

MEMORY THROUGH FIBRE: The Presence of Absence

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HEIR/LOOMS addresses themes of history and memory through the lens of materials and objects. In this essay, remembrance and recollection are examined through the work of Lizz Aston, Amanda McCavour, Jennifer Smith-Windsor, and Meichen Waxer. Through their use of fibre, jewelry and aged items they emphasize ephemerality and create works that represent absence. The artists address loss and memories of people and places that are no longer in existence. These works are personal, and based on objects found in the home and carried on one's person, so they trigger intimate memories, and come to represent individual histories and sentiments.

Their choice to use thread, fabric, or hair is related to memory as it involves composing something tangible from something delicate and indistinct. Memory is reinforced, fragmented, and forgotten, just as fibre is prone to wearing out, fraying, pulling apart, and absorbing odour. Both memory and fibre can be tainted, stained, and faded. In the work of these artists, elements of age and destruction such as wrinkles, stains, and burns are used as positive elements—as a means to reminisce, as well as create new designs and meaning.

Amanda McCavour's work, *Stand in for Home*, is an installation composed of thread silhouettes suspended from the ceiling to form a three-dimensional domestic scene. McCavour renders the kitchen of her previous home, not by replicating exact details, but by depicting only the overt and unique traits of the space, and thus more closely simulating the process of recollection. McCavour's installation is based on time spent with family and friends, and on things found or given to her. The table was passed on from her grandmother, and the chairs, which form a proper set with the table at her parents' house, were passed on from her great-grandmother. Based on nostalgia for the time and place in which her early adulthood friendships flourished, the work functions as a memorial, a way to ensure against forgetting these youthful experiences, and extends a personal history to the physical world. Although the thread objects are delicate, they are undeniably corporeal, and in this sense, secure intangible memories.

In order to compose drawings made only of thread, McCavour first draws, then stitches into water-dissolving fabric. Composed of layers of stitches that are at first fragile then eventually become difficult to pull apart, her work mimics the way memories seem to

become both established and convoluted the more one returns to them. Leaving negative space around the stitches, she conveys emptiness, but in representing the fragments of a remembered space, she also captures the transient nature of memories—as images that are both taking form and fraying apart. The artist moved before she could take measurements of the object configuration in the kitchen, and consequently, by the time she made the work, the space no longer existed and had to be modeled on photographs and recollection. The fragility of thread conceptually suits the vulnerability of the memory of this home.

Jennifer Smith-Windsor is also inspired by her personal past to make works that deal with location and memory. She worked for many years in textiles, both in theatre and in museums. This along with her family history—a great-grandmother who constantly crocheted, and a grandmother who collected fine linens—fostered a love of fibres. Her studio is filled with old linens that she has collected over the years from antique sales, charity shops and flea markets, as well as pieces that have been passed down from relatives. These personal and domestic objects become inspiration as well as a blank canvas upon which she projects her meditations on the fragility of human experience, especially sentiments of grief, loss, and nostalgia—feelings that are at the same time individual and universal.

Robsart, a cloth wall work, was inspired by the artist's visit to the town in Saskatchewan. It was deserted in the mid-1980s after struggling for years to maintain its population. Many of the houses were abandoned, some still with furniture and pantry items. The loss experienced by these residents—loss of their homes, heritage, family history, and memories—is taken on by the artist, and used as a referent for the universal experience of loss. Smith-Windsor incorporates linens inherited from her great-grandmother to link her own personal history with the collective history of Robsart's former residents. Another wall work, *Tears Have Been Shed*, is made up of handkerchiefs that the artist has collected over the years. As the title suggests, this piece addresses collective grief, mourning, and tears that have been shed on these now discarded items. Like *Robsart*, it weaves together notions of place, memory and personal history, as the layout of the work was initially inspired by the image of snow-covered farmers' fields.

In both of these works, Smith-Windsor references the tradition of collage, using natural fibres such as cotton,

wool, silk and linen. Often responding to the pieces of fabric themselves, she deliberately distresses the fabrics by burning, staining, marring with wax, and collaging with paper, birch bark, and organza. The act of mark-making adds history and meaning to these fabrics and goes against the tendency to erase the visible signs of use in fabric by cleaning, bleaching, or discarding entirely.

This subversion of traditional practice and appearance is also present in **Lizz Aston's** series, *Antiquated Notions*, in which she recreates the look of doilies, and evokes the remnants of a fire. She created this body of work with paper, a medium that is typically kept pristinely flat and clean of marks, and given particular care, to prevent it from ripping, rippling, and staining. While incorporating natural elements, Aston's process elicits numerous contradictions: it is playful and elaborate, yet destructive, and involves intricate free-form embroidery, and uncontrolled burning. The work conveys a mix of dark and rough ash marks, and soft, domestic decoration. Burn marks point to loss and destruction; yet the pattern of radiating dots makes one think of organic growth. Much like webs woven of various events and memories, temporal acts are represented by the repetitious folds and meticulously burnt edges and are all the while invested with the artist's personal histories, channeled through touch and material manipulation. Aside from achieving a visually intriguing design, the decision to burn something delicate, old-fashioned, and domestic can symbolize a critical intervention by the present into the fabric, and memory of the past.

The tension between melancholy and playfulness in relation to the past also appears in the work of **Meichen Waxer**. Her *Fake Mourning* series is an exploration of rituals of mourning, decoration, commemoration and self-representation. Locks of synthetic hair are styled or woven into decorative inserts for antique pendants, revisiting the Victorian trend of mourning jewellery, which developed from the custom of carrying a lock of hair of a deceased loved one. These lockets are a way to explore understandings of the past as well as the rituals that tie the past to the present. For Waxer, hair, which appears in much of her work, symbolizes the carrying of history, and of pre-determined associations. Hair is linked with powerful beauty and sexuality, and with luxury, as well as with bodily odour, dirtiness, ugliness, and wildness.

A personal and intimate object, the mourning locket brings with it a wealth of questions about how we as humans remember, preserve, and commemorate. Waxer, who was inspired to learn to weave by a loom she inherited from her grandmother, interrogates this tendency, embracing something personal and

sentimental while at the same time highlighting the constructed nature of ritual and memory. To create *Fake Mourning Waxer* used the cheapest brand of synthetic hair, which is made of an oil by-product, and in this sense, contrasts an idea of the organic and natural that we associate with beauty, with the falseness and layers of artifice that are often involved in achieving it. This tension between what is real and fake suggests a complex idea about the way we perform the processes of mourning and remembering.

Strong interests in personal histories inform the work of these four artists, yet expression of personal sentiment is far from their only goal. Their use of fibre serves as a means to express issues around remembrance, as it is inextricably tied to ideas of inheritance, origins, the individual, and the collective. Their works take on new meaning in reception, as they serve to remind the viewer of their own histories, and of the ways in which domestic objects channel a deep-rooted sense of self, community, and interrelations. Through their work, Aston, McCavour, Smith-Windsor and Waxer address tensions between destruction and reconstruction, the historical and the contemporary, melancholy and renewal, and tradition and subversion. As a result, they create a multi-layered palimpsest that ties the past with the present.

This essay is the second collaborative venture by Meghan Bissonnette, Anastasia Hare and Colleen O'Reilly. In the summer of 2010 the brigade curated Earnest Reverie at The Drake Hotel, Toronto. This group exhibition centered on performativity through material, and how contemporary practice is inevitably woven with historical, cultural and personal tropes, under the aesthetic sensibility of Camp.

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