when the family is cropped out. The hand movements (while even then may have been more aggressive than affectionate) became ambiguous and his open mouth changes from probable pleasure to possible pain.

![Figure 4](image-url)
Other images when isolated in detail became more sentimental, ambiguous, ominous, and sexual.

In this way I became the photographer – re-photographing a childhood that I myself remembered or perhaps concocted. My intention had not been to expose my father’s perspective as false. The narrative uncovered through his photographs was as truthful as was mine. However, I wanted my re-photographs to explore the complexity of memory, and at the same time reveal the idea that the photograph has no inherent “fixed” meaning. The understanding of a photograph is dependent on the context in which it is viewed. In this way, the malleability of the photograph is exposed.

MEMORY:
We are at the kitchen table deep in concentration as we color in the art we have created on our Shrinky Dink film. I am making a dog tag for our black Labrador retriever’s collar. I have drawn a large heart in red and have written the name CORKY in bold letters. As I color in between the lines, I sniff the fruity markers. My mother places our creations onto the cookie sheet. As she carefully places it in the oven, we hover around to watch the Shrinky Dinks shrivel and curl.
All during the time I was playing with my father’s photographs I was struggling with a way to display the “re-photographs” for my thesis show. I realized early that merely printing and framing them would not convey the emotions I was seeking. While perusing a local arts and crafts supply store I came across “Shrink Film” which was inkjet printer compatible. I instantly realized that this was the medium for which I had been searching. My problem had been solved. Not only had I grown up playing with Shrinky Dinks, to which the memory above refers, the connection between the shrink film and the concept of memory intrigued me. As children we would draw pictures on the Shrinky Dink film and then have our mother carefully cut out our artistic creations and place them into the oven. We would watch the film stretch and shrink before our eyes. Our full sheet of artwork would melt and mold into one tenth its original size, and would emerge from the oven as small hard plastic objects. It occurred to me that this process was similar to the formation of a memory. A moment in time changed in shape and form as it receded into the past. Like a Shrinky Dink, parts of a memory were distorted and other parts were stretched and emphasized. Other details disappeared altogether.

In this way I was able to transform my childhood memories, my “re-photographs”, into precious objects.
CHAPTER IV: CONSTRUCTING A CHILDHOOD

MEMORY:
I am walking down the streets of Canandaigua, N.Y. during their annual Arts Fair and am perusing the typical arts and crafts. The art center on Main Street is having a “Bazaar” and as soon as I walk in the door, I see Billy leaning against the wall. Instantly, I know that I am in love. He is standing naked and inscribed on his belly in slanted handwriting is “Billy the Kid. Approx. Size 8”. The most striking feature about Billy is that he has no arms. The woman at the check out table says that Billy is from the original department store (circa the 1950s) and has been stored away in the basement for years. She also informs me that I have just missed the opportunity to purchase a young girl and a grown woman mannequin as well. Why the person who bought the others left without Billy is a mystery to me. He is glorious. For some reason – perhaps the typical first love jitters – I leave without Billy and drive back to Rochester. All night I kick myself for leaving without him. I know I have made a big mistake and as soon as morning comes I jump back in my car and race to Canandaigua. Luckily, Billy is still where I left him. It is fate after all.

My photographic relationship with Billy started off slow. I was uncertain as to what I wanted to illustrate with him. He was serving as my substitute child, subject, and muse. Yet I was still unsure as to what I wanted to convey about memory and what Billy’s part would be in my artwork. I began taking close-up photographs of him – capturing his beauty and his flaws. He had cracks, a chipped ear, and best of all, he had no arms. I am not certain why this fact interested me, however, it is a feature that carries throughout my work. At this point I did not dress him. His nudity – which of course displayed a mere mound
where genitalia should have been – seemed to be important. He was a 1950s child – a time that represented surface beauty and familial perfection. To me, Billy was innocence stripped bare. Still, I was uncertain as to where we were headed.

Then one day on a whim, I baked a batch of cupcakes and decorated them with day-glow colored frosting. I bought birthday hats and balloons and constructed a birthday scene in our dining room. This room was in the midst of renovation, and the colorful birthday party contrasted greatly with the peeling wallpaper, crumbling plaster, and exposed lathe. I began to shoot. When I developed the film, I realized that this was the direction in which I wanted my thesis to go. The pictures were not perfect – there was still something missing-but I knew that the childhood scene, absent of any partygoers except the birthday boy, with the decaying background, spoke to me of childhood memories. In these images, as in our memories, some details were highly developed or remembered while other details were decaying and disappearing.

In these early shots Billy was too obvious as a mannequin. I wanted him, much like “Pinocchio”, to become a real boy. So I went out and began to buy him clothes. Once I dressed him, I set up the scene again, baked more cupcakes, and began to shoot. This time, I was able to capture Billy looking into the camera and to me he transformed from a mannequin into my real boy. My ticking biological clock had a temporary substitute. Our relationship was solidified, and Billy became my child – a stand-in for my constructed memories.
Although he still remained a conscious prop, he served as a viable subject.

With Billy as my model, I continued to construct other scenes of childhood – A boy with his dog, boy scouts, sledding, Christmas, Halloween, etc.

These were not my own specific memories, but memories stemming from a collective unconsciousness. In the book “Who’s Looking at the Family,” Val Williams states, “Flicking through our memories for images of the family, we alight on common visions: a birthday, a wedding, a holiday long gone.”⁷ These

are the events and places that many of us have experienced first-hand or through
depictions of childhood. These are the memories I wanted to construct for Billy.
With these images, I was hoping to evoke personal memories of the viewer.

At this time I bought Sally, Billy’s three-year-old sister. Similar to Billy, she had no arms. I continued to construct family scenes and documented their childhood through photographs.

Through these photographs I was creating a family for myself, and constructing a childhood for my mannequin children.

**MEMORY:**
I am at work when I receive the call. My roommate is scared. He has been contacted by the police and has been informed that they want to talk to him. When he asks what it is about, the policeman gives him the name of a friend’s child. Although he knows he has done nothing wrong, he is unsure as to why the police are involved. He is certain that something terrible is going to happen. I am also certain of this fact but I try to calm him down and tell him he has nothing to worry about. I hang up the phone and begin to worry.
The above event truly changed my belief system about memory. One of my best friends had been falsely accused of touching a toddler inappropriately. I was devastated and could not believe he was going through such a horrific ordeal. Although the case never went anywhere, and his innocence was publicly proven when he passed a polygraph test, the event shook us all. What strikes me as most tragic in this “story”, besides the emotional turmoil my friend and his family went through, is the fact that the accusing parents, and most likely the child himself, will now have a memory of an event that never occurred.

While working as a social worker prior to entering the world of photography, I worked with many victims of sexual abuse. I had strongly believed that the backlash against repressed memory was just that, a backlash, and “false memory syndrome” was merely perpetrators’ attempts to rewrite history. However, this ordeal my friend underwent forced me to question my original beliefs and made me acutely aware of the fragility of memory. As much as I still believe that memories can be repressed and later released, I now realize that they can also be manipulated, constructed, and formed. I began to question my own childhood memories. They had all become suspect. Had my brother really urinated in my face when he was an infant? Did I really eat sixteen English muffins at one sitting while staying with the Goldstein family? These were stories from my family’s mythology and they had become my own personal history. However, even as benign as they were, could it be possible that some of these stories were as contrived as the allegation against my friend – as constructed as the photographs of Billy and Sally?

During this period I put Billy and Sally away in the attic (such an appropriate destination for the family secrets to be stored). Billy was once again hidden. Suddenly these mannequins seemed to be symbols of the corruption of
As months passed, my life continued outside of RIT. My thesis was put on hold as I worked and had my own child. No longer did I have time for dolls or a need for them to fill a vacancy. My daughter, Isobel, was mine and real. She cried and pooped and cried some more. Life became more chaotic, but the concept of memory remained ever present. Here I was now in the role my father had once been. I was taking photographs of Isobel – capturing her infancy that will later influence her memories of her past – forming her understanding of her own self. Were the background sets in which I placed Izzy similar to the constructed sets of Billy and Sally? Is Isobel merely a new prop? A photograph depicts her sitting in front of Christmas decorations. In another she is dressed up as a kitty cat for Halloween.

Although these are quick snapshots and are not preplanned and constructed, is the meaning the same? At this time I am unable to truly critique my photographs of my daughter. However, I am keenly aware that I have become a memory.
constructor. Izzy will not consciously remember herself as a baby. She will rely on the photo albums bursting with images of her baby self.

With this paralleling my thesis work, I realized that my photographs of Billy and Sally remained unfinished. Their childhood remained unformed. If I did not return to them, my role as memory constructor would not evolve into the role of memory contributor. Billy and Sally came out of the attic and the shooting continued. The images evolved over time. No longer were the backgrounds decaying or absent. The environments became even more set-like and obvious. The concept became less focused on the decaying aspect of memory and more focused on the mutability of memory.

Since the newer images were aesthetically different than the earlier photographs, I was uncertain how I would display them in a manner that was cohesive. After playing around with home-made “View-Master” reels with my own childhood photographs, I realized that this medium would be an effective way of displaying my Billy and Sally images. Much like the Shrinky Dinks, I loved the way the View-Master toy related to my own childhood memories. I often spent hours looking through my own viewer – reliving the stories illustrated inside the small windows.
According to Mary Ann and Wolfgang Sell's website "The View-Master Homepage",

In 1939, View-Master was first introduced at the New York World's Fair. Intended as a souvenir, it was originally marketed through photo shops and stationary stores. Through the years, the product has changed its appearance to be aimed at a more juvenile audience.8

By the 1970s, the View-Master had turned into a childhood toy depicting cartoons and Disney stories. However, the View-Master was originally developed as a travel tool. The reels, now collectibles, were souvenirs of places to which people traveled or wished to visit. The reels from the Grand Canyon, the Taj Mahal, the Egyptian Pyramids, etc., allowed the arm-chair traveler to revisit the ends of the world over and over again. This circuitous nature of the View-Master reel seemed very important in the context of my work. Each click brings up image after image – memory after memory – only to return to the beginning again. Similarly, in our own heads, we often revisit a certain memory over and over again.

The intimate nature of the View-Master also appealed to me. The audience is forced to bring the viewer close to his face and spend time with each memory – voyeuristically engaging with Billy and Sally. Through this intimate act, my desire was to evoke personal memories connected however loosely to the images viewed.

---

8 Mary Ann and Wolfgang Sell, The View-Master Homepage, http://www.cinti.net/~vmmasell/.
CHAPTER V: MEMORIES LOST/ MEMORIES REGAINED

MEMORY:
We are all standing by the big maple tree. It is early spring and we are dressed in similar long sleeve shirts and jeans. My brother is complaining that he hears bees. He is scared and wants to move but my father yells at him and makes him pose with us. My brother and sister start running towards the car while they slap the angry bees away. I run too. They are crying. I cry too, even though I remain unstung.

MEMORY:
We follow my father into the kennel excited to pick Corky up after our long family trip. I am turning around in circles anticipating Corky’s wet kisses. A man comes out and starts talking to my dad. My dad turns to us and says, “Go back to the car!” My sister and brother start to cry. I cry too, but I do not really know why. My dad soon returns to the car, but Corky is not with him.

MEMORY:
I am lying in the hospital bed. There are stuffed animals and cards on the tables all around me. I need to get up to use the bathroom but Sarina and her mother had accidentally moved the chair I had been using to get out of the bed. I finally press the call button. However, when a nurse comes in she looks at the girl sleeping next to me. She then turns to leave. I am too shy to call out after her.

These are a few of the memories that came to me while working on my thesis. They remained hidden until they were beckoned to surface. Like imagined photographs, they connected me to the child I once was. Yet, I was not
absolutely certain that the details were true. Even so, I was intrigued by all the memories locked away. I saw them reaching out to me. They became anthropomorphized. They prodded, pulled, and pushed until I allowed them to emerge.

The third part of my thesis work reflected this incarnation of memories. Amputated and illuminated doll arms were mounted on the wall. The arms, like the beckoning memories, reached out to the viewer. These arms, although unmoving symbols of the memories themselves, also took on an animated quality. They were trying to communicate with their small gestures. They were static, yet they suggested movement. The multiple pairs of arms flowed into one another creating a language intended to be translated by the viewer.
CHAPTER VI: ARTFUL INFLUENCES

Through my experiences at RIT, I became aware of several artists whose work and aesthetics spoke to me and influenced the choices I made in theme and installation.

Similar to the artists Mike Kelley and Annette Messager, I wanted to bring domestic and secular “low art” into the white walls of the gallery space. Both artists challenge the idea of “what is art” by using ordinary objects that are either found or handmade.

Mike Kelley’s use of dolls, stuffed animals, and crocheted rugs played on aspects of family, childhood, and emotional baggage. In his own words Kelley explains, “Dolls represent such an idealized notion of the child, when you see a dirty one, you think dysfunctional family”.9 In the Arena Series (1990), he has various stuffed animals sitting on hand knit blankets. In each scene, the figures interactions are unclear. Are they having a lovely family picnic, or perhaps staring each other down in deeply emotional and combative confrontations?

His work entitled *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid* also takes on highly charged familial emotions.

![Figure 21](image)

The piece is comprised of found and handmade stuffed animals and blankets sewn together creating a quilt-like canvas. The quilt is strange and confusing. It leads the viewer to associate childhood memories, stitched and mangled together, with concepts of familial relationships. The title of the work informs the viewer that the quilt is embedded with emotional guilt and an exchange value. Nothing is ever free, not even our mothers love and devotion. There is always an emotional price to pay.

Annette Messager also uses handmade and somewhat crude objects to depict emotional and psychological concepts. In her piece *The Boarders at Rest* (1971-72), she has created bird carcasses out of found feathers, twigs, and beaks. She then crocheted small sweaters that cover their bodies.
To me, there is beauty and compassion associated with her action of protecting the birds with hand made sweaters. This contrasts greatly to the stillness of the constructed dead bodies. It is strange yet maternal. In another work, *Nameless Ones* (1993), she combines taxidermied animal bodies with stuffed animal heads. These constructed animals are mounted on metal spikes.

Again, the combination of death with something domestic, this time a childhood toy, brings up ideas of death and loss and the desire to protect.
Christian Boltanski is another contemporary artist who greatly influenced my ideas and installation desires. Boltanski not only deals with constructed memories using found photographs, he also uses very dramatic lighting in many of his installations to create altars to the lost souls captured on the print. This is clear in many pieces of his work such as Altars to the Chases High School (1987) and Monuments: The Children of Dijon (1991). Both installations involve very bare and stark lighting directly illuminating the prints.

![Figure 24](image1)  ![Figure 25](image2)

Boltanski is very vocal about the fictions he creates. In an interview with Tamar Garb Boltanski states,

In my early work I pretended to speak about my childhood, yet my real childhood had disappeared. I have lied about it so often that I no longer have a real memory of this time, and my childhood has become, for me, some kind of universal childhood, not a real one.¹⁰

---

Later work, as shown in figures 24 and 25, moves away from Boltanski’s own story to issues concerning the holocaust. Yet, he is still constructing memories. In his artist book entitled Sans-Souci, he appropriates photographs and facsimiles of several Nazis and their families and constructs an album in which they are joined in possible familial relations. At first glance the viewer is unaware as to whom the people are and their relationships. We see smiling faces and affectionate embraces. They look like our own families. Through reading the text do we become aware of the twisted way in which Boltanski has fabricated this family history. According to Ernst Van Alphen in Nazism in the Family,

His acts of reconstruction and making the past present hit us with the awareness that what is being reconstructed is lost, that what we see is based on lies, or that we don’t see anything new, or unknown, but that we can only recognize what we already know in the reconstructions of an alien past.11

We come away from Boltanski’s work mourning the past and those who have been lost. Yet we are aware that these are fabrications – memories manipulated and constructed.

---

CHAPTER VII: MEMORIES TRANSFORMED

Once the work within the three sections was developed, the installation of my thesis work came together fairly quickly. I realized early on that the thesis show had to be an installation of all three bodies of work. While each section can be viewed in isolation, it is only when they are viewed in one space that the grander concept of memory’s mutability and photography’s role can be fully understood.

Because the work included my family photographs and could be construed and quickly dismissed as nostalgic and personal, I wanted the actual installation to be more clinical and professional.

The installation space was separated from the main gallery by a large wall, allowing the viewer to enter from either side.

The interior of this space was then divided into three sections.

Section 1: Shrinky Dinks

These were displayed on alligator clips attached to thin wires emerging from handmade shelves. They varied in height and distance from the viewer.
These objects were backlit by faux light boxes that were part of the shelf itself. To me, they were much like the x-rays my father would illuminate for me in his radiology office. Similar to the View-Master reels, the smallness of the Shrinky Dinks forced the viewer to move in close to examine the specimens. The presentation, due to the starkness of the lighting, and the scientific quality of the presentation, was clinical and cold. However, this was balanced by the sentimentality the images elicited.

Figure 27  Figure 28  Figure 29

Section 2: Doll Arms

Across from the Shrinky Dinks, the Doll arms emerged from the opposite wall. They were mounted on the same opaque plexi-glass used to construct the faux light boxes and were framed in identical silver frames. The doll arms reached out to the viewer, as well as the Shrinky Dink memory objects. The amputated arms were like the memories themselves — reaching out to be remembered and acknowledged. The lights within illuminated them, creating miniature altars.
Section 3: View-Master Reels

The View-Master reels were placed on a white pedestal lit from above by a bare bulb. Again, the starkness of the space, and the use of black bakelite viewers (originals from the 1950s — just like Billy and Sally) was intentional in creating a more clinical environment.

The audience was invited to bring the View-Master viewer close to their faces (Figure 32). They were forced to become intimate, if just for a moment, with the constructed images inside. The two View-Master reels had labels similar to original reels, documenting the titles of the photographs – the experiences that I had constructed for Billy and Sally. Figures 33 and 34 depict close-up images of the displayed View-Masters.
Each section speaks to a different point of view. The Shrinky Dinks are personal memories manipulated and turned into objects, while the doll arms are objects turned into personified memories. The View-Master reels bridge the other sections, combining object and memory in their construction.

Through this installation my intention was to have the viewers interact with the objects – with the memories. I wanted to give the audience an opportunity to spend time with my constructed memories so that their own memories could be elicited and perhaps questioned.
CHAPTER VIII: CONCLUSION

It is apparent to me that memory and photography are allies. Together they provide us with the perceived knowledge of who we are and from where we came. However, through my thesis work I have come to the understanding that both are malleable. Photographs can be constructed and manipulated, and memories are mutable.

Through my thesis work, I explored the connection between childhood memory and photography. Like the artists and writers who inspired me, I questioned the “reality” that we have learned to expect from photography. I wanted to expose the capacity for distortion that is inherent in both photographs and our memories. Through the use of my own childhood images and childhood toys, I constructed a past for myself as well as one for my mannequin dolls. In doing so I intended for viewers to look at my creations and question their personal memories and photographs. I have asked them to “set out on a detective trail”12 and to search for the “real” of their own.

12Patricia Holland and Jo Spence, eds., Family Snaps, 13.
WORKS CITED


