RECONSTRUCTING MEMORY

A Thesis

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by

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Authorization to Submit Thesis

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ABSTRACT

Deconstructing Memory is a body of work that winnows the value of physical images through memory and story in the digital age. Starting with time-lapse photography, and ending with the shredded remnants of the 1,600+ images I've uploaded to social networks, I'm searching for new ways to associate with my own memories through creative thinking. The stripped-down content can trigger experiences — overlapping intersections can shift perception. The work has materialized questions about the altered value society has placed on photography and history, our deeply rooted connection to social media and our drifting detachment from human memory and the physical world.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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SECTION 1 - INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

My interest in photography roots back to early childhood. The sense of unexplainable magic that had to take place to permanently capture a piece of history in time captivated me. As I learned more about the value that my family had placed on certain pictures, and how much they meant as a token of honor for the people or places captured within the image, I was hooked. Storytelling became alive through this visual history. As I aged and became more familiar with the specific equipment and its purpose, I felt empowered by a photo's ability to captivate an audience, even if it were only the few family members huddled around the photo album. I learned to edit the image in camera and control the narrative. The ability to look through the lens to capture a separate reality and create my own story became a release, and an addiction. I became enthralled in the medium of photography as an escape from my own reality – a way to hide myself from new situations – to be the "cameraman". The control that this tool gave me to manipulate the scene in front of me - to crop out what I didn't want and to direct the focus on what I did - felt like a superpower. The world was still shooting on film back then, so the chance to review those photos and discover that a shot came out as intended caused great joy and excitement – I would rush to share that success with family and friends. I loved the physical prints of those days.

I began to shoot more than I should, as I sought to make the perfect photograph. I was constantly shooting roll after roll of film – as much as my father would allow. At the time, my favorite subject was anything in the outdoors – typically landscapes. I was fascinated by the fact that I could capture a moment that no one else had ever seen before, nor would ever see again. My interest in this time-based media and my desire to capture these scenes perfectly caused strife sometimes - my father has stories of our travels when I was left alone with his Pentax P3 film SLR, where I would consistently shoot the same image, with merely a miniscule framing tweak or camera setting change, constantly chasing the perfect shot from my perspective. My perspective and his wallet didn't often get along once we had the rolls developed and he was made aware of my over capture and subsequent waste of money. My camera privileges were revoked for a time, but the impression had been made.
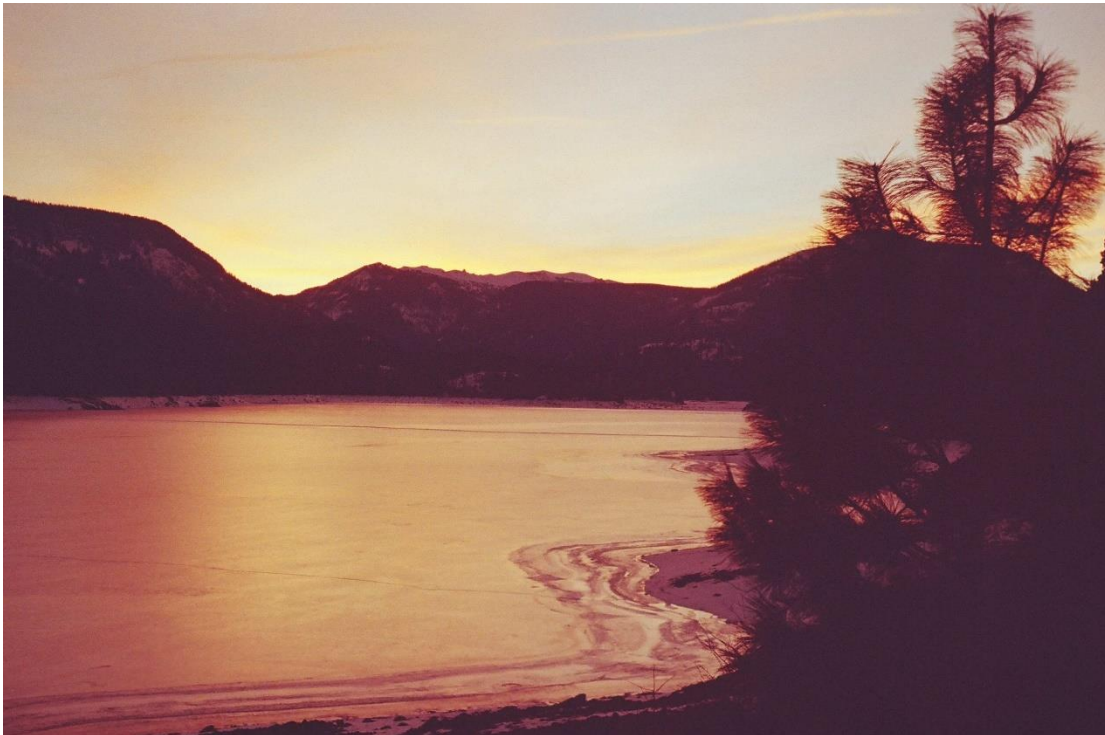
Image 1.1: *Frozen Lakes* **- two images taken of the same setting, minor framing and exposure adjustment between each**

SECTION 2 - TIME-LAPSE

In my early MFA work, I felt a returning internal pressure for perfection. I wanted to only show work that I felt was complete and aesthetically sound. I stayed in my comfort zones, and only challenged myself technically as I worked with photography. I started by chasing the light on a landscape scene in hopes to capture those perfect moments that I chased as a kid. I explored this through shooting time-lapse photography - a way to show a long period of time in a short span of video or film – when the images are stitched together, a smooth drift of light and time across the scene becomes visible. Clouds ebb and flow like water in a lazily flowing river. The sun paints the setting with highs and lows, highlighting the natural wonder of our earth in what gets presented as a quick, digestible moment. For me, these time lapses give a sense that existence is passing faster than we expect, and forces us to pause and reflect on what is truly important for ourselves. In staying with the material, you can begin to ask yourself –Was this experience worthwhile? How long did it take to capture this? What was I doing at that time? Why? Was whatever I did as beautiful as this? Was it worth my time?

Natural landscape time-lapse photography remains one of my keen interests – the effort required to capture these works typically involves many of my passions – Wandering the open road, hiking through remote areas, exploring wilderness and landscapes new to me, and becoming more intimately aware of locations I am already familiar with. I wanted to focus on simply existing in these spaces, at these moments, witnessing the environment as it will never exist again. I wanted to document these moments for my own curiosity as well as their historic context. This work became about capturing something that will have the potential to exist in perpetuity as a personal and public record of my experience at a pivotal moment in my history.

Time-lapse photography became a way to try and capture technical perfection. This approach allowed me to accomplish the goal of 'getting the shot'. As the camera fired off thousands of times, I believed that it would capture a beautiful moment when the static exposure settings perfectly aligned with the natural light of the scene. There would be many failed attempts where the environment shifted or I missed the moment, but the times it all came together felt like magic.

Image 2.1: Single image from *77 Minutes - Osprey Point Sunrise* – A satisfying moment of exposure and natural light

As I continued, I began to re-think the delivery method of time-lapse. The typical time-based playback through video or film felt too simple and familiar. I wanted to explore options of conveying both the time investment in capturing the work and the shift in the scene from my camera's perspective. I had seen a video by Ken Murphy titled *"A History of the Sky"* and was mesmerized by the way color was registering across the screen. In this video, Murphy captured a picture of the sky every 10 seconds for a year, and assembled them into 360 days' worth of time-lapses on one full screen video mosaic. The shifting weather patterns and slow fades of the days was hypnotic. This inspired me to explore a time-lapse's presentation by tiling the images into a large format document, then printing out the time-lapses as a large-scale image, creating the sense of a color exploration as the shifting light transitions in a gradient-like format across the print.
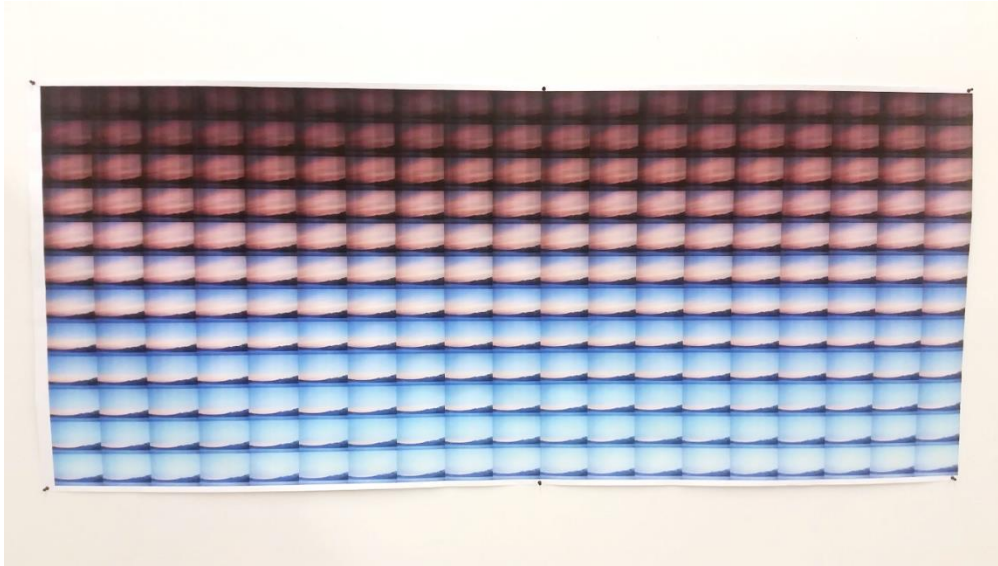
Image 2.2: *82 minutes* **- Payette Lake Sunrise**

Displaying time-lapse images in this unique way became a focal point to research. These large-scale prints drew me in and I would stare at the work as I reflected on it and the memory of capturing it. I wanted to find others who had experimented with time-lapse as a medium. This was followed up through the study of works by Kurt Kren – an Austrian born filmmaker. As Hans Hurch writes,

> Much has been written about the abstract, serial, musical, structural or mathematical nature of Kurt Kren´s films, their affinity to painting, poetry or twelve-tone music; but too much concentration on their structure and rhythm has eclipsed the films objectivization, their *almost documentary quality*. The compact and artistic interweaving of the fragments of reality being expressed - which may be glimpses out of a window, paths, trees, walls, the changing of the seasons, faces or the human body in motion - as well as the way they are filmed, processed and arranged can often go unrecognized even if each film is seen several times … And yet, appreciating Kurt Kren´s films is not a question of dissecting his technique, recognizing their richness of innovation or analyzing their rhythm. To understand these films it is not necessary to see through them but to feel and perceive them as real.

In *Tree Again*, Kren captured a tree in a Vermont field using a rare infrared film for 50 days. I believe this to be an early example of the time-lapse concept presented as art outside of cinema

and science. Kren was exploring the effects of his equipment and medium on a setting, as well as how the settings can change and drift through movement within the environment over time.

Image 2.3: *Tree Again* **– Kurt Kren – Video Still**

I was drawn to his use of highly sensitive infrared color film and the variances it brought to the film. I explored my own sense of affecting a captured time-lapse in post-production to add an unexpected element that made the scene indecipherable. I was curious if it would still feel like a time-lapse, or become indiscernible. Using images already captured from an earlier time-lapse, I reduced the image's data rate down to an 8-bit influenced output and then shifted select aspects of exposure, saturation, hue and contrast. The result was an abstract exploration of time through light. It began to take on the appearance of microscopic levels of cells.

Image 2.4: *55 minutes – ECU Sunrise*

Image 2.5: *55 minutes – ECU Sunrise, Effected Version 4*
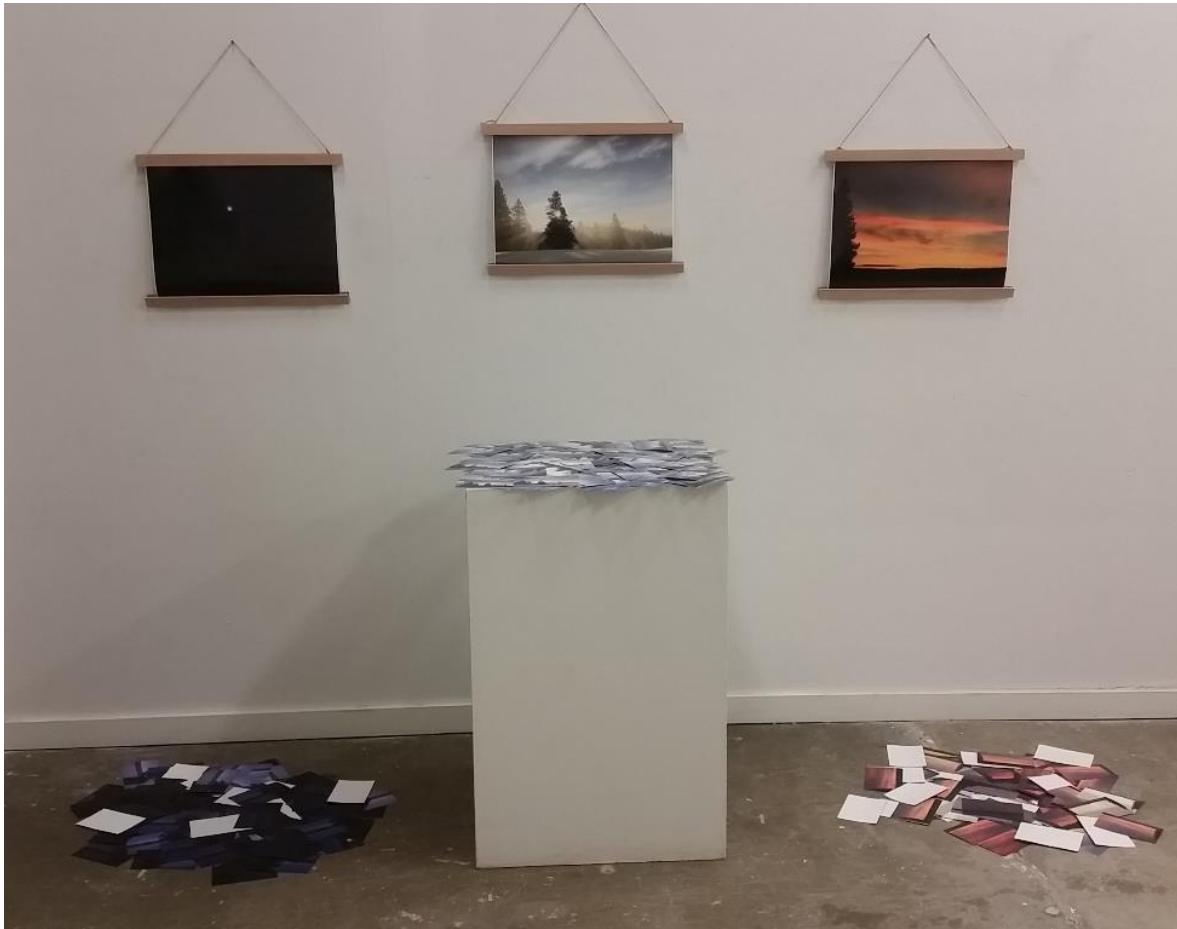
SECTION 3 - VARIED APPROACH TO TIME-LAPSE

Image 3.1: *When It Works* **– two failed and one successful time-laps**

Often, when a time-lapse scene did not work as expected, I felt a desire to discard the entire bank of photos that represented the time I considered a failure. The consideration of that wasted effort, that I had worked on something that would never see an audience, stuck with me as I continued to think on what my next approach could be. In most every time-lapse I shot, no matter the overall success or failure, I still felt there was at least one successful image – one exposure that aligned with what I had imagined. I wanted to showcase that successful image, but still share the mess of what became of the rest of the images. In *When It Works,* I shared the best, singular moment of three time-lapses on the wall, while including the "residue" of every

frame captured while I shot all three time-lapses. I printed 4x6's of every frame for each time-lapse, and I threw the prints of the failed time-lapses on the ground. I elevated those of the time-lapse I had considered successful, trying to add a greater value to them for the audience. Overall, this presentation did not feel as successful either, but seeing the pile of images discarded on the ground sparked new imagination on how to reflect on failures, on time, on memory and perhaps most importantly how society has come to value a picture.

In critiques, faculty often called on me to explore what the artistic point was when I shot time-lapse, challenging me to look outside of the final output and try to recognize the beauty of each moment spent in the wilderness that I was so fixated on. By removing the output (a completed time-lapse sequence), I could begin to peel back the real reason I loved shooting time-lapse. Those moments alone in nature gave me the freedom to let go of my other worries and explore my own mind through memories of moments new and old. Shooting time-lapse became more about self-healing and self-understanding than about the moments I was capturing. I came to accept why I enjoyed viewing these time-lapses so much - because of the memories they triggered in me. I was applying my own projections to them, achieving self-exploration while I had the freedom to focus on myself. I began to wonder about memory, and how we recall these moments that can mean so much to us at the time, and how those memories can be influenced or triggered by other memories.

After a blitz of shooting more time-lapses, I changed direction and built the shredded time-lapse machine – shredding each image as it was captured and immediately printed. This was about being in the moment, not about sharing those moments. The action became the work for the first time.

Image 3.2: *Shredded Time-Lapse Machine*

This felt fresh and exciting, but still didn't quite feel like home. The shredded content was beautiful, but I initially reacted to the waste as well as how we deal with being presented something that is destroyed immediately and what this represented as a value or memory.

It opened questions about the human desire to share moments with others, our own image and sense of self becomes immediately relatable when we consider what we are comfortable with sharing. Our perceived audience factors in to these decisions as we contemplate what they might bring to our experiences. I started to question why we may make the call to throw some images and entire stories away, or at least, never share them with others.

I settled in and built a new work that explored how an audience would engage with something that loosely merged the ideas of time-lapse and discarding photos immediately. This machine allowed the audience member to interact by voluntarily triggering the camera to take their own picture, then immediately printing and discarding the images captured into the trash. The audience was invited to collect their image to keep, or leave it with the work - most left it with the work.

Image 3.3: *Wasted Selfie*

SECTION 4 - SOCIAL SELF

As I reflected on the content people willingly volunteered to share with me through their participation in the Wasted Selfie project, I thought of what we deem appropriate for sharing and how social media has changed photography and our connection to images. How we establish our own self-worth and identity through photography has changed dramatically in a few short years - what effects it is making on human memory?

I began studying the works by Penelope Umbrico and how she was using her voluminous collections as a commentary on the ways society was changing its interactions with and opinions of images. According to the Bruce Silverstein Gallery ("Penelope"),

> "Umbrico… utilizes traditional photographic techniques along with various methods of appropriation and reproduction to explore how images are made and used in contemporary culture. Considering the wealth of images on the internet as a collective archive and portrait of society, Umbrico creates a body of work that navigates between consumer and producer, materiality and immateriality, and individual and collective expression."

It wasn't long ago in human history that we were reluctant to share our lives or ourselves with others. In today's fast paced social media infested environment, we are constantly making decisions on what will improve our social clout. We steer our lives based on the immediate feedback that a social media channel can provide. As I researched more about social media, I learned of our society's growing addiction and consumption of content on social networks. It has become harder to resist the urge to share on social media than it is to resist a cigarette (Meikle). Social media has become a physical addiction, which will ultimately change the course of life for almost everyone we know.

This addiction has only grown with each new channel to come online. We feel an urge and need to feed each of our different audiences with the content that they are most likely to engage with. They then comment, like, subscribe, follow or otherwise engage with our content, feeding the loop. Dopamine floods into our brain giving us a short high of self-satisfaction, momentarily boosting our own self-worth (Soat). But – as we continue to return for that same high, our

tolerance rises as the dependency builds, making the endorphin high dissipate. We give chase by seeking out more engagement from our audiences. We reconsider what we deem appropriate to share – we push our own established boundaries, which erodes away at the morals and standards we may have previously upheld ourselves to.

I started to dig deeper into my own social media use, and what my own threshold of appropriate content to share might be. In that review, I unveiled that I too had lowered my standards of what I initially thought was appropriate. In my early 20's, I lived more selfishly, and more for the engagement I received online rather than for my own true self. In my late 20's I could see myself shifting back to within my own comfort zone, writing my own story.

As I continued to review my own actions on social media, it became clear that I had recently come to rarely share *anything* on social media – I had edited myself out of the conversation. I still constantly engaged with others on the platforms I used (facebook and Instagram). I would hide behind my lack of content by appealing to others through engagements showing that I was still around, still relevant, still important. I was afraid of the content I did share, and my personal network's reaction to it. I feared it wouldn't be accepted, or that it would bring negative attention.

A portion of my sense of self-worth stemmed from the ability to control the narrative and hide the aspects I didn't feel comfortable sharing anymore. Social media was still allowing for me to continue to hide behind the selectiveness of my own version of stories. As part of this reflection, I ultimately decided to de-activate my social networks while I explored further and tried to gain a better understanding of my own addictions to them, but I wanted to capture one major component of my social network life before disappearing… I wanted to try to reconnect with the memory of the images I had shared.

Image 4.1: *Social Stack* **– Still from Video**

SECTION 5 – SHARING

In my observations, there has become a lack of interest in keeping tangible, physical copies of our own images. The general populous is not paying for photos to be printed anymore. This is evident in the disappearance of photo development facilities across the country (Clark). Our youngest generation is growing up without the experience of holding printed versions of memories in their hands, and it's changing the human relationship with photography and how we value imagery. Taking a photo is so simple by today's standard that we sometimes don't ever look at them after we've taken them. We often forget about the images we take or share, and we certainly have lost connection to the reality that they are in fact tangible and can be downloaded and printed.

I needed to explore my own social image history. Before I deactivated my account, I downloaded all 1,600+ images that I had uploaded to Facebook and printed them out (see image 5.1) at the familiar and nostalgic 4"x6" print size. The longer I was away from social media, the more artificial it became. These photos, these memories were tangible though – they represented a real moment in time, a true experience I felt worth sharing. Something beautiful began to happen when I viewed them from this perspective. My sense of memory from these images began firing off in rapid succession. Emotion boiled over as each picture quickly recalled a specific time, or triggered one of the five senses in my history. It was a strange feeling I hadn't experienced in a long time. A simple 4x6 print can represent a beautiful memory that awakens many of our senses. Beyond their visual beauty, they have a unique texture in hand, a specific sound as you flip through them and a chemical aromatic presence that is undeniable. This is a stark contrast the relationship most people have with photography in today's social media heavy environment.

Image 5.1: *Social Stack*

SECTION 6 - SHREDDED

I wanted to explore how I could impinge upon my own sense of memory further. Reflecting on the emotions and connections I experienced shooting time-lapses, and on the more visceral feelings I felt when I discarded or shredded people's own image, I chose to experiment with that deconstruction of memory. I settled on the idea to shred each of the 1,600+ images. I did so with intent, revisiting each photo beforehand and shredding each photo according to the original orientation of the image. This created a unique mix within the residue, which alone became an overwhelming sensory experience. Capturing video as I went about the process of shredding, mixing and shifting of the strips of memories, I could reflect on which images I spent more time with before sending them through the shredder. Sharing that video with the audience became a way for them connect with the weight of the work and understand what the process was. They can begin to imagine the volume of their own social sharing, and who might have access to some of the intimate moments that they may have forgotten about.

Images 6.1: *Shredded Self* **– Stills from Video**

After I completed the shredding, I sought out new stories. Unfamiliar moments left visible in the strips, or familiar moments stripped away from their original surroundings became a new journal to read.
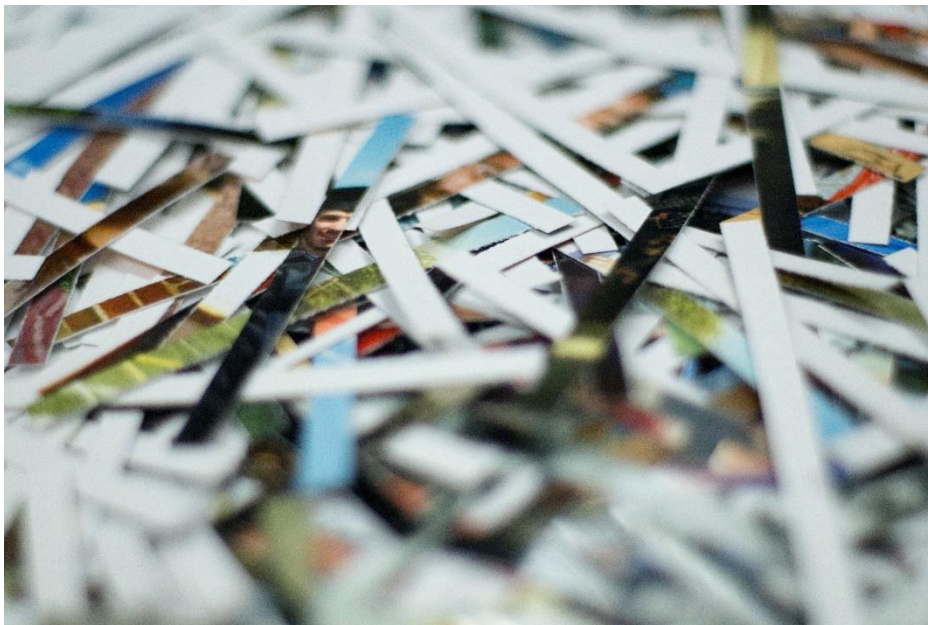
Image 6.2: *A Mess Of Things*

Image 6.3: *Thinking about Grandpa*

I began to mix and stir the remnants of the strip-shred images, which brought forth new possibility. Sifting through the content would create natural waves, which made for compelling imagery as moments in time came crashing together. The strips intertwined themselves, shaping new stories from old memories.

Images 6.4-6.6: Untitled explorations captured during the making process

The strips of memory called out to be reconstructed – to make permanent again. I explored by making 3D resin castings that included strips, but those felt too dense for the end goal of the work. I returned to the 4x6 form factor, and took a more 2D approach. I needed to feel how the physicality of their interaction could exist on its own, on a wall, and for an audience. I decided to create a resin coated "photograph". I chose resin to give the image it's familiar gloss finish to relate back to the original gloss prints, and to permanently bond these memories together. This process was cathartic in practice and relieving in completion. Committing the strips to a new form took away some of the endless possibility and consideration for the work. I purposely placed some strips but left much of the pieces to chance. As I poured the resin, sifted the strips, and compressed the final piece, I bound the stories contained within the strips to their final place. In *The Life You Lived In College,* There was a sense of closure that also felt a little uneasy – I had some buyer's remorse for the strips that now could no longer be pulled from. I wanted to explore more about what could be done to make something permanent, but still have the ability to move and manipulate the stories.

Image 6.7: *The Life You Lived In College*

I returned to the collection of strips and intuitively began isolating strips of memories to allow them to play off each other. That play made for interesting compositions that invited the viewer to try to find their own identity within the work. New stories began to formulate in my mind – I would relate the individual strips to the memories they represented, and allowed the stories to intersect with one another. I sought out faces, I sought out myself, I sought out landscapes, horizons, pets, colors, gradients… the parings felt infinite. In many cases, a singular strip would catch my eye, and I would spend time with it. Often, I could not recollect what photo these strips came from – they gave off an ethereal vibe that made me hang on to the time spent with them. These individual strips are what pushed me to dig deeper and find more ways to share these pieces of me with the rest of the world.

Image 6.8: *Feelin Faces*

Images 6.9-6.11: Untitled explorations captured during the making process

Image 6.12: *A Dream I Had Yesterday*

In looking for ways to share these new moments and natural compositions, I took to scanning the strips. This allowed me to generate higher quality images, which revealed the intimate markings left behind by the shredder on each strip, a mostly consistent but still unique imprint – much the same as the original photos imprinted me. These scans allowed me to explore the use of empty space, and give consideration to the shadows that could be created through the process. I continued down a deep dive as I searched for more pairings of strips. While on my hands and knees, I picked through them, sometimes intentionally seeking out moments that worked well together to tell new stories, or allowing the serendipity of the moment strike as I intuitively selected and scanned.

Titling them added a new and exciting stage to the development of the body of work. Once I had a number of photos and scans, I ordered low resolution prints in 4x6 to handle and work with as I developed titles and began to think about what they might look like in space with each other. The re-printing 4x6's of photos from the stripped material felt like the process was coming to completion. I wrote ideas of titles on the back of the prints to help work through the process of coming up with titles. The list of title ideas, along with scribbles and other notes on the backs of these prints became another interesting factor of the project. Because the photos

now contained strips from different times and memories, the scribbled notes felt so familiar, as if I were viewing the front and trying to identify everyone or everything in the image.
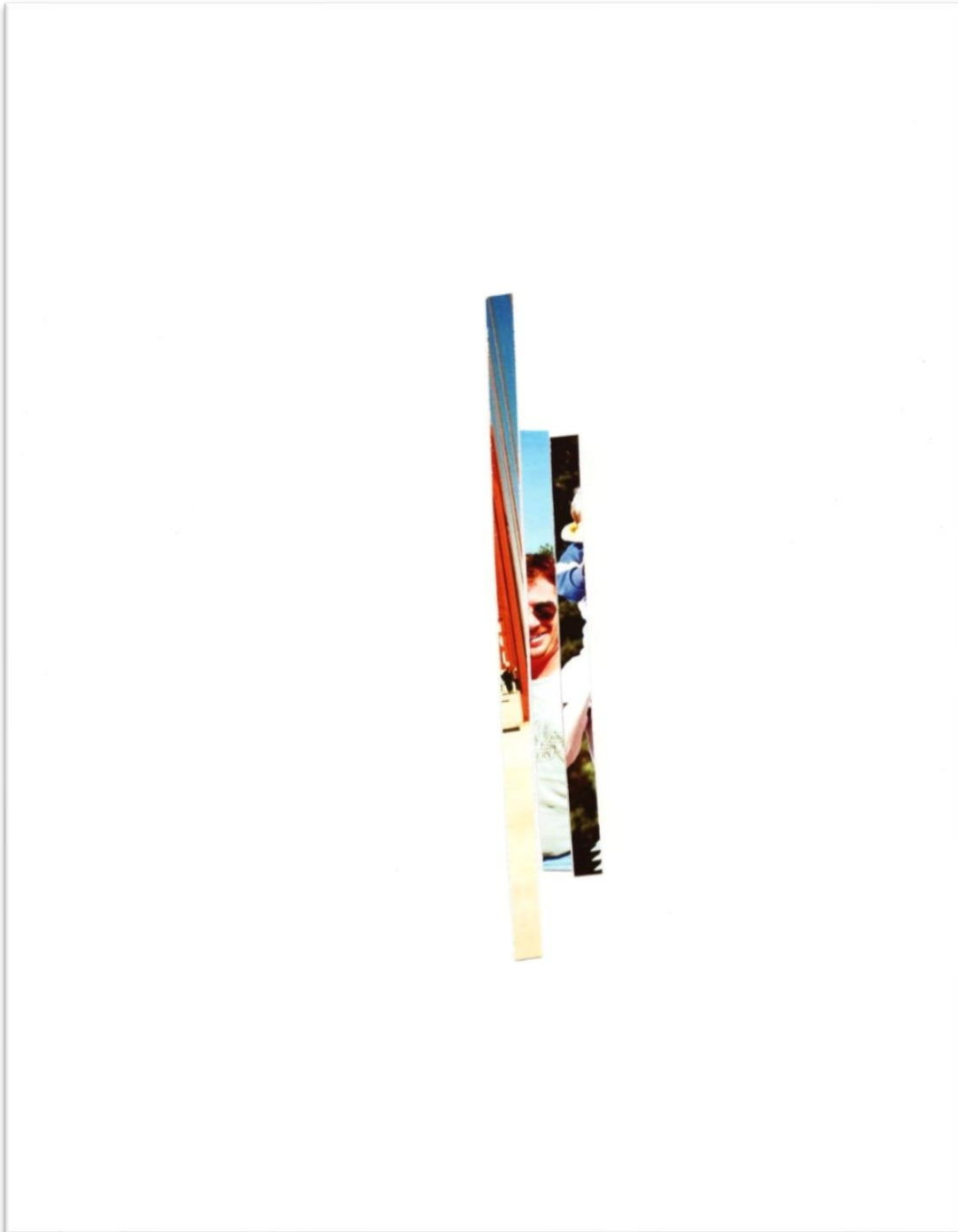

Image 6.13: *Dad, I Think*

In *Dad, I Think,* I found three strips from three different photos that were either taken by or had my father in them. Because I grew up with a stepfather from a young age as well, the title has a plurality of meaning to me. Both my Dad and Stepfather were in the Navy, and I did not see them often, which added to the confusion. Exploring the strips to find images and memories like this was valuable in that it gave me reason to pause and more wholly consider what life might have been like for the other people captured in these moments, at those specific times. What was Dad thinking about? What about Mom? And my step-father? What sorts of pains were they dealing with? This pairing pushed me to really think about the forces of emotion across everyone in the family, and how they might cope.

The title also reflects what might be written on the back of a photo found when thumbing through a collection originally held by our parents or relatives. This is one of the most common experiences people may still have with physical photos today. Thumbing through a collection after a family members death, or out of nostalgia during a get-together can bring up a lot of memories, and a lot of questions. Writing simple notes on the back of the photos gives us a reference point for the next time we revisit the image, or for the next person to stumble across it.

Image 6.14: *My Friends Just Got Engaged*

With *My Friends Just Got Engaged,* I was constantly finding pieces of photos that we all took during the build up to a friend popping the question. It became a collage of the memory – many strips focusing on the individuals who would eventually commit to life together forever. The original photos had obviously been shredded one after another, and so the strips remained grouped together on the floor, but what struck me was how they began mingling, how they became obscured, and what specific moment each little strip reminded me of that night, or what moments I had missed but were still captured forever. I learned more about that night from seeing these captured moments broken down, forcing me to focus on one sliver of one instance.

Those singular moments became the power behind this collection of work. Noticing the details of someone's face in a strip pushed me to try and think about what they might have been experiencing in that exact moment of time, what they might have been thinking, or how they might react to seeing this same strip. When looking through old photos, we often focus on our own memory of that experience, or our own interpretation of what was happening. Breaking the image out into smaller pieces caused me to approach these stories differently, considering in greater detail the whole moment from everyone's perspective.
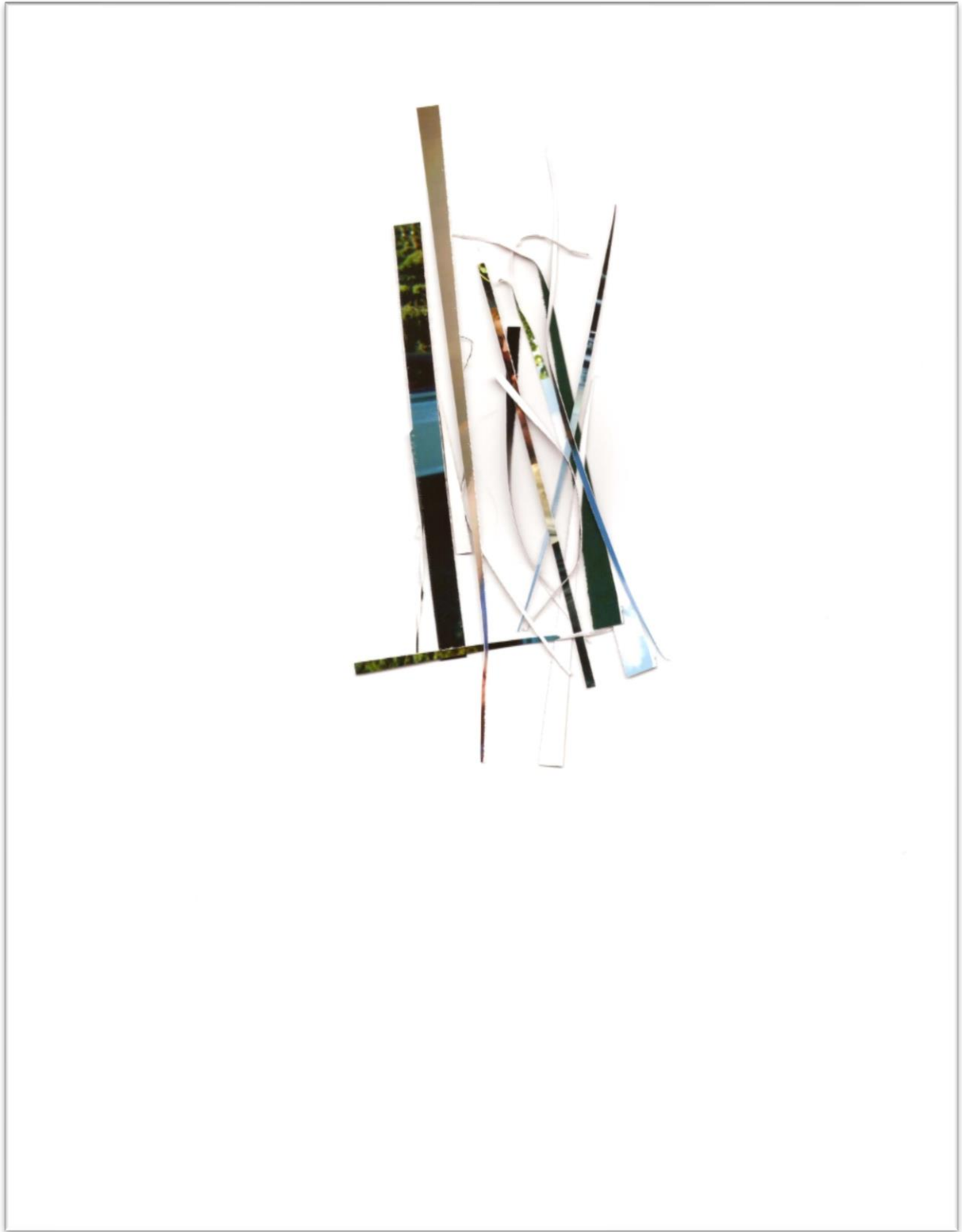
Image 6.15: *I Wonder What's Next?*

On *I Wonder What's Next?* I was reminded of work by John Stezaker. According to William Ewing, Stezaker's collage work "re-examines the various relationships to the photographic image: as documentation of truth, purveyor of memory, and symbol of modern culture" (Ewing). In *I Wonder What's Next?,* the way that these smaller, misshapen remnants of story overlapped or obscured others became almost controversial, adding tension and drama while focus was drawn back on strips that were indistinguishable from their original source. The confusion of trying to decipher content that is no longer formatted to make sense pushes the viewer to think critically and creatively to discover what parallels can be drawn with their own life. A questioning title encourages conversation both internally and externally as we work to understand how our brain processes memory and story.

CONCLUSIONS

This body of work feels alive with energy. The work is meant to inspire reflection on memory and how we recall it in the digital age. It has been telling to watch others interact and experience the content. Because these are photos that would have otherwise never been printed and never become tangible items for us to reflect on, it is a commentary on our detachment from the physical world. We are stripping ourselves of the experiences that physical images can bring and represent to us. It is a much different experience to hold a photo in your hands for viewing compared to recalling an image on a screen. It reminds the viewer that the things we put out on social media do exist and are accessible to others even when we aren't viewing them. They sit stacked on servers somewhere, with a lot less control than if they were printed and stored in your home. Beyond that though, it asks the audience to challenge themselves and reflect on their own memories, and how they may interact with each other in our minds. The things we have done have made us who we are, the whole of us is built upon our experiences and memories. How can we influence that through reflection on everything we have already lived and imagination on what may come next?

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