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Artist Statement
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artifacts.

At a time where our lives have become staged photo opportunities to be posted on Facebook, saved as screensavers, or tacked to our dorm room walls, I am ever intrigued by the way we recall our history. In a world so dominated by imagery, where do our memories fit? Which are more honest, more tangible, more everlasting? After discovering family snapshots taken of a time I can no longer remember, before the death of my brother Avery, I am most disturbed by the disjunction between this parallel history of images that exist separate from my memory.

My brother died when I was nine years old. He was six. When asked of my earliest memory I am immediately drawn to that night, looking out from my front window at the array of emergency vehicles illuminating our yard through the downpour of rain. As a painter of photographs, it would be easy for me to say that from that moment forward pictures were all I had left of him. But as our lives continued and our houses changed, these photographs slowly made their way into boxes and, until recently, never made their way out. Instead it was specific memories (our last conversation, the sound of his voice, his laugh) that took up the space in my memory and home. The gravity of these moments, and the effort it took to preserve them, was just too great to allow room for anything else.

But I still find myself left with questions, doubt:
Shouldn't a photograph last forever?
Aren't memories constantly tricking and evading us?

Which can I trust?
Which is more fragile?
Which is forever?

My paintings, evolved from individual pictures, set out to navigate this uncertainty as I struggle to articulate my own relationship with photography in the wake of my brother's death. My images are blurred, smeared, or altogether empty in an attempt to reiterate the collapsing and reassembling of a moment and it's inevitably fleeting nature. I use the element of focus and visual clarity as a transcription of memory and progression of time. I allow my wood supports to show through, as the image and moment disintegrates. My panels are oversized and my figures - life-sized or larger, in an attempt for the emotional weight a 4"x 6" snapshot print inevitably lacks.

As a whole my work is a self-contained world of my history, a nostalgic realm in which my photographs and memories coexist. They exploit the painful absence that is the result of the presence of the image, and are the physical evidence provided for a moment against the otherwise haziness of my history. My paintings are an attempt to assimilate the contradictions and hesitations that remembering creates, and provide a sense of honesty amid my otherwise fraudulent past.

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Full Statement
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I approached this St. Mary's Project as an opportunity to set out to understand why I'm an artist, why I do what I do, and what type of artist I want to be in the future. In the end, my painting evolved into a channel for unspeakable emotions. It became my voice, in which I created a dialogue with the memories of my brother, Avery, and developed into an outlet for which I could finally make these unresolved experiences and untouched emotions tangible in a visual form of painting.

This past May when I found out I had been selected to do a Studio Art SMP, the first thing I did was go out and get myself a little leather-bound journal; I've never been a big fan of journals, they usually lose my interest by the second or third entry, but in this case it became an invaluable tool to get all of my thoughts on paper, and allowed me to constantly return to them for inspiration. I did however forget what I had written on the very first page, until just the other day when I sat down and began writing this speech:

“Why do I paint people?”

“What is my earliest memory?”

And, “why have I never painted Avery?”

Perhaps if I had revisited this earlier, I would have arrived at my final set of works much sooner, but I was honestly shocked at how full-circle this experience had come. I had been worried that I was painting just to please my professors, playing some sort of random grab bag game trying to pick something they would like. In reality, I had been painting for myself all along. I was painting what I always needed to paint in order to understand my discomfort with images of my

brother, and what for twelve years since my brother's death, I had been struggling to articulate and recognize.

My parents are divorced, and I realized in both of my houses, photographs of Avery were limited, to none. Why was he no longer present? Why had I never painted him? My memories of my childhood as a whole are simply a blur, except for the few days surrounding his death. I remember his last day, our last conversation, his funeral, and that particular stench of floral arrangements that littered our house for weeks afterwards), but it was as if everything else simply didn't matter, and the gravity of those moments was too great to allow room for anything else.

As I began exploring boxes of photographs of my childhood that had been stored away, searching for images to paint, it was as if every moment captured in these pictures was a new memory in itself. Although these images rarely brought me back to that specific moment, it was like looking into this other life, one that I have a hard time remembering ever existed. I was able to expand the visual library in my mind of moments with Avery, but I still had an unresolved relationship with photographs against what I can remember. Which was more honest? Which would last forever?

My most recent works are my attempt to challenge this uncertainty and articulate them visually. The only thing I have realized is that nothing is forever, and inevitably, both a photograph and a memory, artifacts of our history, are constantly fleeting and deceiving us. Despite looking at over twenty various artists and sources, I have selected my three primary, most relevant sources in order to provide some explanation as to how and why I arrive at my final set of works.

Looking back in history, I was drawn to the paintings of Francis Bacon due to his similar working process and my admiration of the environment - both physically and emotionally that he creates within his work. He manipulates and transforms photographic sources to evoke a dark sense of anxiety and alienation, in a warped, self - invented world.

An English Artist, Bacon is considered by many to be one of the most influential contemporary figurative artists of the twentieth century. His working process evolved throughout his career, initially appropriating images from mass media and external sources, such as medical books and historical paintings. He later commissioned photographs from his close circle of friends - in particular John Deakin - just for the purpose as source materials for his paintings. During this later transition, however, he still maintained a certain distance from his subjects and source objects because he himself was not the photographer. I suppose I see myself as a bit of both methods, as I am using childhood photographs not taken by myself and mediated by a third person, while maintaining an intense personal connection to the subject matter.

This intense connection and sentiment for my imagery restricts my ability to completely deform my source and manipulate it beyond recognition, but I do look to Bacon's work for inspiration in terms of his disintegration and reassembling of a single image. His consideration and reconsideration for his source material is most evident in his *Study After Velazquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X*, as he revisits source images multiple times, in which each image evolves and approaches the source in a different way in multiple subsequent paintings. It should be noted that Bacon never visited the original painting by Velazquez – instead he fashioned his own interpretations of this masterpiece from multiple photographic reproductions he found in art magazines of the time.¹ Much like the commissioned portraits he had made, these reproductions helped him distance himself from the power of the original, thus giving him the freedom to make it his own. For me however, I consider my family snapshots to be the original image, and consequently hold an indescribable amount of power for which I struggle to let go and result in my hold on representation.

¹ Martin Harrison, *In Camera: Francis Bacon : Photography, Film and the Practice of Painting* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2005), 11.

From a formal standpoint, I examined how Bacon would leave parts of his canvas bare, allowing the raw, unpainted areas to show, becoming part of his overall composition. In my work, while I have transitioned from painting on canvas to using wood panel – I too, have explored this formal device. I leave areas of my wood panel unpainted, allowing the natural wood grain to become a part of my compositions. In terms of my concept, this visual disintegration speaks to the disintegration of both memory and a photograph, and the lack of security neither provide. Just as I struggle to recall specific elements of a moment, I intentionally leave aspects of my images absent which give way to the wood support.

Individually, each piece maintains an acute sense of space and depth, created with the simplest of forms. Perhaps stemming from his brief interest as an interior designer, he maintains a sense of awareness for the physical environment his figures inhabit, evident through choice of simplified forms of color and line to create depth.² I am attracted to this simplicity, as I personally am not interested in architectural details, only relying on these basic elements to locate and ground my figures within my picture plane. Conceptually the simplifying and minimizing of space is coherent with my experience of memory, as it is most often the face, smile, or sound that is imprinted into my memory, not the more concrete elements of the space in which these moments occurred.

Examining his works more broadly as a whole, I seek to evoke a similar sense of an emotional environment, and invented world within my work. While intensely deformed and warped, in contrast to my more nostalgic aim, I still appreciate this alternate universe he creates in order to allow his audience to enter and contemplate his individual perspective. For me, my created world is one in which I attempt to reconcile the disjunction between photographs and memory.

² Ibid, 23.

I worry that my work in itself is too self-indulgent, too removed from my audience. I hope that in seeing my work collectively as whole, I can create a similar environment in which the viewer can explore in an attempt to understand my emotional journey through my brother's death and question their own relationship with photographs and memory, as I have attempted to decipher it through this St. Mary's Project experience.

The contemporary artist, Gerhard Richter, has also influenced my most recent work. His "photopaintings" fall in the realm between a mechanical production of an image and the human production of an art object, exploring the detachment of photography. My work is formally in direct dialogue with his, often using a similar visual vocabulary of smearing and blurring an image, to reiterate its mechanical, concrete source. This abstraction results in a dialogue between the concrete and ephemeral - the artist's failure and imprecision to accurately represent the subjects, leaving the figures lost within an intangible reality.

My method of painting is very similar to Richter's; reproducing a photograph, and then smearing it, all the while making decisions as to what and how much will be distorted. Richter writes, "I blur things to make everything equally important and equally unimportant. I blur things so that they do not look artistic or craftsmanlike but technological, smooth and perfect. I blur things to make all the parts a closer fit. Perhaps I also blur out the excess of unimportant information."³ In my work and Richter's, the 'blur' does obscure detail, but it also simultaneously creates a relationship of the details that survive, a conversation between the general and the particular. I see examples of this in my work through the coincidences that occur with the incorporation of wood grain, the way my brother's face and my own meld together, and the sudden awareness of the subtle shadow of a wrist or knuckle, when these are the elements left untouched.

³ Hans Ulrich Obrist and Dietmar Elger, *Gerhard Richter - Text: Writings, Interviews and Letters, 1961-2007* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009), 33.

Richter's work lacks an overt sense of personal attachment, even when he is painting his own family. Although Richter is deviating from his source material, he does so in a relatively mechanical, consistent method, in an attempt to maintain a certain distance or detachment, referential to his perspective of the mechanism of photography as a whole. With this in mind, I would also consider that while a blurred photograph is a mechanical product, the blur itself is the result of a human mistake. Despite Richter's attempts at detachment, this element constantly relocates his work back into the hands of a person, and the memory of the moment it was taken.

One of his most iconic images is *Uncle Rudi*, from 1965. This black and white image, blurred from its original source, depicts a family snapshot of his uncle, a young Nazi, soon before he was killed in action.⁴ The Swastika is not evident from the image, only his traditional military uniform, and yet the tone of this image is nevertheless somber and critical, as Richter and his audience are faced with how to deal with the reality of this relationship. This image confronted me with the perceived evidentiary truth with which a snapshot provides the audience. The informality of his posture and the camera's slightly off-kilter point of view conveys an element of effortless truth and accuracy that a more formal image would convolute behind the artifices of perspective and stiffness.

In addition to the abstractness of the resulting blur, I become increasingly aware of the presence of the photographer, and the moment that he and his subjects experienced together. These otherwise overlooked moments and snapshots become monumentalized when explored on a large scale. This is an element I bring to my own work, especially working in a life-sized or larger scale, painting images that would be otherwise stored away in the attic and forgotten. This is not my attempt to re-experience a moment, but instead my desire to reconsider the forgotten, and elevate the role of the photograph to the weight of my memories.

⁴ Paul Moorhouse, *Gerhard Richter Portraits: Painting Appearances* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2009), 64.

Outside of the realm of painting, I examined the wide arena of photography by considering the literary perspectives of Roland Barthes and Hervé Guibert. As I struggled to articulate my own relationship with photographs, it was incredibly insightful to turn to these eloquent authors and consider each viewpoint. Barthes provided a perspective parallel to my own as a non-photographer, as he examines his relationship with photographs, particularly those of his mother. His struggle to find an image that encapsulated his mother specifically resonated with my own search for reconciliation between my physical evidence of my past in contrast to my memories. I appreciated Guibert's brevity and confidence within his piece, *Ghost Image*, a collection of vignettes where photographs and memories intertwine, in which he decides that photography supersedes memory and his lust for photography outweighs everything else.

Barthes, a French literary theorist and philosopher, crafted one of the most influential texts regarding the role of photography, when he published *Camera Lucida* in 1980. He considers the act of looking at a photograph, as he searched for an image to encapsulate his mother as he mourned her death. In the end, he found a photograph of his mother as a little girl that he felt most satisfyingly captured her. He describes it as such:

My mother was five at the time (1898), her brother was seven. He was leaning against the bridge railing...she, shorter than he, was standing a little back, facing the camera...she was holding one finger in the other hand as children often do, in an awkward gesture. The brother and sister had posed, side by side, alone, under the palms of the Winter Garden...I studied the little girl and at last rediscovered my mother.⁵

⁵ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 69.

While he includes several other images within his book, he never provides his reader with this most important image, only continuing to support an image's intangibility. The struggle he encountered is very similar to my own in which despite the concrete reality a photograph provides, it falls short as capturing the truth of my past, as I remember it. Through reading his collection of essays, I did, however become increasingly aware of how photographs have shaped and perhaps convoluted my memory. This seemed to add another layer of complications in my search for clarity. If I was able to remember the moment captured in an image was it the moment I remembered, or the memory of the image? Which memory occurred first?

Hervé Guibert's writing is a collection of candid moments, capturing his evolving relationship with photography, both as photographer and viewer, until his premature death due to AIDS in 1991. The "ghost image" for which the book is titled, was a would-be photograph he took of his aging mother, but due to a technical mistake the film was over-exposed and the image was never captured. This moment collapsed the idea of image and memory into one event that shaped his perspective of both his mother, and photography forever.

His essay "Inventory of a Box of Photographs" was particularly relevant to my own journey as he recalled looking through his family photos, and discovering a "history [that] exists parallel to that of memory."⁶ As he explores his past and recalls the moments of which these photographs were captured, he expresses that the image does not preserve the memory, but replaces it. I appreciated Guibert's confidence and clarity for which he approached the arena of photography from a photographer's perspective. He seemed oddly comfortable with the incoherence of photograph and memory I have so consciously tried to resolve.

⁶ Hervé Guibert, "Inventory of a Box of Photographs," in *Ghost Image*, trans. Robert Bononno (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press, 1996), 38.

Although these authors did not necessarily resolve the tension between my photographs and memory, they were invaluable sources to provide me the tools and perspective to realize and articulate my dilemma. It was also comforting to know that I am not alone in this frustration. Guibert's quote sums it up the most fluently, in which photography provides a history "parallel to that of memory."⁷ With the aid of Barthes and Guibert I have realized that within y work I try to create a third history in which they co-exist, to create more complete compilation of my history. Neither are as truthful, or concrete as I would hope, but I'm beginning to see that they are much more dependent on one another than I have been previously comfortable to admit.

While a photograph may be a concrete, physical object, it can just as easily be accidentally lost, tossed away, or simply forgotten. For me, my few, yet powerful memories of moments with Avery have proven a safer, more lasting form of remembering, but will I be able to recall these memories forever? Will my memory deceive me? I hope my audience can enter this world of my work- inspired by the abstraction of Gerhard Richter, the environment and process of Francis Bacon, and articulated through the words of Roland Barthes and Hervé Guibert, and challenge these questions I have asked all along of photography and memory:

Which can I trust?

Which is more fragile?

Which is forever?

⁷ Ibid.

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