CONFABULATION:

PHOTOGRAPHS, MEMORY, AND PAINTING

by

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A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts, Visual Arts

Boise State University

May 2011

BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY GRADUATE COLLEGE

DEFENSE COMMITTEE AND FINAL READING APPROVALS

of the thesis submitted by

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Thesis Title: Confabulation: Painting, Photographs, and Memory

Date of Final Oral Examination: 10 March 2011

The following individuals read and discussed the thesis submitted by student Erin Cunningham, and they evaluated her presentation and response to questions during the final oral examination. They found that the student passed the final oral examination.

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Thanks Mom.

Special Thanks to my Thesis Committee: Dan Scott, Cheryl Shurtleff-Young, and Jonathan Sadler.

ABSTRACT

This thesis is in regards to paintings created by Erin Cunningham for the completion of her MFA in Visual Arts at Boise State University in the spring of 2011. She primarily discusses the tenuous connection between photography and memory. Examining ideas developed by Roland Barthes, she set out to prove that while there is a distinct difference between the factual language of photography and the fictive language of memory, that the two have a type of symbiotic relationship. Particularly in regards to familial photography, the paintings she has developed from this concept examine the construction of memoir using images that are unfamiliar within personal memory and how those images are consequently re-authored with the attachment of personal narrative. The artist also examines how a representational quality that is painted similarly to photography can affect the viewer's conception of the work due to the inherent trust granted to the photographic image.

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INTRODUCTION

> Here is where the madness is, for until this day no representation could reassure me of the past of a thing except by its intermediaries; but with the Photograph, my certainty is immediate: no one in the world can undeceive me. The Photograph then becomes a bizarre *medium*, a new form of hallucination, so to speak, a modest, *shared* hallucination (on one hand "it is not there," on the other "but it indeed has been"): a mad image, chafed by reality.[1]
>
> Roland Barthes

In the statement above, Roland Barthes sets out to characterize the quality that distinguished photography from anything that had existed prior to it. This quality is demonstrated by the ability that photography has to make a bridge between the past and the present. The photographic print changed the world's relationship with history because it represented a direct link between two periods in time, that in which the photo was taken and that in which it was beheld. The photograph became, in essence, a testimonial from the past—a permanent reflection of representational exactness. The photograph presented a more clear and objective view into the past than the preceding evidence provided from history—artifact and language. From Barthes' perspective, these provided insufficient

[1] Barthes, Roland, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography,* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 115.

evidence when compared to the visible truth that photography carried with it inherently.

I have always been fascinated by the varied nuances of representation within the visual arts. I have long been driven by the illusionistic potential presented by painting and drawing, in spite of the existence of photography, because I'm interested in exploring the rift between what is visually convincing and what is physically created. This is where representation becomes subject to my interpretation, and where I try to convince the viewer of an idea that uses surfaces that point towards verisimilitude, but which is simultaneously directing the viewer to other levels of content. Painting allows for meaning to be developed through color, brushstroke, impasto, economy, and layering as well as many other approaches. Painting functions like language, in that it can emphasize particular elements and subdue the presence of others. The viewer is responsible for reading the material quality as well as the image itself in order to fully grasp the artist's idea.

This interests me because I have always had a fascination with telling stories. From an early age, I was twisting together extravagant plotlines, characters, and settings that were loosely based upon my everyday life. The stories were never entirely untrue because all of the elements of the truth were present, but were now embroidered with theatricality and extensive details. I took great liberties in my position as narrator, creating empathy for my chosen protagonists, begging for emotional response through exaggerated detail, and, of course, offering my opinion regarding the whole sequence of events. I was never an objective eyewitness. I think it was for this reason that I became an artist, because I saw immense possibilities for elaboration. At some

point in my childhood, I began to lose touch with the fact that these exaggerations were only that. They became so solidified in my everyday practice of telling and building upon stories that they began to build up my remembered experience.

In fact, I'm not positive that I ever had a grasp of where the reality of truth ended and where my annexations of it began. Certainly, when reviewing the details of my life—those autobiographical components that lead to a reservoir of memory—I could not distinguish fact from fiction in many instances. Presently, I have begun to speculate that personal memory is precisely that: recalled events that are strained through a continually changing filter of personal interpretation. In any given event shared between two people, one person may latch onto details that another does not, and that any attempt in recalling the same event through language or image will probably result in two completely different stories being told. The clearest memory shared between the two will potentially stray from its origin on completely separate trajectories, the new forms moving farther apart with every new experience gathered by each individual.[2]

During my research, I encountered the psychological phenomenon of *confabulation*. I became interested in this idea because it describes an event in which a person has constructed false details within their memories that they believe to be true. I began to draw similarities between this phenomenon and my own approach to story telling and image making as well as my conception of memory. Confabulation can exist in several different variations; sometimes this fictionalization serves to fill in gaps of an existing memory that a person does not possess the full details of, and, in other times, it

[2] Nader, Karim, interview by Jad Abumrad and Robert Krulwich, June 7, 2007, "Memory and Forgetting," *Radiolab*, 17:19 (WNYC 2002-present; NPR podcast).

can manifest itself through completely fabricated scenarios of repressed memories.[3] The term confabulation can also be used to describe a casual and lighthearted discussion. I adopted this term to be the title of this thesis because I am interested in how both meanings can inform a reading of the work.

The conception of this, my culminating thesis, is rooted in this strange hinterland of remembered experience. It negotiates the borderline that exists between photographic document and personal memoir. Using family photographs as a source, I am making paintings that are retelling those images. By making paintings from the photos, I am able to move from referencing an image that is granted a certain amount of authentic credibility towards a translation of the image through paint that is dependent on my contemporary position within my life's experience. The paintings operate through a twofold process of reflection; they utilize historical evidence gathered by the physically reflective process of photography in order to elicit, in both the artist and the viewer, the mentally reflective process of memory construction.

On one hand, the viewer is moved to trust the presented imagery because it is constructed to appear visually similar to photography. On the other hand, the viewer should also be aware of the fundamental fiction that is presented through the medium of paint; these are not photographs. They are images constructed from personal experience and the artist's interpretation. It is my hope that while these images depend on particular qualities of photographic representation they will undermine how the viewer engages with representational imagery overall. Sontag states, "Instead of just recording reality, photographs have become the norm for the way things appear to us, thereby changing the

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[3] Loftus, Elizabeth et al., "The Reality of Illusory Memories," From *Memory Distortion*, Daniel Schacter ed., (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) 47-50.

very idea of reality, and of realism."[4] Therefore, by my use and reference of the photograph—i.e., short depth of field, spectral highlights—I am mimicking a way of seeing that can elicit notions of authenticity and the real. Simultaneously, I am working within that structure of photographic seeing to summon a notion that is somewhat contrary to it.

The source material for these paintings is derived from my family photo albums. They illustrate a period of the first fifteen years of my parent's marriage, from about 1970 to roughly 1985, through my first five years. I have chosen my imagery somewhat arbitrarily, but with a few factors in mind. I began by analyzing the formal qualities of the photo and then removing much of the print down to a small selection. Another point of interest for me was to choose images of events that I have little conscious memory of, because I was not yet born or they left no significant bearing within my gathered experience. The paintings primarily depict my parents and myself, excluding my siblings for the most part. I am roughly the same age now as my parents were when most of these photos were taken and I find that to be a compelling force within the work. It becomes an act of measuring myself up against the perceived past that I can never fully have an understanding of. It also becomes an act of confabulation by filling in the blanks of the stories when I don't possess all of the details surrounding the events of the photo.

In the following chapters, I describe my research and process towards developing this body of work. I begin by examining the familial snapshot, its role in developing ideas of family history and personal memory. I explore ideas proposed by Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, and Susan Stewart regarding the relationship of photography to memory, death, and lived experience. I will follow this with a brief discussion of other

[4] Sontag, Susan, *On Photography*, (New York: Picador, 1977), 87.

painters who also rely heavily on retaining visual aspects of the photographic print within their work as well as multiple perspectives on how they have come to make this choice. Lastly, in Chapters 5-7, I will provide my formal reading of my own work as well as my ideas about developing content within the paintings. This will include a brief discussion of each painting in detail. I will also elaborate on the personal narrative that informs these paintings and my process in developing the images from photographic document to functioning as my personal memoir. In conclusion, I will reconcile how this work will communicate to a wider audience in spite of its being so closely developed within my own autobiographical experience. Hopefully, the audience will be able to capture a sense of my ideas about reminiscence as well as explore their personal conceptions of memory.

CHAPTER ONE: THE FAMILY SNAPSHOT

> [Kodak] enables the fortunate possessor to go back by the light of his own fireside to scenes which would otherwise fade from memory and be lost.
> Eastman Kodak Company[5]

A snapshot consists of imagery taken most likely by an amateur in order to quickly record visual information without particular consideration to composition or other aesthetic details. The device used to record the snapshot is usually a small, handheld and automatic camera; allowing the photographer to quickly "point-and-shoot" at whatever subject matter is considered desirable. The images have an instantaneous quality—taken in the moment when something strikes the photographer as being important about a scene or event. Furthermore, the snapshot, as I am defining it, has probably been processed into the final print not by the photographer who has authored the work, but has either been printed in a commercial lab, through instant processes such as Polaroid, or in more recent years, has originated from a home computer and printer. The purpose of these images is in most cases primarily documentary, with minimal amounts of formal consideration.

The final prints may bear evidence that suggests the image's hasty capture: flutters of candid self-abandonment from the subjects, the photographer's finger slipping

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[5] Batchen, Geoffrey, *Forget Me Not: Photography and Remembrance*, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004), 8.

into the scene, or unexpected cameos by unsuspecting people. At other times, the snapshots can seem aggravatingly posed, self-conscious, or superficial. While all individual purposes may not be fully realized at the time of the photographic action, the moment the shutter is released the image becomes sealed into a negative that cannot be recreated. Ultimately, the reason the photograph is taken is to hold a visual document that, in Barthes' words, is something the photographer and those who come into contact with the photo in the future, can clearly affirm, "*this* has been there."[6]

In relation to the work that I have created, this type of snapshot photography most clearly relates to one particular subset of this genre—that of familial photography. Familial photography is identifiable in contemporary Western culture as photographs that have been taken of significant events in family life; portraiture, celebrations, and family vacations are most commonly the subjects associated with this type of photograph.[7] Family photographs orient themselves around documenting the lives and growth of the children within a family, and rarely serve to retain anything that is unflattering to a depiction of the familial ideal.[8] In other words, family albums often skim over the actual facts of familial life and serve to propagandize, if only for the family itself, an idea of contentment and well-being—an ideal of that particular family's self-image. Simon Watney expands on this idea:

> … I am not convinced we should simply blame photography for the narrowness of its conventional pictures of family life. Indeed the very determination to put a brave face on things, to show us all smiling…only demonstrates our more or less

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[6] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 77.
[7] Miller, Nancy K, "Putting Ourselves in the Picture: Memoirs and Mourning," in *The Familial Gaze*, Marianne Hirsch ed., (Hanover: University of New England Press, 1999) 51.
[8] Novak, Lorie. "Collected Visions," in *The Familial Gaze*, Marianne Hirsch ed., (Hanover: University of New England Press, 1999) 15.

> desperate desire to be happy: a dumb, clumsy inchoate awareness that *somehow* life could be better than it is.[9]

Using photography to improve a family's inward perception of itself rather than its outward appearances would seem an apt way of dealing with familial tribulation. The narrative that is then created is one without evident discomfort, sickness, or awkwardness, which can therefore transcend the potential ugliness of everyday life.

What the family album cannot avoid depicting, however, is a distinction inherent to all photography: that characteristic wherein the moment's capture is immediately followed by that same event's movement into the past. No matter the subject, the beholder of the photograph should be intrinsically aware that their relation to that image will forever be a relationship of the present looking back onto history.[10] When reviewing family albums, a viewer might notice past homes they have lived in, toys they had loved, and singular milestones that they will never experience again. Probably most predominant amongst these things, however, are faces that are no longer present in the viewer's life. Sontag states:

> Photography is the inventory of mortality. …Photographs show people being so irrefutably there and at a specific age in their lives; group together people and things which a moment later have already disbanded, changed, continued along the course of their independent destinies.[11]

Either through death or growth, photographs and family albums become continual narratives in which a person can see his or her friends, relatives and self. Family albums also serve the purpose of linking younger and future family members to people and events that passed before their time. Sontag continues, "Through photographs, each

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[9] Novak, "Collected Visions," 15.
[10] Stewart, Susan, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 135.
[11] Sontag, *On Photography*, 70.

family constructs a portrait chronicle of itself--a portable kit of images that bears witness to its connectedness. It hardly matters what activities are being photographed so long as photographs get taken and are cherished."[12]

It could be argued, then, that this particular function of family photography, that of connecting the present with the family of the past, could be applied in several different manners. First, it can connect family members who have never known one another. A parent could simultaneously read the same expression on their child's face as they see on their grandparent's—similar hair or the same nose. Barthes states, "The photograph gives a little truth, on condition that it parcels out the body. But this truth is not that of the individual, who remains irreducible; it is the truth of lineage."[13] In this way, familial photography can function as a record of appearances and genetic attribution. People can also use family photographs to connect themselves to passed relatives they have once known in order to seek out more telling images of that person's particular character. Barthes used photographs to pinpoint the essence of his late mother. He looked not at her appearance solely, but sought out a more intrinsic quality, one that identified her distinct individual qualities in a photograph he refers to as *Winter Garden*. In essence, he was seeking out her signification, his own memories of her set aside—he was looking for something in photograph that revealed something underneath the immediate façade of the print.

In some cases, however, one need not look to photographs to solely connect with the dead souls of others, but could instead use these images to connect with past apparitions of oneself. Just as time removes the faces of family members around you, so

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[12] Sontag, *On Photography*, 9.
[13] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 103.

too does it extract from and annex an individual's appearance as it exists in the present. Perhaps this is one of the most interesting aspects of familial photography in general—its arbitrary but stalwart emphasis on the growth of children and shifts in their development. Albums can seemingly encapsulate whole lives. Often the earliest years of childhood are demarcated by the near constant presence of a camera. As the life expands outwards from youth, the stream of picture taking seems to slow, synchronizing with growth spurts, until the subject reaches adulthood. At this point, characteristically, the picture taking reaches a stand still until at one point or another, the subject again appears as a background figure in the photographs of their own children. I learned this from watching my own family grow up—seeing the positions of my siblings change in photographs as they each started families of their own.

Fluctuating physical traits can effortlessly be mapped through early childhood development with the aid of photographs, but when examining the changing characteristics of an adult, different factors come into play—subtle accessories, those beyond the face and body alone, can inform a viewer as to whom the subject of the photograph is at that time. Sontag states, "For us the more interesting abrasions are not of the stone, but of the flesh. Through photographs we follow in the most intimate, troubling way the reality of how people age."[14] Photographs document people's changing appearances and reveal developing tastes. Changing hair styles, clothing, and room décor can describe dissimilar states of mind, as conscious and independently motivated choices are made regarding not only physical appearance, but towards developing a distinct individual identity.

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[14] Sontag, *On Photography*, 70.

When reflecting on an image, the subject will probably not ruminate solely on the moment contained by the photograph, but will refer to a place outside of the photograph, the whole of what brought that subject to that moment in time as well as what succeeded it. The subjective viewpoint of the subject in relation to the photographer, as well as to other elements of the photographic composition, can be revealed by this descriptive recollection of the image. In addition to this, the contextualization of images within a family album provides additional details to the extensive narrative of family photography.

A family album can serve to cement roles that each character plays within a household. In general, one of the parents is probably out of the picture, functioning as the photographer, while the other may take a less prominent place in the photo, serving to display or conduct the behavior of the children for the image, or may be the subject of the photograph as well. In my own family albums, it is my father who generally serves as the photographer. My mother—who did not think of herself as photogenic—is also often eerily absent. The children sit in the foreground of most photographs, the majority of which, posed smiling and quiet, are generally unrevealing about the peculiar nuances of our family life. In truth, most of the images seem to resonate with the ideal of the middle class American family. It is only on occasion that a candid glimpse at our lives slips into the frame.

Much can be read into this particular posturing within my family albums. However, I think there is little about the focus on the children that varies from many of the family albums emerging from the same socio-economic family structure produced at the time. In the context of history, however, my family, like many others, was working relentlessly towards the portrayal of an image that was removed from the tedium and

truth of everyday life. In the period passing from the late seventies through the mid eighties, my family was in the crux of a dynamic change as my father, diagnosed with leukemia, was forced to retire from the U.S. Navy. The relatively few times that my father is within the frame of a photograph over that period, his face is often markedly distracted and tired. His presence in photographs seems to be remarkably insistent as well, his interaction with the children is often overly enthusiastic as if to mask himself in feigned self-abandon. My mother, by contrast, seems to shy away from the lens even more adamantly unable to hide her true emotions. Through the subjective lens of memory, I can note that my family life is dissolving rapidly over a seven-year period—the banal accomplishments of the children reigning more and more supreme until eventually my father disappears from the frame entirely.

CHAPTER TWO: SHARED HALLUCINATIONS[15]

> For an experienced event is finite—at any rate, confined to one sphere of experience; a remembered event is infinite, because it is only a key to everything that happened before and after it.
>
> Walter Benjamin[16]

A snapshot, often an unintentional marvel, can reveal all of the complex, dynamic undercurrents of the image in a way that requires little explanation. However, when viewing these pictures with someone who was present at the time of the visual arrest, or who is somehow intrinsically linked to the image at hand, a much different experience comes into play. The photo solicits a chronicle of recollection, allowing the photographer or subject to explain details surrounding the photograph. There is no surrogacy of word for image or image for word, but instead a symbiotic relationship is formed between the two. This is a relationship wherein each one validates the other by providing details that it cannot offer on its own.

Whether or not a person was the photographer or the photographed, their presence at the moment of photographic capture grants them the status of narrator to the events surrounding the image. Regarding a photograph of yourself becomes something much different than possessing a record of an event. It is like holding a single paged story that

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[15] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 115.
[16] Benjamin, Walter, "The Penelope Work of Forgetting," in *The Treasure Chests of Mnemosyne*, Uwe Fleckner ed., (Dresden:Verlag der Kunst, 1998) 256.

either you or someone around you holds the details to. Engaging with and looking at the photo becomes a subconscious act of recounting details that have been cropped out of the image. The presumed non-fiction a photograph depicts is automatically accompanied by the relatively fictive or subjective recollection of the experience underlying the image itself, if a memory of said event has been retained. That is to say that in the linguistic description, details are added to or altered by personal memory that are visually non-existent within the photograph but are simultaneously corroborated by the facts of the image itself. Barthes writes about the discrepancy between language and photography:

> … Language is, by nature, fictional; the attempt to render language unfictional requires an enormous apparatus of measurements: we convoke logic, or, lacking that, sworn oath; but the photograph is indifferent to all intermediaries: it does not invent; it is authentication itself…[17]

From Barthes' perspective, the photograph is not reliant on language to justify it, but the story requires the image for its own substantiation. From my perspective, however, this is precisely where the co-dependence of memory and photography becomes cemented. One does not replace the necessity of the other, but instead builds the credibility inherent to both.

On the *Collected Visions* website, artist Lorie Novak has amassed a compendium of family photographs.[18] These photographs are arranged into linked "albums" that are related by theme, subject, or period, as well as other criteria. The collection of this website is not one that is personally curated by Novak, nor is she the sole source of the pictures. Instead, contributors who provide all of the necessary information for cataloging the photographs add submissions to the site. In addition to supplying the

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[17] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 87.
[18] "Collected Visions," Lorie Novak, http://cvisions.cat.nyu.edu/mantle/index.html, accessed February 2011.

photos, each contributor also submits the background information necessary for understanding the photograph. This information can either detail the events surrounding the shutter release or, in many cases, can explore the person's experience with that photograph as a stimulus for other memories that aren't necessarily present in the image. These brief essays propose ways that photographs can invoke memory.

Novak provides a forum for viewers to reflect on photographs emerging from households other than their own that are nevertheless suggestive of personal memories. This phenomenon seems to intimate a kind of universal language that spreads itself over all types of family snapshots, wherein we are compelled as viewers to seek out connections between our own lives and those of others. Once removed from the dialogue of personal experience, these images still have significance in spite of visual dissimilarities between the depicted subjects and those in one's own family album. The essays establish each contributor's connection to their own images and those provided by others. This suggests a definite interplay between language and photography, wherein the photograph is perpetually subject to interjections of subjective memory.

Barthes asserts that a photograph is not, under any circumstance, a memory.[19] He argues instead that the photograph functions against reminiscence, as if it can be nothing more than what it is, a factual description of the appearance of a moment unadulterated by all of the illogical lapses of personal experience. In other words, while a photograph is a reflection of reality, it cannot represent a reflection of the mind. A website such as Novak's, however, indicates how the snapshot can stimulate dialogue outside of the representational qualities of the photograph. A snapshot, under certain circumstances, can come to replace or displace memory, and under other circumstances create memory.

[19] Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* 91.

In truth, this strange power of the photograph is what makes it the most evocative. As we examine its surface, we are transported into the grasp of another time, regardless of what the photo actually depicts. This is the power of nostalgia and memory, which, while not directly encoded in the medium, seem to conspire closely with photography.

While the photograph seems to have an authoritative lean towards describing the visual facets of an event, it cannot necessarily be separated from the experience that accompanies it until all of those who can identify that event have been separated from the image. While most family photographs can be grouped into homogenous categories of similar occasions, each stands as a testament to that particular set of circumstances unfolding to make the photograph look exactly as it does. A photograph and, in truth, a family album come to serve as documents proving events, recording participants, and detailing notes. While the narratives spread through the covers of each family's particular chronicle, they stand to not only connect the members of the family together in the album, but also to relate those individuals of the past to those of the present and future. The photographs serve as a metaphorical bridge to events that have been lived, but that are distanced over time. Whether or not a memory is retained of an experience, the photographs and albums prove that at one point in the past, "*the thing has been here*."[20]

An album serves to transport a person to experiences that they may not remember having lived through or that seemed unimportant at the time. The adult version of the child posed in front of the cake can recognize and identify the details of the celebration while maintaining no recollection of the event. In truth, many situations that do not

[20] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*. 77.

possess memorable qualities are captured by photography. Barthes describes not remembering the particular circumstances of a photograph:

> One day I received from a photographer a picture of myself which I could not remember being taken, for all my efforts... And yet, *because this was a photograph,* I could not deny that I had been *there* (even if I did not know *where*)… I went to the photographer's show as to a police investigation, to learn at last what I no longer knew about myself.[21]

In this scenario, the picture informs the viewer of a past that had been forgotten or simply not retained, but that could not be remonstrated due to the nature of its origin. It is the last statement that resonates most clearly for me, and it is here that I think photography can move to create memory. If a person cannot deny his presence in a moment that they have no recollection of, then it seems that it is here that memory is created by photography. The picture, because it does not invent what it documents, injects the image of an experience into a person's consciousness. Acting like a repressed memory, a person is forced to come to terms with this new amalgamation of information.

In the paintings I have made for *Confabulation*, my intent was to exploit this phenomenon as the source for my imagery. I used photographs of events that I could not directly recall. I can describe the moment through hearsay, or can identify the participants within the frame and venture an approximate guess about the time and place. My memory is stimulated by the information conveyed by the photo and, simultaneously, becomes more evocative of the relationship between myself to photo rather than myself to event. I chose this type of image because I was interested in surrounding myself with the alien parts of my own life. In the manner that Barthes described, I was interested to learn what I no longer knew about myself. Since the photographic documentation of my existence has tapered off with my induction into adulthood, I was forced to turn to

[21] Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* 85.

childhood. I noticed an extreme concentration of images prior to my father's death, and since I cannot remember much of the time before he was gone—nor do I necessarily remember him—this was where I focused my study. I began to explore images of my father and myself as well as the rare appearances of my mother. In a sense, what motivated me the most was to examine how much the photographs have informed my memory and, in contrast, how my current perception of my personal history has infused the photographs with new meaning.

CHAPTER THREE: OBJECTS OF LONGING

> …Neither image nor reality, a new being, really: a reality one can no longer touch.
>
> Roland Barthes[22]

Photographs function as representations of distance. Similarly to the mass produced souvenir, these images operate as a surrogate for experience. They are metonymic objects that represent a connection once had between the subject and the places he has gone, now separated by physical and chronological distance. All photographs can function in this way, since they are not lived experience but documents of it. The photo represents authentic experience through its existence in the present in correlation with the memory that accompanies it. Nostalgia is the driving force behind this metonymy. It is as if a person needs the image or souvenir to maintain a connection to that place or time. Susan Stewart states, "As experience is increasingly mediated and abstracted, the relation of the body to the phenomenological world is replaced by the nostalgic myth of contact and presence."[23] The photograph or the souvenir aligns that person to things they can no longer see. These objects suspend a bridge between the past and the present and both objects give the person something that can be held in a

[22] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 115.
[23] Stewart, *On Longing*, 133.

relationship to the body that can be visually contained. The photograph serves as a tangible representation of an experience that has passed.

The photograph as an object has perceivable boundaries that are intimate, but generalized enough within the fulcrum of experience that they can be expanded upon in order to apply personally within the imagination. Susan Stewart states that this relationship to the body—the flattening and shrinking of mass into this miniature symbol of experience—is precisely what endows the photograph with importance as long as someone who has a connection to that image beholds it. Without its relationship to the present, with no one to identify faces or places, the content becomes abstracted and virtually meaningless. Unless the photograph is of particular aesthetic appeal, or possesses qualities of subjective interest, the snapshot is reliant on memory for its identification and signification. Stewart states, "The souvenir is destined to be forgotten; its tragedy lies in the death of memory, the tragedy of all autobiography and the simultaneous erasure of the autograph."[24] In the same way, knowledge of the family snapshot dwindles as time hurls into the future.

My relationship to the images in my family album is not the same as the relationships held by my mother or siblings. As we proceed towards the future, it is predictable that eventually, in a generation's time, no one will be able to directly recall any of the events depicted in our photographs. A face may be recognized here and there, but identities will probably be skimmed over in favor of examining distant likenesses and distinct historical differences. What will remain is a grouping of photographs that were seemingly significant enough to take, but that are stylistically and visually similar to many other photographs taken during the same period. The viewer will see record of

[24]Stewart, *On Longing,* 145.

smiles and poses that are analogous to the smiles and poses of the present. At this point, the photographs will have moved entirely from being photographs of experience to simply being photographic objects. The metonymic incantation they once possessed will have dissolved because the images no longer elicit the narrative displaced over time. The promise of reunion between memory and object is removed and, "Without marking, all ancestors become abstractions, losing their proper names; all family trips become the same trip--the formal garden, the waterfall, the picnic site, the undifferentiated sea become attributes of every country."[25] This is the promise that family photography will always keep, that while something was once here, it is no longer.

[25]Stewart, *On Longing,* 137.

CHAPTER FOUR: PAINTING FROM PHOTOGRAPHY

> Photography has, or will eventually, negate much painting--for which the painter should be deeply grateful.
>
> Edward Weston[26]

Once the first photographic print was developed in the early nineteenth century, a strange relationship began to form between painting and photography. While several optical devices had purportedly been the secret of success for many painters prior to the 1830s—i.e., the camera obscura—none had left behind so physical a trace of the support that could be provided to painters as those supplied by the photographic print. What had once been the duty of the painter's imagination and hand—to provide illusionistic visions that could be returned to again and again—was soon to be displaced by a method that was much more practical, reliable, and progressively accessible to every one. Photography did not replace painting, as many critics thought it would, but was instead adopted by many painters as an allowance of certain freedoms that had previously been inconceivable. The technology was quickly brought into the studios of Delacroix, Ingres, and Courbet as an accelerated means to an end. Difficult poses could be preserved and kept readily accessible at all times. Natural phenomena that had been undetectable to the human eye were now documented through the trials of Muybridge and other photographers. Painting became freed, in essence, to explore the frontiers of its own

[26] Sontag, *On Photography*, 145.

medium because it was no longer held hostage to the representation and illusion. It was now able to explore the limits of expression and material, which subsequently hastened the inception of Modernism in the Twentieth Century.

The role of painting changed drastically in this time. Because painters no longer had to focus on figurative imagery, they were enabled to examine different levels of content through their medium. Representation no longer dealt with the subject alone, but explored how the material could be used in order to achieve different levels of meaning. Those painters who retained an interest in figurative work often maintained a close relationship with photography that both exploited the capabilities of a camera and pointed fingers at the new way of seeing that was evolving close by. The exponential expansion of visual vocabulary provided by photographs was leaking into the world of the painted picture. Sontag states:

> The instability of nineteenth century painting's strictly representational achievements is most clearly demonstrated by the fate of portraiture, which came more and more to be about painting itself rather than about sitters--and eventually ceased to interest most ambitious painters with such namable recent exceptions as Francis Bacon and Warhol, who borrow lavishly from photographic imagery.[27]

Bacon and Warhol were hijacking icons from the wider cultural consciousness to supply the subjects for their work but were using the photograph as a catalyst to examine content that was separate from their source. It could be argued that both of them were examining how images enter our consciousness, either on a global scale of mass production or the subconscious affects such an image can create, but neither Warhol nor Bacon would have substantiated that their work was directly about photography.

Gerhard Richter is another artist that emerged in the nineteen sixties who also used photography predominantly within the creation of his paintings. However, Richter

[27] Sontag, *On Photography*, 94.

was not merely using the print to work from as a source. Instead, Richer was intent on examining the how the visual attributes of photography could be applied towards painting, and how that would affect a viewer's perception of the image. His early exhibits featured collections of photo-based paintings that were intent on suggesting qualities of realism, but were systematically blurred in a manner that suggested the camera, but was actually an action of the artist during the process of painting. The sources for his paintings are often quite disparate from the final product; the paintings themselves often having an overall impression that is more rooted in the foibles of a camera than the original image itself.[28]

In *Woman Descending a Staircase*, Richter uses his liberties as a painter to invent many details not present in the photographic source (Plates 1 and 2). In addition to altering the overall value structure and changing the physical setting for the human subject, Richter actually increases the effect of the blur significantly. What results is a painting of a subject that is recognizable with a determined sense of realism, but one that is also compelling in how it is eluding its own identification. Richter was interested in examining the authenticity and objectivity that is inherently suggested by the photograph and its relationship to painting.[29] His work asserts itself as a sort of intermediary between two parallel worlds of image making. He states:

> As far as the surface is concerned—oil on canvas conventionally applied—my pictures have little to do with the original photo. They are totally painting…. On the other hand, they are so like the photograph that the thing that distinguishes the photo from all other images remains intact.[30]

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[28] Elger, Dietmar, *Gerhard Richter: A Life in Painting,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002) 85.
[29] Ibid, 83.
[30] Ibid, 88.

The work was clearly engaged with both photography and painting but showed its allegiance only through one used as a medium for depicting the other.

The blurring that Richter capitalizes upon functions in many ways within the paintings. It does seem to grant a particular air of authenticity to the paintings, in that they are clearly referencing a certain type of visual document that is granted the "this has been" quality that Barthes esteems. In other ways, the blur is also suggestive of a sort of ephemerality, or impermanence of vision, to which the photograph is the only cessation. As Richter never allows for focus on the subject—rather the viewer must reflect on disparity between painted surface and photographic perception—he is creating an insurmountable distance between the photograph, the subject, and the viewer. He does not allow the viewer to concentrate on minimal detail, instead presenting a passing flurry of implied light and movement. This is why the paintings function like intermediaries from photography—ghostly apparitions from the beyond the grave. As is the fate of much photography over time, identities are seemingly lost within the paintings. Richter does not paint celebrity but instead paints photographs that are destined to be lost, images that are inconsequential. In doing so, he changes photographs from being visually mediocre into paintings that traditionally bear a heightened sense of permanence and importance. Dietmar Elger states:

> It is the norm for private snapshots to disappear from family albums or for images from the public media to pass quickly into obscurity; this is our expectation. Richter's paintings, however, anchor such ephemeral images into our collective memory.[31]

Amongst contemporary painters, Richter's influence is undeniable. The photograph has come to bear resonate significantly in Postmodern painting. Artists such

[31] Elger, *Gerhard Richter: A Life in Painting,* 89.

as David Salle, Luc Tuymans, and Elizabeth Peyton all pull liberally from photographic imagery. Previously held predilections towards hiding the photographic reference have been replaced with an active identification between painting and photo. Now it seems that the camera simply provides another way of seeing that is acceptable and readily acknowledged. As catalogs of photos are infinitely expanding by the minute, it seems that the aesthetic influence of the photograph on contemporary painting is a feature that will remain. While the approaches used by each of the above-mentioned painters are meant to achieve different ends, all provoke an investigation of how we accumulate and attach meaning to pictures.

The implied intimacy that Peyton infuses into her small and almost sensory paintings is quite different than the cold irony of Tuymans'. The difference is supported by the shifts in scale between the works of the two painters as well as their particular application of color. Peyton's work saturates itself in a selective and somewhat naïve use of jewel-like colors, while Tuymans reduces his imagery to a blaring, stark monochrome. Both artists rely on a particular economy of paint in favor of expression, but to dissimilar ends. Both Peyton and Tuymans seem to work as quickly as imagery is being produced; in the true spirit of the present media age, they gather and interpret as many pictures as possible.

Other painters have situated themselves more directly at the intersection of photographically derived imagery and the potential of representation presented by painting. Michaël Borremans, in particular, seems to show a distinct interest in how imagery that is obviously tied to a photographic route can be halted and moved to a wholly different system of representation. In *Four Fairies*, 2003, Borremans paints four

women emerging from a black rectangular pool suspended slightly diagonally across the midsection of the canvas (Plate 3). Beneath the pool, which is a flat, two-dimensional plane perpendicular to the canvas, the bottom halves of the women are absent. It is as if a magic trick has been performed while the viewer is watching. The trick itself lay in that the illusion of the women has been revealed quite plainly as the construction of an image with paint, it is one that can be perpetuated or dispelled according to artist's desire. Borremans uses the language of the photograph to let the viewer in and, just as quickly, let them out into a perplexing cycle of absurdity. The figures on the canvas are equally as mesmerized by the split in plane, the shift in language. He seems to be interested in reminding the photograph that it is actually painting and that painting has the potential to re-author the real into something quite extraordinary. This is the overlap that painting has with language; it has an innate ability to write convincing fiction, especially when coupled with photographic imagery.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONFABULATION

> What distinguishes confabulation from lying is that there is typically no intent to deceive and the patient is unaware of falsehoods. It is an "honest lying."
>
> Morris Moscovitch[32]

It has been my goal in the first three chapters to examine the multi-faceted relationship that photography has with memory. At times, the two appear closely related, one serving to either replicate the other or at least to support it. Other moments seem to indicate the more divergent relationship between the two, in Barthes' words, when photography becomes a "counter-memory." I have meandered through this examination in order to elucidate a more proximal stance regarding how I think the two are functioning within my work. I have also, at this point, provided a brief examination of how photography has been used in conjunction with painting. I have done this through an introduction to a select group of historical and contemporary painters who have actively worked from photographic sources that subsequently informed content within their work. At this point, I will begin to examine the conception and culmination of group of paintings entitled *Confabulation*.

Beginning in the fall of 2010, I began painting a group of large oil paintings that utilized my own family snapshots as a primary subject. The resulting five paintings, each

[32] Moscovitch, Morris, "Confabulation," in *Memory Disorders*, Daniel Schacter ed., (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 226.

four feet square, are created from portions of family photographs that are no larger than two inches square. While my initial selection was drawn from a wide variety of photographs that represented varying degrees of memory clarity, the final body of work has been made from images that I have virtually no memory of; those images where my memory exists entirely in my relationship to the photograph as opposed to the event.

Memory on a personal level is incredibly subjective; details are omitted while others are emphasized depending on the personal perception of the events at hand. This is an ongoing process that continues to change as distance between person and event is accumulated. This selectivity can be likened to the photographer's process, and again is similar to how moments are included and excluded within a family album. In essence, in both the brain and the photograph, there is a tendency to seek out the most important images and to pinpoint the essence of a thing or event. There is also, however, a crucial difference; the photograph locks the position of subjects in time and is inclusive of potentially arbitrary detail other than the subject at hand, while the brain continues to expand and explore what it retains through memory, changing details a little with every recurrence of it.[33] While a photograph becomes an objective flattening of an uncontrolled group of objects onto a singular space, the mind will selectively choose from those items those that are seemingly the most important.[34] The brain will not necessarily retain the visual strata of each object, but will have a combination of multi-sensory and emotional perceptions regarding what it preserves. While the photograph provides a physical image of the irrefutable evidence of visual existence, the memory can be refuted and is by no means physical, but is ethereal and contained within the limits of the mind's capacity,

[33] Loftus, "The Reality of Illusory Memories," 49
[34] Krakauer, Simon, "Memory Images," from *The Treasure Chests of Mnemosyne*. Fleckner Sarkis ed., (Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1998) 238.

that is, until it is linguistically expressed and details are filled in for continuity and words are assigned to things that are potentially indescribable.

Perhaps my choice to create a body of work concerning memory that uses photography as subject seems rather obvious. In truth, it is the polarizing relationship between the two that I find the most intriguing, in that they simultaneously support and deflect the existence of the other like magnets that pull together when introduced in one position but repel when turned about. This tenuous relationship could not be depicted by one (memory and language), or the other (photography), but instead required examination through another means entirely.

It should be stated that while the work is concerned with photography and memory, it approaches photography as a medium of memory and both become subject, not necessarily form. I am interested in how photography elicits and creates memory, and how this is contingent on the proximity of the object to person. A photograph is a concrete object that accurately logs the spatial associations between things in the past. The mind works with this object in recalling experience that is triggered by it, but may not be present within it. In order to engage with the full spectrum of this relationship, I thought it best to work with a medium that is separate from both. Painting would allow for subjectivity to mingle with illusions of objectivity. These are paintings that embrace the visual language that photography has created and use it as a source in order to gain from the trust that is placed in it as a way of seeing.

These paintings present a view into the world as a camera presents it. Short depth of field, blur, spectral highlights, and inaccurate colorcast have been highlighted and exploited within the paintings. While there is obvious abstraction within each painting,

some reference towards photo-realistic representation has been preserved. Sontag states that photography can never really be more than a recapitulation of the visual; a reflection of a subject that will never be able to transcend itself once captured.[35] Painting can afford this opportunity by capitalizing both in the mimicry of the visual: but with the simultaneous reflection beneath the surface of the subject. The medium works like memory in that its subject is always changing; some areas gather more attention, more material, while others are reduced to the minimal detail. At points, painting is contingent on the provision of components that are not present in reality at all, which can work towards the construction of something that is removed from representation altogether. It requires a type of alchemy between material and perception, hand and mind, and science and mystery. The person behind the curtain of all of this, however, is the painter. The painter engages with this concoction of choices, striving to depict her particular interpretation of the subject. Sontag again:

> While a painting, even one that meets the photographic standards of resemblance, is never more than a stating of an interpretation, a photograph is never less than the registering of an emanation (light waves reflected by objects)--a material vestige of its subject in a way that no painting can be.[36]

When the painter turns to this subject—this material vestige—he must engage not only with an altered structure of vision, but must be able to vacillate both above and below the surface of the photo to gather information. It may be necessary to examine subject, subject in relation to camera, photographer in relation to subject, photographic object, and the viewer's or artist's particular proximity to all of these things. It is then that an assessment can be made as to where interpretation may develop.

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[35] Sontag, Susan, *On Photography*, 95.
[36] Ibid. 154.

In my case, I was fascinated by the roles played out around the camera by my father, mother, and I. I began to gravitate towards pictures my parents had taken of each other. Their relationship with one another has had a strong impact on my adult life. For this reason, four of the five paintings included in this exhibition feature one or the other of my parents as subject. I was interested to look through the print as if it was myself looking through the camera at the other—to see through their eyes, to hear the conversation surrounding the moment, to feel whatever it was that possessed them to close the shutter at that point. I wanted to exist at simultaneous endpoints of the distance that separated me from that moment, to experience both the origin and the future. I wanted to disintegrate every now that had occurred between the present and then. I felt as Barthes' describes when he recounts Sontag:

> From a real body, which was there, proceed reductions which ultimately touch me, who am here; the duration of the transmission is insignificant; the photograph of the missing being, as Sontag says, will touch me like the delayed rays of a star.[37]

This statement provided me with an entrance to the photographs. I recognized my position in the future of these photographs, with all of the knowledge of how events would unfold, looking back onto faces that were either unaware or just beginning to understand the gravity that the next few years had in store for them. Through painting, I had the opportunity to work from both sides of the print, the present and the past. I could never escape from the fact that that all the work I was doing was primarily borne from my personal speculation and invention.

I began to think more and more about the similarity in physical distance to distance in time, as with the light travelling from a star to Earth. The first two paintings I

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[37] Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* 81.

began to work with were isolated because I was attracted to the patterning of spectral highlights across both prints. The camera has a way of perceiving bright light that is completely separate from how humans see the same light with the bare eye. The emulsion is burned from the film leaving blank white spots with halos on the prints. In one image, I stand with my arm outstretched holding a sparkler as far away from my body as possible, looking moderately horrified (Plate 4). The second image is my father washing his truck, his face being oddly overexposed and blurred, the highlights on his camper shell and truck bed becoming a pattern of high values speckled across the print (Plate 5). Both have what are essentially constellations of spectral highlights that spread across the picture plane. Once I had cropped the images, both featured a forearm reaching in towards the center of the painting opposite ends if the paintings were viewed next to one another. The forearm was the highest point of focus in both pictures; one belonged to myself as subject, one to my father, and we were reaching towards each other.

This became a crucial moment in developing the arguments that I would use to support this work. Prior to that point, I had not fully understood what my intentions were. Here were two photographed subjects that were on either ends of the historical spectrum dividing that image. The present me making contact with the past and the passed away through medium; from photograph to painting, it was like one world contacting another, the living contacting the dead. I began to fantasize about an invented mysticism, one that could imbue those spectral highlight constellations with a spiritual meaning that could be translated and read as if through astrology. It was the same type of compulsion that has long compelled humans to associate inexplicable phenomenon with

some kind of spiritual value. For this reason, the paintings bear the titles *Constellation* and *Compass* (Plates 6 and 7).

I can say that I know little about most of these photographs and how they came to be taken. Little histories have been provided for me here and there. One was captured on my parents' second date, but that story later changed to a point much later in their relationship (Plate 8). The image of my father washing his truck is simply captioned by my mother as being "your father doing his favorite thing." Sometimes, the facts of the snapshot can be narrowed, identifying a non-specific place or time within a certain span of years: i.e., the image of the dog in *Canis Minor* was taken between 1982 to 1983 and was probably taken in Maine because the dog died at the end of our time there. Historical detail should be set aside though because, in actuality, it is somewhat irrelevant. These paintings are more about what evolves after they are made: the experience of the painter with the photo and her memory looks towards the past but the experience of the viewer with the painting emerges in the future.

CHAPTER SIX: THE WORK

> The bad memoirist re-touches his past, and the result is a blue-tinted or pink-shaded photograph taken by a stranger to console sentimental bereavement. The good memoirist, on the other hand, does his best to preserve the utmost truth of the detail. One of the ways he achieves his intent is to find the right spot on his canvas for placing the right patch of remembered color.
>
> Vladimir Nabokov[38]

This quote probably best summarizes my approach to transforming my family photographs into paintings. While I am often overtly concerned with preserving certain photographic qualities—because I am painting my memories of the photographs rather than the events—I am often making choices within the paintings that are intrinsically involved with rewriting the image to fit those subjects that I do remember, or think I remember. The paintings are therefore serving to fill in gaps of information between my past and present selves, the photographic document, and my perceived as well as my invented past. Instead of relying on the photo alone, I have meandered through my memories involving the settings and subjects of the photographs. Some of these exist into the present day, including myself, and so my reflection within the imagery involves a wide scope of experience with the subject both through the image and outside of it. All of this has come into play in defining how I have chosen to construct the final paintings.

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[38] Nabokov, Vladimir. "The past is a constant accumulation of images." *The Treasure Chests of Mnemosyne*. Uwe Fleckner ed.. 284.

To give a brief overview, *Confabulation* consists of five oil paintings on wood panel. For the most part, the dimensions are the same for all of the paintings, each measuring four feet square. All paintings have retained a square format in order to refer back to their photographic origin. The square images are more similar to earlier forms of commercial prints such as the Polaroid. I was drawn to the square at first because I feel it requires a more complex compositional approach and seems to be more common within photography than in painting. The frames behind the paintings are also shallower than is typical for work of this size, leaving the final depth of all of the works at little more than an inch. This choice was not one that was particularly informed at the outset, but has since grown on me as a decision that may have been intuitive, because the paintings sit close to the gallery walls, not as thin as paper, but possessing an objecthood that is slight enough to mimic the photo upon album pages. As an album represents an extended narrative of family life, so too does this group of paintings become, in essence, an album.

In general, the paintings are flat, with an extremely low development of impasto in few key points. I have been particularly driven towards developing a heightened material quality in the areas where light has the most insistent presence in the photographs. Those areas that have been overexposed or that are speckled with spectral highlights often have the thickest paint application. When light is particularly overt in a photograph, it seems to take over the image, calling attention to the phenomenon that has allowed this documentation to take place. In the places where light has burned out details of the event, the absence is granted a physical presence. It is as if the light becomes an obstacle that prevents all of the details from being recorded in addition to its enabling the image to be captured in the first place, serving a kind of dualistic give and take. I found

that my particular attraction to the effects of light in the final print was a key point in determining titles for three of the works as well.

In particular, *Constellation* (Plate 6), *Compass* (Plate 7), and *Canis Minor* (Plate 9) are all given titles based in astronomy. I was drawn towards naming these paintings for constellations because I am attracted to the idea of arbitrarily attaching a meaning to or looking for a pattern in something that is a somewhat random physical arrangement. It is the point where astronomy gets confused with astrology, where the universe moves from being purely physical to speculatively spiritual because it is something that you cannot directly study, but perceive from afar. It is this distance between man and the star, between past and present, between photograph and now, that continued to resonate for me throughout the completion of these paintings.

Still, I wanted to preserve that distance to some extent. The surface of the paintings has been kept insistently flat. Spatial reference is established in the paintings, but is most commonly generated through blur and an impression of short depth of field rather than the more conventional approaches used by illusionistic painting. Atmospheric perspective is used, but the space is often so compressed that it does not have any distinguishable presence. Rather than developing a system of perspective that would produce a convincing recession into space, I have relied on the fact that the space I am initially examining is one that is two-dimensional to begin with. The surface of the works, for the most part, is hardened into a singular glossy plane, establishing a clear wall between the viewer and an imagined entry into this space.

Dense areas of shadows become abstract forms upon the picture plane, they are defined shapes rather than an absence of light as in *Canis Minor* (Plate 9) where the

painting is divided diagonally in half between foreground and background by a large shadow that culminates in my mother's face in the upper-right corner. This also occurs in *Compass* (Plate 7) where most of the panel is covered in a deep, warm black out from which the highlighted objects within the painting seem to protrude from or sit on top of. These paintings are demonstrably flat to preserve that distance between photograph and real space. It explores the lyrical abstraction that a photograph can create by using light to translate three into two dimensions, and how this translation is changed when echoed in the medium of paint. In *Oracle* (Plate 10), I have overemphasized this idea; the subject's head levels out almost completely parallel with the curtains. While her face has a slightly heightened sense of modeling, it seems to lie upon the same plane as the background or even recede into it.

All of the source photos have a common feature of familial photography holding them together. Four of the original photos are frontally posed, with the subjects looking directly at the photographer, and as an aftereffect, they are also looking directly at the viewer. During the cropping process, I have made choices regarding how to use this familiar posing within each of the works in order to create a heightened sense of ambiguity in the paintings. I have removed these images from the conventional way of seeing them; either by removing the human subject from the central most position upon the picture plane as in *Oracle* and *Compass*, or by removing the face from the frame either partially or entirely as in *Canis Minor* and *Constellation.* By doing so, the images become as much about what is going on beyond the frame as what is retained inside the picture plane. This is a quality that is already inherent to photography, in that it is a small slice of a moment in time, but I am taking an even smaller slice that is more decisively

designed. The viewer is given a sense that these things have been removed from their original context, to some extent, by the awkwardness of how each human subject is placed compositionally. They are placed upon equal ground with the backgrounds of the images as in *Canis Minor*. In other cases, they are subordinated to what would otherwise be viewed as superfluous detail; the positioning of the subject in *Oracle* is pushed deep into the left side of the image, leaving two thirds of the image to be occupied by the curtain and wall as if to suggest that they bear equal if not more importance than the subject.

Barthes comments on this type of posed image, "For the Photograph has this power—which it is increasingly losing, the frontal pose being the most often considered archaic nowadays--of looking me *straight in the eye*...".[39] He continues to expand on this idea, stating that this is a quality that cinematic film cannot possess because the viewer is suspended in a fiction, which as stated previously, Barthes believed to be the antithesis of the purpose that photography served. I am driven more in the creation of a fiction then. By removing these images from this stylistic model, I am heightening the importance of parts of the image that were only arbitrarily present in the photo due to their proximity to the primary subject. Particularly in *Constellation*, my efforts to remove the painting from the original posed photograph—to eliminate the identity of the subjects by reducing their presence down to a few arms, legs, and shadows—has contributed to the construction of mysterious and terrifying image rather than the staged and moderately humorous image of myself standing stiffly with a sparkler at arms length (Plates 4 and 6). This painting activates the other paintings insofar that there must be a continual realignment within the spectrum of what details I have chosen to retain and those I have chosen to leave out.

[39] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 111.

Ultimately, the viewer will gain the sense that there is some kind of narrative that is working within each of the individual paintings as well as throughout the series. There are repeated compositional structures utilized within each of the paintings. Strong diagonal divisions occur across the planes of three of the paintings, as well as implied lines pointed out by arms or shadows. Also, there is a friction created between areas that have been composed to be predominantly geometric and those that use overtly organic forms. All of these devices can be seen as pointing or directing within each singular picture plane, but also to other paintings in the group. Some subjects are repeated across different images, such as my mother's presence in both *Oracle* and *Canis Minor*, and, also, when light itself becomes a subject in *Constellation* and *Compass*. Another unifying structure within the work is a dramatic use of saturated color as a component of atmospheric setting for each of the works. While the other paintings seem particularly warm in contrast to the green hues of *Canis Minor*, one might want to take into consideration that the divergence from the ultimately predominant color structure could be hinting towards a different mood or a changed relationship that this painting possesses that the others may not. It fits only because it is so utterly divergent because it breaks from the structure of the others in order to grant a new perspective, if only through color. Color, composition, and subject repetition, therefore, all play integral roles in unfolding the narrative for the viewer.

At this point, I would like to briefly expand on the content, subject, and formal qualities developed within each painting individually. To do so, I will give a brief examination into the background of each image. This background will include an exploration of a few of the biographical details surrounding the image, why I chose it and

how I worked towards reinterpreting the photograph within the painting process. I will examine the paintings chronologically in respect to the order of which I painted them.

Constellation

This painting was the first completed in this body of work (Plate 6). Ironically, the photograph the imagery is extracted from is the last photo taken among those I have chosen (Plate 4). The photograph was taken in roughly 1985 and was most likely taken on the Fourth of July. In the initial image, my sister and I stand stiffly on the driveway. The quality of the image is poor and out of focus probably due to the extreme variance between the light of the fireworks and the darkness around us. I chose the sparkler as my focal point in the painting and wanted for it and the surrounding smoke to consume the majority of the picture plane. This would cause the human subjects in the painting to become accomplices to the firework rather than it being produced by them. In my early attempts at describing the photograph in writing, I discussed reading the image based upon my body posture. In the photo, I have leaned as far away from the flame as possible and from this I gather that I felt a great sense of fear holding the sparking object. I do not look particularly happy in the photograph, just awkwardly standing there out of what appears to be obligation.

For the painting, however, I chose to remove these details, my face and my posture, because I felt they were too revealing about the nature of the image. Instead, I chose to focus purely on the development of light, color, and smoke around the sparkler, trying to infuse in it the sense of fear or wonder that I have identified myself as having

felt. I wanted to change this ordinary experience into one that carries a peculiar sense of awe. The sparkler becomes a swirling miasma, but is simultaneously still a representation of a sparkler being held on a suburban driveway. In the upper-right corner, one can see fence planks developed in deep shadow, dully reflecting the light of the sparkler. Below this, a strong shadow with human qualities juts diagonally towards the center of the composition. The upper right features a child's frame from the chest down, the front of the white night gown features red spots—strawberries, I think—that echo the spectral highlights beneath them. This body, in the flattened space of the painting, could almost be standing upon an arm that protrudes from the right edge of the work, two thirds of the way down from the top. This arm holds the sparkler around which the rest of the painting seems to orbit. Once I had completed positioning everything on the picture plane according to the regiment laid out within the photograph, I left the original image and began to invent. I brightened the colors and brought the smoke up to higher value than was apparent in the photo, shadows were deepened and sharpened, and bodies were dissolved into of the atmosphere all in order to increase the desired visual drama.

Constellation became a much different image than that contained within the photograph. Everything in the painting gravitates around this cloud of light and smoke, the reality of which is so brief and small of a moment that it could not possibly have the same effect as it does in the painting. Ultimately, it is interesting, because I think that the painting is really quite still, but it reflects something that is completely fleeting and dynamic, that is only secondary, but burns its negative into the eyes for a few minutes following. By the time it is happening, it is already over. It is interesting too because I

think that no matter how hard a person tried they could not remember all of the particular details of this experience—the photo being taken and the position of all the sparks in the air—because it becomes part of a continuum of all other experiences had like this, just one part of all that represents the Fourth of July. There was nothing particularly stunning about that night, or about that photograph, but by shifting the way it is being presented, the image makes a completely different impression—one that is both familiar and strange.

Compass

Compass became an integral component to understanding why I was making this body of work (Plate 7). I was so drawn to the original image because I was compelled by the ghostly reflection of my father in the side of the truck. I remember the truck very clearly but unfortunately I do not remember my father nearly as well. I believe the photo was taken shortly after my birth. In the photo, the full sense of the landscape and house are present and his body and the truck are also seen in full (Plate 5). This photo, too, is quite blurry. While the details of his face are barely distinguishable, he is smiling at the photographer, my mother. The look that he gives the camera, and incidentally the photographer, is clearly one that is intimate and satisfied. Even through the blur, I can decipher this. I determine that this photograph was taken shortly before he knew he was sick. However, I don't know how much of this is speculation or emerging from my own desire for that look to be present. In the end, however, I decide not to exclude his face

because I want it to be there as a foil to the reflection. He is simultaneously present, and present as a ghostly reflection of himself. He is also, ultimately, a ghost in the present.

I want the reflection to create a conundrum within the painting because while in the photograph it is clear that it comes from my father, in the painting it is not. It is him and not him, because in the reflection, his body is breaking apart. His head has separated from his torso and the edges of the reflection are dissolving into the side of the truck. The resemblance of the reflection to the subject, my father, in the left lower portion of the picture plane is only somewhat reminiscent. The mirrored version of the subject comes conspicuously close to looking more like myself. As the diagonals of the camper shell drive the painting away from the figure, much of the rest of the image lingers on the patterns of light drifting apart from the subject and reflection—highlights upon the metallic sheen of the truck, diffused light through a window in the camper shell and softened shadows unfettered in the forest at the top of the panel. There is a strong contrast between the geometry proposed by the camper shell to the organic and ethereal reflection it frames.

The painting is called *Compass* primarily because direction can be freely maneuvered within physical space, but within time, one can think back but cannot move back. The title is working with the concept of distance reinforced by photography. The reflection on the side of the truck is, in essence, an ephemeral photo of its own and my father is now only present through the photographic objects, split apart like the reflection over several kept moments in our family albums. Only by examining all of them and pulling together parts of each am I able to construct a partially adequate representation of him. To be honest, however, I came to this title through a rather unanticipated

circumstance in which I was trying to find constellations that matched up to the spectral highlights of both this image and *Constellation*. Compass is named for two small constellations, Circunis and Pyxis, both of which fit within the light patterns on the side of the camper shell. The first represents the drafting tool while the other represents the mariner's compass. While they signify two totally disparate tools that are made alike solely by sharing a name, I find they both describe the painting for me. They form a bridge between my father and I by sharing a word, because I am an artist and he was a sailor. It is a logic founded within coincidence and I found this to be suitable form of reasoning with this work.

Oracle

This painting represents a photograph of my mother around 1983 (Plates 11 and 12). It was taken shortly after the ceremony marking my father's retirement from the Navy, which was instigated by a medical discharge. While the image of my mother—who has adorned herself in my father's necktie along with copious amounts of makeup—is somewhat humorous upon first impression, there are distinctly sad overtones marking her face. I was drawn to the image because of the particularly unabashed gaze directed to the photographer whom I presume to have been my father. Upon later discussion with my mother about the nature of this photograph, she has stated that this was the distinct moment in which she realized things were about to drastically change for my family. The life they had known for fifteen years was about to shift entirely, and the resulting photograph seems to linger somewhere between being one that is celebratory and one that

is laden with a sense of mourning. It is the only occasion where I have primarily preserved the frontal pose of the subject from the initial photograph.

Her face simultaneously emerges from and fades into the background of the bamboo-patterned curtain and pinkish wall that is painted using many of the same tones as her skin. Instead of modeling the wall and curtain out of opaque paint, I have used the same tones and layered them through thin glazes in order to achieve the desired affect. The curtain, in particular, has various areas of differing transparency where, at points, the viewer can detect changes made to the initial pattern as well as an implied light source on the other side. At one point, in the upper-right corner of the painting, I have increased the temperature of colors in the curtain as if to suggest a strong light source on the other side of the curtain. This heat, however, could also be read as a small flame beginning upon the curtain. A strong and sharp shadow slices the wall and curtain into two separate areas that do not merge.

In the sense of developing a familial memoir within a single painting, I feel that this is perhaps one of the strongest images linking my memory to an overall narrative of my family's history. Not only is my mother's face both happy and sad, reflecting in both past and the future, it is positioned disproportionately against the wall and curtain. The background becomes a symbol of what brought her to this realization. The bamboo pattern on the curtain was not re-authored by me, but was granted a higher level of significance, whereas it was actually only an incidental part of the photograph—in fact, part of a hotel room where we stayed—it now becomes an equally important subject. For me, however, the curtain gains particular significance because of the future knowledge my family would procure being that my father's leukemia was probably the result of

being in close proximity to Agent Orange during the Vietnam War. The evidence supporting this contamination would soon be illuminated in my family's future, and my parents became involved in one of the many class action lawsuits and settlements regarding this chemical and its effects upon American soldiers.

At this point, the title verges on being didactic; my mother is looking into the future. Perhaps, however, she is not the *Oracle* that the title implies. In essence, the future is also looking back onto her—the viewers and myself as painter. I am also interested in how I have positioned myself within this portrait, because in my mind, the painting depicts me as much as her. Not necessarily through likeness, but through character. The humor of the makeup captures the first impression—she uses the excessive blush to redirect attention from her gaze. She was roughly the same age then that I am now, and I feel an extensive amount of similarities between our two characters in spite of our extraordinarily distinct routes of experience. I have infused the subject that ultimately represents her with layers of my own pathos. The more biographical information that was revealed to me about the background of this image made that even more possible.

Canis Minor

The subjects of this painting are as much the predominant shadow and the grassy background as it is the truncated human subjects that occupy the right half of the painting (Plate 9). The photo is of my mother, the family dog, and I in a place I cannot identify; it is too early and too indistinct for me to have any clear idea about where this takes place.

Initially, I was attracted to the shape of the shadow in the photograph, but once I began to paint the image, I spent most of my time developing the colorfully blurred background of grass. I was doing this, in part, to increase the solidity of the shadow, to make it into this inky field wherein all parts of the painting merged together, as if they were slipping into a giant hole. The material development of the dog in contrast to the rest of the shadow—the animal being held up somewhat indeterminably by my mother—is done so in order to imbue it with a distinct physical presence, as if it is jumping out of the shadow towards the viewer. Its paws give the impression that it is in movement. In contrast, my mother and I fuse into the background, behind the dog—a part of the shadow and the grass.

The dog, Digger, was always said to be mine, in spite of my youth and inability to take care of such an animal. According to family accounts, we were inseparable for the few years he was a part of my life. He also represents my first encounter with death, the first thing that I remembered at one moment being alive and at the next moment being dead. At the discovery of his carcass frozen in the ice outside our home in Maine, it was also the first time I ever *saw* something so clearly removed from life. Perhaps it was that his body was literally frozen, like a photograph, and that the memory that I have of him in the ice is also like a photograph. This drove me to want to depict him suspended in a different way.

This painting required the most invention on my part to suffuse it with a heightened sense of content. In truth, it is probably the most problematically nostalgic images of the group in that it is so simple and sweet in its initial manifestation. I have tried to work against this by removing most of my mother's face as well as my own, the transformation of which has revealed a remarkable similarity between the lower portions

of my adult face with hers in the photo. The work functions most clearly on a formal level; it examines mood through shifts in color and shape. Out of all the work, it seems to be developed from the most overt sense of wonder, as if to some extent it is not laced with the melancholy of the other paintings. Now I feel that this is somewhat due to my recognition that I was incapable of understanding such complex feelings at the point of photographic capture. The greatest sadness that could have consumed me at this point would probably have been deprivation from my mother.

At Rest

This painting, the last one at this point in this body of work, is taken from the earliest occurring photo of the group. The photograph is of my father and was taken by my mother on one of their earliest dates. From the information I have gathered about the photograph from her account, I can speculate that this event happened sometime between 1967 and 1970, most likely towards the earlier part of that spectrum. The image is of my father laid down upon a blanket, surrounded with the remnants of a picnic spread out on the grass around him. He seems to be sleeping, but other photos in its proximity within the album, suggest he is shying away from the camera. It is a strange image for me to decipher, because it is most clearly representative of a person that I never knew, but is laden with suggestions of intimacy. It is a moment in which he is clearly shares a warm emotional rapport with the photographer, in which the communication between the two of them is somewhat private but is simultaneously documented to be included within the family legacy.

I have approached this image with the perspective of my mother's memory of these early years as the primary information upon which I interpret the image. Still, her story is steeped in deep sentiment, drama and nostalgia, simultaneously. It is then subject to being filtered through my own continuum of experience; one that has established their relationship as my personal ideal for love and one that I also have never known the likes of. Ultimately, the viewer will pick up not only on the nuances shared between my mother and father in these early years but also my own desire and longing to understand the nature of this relationship. The image is wrought with implications of youthful sexuality and casual abandon. It is the only image that escapes the frontal pose that predominates the other paintings and is also the most candid. In painting it, I felt as though I was clearly trying to make a movement into another state of mind than I have ever known, into another time, to position myself in the present of the photograph. I sought to look with my mother's eye before history would unfold and that desire would become something much different, much deeper.

CHAPTER SEVEN: THIS HAS BEEN THERE

I could not begin to presuppose that my family photographs or the brief biographical information that I have provided in this document will have any particular effect on anyone other than myself. As I continue to make this work, I continue to struggle with the anxiety that this work will appeal to no one but my family and I. Still, I persist and push past this self-doubt because I keep reminding myself of every time I encounter a discarded photograph in an antique shop. When I pick up the image, I begin to search. There is this innate compulsion that I feel, in which I must seek out the familiar or the strange, to look for eyes I recognize and make attempts, through reading the photograph, to try and tell its story. On some levels, this compulsion is somewhat voyeuristic, but it is also an attempt to reclaim artifacts that have been lost through thinning family lines or auctioned off storage units.

It is my desire that the viewer come into these paintings as I do those photographs, because I do not think I am alone in this practice. In fact, I would assert that when the average audience comes to a work of art, they are seeking out something familiar that will draw them in. That familiarity can come in multitudes of forms, but it is what will keep them looking and actively trying to decipher a meaning within the image. With the paintings that comprise *Confabulation*, I am presenting the audience with something that I think will be inherently familiar; while they may not recognize the

face, they will recognize the pose, or the detail, or the particular color range. Ultimately, I think that most people will understand somewhere in their consciousness that these paintings have come from photographs.

At this point, it is my desire that the viewer too will begin to speculate about the nature of the narrative that extends throughout the work. The clues that I have given are often extremely personal symbols that have significance that has emerged from sources within my personal and family histories. However, the conclusions that will be drawn by the viewer are, in the end, more significant than my own and completely beyond the limits of my own capacity for understanding. It is the viewer who will determine the quality of my storytelling. The viewer will decide whether or not he or she sees fit to fill in the gaps within the paintings, between the paintings, and to engage with what is not shown as much as what is. I would like for this work to open up a dialogue about the nature of memory within each viewer who chooses to engage with my work. Is it nostalgic, invented, or forgotten?

Perhaps this work derives its meaning precisely in that I am publicly displaying images that many families view as sacred, intimate, and private documentation of their personal histories. I am putting the viewer into the obligatory position of voyeur—looking at a film—wherein my family becomes characters and who are simply playing roles to be analyzed. In some ways, I am also proposing that the viewer identify the particular time, place, social structure, and gender that this work has emerged from, and how all of those qualities inform the narrative as well. The reading of the narrative will depend on each viewer's personal position in regards to all of these factors. With each

detail that I add into the equation, the fiction becomes more dense and even more questions are raised.

This is the quality that Barthes pinpointed as being the provocative dividing line between photography and fiction. Amidst minimal doubt, photography asserts, "this has been there." There is a trust that is granted to a photographic way of seeing that is not given to painting because painting is created out of a singular interpretation and subject that change with the multitudes of disparate interpretations from the viewers. Recollection, on the same level, is also dependent on an equally subjective position in space and time. No matter the closeness between two people who share an event, their memories will be inextricably divergent from the moment they cross the continual threshold of the future. The authenticity of the personal account is perpetually up for dispute and constantly subject to change. The problem that I have explored, then, is how such an account is affected when it is describing what is ultimately accepted as a representational truth. In spite of the source, this authenticity presupposed to the inherent within the photograph is always subject to being read and extrapolated upon. Even when the original narrative of the image is lost, someone will step forward and attempt to fill in the blanks.

APPENDIX

Plates

PLATE 1: Gerhard Richter, *Woman Descending the Staircase (Frau, die Treppe Herabghend)*, 1965, Oil on Canvas, 198x128 cm

Plate 2: Gerhard Richter, *Atlas,* 1964, (Panel 13, detail), newspaper clipping

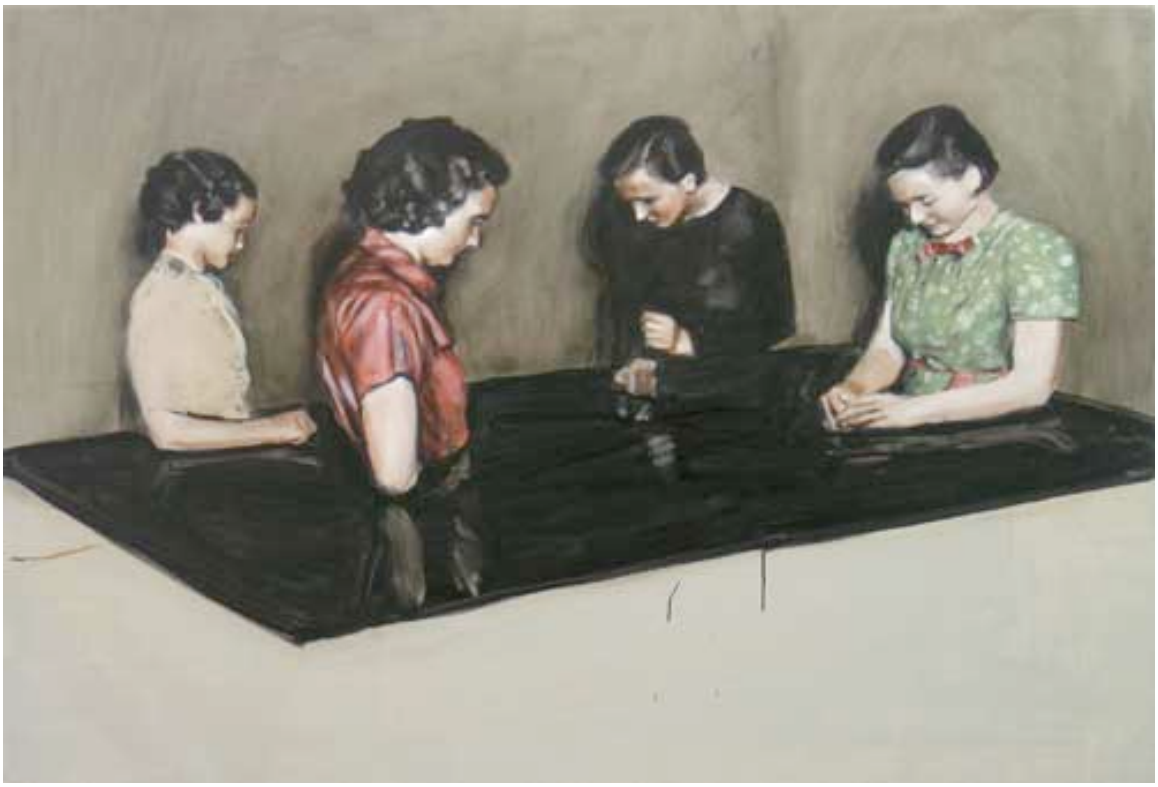

Plate 3: Michaël Borremans, *Four Fairies*, 2003, Oil on Canvas, 110x150 cm

Plate 4: Personal Family Photo used for painting *Constellation*, taken 1985-1986

Plate 5: Personal Family Photo used for painting *Compass,* taken 1980-1982

PLATE 6: *Constellation*, 2010, Oil on panel, 4’x4’

Plate 7: *Compass*, 2010, Oil on Panel, 4’x4’

Plate 8: Personal Family Photograph used for *At Rest*, taken 1968-1970

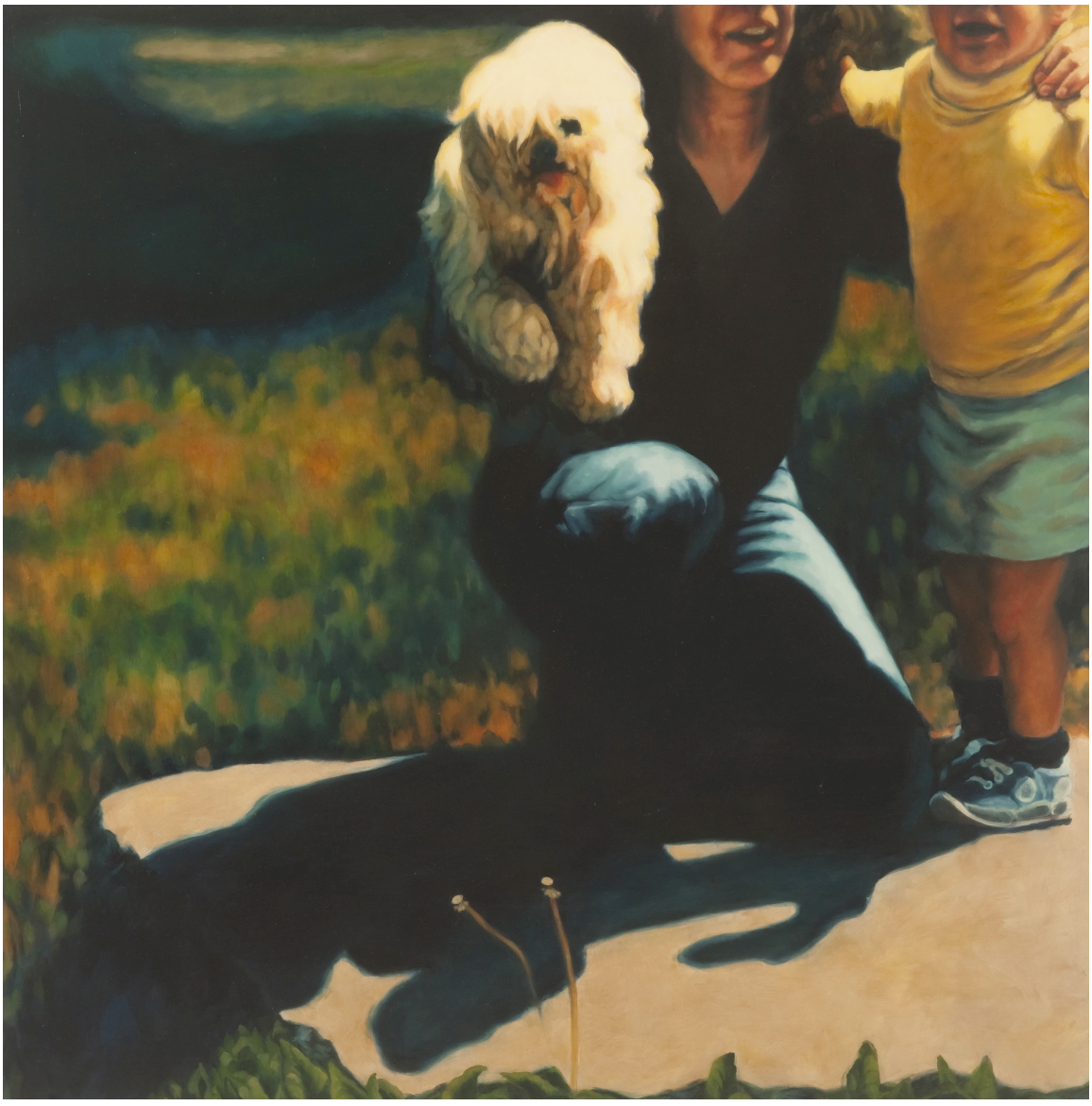

Plate 9: *Canis Minor,* 2011, Oil on Panel, 4’x4’

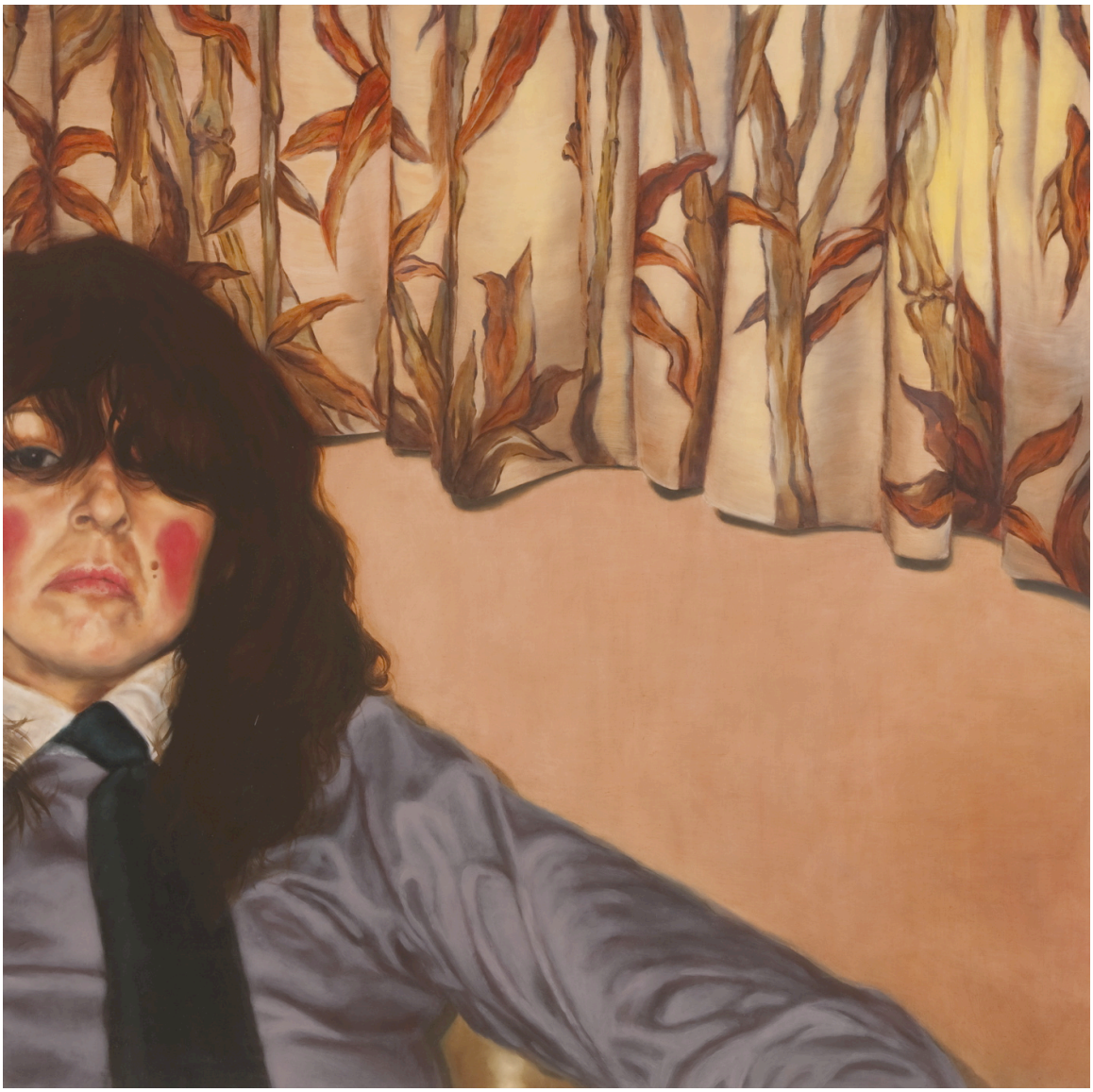

Plate 10: *Oracle*, 2011, Oil on Panel, 4’x4’

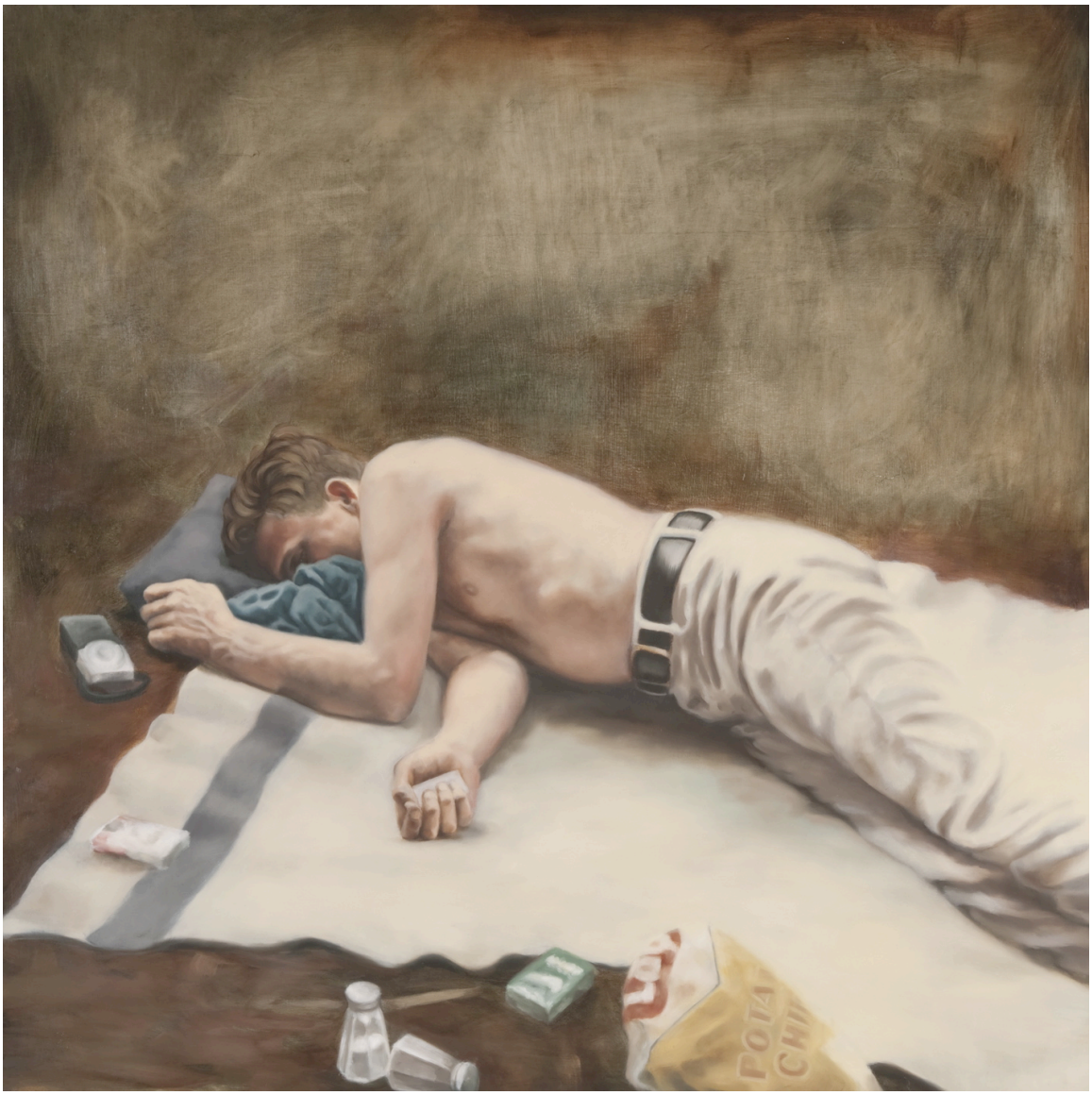

Plate 11: *At Rest, 2011, Oil on Panel, 4'x4'*

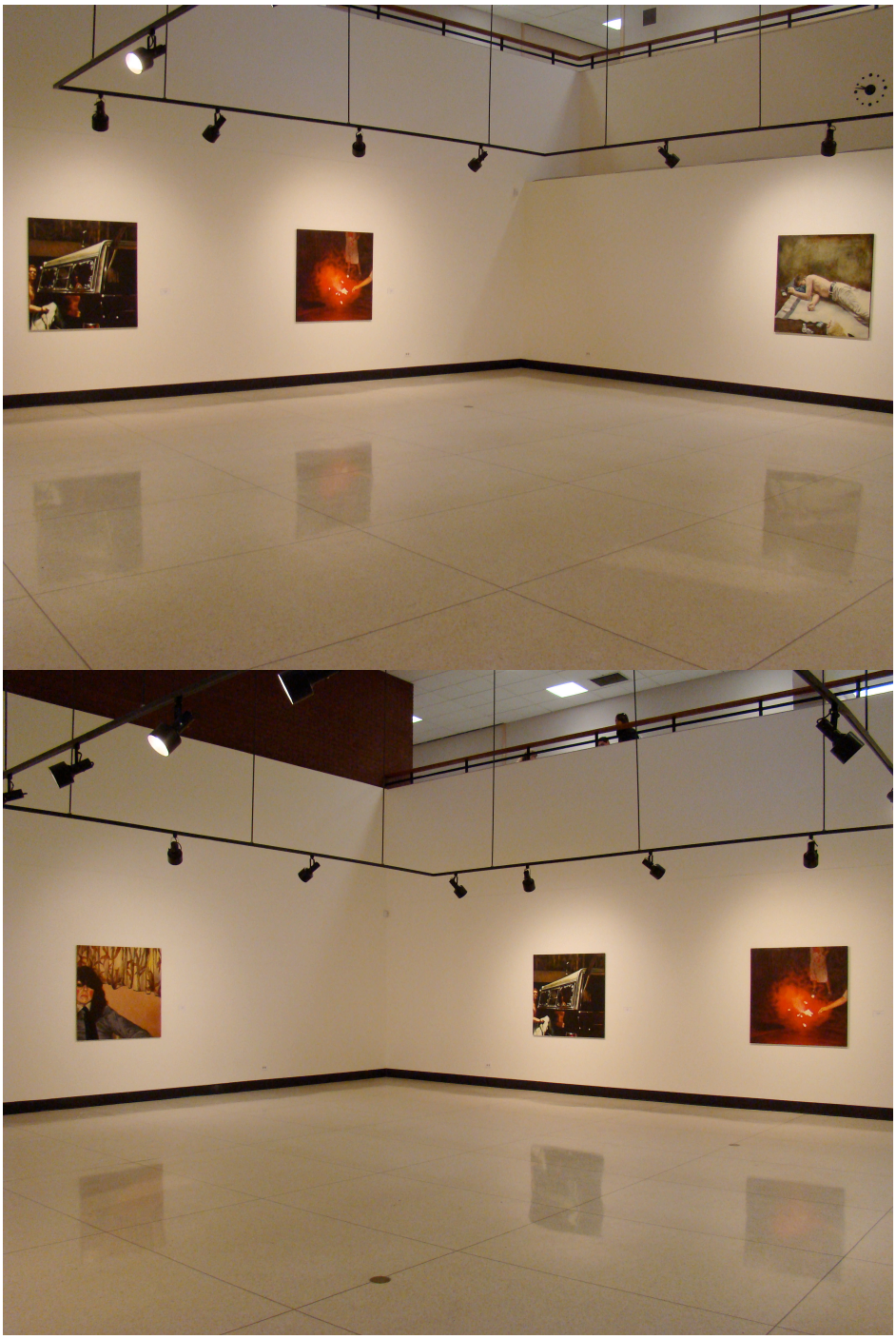

PLATE 14: Confabulation Installation

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