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Memory, Memorial

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MEMORY, MEMORIAL

A Thesis

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Agriculture and Mechanical College
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Requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The Department of Art & Design

by
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ABSTRACT

My thesis exhibition investigates concepts of memory and memorial. These are fueled by feelings of yearning, longing, and nostalgia. We allow memories to linger. I believe we try to strengthen these memories, encase them and tuck them away deep in our minds. These memories create in our psyche psychological memorials. Like physical memorials, our memories too deteriorate and crumble over time. We fill in the gaps to the point where it is unknown just how true these memories are. At times I think that mine are now idealized and idyllic then they really were. The paintings in my exhibit are physical manifestations of my own psychological memorials. "The geometry of thought echoes the geometry of the room."¹ With that quote in mind, my works are abstracted from three components found in the traditional Japanese home. The three components are the tokonoma, the shoji screen, and the landscape.

¹ Pallasmaa, Juhani, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*, (United Kingdom: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2012), 48.

MEMORY, MEMORIAL

The interior of a traditional Japanese room is a beautiful space. The room is laid out with rectangular tatami mats made of rice straw and soft rush straw on the floor. The straw fills the room with a distinct smell. In the corner of the room there is an alcove. In Japanese, this alcove is called a tokonoma. Between the diffused light through the shoji screens by day and soft candles by night, the tokonoma is the deepest and darkest part of the room. In this deep and dark tokonoma there hangs a scroll. The scroll might depict a simple delicate landscape painting or simple lines of calligraphy. On the floor lies a vase. The scroll and vase are not decorative, but rather give depth to this deep and dark tokonoma. "Deep shadows and darkness are essential, because they dim the sharpness of vision, make depth and distance ambiguous, and invite unconscious peripheral vision and tactile fantasy."² The tokonoma has presence and allows the viewer a prolonged state of seeing and contemplation. This non-tangible function of the tokonoma is beautiful and haunting.

The traditional Japanese room is enclosed with sliding shoji screens made of wood and delicate rice paper that diffuses the daylight. Seen from outside at night, the candlelit room looks like a glowing lantern. These moveable sliding screens function in allowing for a visible connection and separation between the indoor dwelling space and outdoor landscape.

² Pallasmaa, Juhani, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*, (United Kingdom: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2012), 50.

The landscape surrounding my old family home facing the pacific ocean of Japan has been very inspirational. The contrast of that landscape in comparison to living in Tokyo for the first eighteen years of my life was phenomenal. Living in a urban environment, the intense noise and pace of life is a given, a norm that one gets used to. In contrast, the countryside, with its lack of urban stimulation, made the land feel foreign. The time spent in the countryside was a powerful awareness of the senses. The deep darkness at night, typhoons brought torrential rain and hammering winds, sunrise and sunsets at the beach, the colors of my mother's garden and poppy fields are some of the sensations. This awareness of the land, and of nature, is an important aspect of traditional Japanese aesthetic.

Tokonoma Shakkei (borrowed alcove) and *In that dark space there hangs a scroll* are direct abstractions of the tokonoma (Figures 1 and 2). The dense black works are rich in materiality, texture, and presence. The painted surfaces are a very physical pursuit. I wanted the two paintings to lend to the viewer "a strong tactile experience in the forceful presence of materiality."³ The black paint and oil stick physically negates and buries the previous layers of paint. The tokonoma abstractions have presence, a presence tangible through the black surface and material of the paint. The work negates the idea of a painting as a depiction of or illusion to another space. It has presence as a physical object

³ Pallasmaa, Juhani, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*, (United Kingdom: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2012), 75.



Figure 1. James Kimura-Green, *Tokonoma Shakkei (borrowed alcove)*, oil, oil stick, and Japanese paper on canvas, 64 x 49 in., 2013



Figure 2. James Kimura-Green, *And In That Dark Space There Hangs A Scroll*, oil, oil stick, and Japanese paper on canvas, 66 x 60 in., 2014

and physical surface compared to the tokonoma which has presence as a physical architectural element within a defined room. I hope that the two paintings can afford the viewer the same prolonged state of seeing and contemplation as I get from the physical tokonoma space.

Richard Serra has been very inspirational in creating rich, juicy painted surfaces. Serra created works that pushed the material of oil stick into thick and textured elements of relief. To say that Serra's work is textured, dense, and black is to over simplify it. Beyond the formal aspects I believe the most important facet of his work is his ability to make you conscious of your own physical and psychological self. I respond to his work as it mentally and physically weighs down upon me. While I have never encountered his sculptures, I imagine a similar experience.

Mark Rothko's black paintings weigh down mentally but serve to bring attention to the flat painted surface negating a painterly perspective. Both Rothko and Serra are influenced by Eastern aesthetics and perhaps hint at this through the transcendent qualities of their work. I continue this influence while also hinting at the specific architectural element that I am abstracting from, an architectural element that very humbly and peacefully offers this transcendent quality. Pieces like *Tokonoma Shakkei (borrowed alcove)* are in homage to works by Mark Rothko and Richard Serra (Figure 1).

Conceptually speaking the tokonoma paintings are pivotal to my artistic practice. The paintings are very personal physical memorials for me in the way

that the Vietnam memorial might be very personal to a viewer who fought in the war or has lost someone in that war. The paintings are very dark pieces that ultimately allowed me to push beyond the more gloomy aspects of nostalgia, yearning, and longing that I felt for my past life in Japan. Works made after the tokonoma paintings become much more colorful and animated.

With work like *I Dream of Places Far Beyond* and *Pastel View* the paintings shift from darker works with a physical presence to works with transparency and greater implications of depth (Figures 3 and 4). In *Pastel View*, the formal and functional qualities of the shoji screen come into play (Figure 4). Remember that the sliding shoji screens with latticework allow for a separation or connection between the interior and exterior space. With this painting I'm taking the stance of being inside looking out. Within the geometry of the traditional Japanese room I'm taking the viewer away from the dark tokonoma to the exterior facing shoji screened wall. I want to offer the viewer a breath of fresh air after viewing the dark and textured tokonoma paintings.

The latticework is the physical foreground layer to bring focus to the painted surface and to stop, for a moment, the illusion of the eye from receding back. This is similar to raindrops on a window that brings our focus to the surface of the window for a moment before we allow ourselves to look through the glass. In back of the latticework there are colors to very simply imply an exterior landscape. I want the viewer to slowly investigate and shift their gaze back and forth between the relief of the impasto surface and the color fades of the



Figure 3. James Kimura-Green, *I Dream Of Places Far Beyond*, oil, oil stick on aluminum, 47.5 x 36, 2014



Figure 4. James Kimura-Green, *Pastel View*, oil, oil stick on aluminum, 33 x 29.75 in., 2014

background landscape. The simple association of landscape in *Pastel View* is depicted in an idealized and idyllic way through color (Figure 4). There are also similar moments in works like *I Dream Of Places Far Beyond* and the series, *Floating World Picture* (Figures 3 and 5).

The idyllic representation of landscape through color blends is done for two reasons. The first is in reference to the bokashi technique unique to the Japanese ukiyo-e prints. Bokashi is applied by hand and creates gradations of color, similar to contemporary printmaking blend rolls, applied by a roller. 19th century ukiyo-e artist, Ando Hiroshige, used Bokashi to depict skies in his prints. Contemporary Japanese printer, Noda Tetsuya, beautifully creates delicate blends not just in his landscapes but also in smaller motifs like fruit and bed sheets.

The second reason is an attempt to convey an ambiguous receding space that does not impose specificity. This drives at the teetering compromise of abstraction and representation that I am searching for. A good example of another artists work is Hiroshi Sugimoto's *Seascape* photographs. The representational images, some with sharp horizon lines and some more blurred, offer similar qualities to Mark Rothko's black on grey paintings. Sugimoto's *Seascape* photographs offer the satisfaction of knowing what one is looking at while allowing space for mental contemplation.



Figure 5. James Kimura-Green, series *Floating World Picture*, oil stick on aluminum, wood frame, 8.25 x 6.25, 2014

I arrived at LSU understanding printmaking and photographic techniques. What I yearned for was a more direct tactile working process. I didn't want to be hindered by time-consuming techniques when developing new ideas. As I started to paint with oils and work in the painterly print process of monotyping I found that these processes did not need to be exclusive. I started to introduce elements like off setting and counter proofing from the printmaking process into my paintings. The tools and techniques of printmaking are no different than the tools and techniques of painting in that both are tools, not separate processes. *It's Your Favorite Foreign Picture* is a good example where I combine photographic techniques and direct painterly marks (Figure 6).

Works made in the second half of the year like *I Dream Of Places Far Beyond* and *Ruckenstuhl* are pushing beyond the main components of the alcove, shoji screen, and landscape (Figures 3 and 7). In those two pieces, the latticework shoji screen and the element of landscape are but mere motifs within the work. When sitting inside, the shoji screen separates and connects us from the landscape. There can be an abrupt disconnect or beautiful bonding of our personal space and the landscape. Something that I sense from my work now is that they feel like spaces bursting out in transition of thought and process. They are ambiguous in its definition as interior or exterior, representational or abstract. Memory is fickle and the various moments and layers in my work are fragments of memories that quickly get jotted down on a surface as one might



Figure 6. James Kimura-Green, *It's Your Favorite Foreign Picture*, oil, oil stick, toner transfer, Japanese paper on canvas, 60 x 40 in., 2014



Figure 7. James Kimura-Green, *Ruckenstuhl*, oil, oil stick on aluminum, wood frame, 47.5 x 36 in., 2014

write in a diary. For a moment the memory is captured and physically memorialized to contemplate upon before my mind and hand moves on.

As the work pushes beyond the main components of the shoji screen, alcove, and landscape I also believe that I am actually pushing past the overarching idea of my thesis show, memorial and memory. The works are memorials, not just of memory but also of my day-to-day lived experience. Memory in itself is now a factor that inspires and influences my work along with architecture, music, history, and my niece, Lilian. All of those themes have at one point or another inspired works at both the University of Connecticut and LSU. With those influences and inspirations in mind I now aim to explore and discover varying degrees of abstraction and representation through my tactile process, my visual language. Creating works of art is a beautiful endeavor where process, thought, and exploration, but most importantly, discovery, all collides.

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VITA

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