

YOU HAVE TO BELIEVE TO SEE: FROM MEMORY

by

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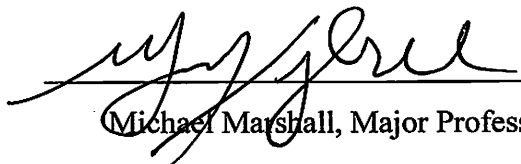
2011

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Approved:



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Michael Marshall, Major Professor

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Date

## INTRODUCTION

When I was young I had this fear that I was screaming and cursing at the top of my lungs but did not realize it. It only happened when I was in a large room with many quiet people like when I was in an assembly or in mass. I tried to clench my muscles and bite the inside of my mouth to snap myself back into reality; I just wasn't sure if the my quiet stillness was reality or if it was my screaming. On my worst days, I still question if I am really silent or if I have lost all control and just do not realize it.

My work is rooted in personal experiences like this that, in retrospect, are disconcerting. Moments like the one described above are terrifying at the time and ridiculous later, until it happens again. It is important to note that this is not a completely negative realization. The experience and memories that I draw on are full of things like awe and wonder. They are often just banal moments that strike me as strange. In my working process, I try to look back objectively, like a sociologist examining my own life. I find that I am influenced by the religion and mythologies I learned and lived growing up. In youth, I found comfort in the simplicity of what was right and what was wrong. With experience, dualities like right and wrong, real and imagined, the truth and a lie, become confused. My work provides a catalyst for reflection by pulling moments out of context. Viewers are challenged to question what they see and what they hear. Even as the artist, I sometimes wonder what parts of my memories are simply a figment of my imagination, or, even more unsettling, what parts of my memories are true.

## MFA THESIS PROJECT

The majority of my work in graduate school is video, often with emphasis on sound and installation. I trained and began my career as an artist in the medium of still photography and more often than not I feel that my videos are simply moving photographs, adopting much of the same language of the still image. Consequently, my narratives are more like the brief moments

of photographs and less like cinema. Most of my pieces are relatively short (often less than five minutes). In building a body of work, I sought to create many of these brief moments, each one contributing a visual language that would communicate to an understanding of the whole. The goal of my MFA thesis project is to create an installation that would place my video works into context with each other. Each disparate piece contributes to the overall whole, while still functioning independently, much in the same way that our memories come together to tell us who we are and where we came from.



**Figure 1:** *You Have to Believe to See: from Memory*, 15:00, Video Installation, 2011

My MFA thesis project, *You Have to Believe to See: from Memory*, consists of three channels playing on flat screen televisions that hang in a row on the wall. Each screen operates independently, but in sync with the others.<sup>1</sup> The 15-minute loop begins with a title on the center screen - “You Have to Believe to See.” As it fades to black once again, the subtitle- “from Memory” - materializes acting as a both a device to denote that the videos included are part of

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<sup>1</sup> See Figure 1

the larger body of work titled *Memory* and as a pun, as if I am recalling facts from “memory” rather a more absolute method like from a book or record.<sup>2</sup>

#### REFLECTION: Deconstruction of the Real

The subject matter of my work is both personal and analytic. The inspiration and textual elements often derive from my personal experience and I am interested in investigating how my recollections coalesce to create a self-portrait. Analytically, I am interested in the psychological process of reflection. The word itself is used both as a verb and noun, meaning to contemplate a past occurrence and as in a mirrored version of oneself respectively. My work is subscribing to both meanings as I am looking at myself - in the past.

According to Terry Barrette, Professor Emeritus in the department of Art Education at Ohio State University, Jacques Lacan “deflates the commonsense notion of identity by arguing that individual autonomy is an illusion.”<sup>3</sup> Lacan theorizes that we establish our identity based on the “other.” This theory is made incarnate by the concept of the “mirror stage,” in which the child sees her reflection and incorrectly identifies it as herself.

I use the mirror motif often in my work. It is unmistakable in the individual video that gives the project its name, *You Have to Believe to See*, where the dissection of the left screen into two mirrored halves, seems to converge and devour the landscape.<sup>4</sup> Though the subject keeps turning, she never confronts her own image. The viewer also is never rewarded with the subject’s face. In this video, the text speaks directly to the viewers, telling them that if they “believe,” then they will “see.” In one way, the lack of satisfaction means the viewer did not want it bad enough. Alternatively, if the text is directed at the subject (or at myself), the failed attempt at self-

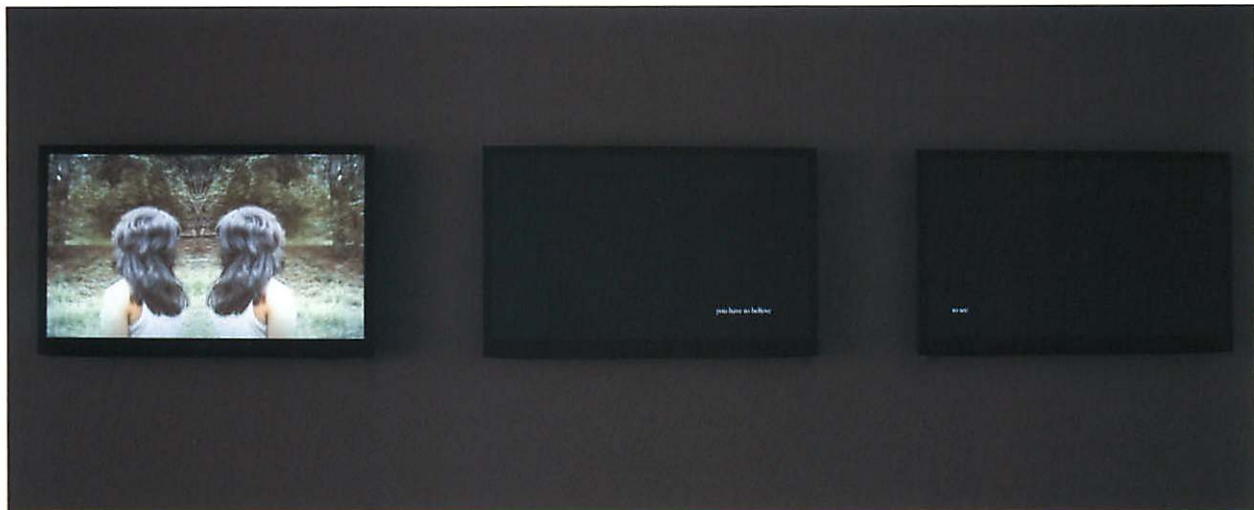
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<sup>2</sup> Note the capitalized state of the word “Memory” designating it a proper noun.

<sup>3</sup> Terry Barrett, “Postmodern Pluralism.” In *Why Is That Art?: Aesthetics and Criticism of Contemporary Art*. (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2008.) 156.

<sup>4</sup> See Figure 2

reflection is because of a lack of faith. A large part of my identity was molded by my faith in God. This belief was sustained during my formative years in Christian and Catholic schools, but when I left those places that I called home, I started to question my faith and lost my belief in God. Something that I knew was true I now know to be false. Through this experience “knowing” has lost its authority. I wonder if we can know anything.



**Figure 2:** *You Have to Believe to See, 1;18, [as part of You Have to Believe to See: from Memory]*



**Figure 3:** Douglas Gordon, *left is right and right is wrong and left is wrong and right is right, 97;00, Video installation, 1999*

Contemporary artist, Douglas Gordon, also uses mirroring to question truth. In his video installation *left is right and right is wrong and left is wrong and right is right*, the same film is

projected on two screens side by side, the image right screen is flipped vertically and almost mirrors the left screen.<sup>5</sup> I say almost because the screens are out of sync by one frame; the left screen plays the odd frames and the right plays the even frames. In this piece he is literally breaking apart a whole into two; half is the original and the other half, the reversed half, is its doppelganger. *You Have to Believe to See* I also provide a bit of discontent in the images before they line up, but they do line up. However, I chose not to allow the subject or the viewers the gratification of seeing her face herself.

The tension inherent in Gordon's fractured film is similar to the tension sustained throughout *from Memory*. For Gordon the tension forms in the installation of the piece. As stated earlier, the intent of my MFA Thesis project is to bring together a body of work to build an over all understanding. The formal presentation of *from Memory* supports and emphasizes the ideas brought up in the individual works. Where as many of the videos tell (sometimes literally) a disorienting or magical experience, the form provides that experience.

Three screens glow on a wall. There are no chairs in the gallery from which to view this work. There is no one 'sweet' spot from which the work is supposed to be witnessed. The videos move across the three screens and the viewer must turn her attention back and forth. In the viewers living room there is only one TV from which to receive information as if there is one omnipotent narrator, in *from Memory* the information is split 3 times. I am literally deconstructing the notion of cinema, pulling it apart and out of its home so it can be examined in the gallery. Barrett says that according to Jacques Derrida "when one deconstructs a text, one opens it to a range of meanings and interpretations." He goes on to say that "Derrida does not do something to a text, he sees what it does to itself."<sup>6</sup> I have presented *from Memory* as individual

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<sup>5</sup> See Figure 3

<sup>6</sup> Barrett, "Postmodern Pluralism," 159



works that are built into a whole, however, perhaps a better way to think of it is as a whole (my life) that is dissected into individual moments and filtered through time and experience. My MFA thesis project is reconnecting these memories in both space and time by constructing them into a linear video that allows for comparison (3 screens instead of one).



Figure 4: *It's Pouring Rain...*, Video, 4:05, 2010

The presentation of the work is not the only deconstructive property of my work. I oftentimes use binary themes like good and evil, pain and pleasure, dark and light. *It's Pouring Rain*<sup>7</sup> is beautiful while at the same time strangely threatening. Right before the female character stares out the window, a child's distant laugh or maybe cry can be heard. We never see any other character besides the woman. We never see a child. Something is amiss. In *Deer* the binary is

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<sup>7</sup> See Figure 4



found between the non-threatening audio and the gruesome video of the bleeding deer.<sup>8</sup> The viewer is left to decide what is real and what is imagined.



**Figure 5:** *Deer*, Video, 48 seconds, 2010



**Figure 6:** *Dennis*, Video, 1;55, 2010

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<sup>8</sup> See Figure 5

In other work, the binaries are clearer. Dennis, an earlier work not included in *from Memory*, opposes prayer cards with a strangely serpentine cat.<sup>9</sup> The stationary religious figures are in the course of the video intertwined by the demonic cat.<sup>10</sup> I am attracted to these conflicting notions and the idea of them existing together.

#### IDENTITY: Construction of the Real

Identity is defined in the dictionary as “the fact of being who a person is.” This definition seems quite simple, but at the same time far too vague. Coming to terms with one’s own identity proves rather problematic because the source of most individuals’ identity does not exist internally; instead it is reliant on assistance from outer forces.<sup>11</sup> In my previous photographic work I asserted two main approaches for self-identification; to literally see oneself through a reflection or photographs and/or to be seen by someone else, to be the object of their gaze. In *from Memory*, I am considering a third approach. What happens when you try to build a self-portrait based on what you remember from life?

I remember my own baby shower. I remember details like that my dad was wearing his work uniform and that his mustache was much smaller than it is now. The experience is a complete fabrication derived from an old photograph that I saw over and over, but it feels real. Even though I had not met him yet, I remember my husband’s first time making love. I remember my grandfather’s stern voice and he passed away in the first few months of my life. It becomes obvious after a while that memory is not a reliable source for absolute truths. This does not mean that my grandfather was a soft-spoken man, for all accounts he was as much of a hardass as I remember him to be. There are other factors at work here that distort and amplify certain truths and sometimes certain lies. Time is one factor. We simply are not capable of remembering

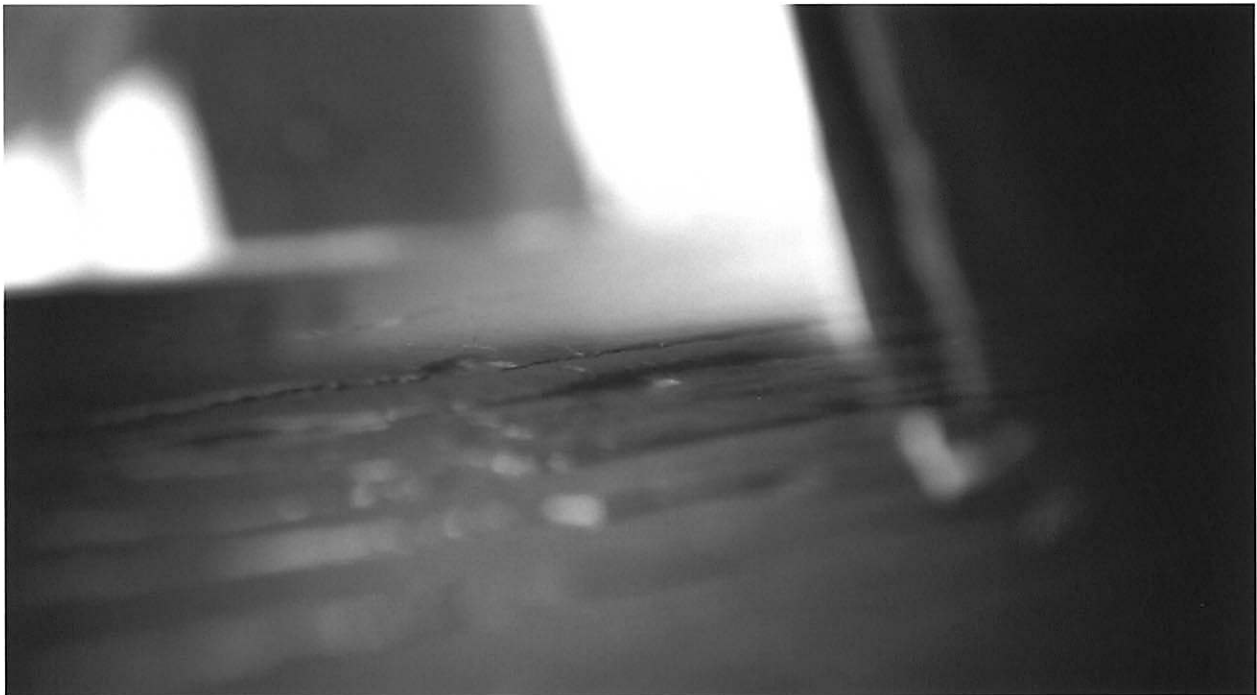
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<sup>9</sup> See Figure 6

<sup>10</sup> The cat is commonly associated with evil, like a black cat of urban legends or even Manet’s *Olympia*’s cat.

<sup>11</sup> Buddhism, as opposed to Western cultures, teaches that identity is to be found internally.

everything we experience. Our brains sometimes fill in the rest of the information the same way they flip the world right side up when our eyes project it upside down in our heads. Influence from others is another factor. My mother, my priest, my friends; they all told me stories about their lives and their beliefs and, just like a game of telephone, the truth is often lost somewhere in the retelling. Finally, sometimes we just want to remember differently. Sometimes the truth was too hurtful or too boring to stay the same.



**Figure 8:** *Cockroach*, Video, 4;11, 2011

In *Cockroach* the audible narrative starts with the phrase “my mom said...” and continues to tell an anecdote that was told over and over growing up.<sup>12</sup> Though the narrative starts by establishing authorship as my mother, it moves quickly to my own perspective as a toddler and it finally ends with an observation from my perspective now, as an adult. What started out as another family story develops into an experience that I may or may not have had. It is the

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<sup>12</sup> See Figure 8

objective of *from Memory* to show that it does not really matter either way. Truth, like beauty, is in the eye of beholder.

In the first essay of John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* he introduces the problematic relationship between what we see and what we know. Though we *see* the sun set in the west and rise in the east, we *know* it is not actually revolving around the earth. "Yet," Berger counters, "the knowledge, the explanation, never quite fits the sight."<sup>13</sup> I acknowledge this problematic relationship by beginning *from Memory* with a window in the center screen. The window reappears in the same screen over and over throughout the piece. Sometimes someone is looking out as if trying to see out of the TV at the viewer, other times the window is obscured by heavy blue drapes and the only vision of beyond is a blinding light peaking from between the blue panels. The videos to the left and right are like visions that one can see through that window, visions that take place in this blinding light. At one point all three screens are lit with images. After waiting, the drapes in the center screen miraculously rise up into the air establishing this window as site for the incredible.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, anyone who is paying attention can tell that this video is just running backwards. Maybe looking back makes things *seem* magical.

In most of the videos that contain people, the subject is actively seeing. In *It's Pouring Rain*, *Deer* and the final segment of *from Memory* the subject is looking through the window and in *You Have to Believe* she is trying to look at herself. The viewer is not privy to the view and is left to wonder. Simply by being on the other side of the window puts the viewer in a position to be the object of scrutiny.

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<sup>13</sup> Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1972), 7.

<sup>14</sup> See Figure 1



Figure 9: *Elizabeth*, 3 channel video, 1;15, 2011

In *Elizabeth* the three screens create an opportunity to compare the same subject looking three different ways.<sup>15</sup> On the left, the subject is simply looking at the viewer. In the center she is staring as if in a trance, not really looking at all. In the third she is dead, staring but not looking or seeing. By activating the three screens, I am breaking the narrative flow. All three actions cannot occur at the same time, thus they cannot be real. This same device is apparent in the moving landscape that continues across all three screens, connecting them as one continuous image. Whereas the individual narratives take place through out many years in various locations, the inclusion of this piece truncates the time and space and dismisses narrative altogether. Just as an actively looking subject puts pressure on the viewer, this open ended sequence causes anxiety. Which staring girl is dead and which is alive? Where does the image end and where does it begin? Who is this about- her or me?

### CONCLUSION

Not knowing is where I started and where I end. I began this project because I wanted to know why I made the work I did and why I grew into the person I am. My mother, with whom I have a close but capricious relationship, is the subject of much of my work and the storyteller in my family. She can tell the same lie over and over again with such sincerity that I sometimes wonder if she believes herself. She talks about God with the same conviction that she talks about the

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<sup>15</sup> See Figure 9



Easter Bunny. We all laugh, because, really, my mom called me last week, and said certain large rabbit lost my zip code; yet I cringe at when she asks how I could question the existence of her god. She believes in miracles and magic and in good and evil. One time she made me throw away a red bell pepper because when I sliced it in half, it looked like Satan. She can also make something so beautiful that the truth of the matter seems trivial. In this body of work I am reflecting on this tradition of oral storytelling. I am especially interested the inexplicable nature of this kind of history.

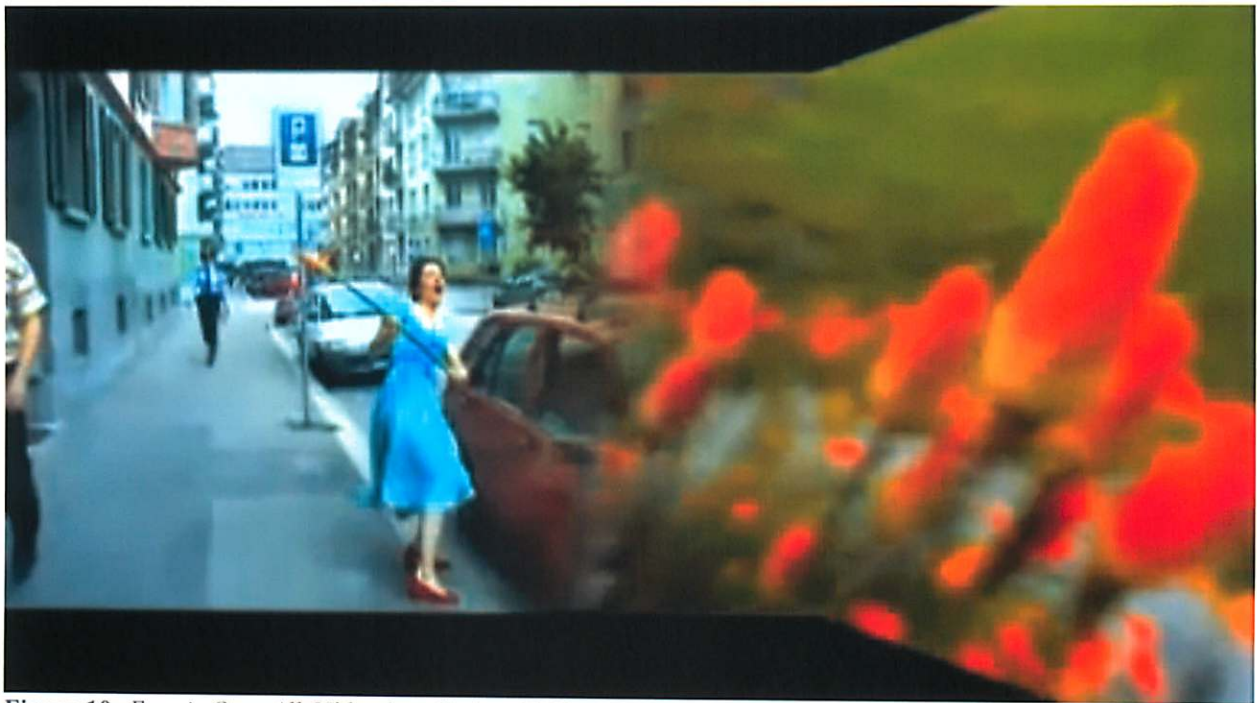


Figure 10: *Ever is Over All*, Video installation, 1997

There is a mystery and playfulness in my work that I attribute to story time at the Laurentius house. Pipolotti Rist is a contemporary Swiss artist whose mysterious and delightful work is popping with giant projections of flowers, beautiful women and pornographic images. In *Ever is Over All* (1997) she contrasts two projections on adjacent walls. The right side is close-ups of vivid bright red flowers and on the left a woman walks along a street in slow motion,



languidly smashing in car windows with a giant flower/hammer. She passes a police officer who smiles as she walks by the destructive act. The MoMA publication for this piece says that “fiction-versus-reality is an important theme for Rist, in whose work an odd combination of nightmare and magic prevails over the logic of common sense.”<sup>16</sup>

While Rist’s work might “prevail” over common sense, my work struggles with letting go of the perceived real. The binary themes that I use to deconstruct my histories remain balanced and do not take the leap into the truly fantastic. Though I strive to make my work beautiful, like my mother makes moments from the past beautiful, it is always held down by doubt and fear. I asked earlier what happens when you try to build a self-portrait based on what you remember from life? I have come to the conclusion that what you get depends on whom you are when you are remembering. This work, which focuses on my childhood and adolescence, is more revealing of the person I am now, not who I used to be.

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<sup>16</sup> "MoMA | The Collection | Pipilotti Rist. Ever Is Over All. 1997." MoMA | The Museum of Modern Art. [http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object\\_id=81191](http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=81191) (accessed April 20, 2011).

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