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Hidden memories

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HIDDEN MEMORIES

A Thesis

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Agricultural and Mechanical College
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in

The School of Art

by
Jennifer Elizabeth Swanson
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ABSTRACT

Using the Cottage Plantation ruins as a vehicle for investigation, this thesis demonstrates how fragments of information can be layered on each other to draw relationships between the past and present, self and space, memory and experience, architecture and nature. And, in turn, how an understanding of these relationships presents a greater perception of the self.

HIDDEN MEMORIES

Lingering thoughts wander the mind. Pulling me close. Consuming. Softly, with each step, hidden memories reveal themselves. The work is the result of three years worth of obsession. Questions of how architecture, history, and a sense of place reflect on an understanding of the self. Particularly Myself. Sense of place is revealed. In the relationship between humans and architecture, past and present, reality and mystery, place is revealed.

The Cottage. Today it is only a ghost, a memory. Scattered. A ruin of columns and meticulously stacked piles of bricks. Through the remnants, pieces of history unfold themselves. They whisper to me, as witness to all that has taken place at one particular bend in the Mississippi River. Once a working plantation just outside of Baton Rouge, it witnessed the Steamboat Princess explosion (in which slaves from The Cottage brought burn victims to the grounds and rolled them in flour). It had been a survivor of the Civil War in addition to pillaging and vandalism after its abandonment. It housed a yellow fever hospital, and its land is home to the graves of unknown Union soldiers. It succumbed to fire on February 18, 1960, leaving its skeleton as a memory. This skeleton has been the vehicle for my investigation.

Watching the landscape, trees pass quickly, blurred. The road twists and turns. Faintly over the horizon the remains of the structure appear. Stepping into the landscape for the first time, I am conscious of my connection to the site. The live oak forms a passage into another place. I enter, and begin gathering visual information, historical information. A quick fascination with the past's reflection on the present emerges. Reading letters, books, newspapers. Listening

to other's memories, stories compose themselves in my mind. As I try to form a more logical, more reasonable connection to this place than my subconscious knowing, the magnetism of the Cottage tugs at my thoughts. Attempting to understand this obsession, I continually question myself. This desire would spark a journey.

Moving back and forth, the past and present begin to overlap. A once monumental structure is still powerful. Even in ruins. As cows graze, memory disguises itself. The more I learned, the less I knew. Missing parts developed as bits of mystery, sparking an unfamiliar voice. The ghost of a structure remains. In orderly piles, among the tangled live oaks. February 24, 1834...Weather was threatening. Frederick, detained longer than expected. Many winters later. Flames consumed. Graceful lines of the woodcarver, family portraits, mantel ornaments...A fine carved rosewood etagere. Ghosts of these flames tug persistent. Grass surrounding the ruins grows tall, moving toward the Great Mississippi...one of few remaining witnesses. Standing. Under the moss-covered trees, I hear steamboats pass, preparations for evening's meal.

I am never looking singly. Always everything in relation to everything else. My eyes stay constantly active. Engulfed by the space, my vision is disjointed. Wandering the Cottage ruins until I can make sense of what surrounds me. As I move around, a map begins to form in my mind, and the space starts to crystallize. Pieces come together, allowing a slow understanding of my surroundings. And of myself. A relationship to the book form is obvious, however, the work is meant to allow the viewer more freedom: To move loosely, make associations, and continually interact with the environment. Fragments of information, layered to draw relationships between the past and present, self and space, architecture and nature. Narrative qualities relate directly to the

relationship formed with the viewer. Part to whole. Circular rather than linear. Constant movement, relating information, and inviting conclusions.

Hidden memories reveal themselves. Gathering, researching, reading, photographing. Time spent at the Cottage ruin was crucial to my relationship with the site. Over time, the structure marked the figure, just as the figure left a part of itself behind on the architecture. Remnants of the two now exist together. Not simply resting on the surface, but rather in their essence. Each reflects on the other. When the Cottage first began influencing my work, regular visits to the site were necessary. However, as time passed, I removed myself from its environment so that I could process the information I had spent time gathering. It was this time that I spent absorbing, living within this visual and textual information that permitted memories of the memory to surface. Internalization. Separation. Isolation. Self-reflection began once memory was all that remained. Left with only what I could recall of my studies, I began to invent memories. Triggered by senses, as if I had also been a witness. Remembering. Turning inward. Processing these invented memories proved to alter the way I envisioned myself relating to the Cottage. Disjointed, seemingly unconnected parts hint at my experience, my sense of place.

The layering of visual information in the prints mimics the layering in my mind. Just as memories alter and fade over time, my vision was soon masked and reality receded into mystery. The physical layers of ink represent the ethereal layers that make up memories. Separate parts of my memory collide. Individual sections are connected to a single memory, yet each comes together with others to structure a new experience. The contrast among layers and the images connected to them present themselves unexpectedly, forcing experience. Interior and exterior. Architecture and nature. Body and mind.

Like the physical layering of ink on paper, memory is formed when the mind begins to link...Events. Images. Textures. Colors. Smells. Intentional blurring. A lack of clarity. Capitalizing on the limitation of memory, capturing bits along the way. The prints become moments, "snap shots" of looking, experiencing, understanding. The relationship of actual events and our memory depends on the information noted, collected, processed. The prints mimic this action. Time plays a role...deterioration of memory and of information is crucial to the making.

Sounds of crisp grass, light footsteps. Senses confused. Enveloped in a world unknown, but familiar. Visions appear in a haze, barely visible. The ghost of a structure continues to call as the chatter of voices echoes in the rustling leaves. Dreams. Reality. Memory. As senses are triggered, I am pulled further...into the hidden. Experience is a crucial element in the work. For myself. For the viewer. Photographic imagery, drawings, sound, texture. Contrasting relationships presented in the prints are meant to deliberately change the pace of the viewer's way of looking, and in turn, the experience. Confront. Question. Envelope. In presenting my own specific experiences, I hope to spark interactions for the viewer. In this specific way of looking, telling, processing, I propose relationships to be questioned. My own way of processing information is echoed in the presentation of the prints. Relationship of scale, both within the imagery and to the viewer. Cropping. Perception of my mind's eye, passed on to the viewer. Change in point of view. In and out. Movement around and through images. Alone. Together. Piecing information, slowly, forming.

Free thoughts flow smoothly in my mind. Wrapping the body tightly. Air suffocatingly still. The ghosts tug persistent. Memories still fade in and out of

focus. It will continue. Lingering thoughts wander. Pulling me. Consuming. Softly, with each step, hidden memories reveal themselves. A distinct bond formed. Figure and structure. Hints left behind, transformed. The two can no longer exist alone or together. A shadow of the figure remains. On the column, in the bricks, under the tree. Just as the ghost of the structure plagues the figure. Visible only, hidden in memory.

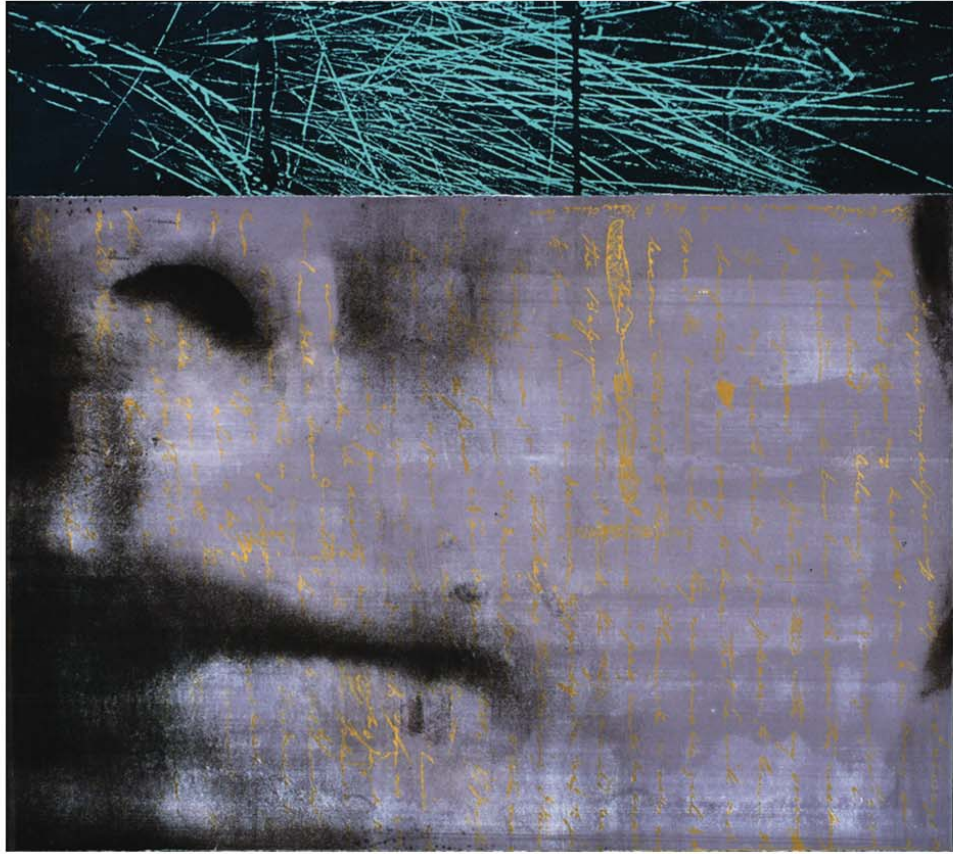


Image 1



Image 2



Image 3



Image 4



Image 5



Image 6



Image 7

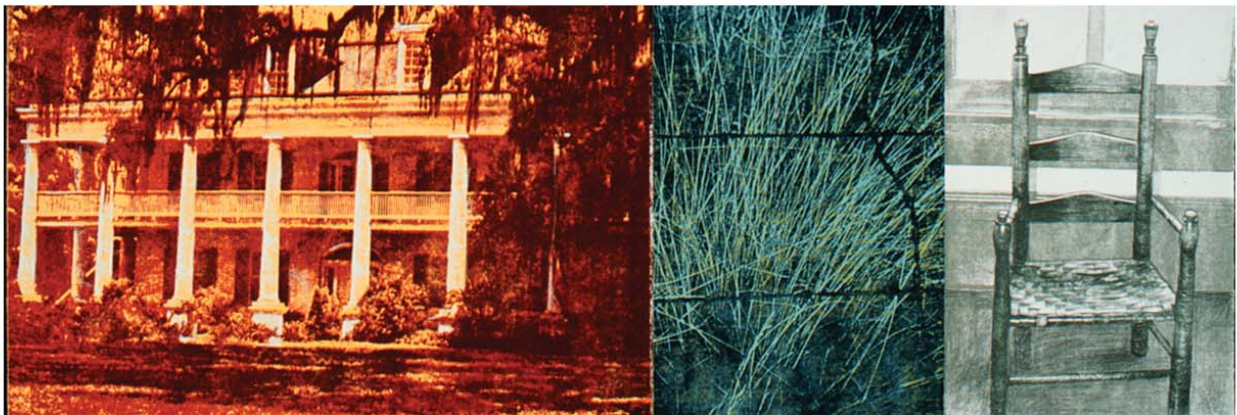


Image 8

VITA

Jennifer Swanson was born in Richmond, Virginia, on January 28, 1977. She is the daughter of James and Susan Swanson, and older sister to Cynthia Swanson. Jenny attended elementary and middle school in Wilmington, Delaware, and junior high and high school in Chattanooga, Tennessee. She received her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Syracuse University, where she graduated *Summa Cum Laude* in May of 1999. The same year, Jenny moved to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, to attend graduate school. She expects to be awarded a Master of Fine Arts degree from Louisiana State University in May of 2002.