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Liminal recollection...between memory and reality

Blake Jamison Williams

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, bwill16@lsu.edu

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**LIMINAL RECOLLECTION . . .
BETWEEN
MEMORY AND REALITY**

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by
Blake Jamison Williams
B.F.A., New York State College of Art and Design at Alfred University, 1996
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Blake Jamison Williams

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ABSTRACT

In the year I applied to graduate school, the objects in my life acquired a distinct preciousness after my grandparents passed away within three months of each other. I realized that the things we collect, and those that surround us, reveal our narratives and silently map our personalities. I discovered that material items triggered memories for me specific to their function and relationship to me. My grandmother's set of ten figurines reminded me of the many times we would sit and drink tea together. I became acutely aware of material items that were results of human actions. A used teabag can suggest the event of drinking a cup of tea or it can suggest moments of time spent thinking. Scent integrated with visual information heightens the suggestion of specific memories. I disclose my history by using objects that are specifically related to personal experiences and association with daily ritual. The collections of objects I create speak of memories that reside within all of our minds.

LIMINAL RECOLLECTION . . . BETWEEN MEMORY AND REALITY

“Objects hang before the eyes of the imagination, continuously re-presenting ourselves to ourselves, and telling the stories of our lives in ways which would be impossible otherwise.”¹

Past

Utilitarian ease and the marriage of form and function are crucial in order to produce an aesthetically pleasing pot. My interest in function is linked to the daily act of eating and drinking. By making pots, I am able to become involved in the lives of other people because I am able to be part of their rituals. I have a collection of pottery largely acquired by trading with friends. When I drink tea, I think of the artist who made the particular pot that I am using. In an abstract way, I sit down to have a cup or bowl of tea with the person who made the pot. Through sight and touch I am able to discover the thought process behind the creation of the work. Clay is a fluid, plastic material. It will record actions, marks, moments. A pot is an action that has been frozen in time.

In the year I applied to graduate school, my grandparents passed away within three months of each other. After their death, the objects in my life acquired a distinct preciousness. I was aware that the pots I made were to become part of other peoples’ lives. The process of making objects obtained new meaning once I realized the things with which we surround ourselves and that we collect reveal our narratives and silently map our personalities. What we leave behind becomes the physical memory of our existence.

Present

I create collections of objects that are left as results of actions, or are layered in materials specific to their purpose. Layers obscure the original object, erasing fine details softening edges and precision, resulting in an object that has become the memory of the original. An object made from a mold can be considered a trace of the initial form. I use mold-making processes and their associated materials because the physical act of creating becomes a metaphor for the act of remembering.

Pieces incorporating tea, perfume, or spices produce an aroma that lingers engaging the senses and stimulating recollection. I associate events that have taken place in my life with the scent of the area or room in which that moment occurred. It is strange because the scent of a building or home is usually consistent, even though time passes. Whenever I return to my high school, the smell takes my thoughts back to that period of my life. My father lives in the house where my grandparents used to live. Sometimes, my grandmother’s perfume softly floats by, even now, four years later.

We leave marks in the places where we have been. Energy transfers.

“We know that the earliest art works originated in the service of a ritual — first the magical, then the religious kind. It is significant that the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura

¹ Moira Vincentelli, *Women and Ceramics: Gendered Vessels* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000) p. 106.

is never entirely separated from its ritual function. In other words, the unique value of the 'authentic' work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value."²

Domestic objects hold a particular aura due to their ritualistic functions in the household. I believe the aura of such objects acts as a reference for memories. My past is reflected in the objects I collect. Collections of objects are connected to the particular history of those objects. My personal objects connect me to my history. Objects hold the energy of touch transferred through time. My energy is in the things that I will leave behind and the things I make. In the same way, individual experience becomes personal history, identity.

I reveal my history by choosing to use objects that are specifically related to personal experiences. I select household items, such as wooden spoons, for their association to daily ritual. I choose articles that are related to everyday events because I believe identity is comprehended in repeated actions. It is revealed by past and present interactions, actions, and reactions. Memory is the faculty of repeating a past action or event through imagination. Identity and reality are based upon what is remembered, and what is remembered is not necessarily reality. The constant can be a material item selected to mark a certain event, to remember, to prove that a memory is true and not a lie. Lying to oneself can be as elusive as memory. Interpretation. Identity. The harshness of reality is softened by memory, layers of time and repetition. If actual reality depends upon perception, then memory is reality. I am telling you the truth, but I am lying. I believe I know who I am, but who I am is my interpretation of reality, of time passed.

"Invention is the shaping of spirit that re-forms fragments into new wholes, so that even what has been familiar can be seen fresh. Discernment is to know how to test the true and the false and to reveal objects, emotions, ideas in their coherence. The artist is a translator; one who has learned how to pass into her own language . . . The reality of art is the reality of the imagination. The reality of art is not the reality of experience. The charge laid upon the artist is to bring back visions."³

Objects contain ghosts that linger in our minds, haunting, revealing secrets. Scents linger, stimulating memory. It is my hope to impart my deep affection for the home and the traditions surrounding objects for domestic use by creating installations that unearth forgotten memories by engaging the senses and that will summon introspective responses.

² Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968) p. 223-224.

³Jeanette Winterson, *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996) p. 146, 148.



Illustration 1. *Tools for Secret Recipes*, mixed media, H.10' x W.30' x D.30', 2002.

Tools for Secret Recipes

My mother's passion is cooking, creating nourishment for her family and friends. When I think of my mother, I think of her kitchen. I think of her counters and the sound of chopping. My mother will not give her recipes away. She will tell me in confidence, but even then, she cannot tell me exact amounts.

Kitchen utensils are layered in spices, herbs, and other foods determined by my mother's expert opinion. Making work dependant upon my mother's advice illustrates my connection to her. The utensils are hung on the wall above an installation of tiles that hide a repeated collection of my mother's secret recipes. In order to closely inspect the utensils, it is necessary to walk over the hidden recipes. Tables the height of countertops are piled with spices necessary for my mother's recipes. The piles contain a utensil to suit the need of a specific recipe, or an impression of a tool. The smell created in the space references food, but is so combined that no herb or spice is particularly overpowering.



Illustration 2. *Tools for Secret Recipes*, detail.



Illustration 3. *Collection*, porcelain figurines on individual clay shelves, H.11' x W.30' x D.2", 2002.

Collection

My grandmother was very selective in the objects and furniture she had in her home. The summer after she died, I was surprised to find a collection of figurines on the television in her kitchen.

My grandmother always had a pitcher of iced tea ready in the summer, and hot tea in the winter. The figurines were acquired because of her consumption of Red Rose Tea. A figurine designed by Wade of England can be found in boxes containing one hundred tea bags. She collected the figurines as she bought boxes of tea. I know that her collection of figurines would have been great if she had actually saved every figurine from every box of tea that she had bought. Instead, she would give the figurines to friends, family, or throw them out. She did not like clutter. The collection of ten on her television fascinated me. It was not like her to collect anything. She owned material items based on their purpose, whether functional or decorative. She was particular.

The figurines in my collection are infused with her perfume, the scent lingers as the ten original forms are repeated.

I realized that even her small collection of figurines actually represented one thousand cups of tea.



Illustration 4. *Collection*, detail.



Illustration 5. *Collection*, detail.



Illustration 6. *Accumulation*, used tea bags, wood, silica sand, H.40" x W.48" x D.18", 2002.



Illustration 7. *Accumulation*, detail.

Accumulation

Actions can result in materials that are thrown away. By saving tea bags and piling them on a table, I am saving the physical evidence of an event that has taken place. I am saving the result of an action, the remains of having a cup of tea.

The table references the form of a traditional china table and is layered in silica sand, a material used for ceramic shell casting. Stains from the tea bags further the record of time. The tea bags are piled, illustrating an accumulation of use and time.

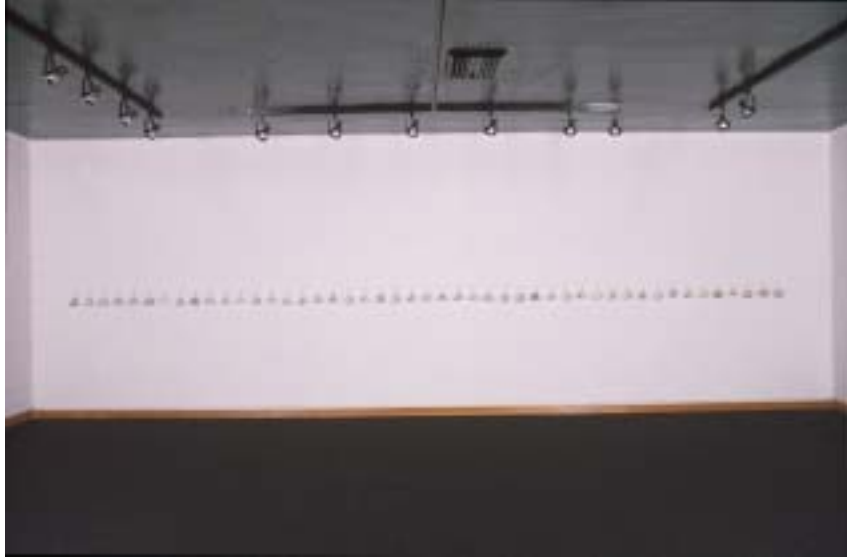


Illustration 8. *Contemplation*, used teacups, porcelain hooks, H.6" x W.28' x D.4", 2002.



Illustration 9. *Contemplation*, detail.

Contemplation

The thought of having a cup of tea suggests time for contemplation and personal assessment. The smell and warmth of tea can soothe and trigger memories that are particular for each individual according to their own experience.

The used cups in a row represent the daily ritual of drinking tea, an action frozen, saved for contemplation.

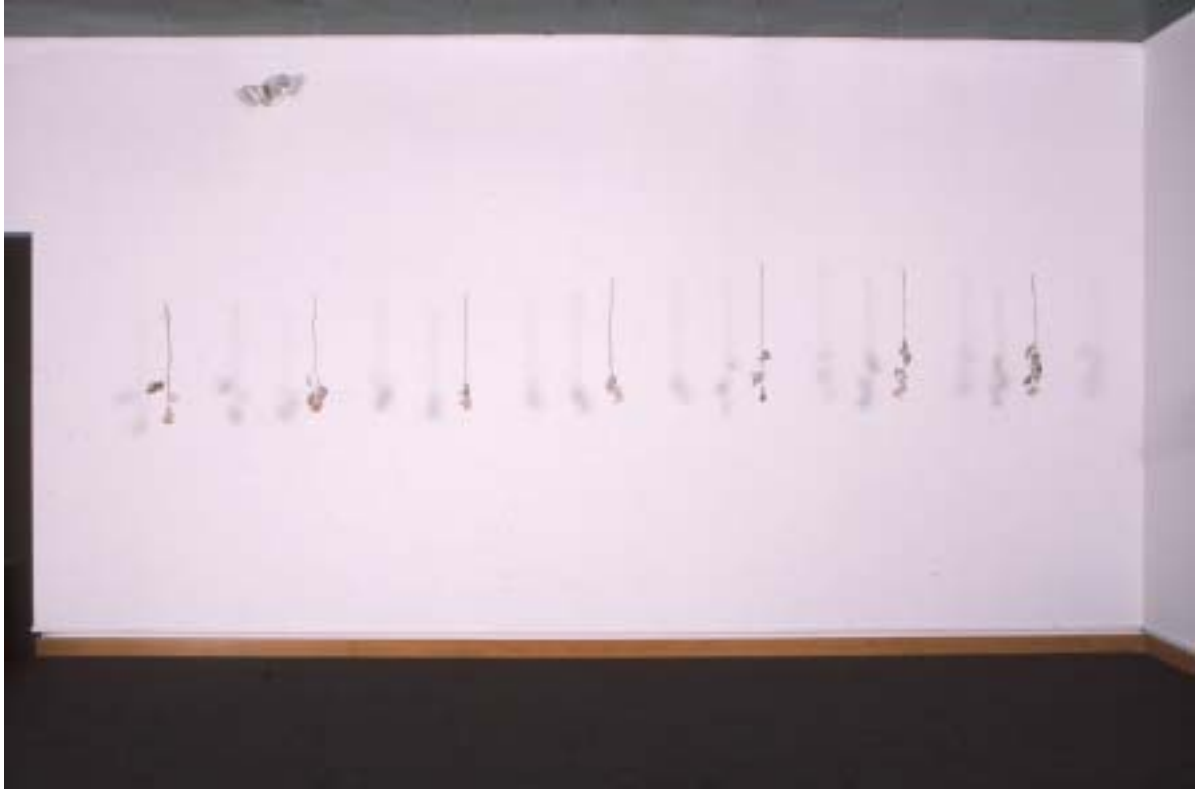


Illustration 10. *Heal: Saving to Remember*, dried roses covered in salt, H.18" x W.2" x D.2" each, 2002.

Heal: Saving to Remember

I cannot remember how many homes I have been in that have dried flowers hanging on the wall. I save flowers given to me by loved ones to remember. This in itself is ironic because a dried flower is not permanent, it will eventually decay, though it is a record of life at one time. It is a record of what is not, what has been lost, what has changed.

Saving is to remember what did take place at one time. What has been saved acts as a comparison to reality. I believe that in this act of saving, healing takes place.



Illustration 11. *Heal: Saving to Remember*, detail.

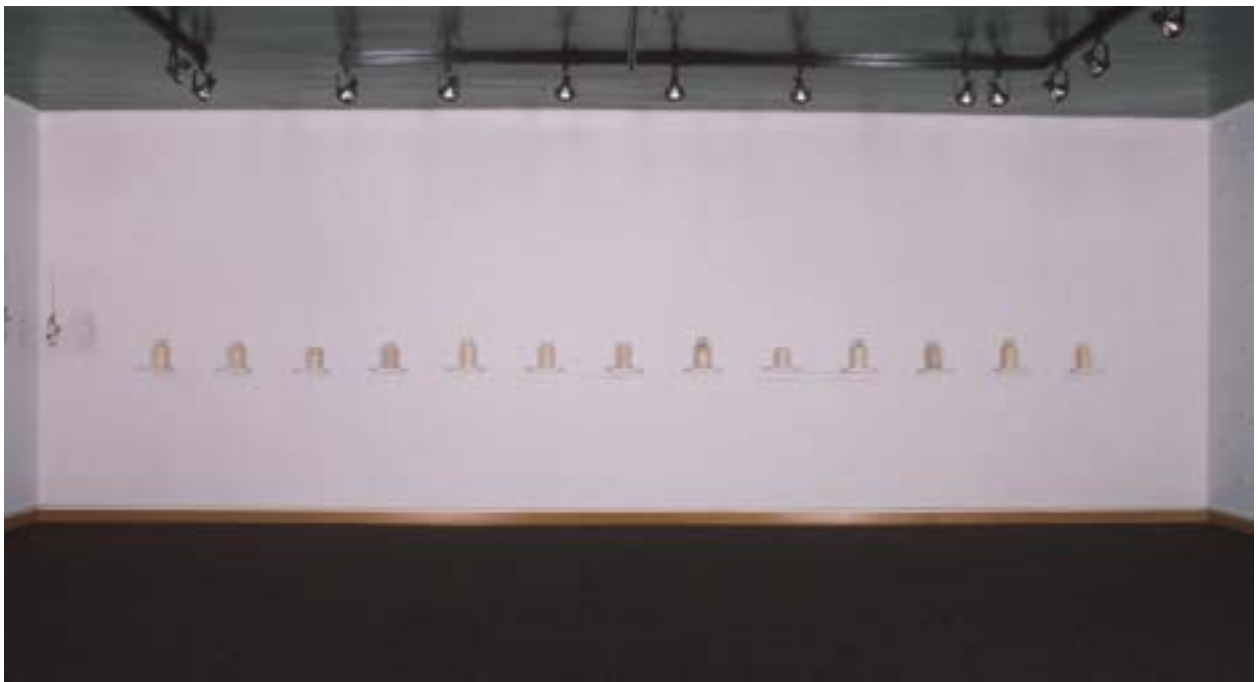


Illustration 12. *Wash*, solid cast soap, wood, steel, H.10" x W.7" x D.7" each, 2002.



Illustration 13. *Wash*, detail.

Wash

Cleansing, washing away what has taken place, is an act to which all people can relate. In *Washing Hands* by Huang Huacheng, installed in 1966, the familiar act of cleansing is framed by “an installation consisting of a washbasin, a wooden chair, and a poem by Qui Gangjian”⁴ which expresses his “conviction that poetry exists in the seemingly mundane activities of everyday life.”⁵ Terry Smith emphasizes this idea by stating, “art is an activity continuous with life, not a special sort of activity separate from life. Art should draw its form and content from our life systems, our social communication systems, our ideas of what we are in the world. And in doing so, it has the real option of changing the way we see ourselves.”⁶

My grandparents liked martinis made with Absolut and Tanqueray alcohol. Each family member was given a solid soap cast in the form of either an Absolut or Tanqueray bottle. We washed our hands to not forget, and to become aware, to forgive. Erosion is the mark of time, of weather and softening.

⁴ Gao Minglu, “Conceptual Art with Anti-Conceptual Attitude: Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong,” *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin* (New York: Art Publishers, 1999) p. 129.

⁵ Minglu, 129.

⁶ Terry Smith, “Propositions,” *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999) p. 259.

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VITA

Blake Williams was born in Michigan in 1972. She attended the Cranbrook Kingswood School, where she took her first ceramics class as a sophomore in high school. After majoring in ceramics and completing her studies for her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the New York State College of Ceramics and Design at Alfred University in 1995, she moved to Seattle and became a studio potter at Pottery Northwest. There she held instructor positions in ceramics at The Seward Park Art Studio, The Seattle Center Arts and Science Academy, and Pottery Northwest. She applied to Louisiana State University in 1999, where the focus of her graduate work took her beyond the ceramics studio into the realm of sculpture. It is her hope to impart her deep affection for the home and traditions surrounding objects of use by creating installations consisting of collections of objects that summon introspective responses. Blake has been in a number of national juried exhibitions and is represented by the Pewabic Pottery Gallery in Detroit Michigan, the Pottery Northwest Gallery in Seattle, Washington, and KOBO in Seattle, Washington. She will receive her degree of Master of Fine Arts in August, 2002.