Puncture

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Dedicated to Charlie

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Puncture

Puncture is an epitaph for a past world, one that is abstract and anonymous. Working with still frames from vintage 1960's and 70's home movies, lost images of family life are captured, their distinctions suspended and sealed with encaustic wax. These works bring light to anachronistic mediums and accentuate a quality of analog decay. There is just enough in the diffused images to conjure ones own lost idealizations and memories of the past. A particular muffled memory becomes evident and falls short of full realization, the voices of the past having merged with the present. Figures are reduced to essences, foregrounding modes of abstraction and merging the use of photography and film with the medium of painting.

The advent of new technologies has created a culture of hyper-production and consumption of images at a rate we have never before experienced. This has led to an ever-greater crisis of authenticity, a simultaneous presence and absence of self. In this new digital age, what is being gained and what is lost? This thesis exhibition opens up a conversation between analog forms of technology and the digital. Inherent within this series of reinterpreted film stills is the notion that we can now look nostalgically at what was in the 1960's and 1970's a cutting edge form of documenting family life. As our society makes apparent leaps forward with new technologies a moment opens up to look at the past and what is becoming obsolete. The work in this exhibition points towards this obsolescence while capturing traces of our cultural past selves and who we are now.

In understanding how the films I am using for my source material function, it is helpful to study the discourse on mechanical reproduction and photography. In 1980 the notable French theorist and philosopher Roland Barthes published the book *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. This book provided new perceptions on photography and how it is distinguished from other mediums. Barthes states that a photograph can never be detached from its referent and that "every photograph is a certificate of presence."[1] Barthes further defines the power behind the photograph by introducing the studium and the punctum, two elements that he utilized in the viewing of photographs. For Barthes the studium functions as a kind of general interest in the photograph. The studium is connected to culture and as Barthes states, "It is by the studium that I am interested in so many photographs, whether I receive them as political testimony or enjoy them as good historical scenes: for it is culturally (this connotation is present in the studium) that I participate in the figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings, the actions." Barthes's second element is the punctum: something that will " break or (punctuate) the studium."[2] Punctum exists alongside the studium but actively disturbs it and grabs the viewer. Within the films from which I worked, the captured images existed as part of the studium. However, the specific frames selected record moments that moved me towards an emotional puncture.

The process for creating the pieces in Puncture began with extracting stills from 1960's and 70's 8mm and 16mm family films found in online digital archives that were transferred to a digital format. The exploration of these continued by retranslating

[1] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 87.
[2] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 26.

selected stills into paintings that capture intimate moments but also render glitches, damage and splices in the film. The retranslated images were painted on small wood panels and canvas (see Figure 1).

I found that transforming home movies into still paintings was more like setting up the framework for a puzzle with no real solution, just a pile of leftover pieces. By the time the stills were enlarged and printed much of the detail was blown out and lost. The way in which motion is captured in the films often resulted in the figures being blurred, which caused ghost-like double images similar to double exposures in photography.

While experimenting with various ways to layer paint as a means of translating the found footage, the process shifted and resulted in printing the still on a translucent Japanese paper, painted and saturated with encaustic wax. The wax works as a means of entombing the image, almost like amber, preserving it into an incandescent form somewhere between the projected image and the digital. The wax also lends to the surface a visceral and skin-like texture, giving it a mysterious physicality. Using the archaic medium of encaustic as a coating for these images incorporated painting into my process and created an extremely durable and re-workable surface. Additionally, the final pieces are presented in such a way as to reference their original source and yet suspend them in a dream-like state, one that further distorts the historical moment and yet maintains a trace of the vintage technology.

In order to reference the passage of time in the film, I began layering the printed stills. Each grouping was taken from a consecutive segment in the film, one representing a distorted or broken image and the other a more discernable image. They are hung layered together, separated by tiny magnets, and framed in a black light box. A fluorescent light sits at the bottom of each box and translates light through the layers,

illuminating the fluid texture of the wax. This act of concealed layering becomes a conceptual device that speaks to a repeated and retranslated history, diffusing and displacing narrative and memory. (Figures 2 – 6).

There is a haunting, silent and candid quality in these old films. They function as records of a personal and collective past. Viewing them triggers a search for an origin, one that is embedded with loss and fragments of memory. Here we find ritual moments disjointed and displaced, a lost authenticity. These films do not present a factual past; instead, they show us traces of the past distorted by the tiny fractions of time captured by an amateur filmmaker.

Like our memory, watching these films distorts the reality that these home movies were meant to depict by interweaving private fantasy and public history. The power behind these types of films resides in our associations of our own family life. Patricia Holland states, "Family photography can operate at this junction between personal memory and social history, between public myth and personal unconsciousness. Our memory is never fully 'ours', nor are the pictures ever unmediated representations of our past. Looking at them we both construct a fantastic past and set out on a detective trail to find other versions of a 'real' one."[3] It is this intersection between seeing these films as a constructed past and experiencing the associations they conjure that is the driving force behind the works created for my thesis exhibition, Puncture.

Perceiving memory as something that is fluid is an important aspect of my work. In her essay "Remembrance" Annette Kuhn states, "Cultural theory tells us there

[3] Patricia Holland, *Family Snaps: The Meanings of Domestic Photography* (London: Virago, 1991), 4.

is little that is really personal or private about either family photographs or the memories they evoke: they can mean only culturally. But the fact that we experience our memories as peculiarly our own sets up a tension between the 'personal' moment of memory and the social moment of making memory, or memorizing; and indicates that the process of making meaning and making memories are characterized by a certain fluidity. Meanings and memories may change with time, be mutually contradictory, may even be an occasion for or an expression of conflict."[4] In spending so much time with a few clips of a captured moment the image is worked into my own memory and the picture becomes a unification of all these different translations. The selected stills conjure my personal history, revisiting moments of tension or love embedded within my own memories of family. The works produced for this exhibition are a simple retranslation of a somewhat clumsy moving image that has become a fixed surface, a mnemonic trace of fluid time.

[4] Annette Kuhn, *Family Snaps: The Meanings of Domestic Photography* (London: Virago, 1991), 19.

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