

*Uncertain Memory*

An Exhibition of Figurative Oil Paintings

by

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## AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

## ABSTRACT

*Uncertain Memory* features a series of figurative oil paintings on canvas and paper inspired by photographs from my family archive. My paintings are developed in stages; beginning with a process of mining and selecting specific images, which are then manipulated before being translated into paintings as works on paper or canvas. I focus primarily on female figures as I search for a sense of strangeness within each image as well as an uncertainty about the figure's actions or whereabouts in the scene. I am drawn to ambiguity as a means of exploring relationships between past and present, reflecting a personal need to establish a sense of identity and understanding of my family's past, as well as examining the universal and intimate relationship we have to photographic images.

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## UNCERTAIN MEMORY

Distance, connection, relation, and disconnection – these are commonly uttered words when I discuss my family. My knowledge of them is based on stories and photographs of times past – experiences that took place in Warsaw, Poland. Through listening to these stories an image comes to mind, not one I imagined on my own, but a particular image that I have seen before in a stash of loose photographs that live in a tin box. Like synapses of the mind when uttering a single word, a particular snapshot arrives for each story, each memory. Except this memory is not mine, it belongs to my mother, my grandmother; it is their experiences I look in on. I am the outsider who is welcome yet excluded.

The painting series, *Uncertain Memory* begins with my desire to recapture experiences found in the photographic image. Primary source material is selected from my family's collection of old photographs. This process of translation (photograph to painting) goes beyond merely copying the picture, but stems from photography's failure to articulate the interiority of the documented moment and the complexity of sensations experienced. I have a connection to these images that stems from a personal need to establish a sense of identity as well as to inherit the stories of my family's past. Through my interest in exposing a universal relationship we have to the photographic image, and that by painting the photograph, I am able to appreciate the documented moment with a profound sense of physical (through experiencing the image) and material (through painting the image) inclusion.



## MINING THE ANALOG PHOTOGRAPH

My process begins with mining through the tin box that is filled with personal family photographs. As I open the lid, I am overwhelmed with the scent of musty paper and the aging walls of a post-WWII era apartment in Warsaw. Age and analog photography implies an authenticity to these images; the subjects' emotions seem tangible. There is also sincerity in the physical nature of the photographs themselves, as delicate objects: some are torn, discoloured or curl inwards. These pictures take place (1950-1990) when there was a labour involved in developing photographs - in the same sense that there is a labour involved with painting.

My desire to render the memory infinite leaves me with the archival uncertainty of the two materials. I decide to trust in the durability of oil paint (proven to last longer than a photograph) to memorialize the picture. Also, there is the labour involved in painting through time and energy spent with the single image – evidence of time is ingrained in process.

Through painting I memorialize the image in a way that does not overbear the significance of the photograph, but highlights its worth. I see oil painting as a way to excavate the image by uncovering its depths with a brush. I use the brush as a tool to exhume a certain effect – insignificant details can be erased, movement is blurred, and tones blend to create soft flesh. Mimicking the process of early analog photography, I mainly use a monochromatic palette of hues and tones that are appropriate to the energy and subject matter of each image.

Once selected, I document the photo using a digital camera and make adjustments in Photoshop. I play with composition, crop, cut and paste, alter hues with colour filters, and bump up the contrast for dramatic effect. Using the adjusted image, I quickly paint a study on 11 by 14

inch sheet of gessoed paper. The study/sketch acts as a middle stage in the process, a deliberate pause. Sometimes the studies remain as they are, and sometimes they serve as source material for larger paintings on canvas. Through these modes of translation, I manipulate the paint and composition not only as a way to mimic the photograph's impenetrable surface but also reinterpret its meaning. As Roland Barthes explains, "The photograph is flat, I cannot penetrate or reach into it, I can only sweep it with my glance, like a smooth surface" (Barthes 106). The smooth surface satisfies this connection to wet oil paint, as it can be swept over with a brush into a low gloss finish.

I am interested in how the tin box contains a documented reality that exists perpetually in the past, yet feels so present. Presence can be found on the painted surface, where movement is captured through faint brushstrokes, smears, and blurs, which connect the viewer to the present moment and my process. Like a photograph, I see my paintings as captured moments, yet what differentiates them from the photographs are the physical layers, depth, and animation found on its surface. Painting also holds the ability to draw the viewer in. Scale, vibrancy/intensity, and number of works have the power to grasp those into its immediate surroundings.

What compels me to mimic the photograph are the captured actions, poses, expressions, and mannerisms of the people in the picture. I see old photographs as a reserve of paintable subject matter that serves as a time capsule to simpler, more candid experiences of life. I paint these photographs as a means to highlight the inviting authenticity of these experiences and as a way for the viewer (and myself) to concede in the fleeting moment.

I am also interested in the sensations that the subject or figure in the painting manifests through his or her recorded presence. The main figure in *Uncertain Memory* is my mother. In the original photographs she appears to be close to the same age as I am now (twenty-seven). In a way I am reversing estrangement as I strive to relate to and understand the young stranger in the photographs who became the mother I know. Through painting I wish to capture the likeness of the subject – the essence of her being. As Barthes explains, “all the photographs of my mother



which I was looking through were a little like so many masks; at the last, suddenly the mask vanished: there remained a soul, ageless but not timeless, since this air was the person I used to see, consubstantial with her face, each day of her long life. (Barthes 110)

A true portrait captures the air of one's soul; an imprint or shadow of that being. Technically, I construct this essence by blending the paint to give a blurred impression – an expression or look that is captured by its *air*. Through blurring, the air of a face is un-analyzable (Barthes 107-108). A vision of her is caught within movement, at the speed in which we envision that moment in time. “A body, face, and what is more, frequently, the body and face of a beloved person” authenticates the existence of a certain being (Barthes 107-108). Through painting I discovered that the *being* in the photograph forms an essence that goes beyond simple resemblance, and uncovers a living soul.

Figure 1 (page 4) Veronica Murawski, *Passport*, 2016, oil on canvas, 40.64 x 50.8 cm  
Figure 2 (page 6) Gerhard Richter, *Mother and Daughter*, 1965, oil on canvas, 180 cm x 110 cm



**Gerhard Richter** is one of the pivotal figures in the Painters of Modern Life, Post War, and New European art movements. His early figurative paintings are based on found photographs from advertisements, magazines, newspapers, and amateur family snapshots. Richter is known for his ability to capture the likeness of the person. His process of blurring his paintings employs a squeegee on the wet image effect; this pulled motion abstracts the photographic image, drawing attention to the materiality of oil paint. His works were coined “photo-pictures,” since he was interested in maintaining a resemblance to monochromatic photography, sometimes deviating little from his source of reference. Richter is also known for his famous archive project *Atlas* (1964- ) a collection, arrangement, and catalogue of personal and found images, that he not only used as source material, but has also displayed as an exhibition and as a bound, hardcover publication. Richter believes found photography provides a mine of readily available source material that can be used for painting at any time.

My work relies on our ability to ascertain objects or cues as personally and universally familiar. This idea is supported by my understanding of Kant’s theory of *phenomena* and *noumena*, which claims that our experiences reside in a facet of the familiar. It is vital to distinguish between the distinct realms of phenomena and noumena. *Phenomena* are the appearances, which constitute our experience, and *Noumena*<sup>1</sup> are the presumed things themselves, which constitute reality and exist outside of ourselves (Kant). These distinct realms

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<sup>1</sup> Kant’s term can refer to photograph as *Noumena* – A thing outside of ourselves —an example of this would be a found family photograph, which contains events I was not present for; as they occurred before my time. A photograph could be considered *a-thing-in-itself* since it contains events that occurred outside of my personal experience. These separate realms of experience; before my time, after my time, and as I have lived it, allow me to relate experiential knowledge to old photographs through the act of looking.

exist simultaneously in our everyday world.<sup>2</sup> They can be actual lived experiences that determine how we navigate or perceive daily life. For example, a traumatic experience with an animal or automobile could alter our connection to that particular thing, forever associating it with the sensation of dread, fear, or avoidance. On the other hand, more joyous occasions that commonly take place in the company of loved ones, such as an annual camping trip or holiday gathering, are associated with experiences of joy.

One example of a navigational aid is our relationships to photographs and their ability to contextualize memories from our past. Virginia Woolf discusses how there is strength in a picture that connects to our sensorial experience of the world, she writes, “Sight was then always so much mixed with sound that picture is not the right word – strength anyhow of these impressions makes me again digress. Those moments in the nursery, on the road to the beach – can still be more real than the present moment.” (Woolf 67). Memories can become so vivid – so real that they form into part of our being. These recollections, like photographs, serve as portals to particular moments that perpetually define who we are: our preferences (likes and dislikes), our emotional response (fears or joy) – experiences that influence how we navigate both the past and present.

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<sup>2</sup> Kant believes that the mind must accept understanding from a phenomenal and noumenal standpoint since it contributes to our personal scope of knowledge and how we perceive the world.



Figure 3: Veronica Murawski, *Last One*, 2015, oil on canvas, 182.88 x 151.13 cm



An image's sensorial output has the ability to trigger sensations such as nostalgia, joy, fear, and boredom, and reason prompts us to relate these images to our emotions. As "place is understood experientially," (Trigg 6) it is a result of personal experience gained by interacting with natural environments.

The physical act of painting photographs allows me to insert myself into their time and place, and my understanding of the landscape depends on past interactions with natural environments, such as water, fields, sand, and sun. Through painting (i.e. spending time with the scaled image), I re-enact the actions, events, and sensations that occurred, first within the historical moment, then second within the documented image, and third within painting.

By revisiting the photographs again and again, I discover something that goes beyond exploring my own past; I notice a deeper empathy for those within the photos. Through experiential knowledge and the act of looking, I adopt their memory as my own. There is a familiarity to interacting with photographs from the past, and to live vicariously through another being. Painting permits a deeper empathy through time spent with a single image, a way to gratify the intensity of the scene. By painting the photograph, the memory forms into part of my being, which at times can seem more real, more engaging than many present day experiences.

This concept of eliciting emotion from an image emerges from our inherent ability to connect familiar aspects of photography and apply it to our concept of time and memory. The figure in the picture acts as a catalyst, as *she* navigates the environment within the painting. Our ability to empathize with the people in any given scene grants us the capacity to live through the subject within the painting. By depicting the figure, "I am immediately returned not only to a specific time but also a particular mode of embodiment" (Trigg XIV). Thus, by relying on

intuition; through phenomena and noumena, imagination, and experience, we permit ourselves to experience these sensations through the figure.

## MEMORY

Throughout my life I remember shuffling through these old photographs, and in the process I would inadvertently jumble the order – an order that my mother would painstakingly restore time and time again. This restoration of picture-memory developed a sequence, as she discerned time by faces (and ages) of people within the photographs. Based on her own memory and the memory of reordering, she attempts to maintain her constructed perception of linear, lived time.

I am interested in the spatiality of memory, and how time can alter our perception of reality. “An approach to memory can be drawn, which relies less on linearity and more on a constellation of different perspectives...Memory is inherently spatial, so spatiality is inherently temporal, occupying a place in the present but stretching back to the past” (Trigg XVII). Like photographs, memory can be vast, scattered, out of order, and affected by time. It can be a random order of events – like pictures that fall out of chronological order. We rely on images to recollect and re-assemble pieces of the past based on our understanding of how time unfolds.

Images from *Uncertain Memory* are treated as pieces from my memory, from image selection, to painted study, to painted canvas. Within these three stages, my larger task is to reassemble these pieces/memories in order to become more acquainted with my truer self. Since the past always exists simultaneously with the present, memories have the ability to teleport us to a specific time and place within our present mind set.

Affected by nostalgia, I intrude into the timeframe of these events. My paintings do not exist in order; they are unsystematic like scattered photographs, however the connections between the paintings are not coincidental. Although the images are carefully chosen for their

composition and ambiguity, every piece shares a subliminal relationship to the other that can be only witnessed through complete unification of the work(s). As John Berger describes, “The meaning of an image is changed according to what one sees immediately beside it or what comes immediately after it.” (Berger 29)

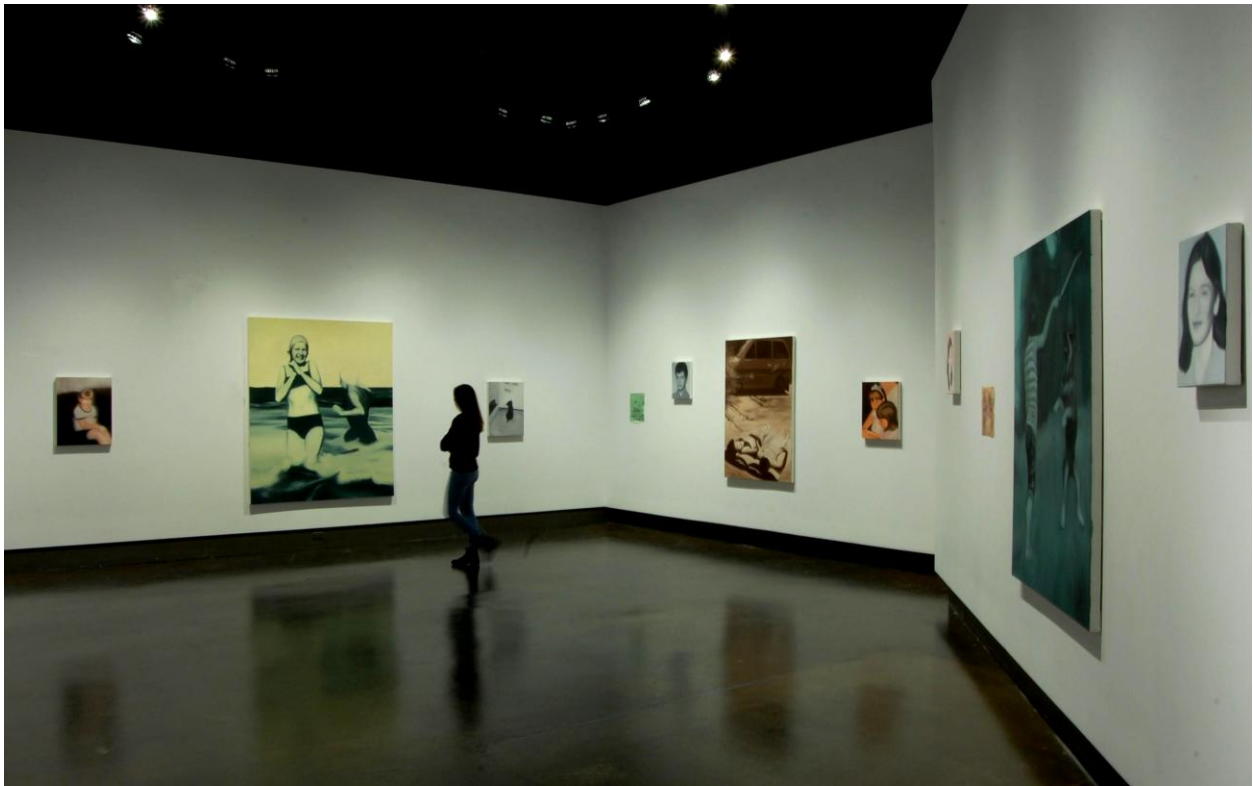


Figure 4: Veronica Murawski, *Uncertain Memory* (installation shot) UWAG, April, 2016



Figure 5: Veronica Murawski, *One and the Same*, 2016, oil on canvas, 101.6 x 83.82 cm

## THE PUNCTUM

In “Camera Lucida: Reflection on Photography”, Roland Barthes discusses the *punctum* as “the detail” (Barthes 47) that strikes interest. It is a delightful yet peculiar element that reveals itself and occurs outside the viewer’s control. What I seek within the selected photograph is the *detail*; an indiscernible, humorous, or strange element. An example of this can be seen in *One and the Same*, where the front leg of the girl is indistinguishable from the leg of the cow. Reason tells us that this mythical girl/cow creature cannot be true. The striking detail within this photograph is the lack of separation between the markings of the cow and the girl’s dress. The contrasting monochromatic magenta hues merge highlights and shadows as though human and bovine are combined. It is an unsettling, or humorous aspect of an ordinary scene; an “augmented familiarity” that contains facets of the familiar and unknown (Trigg 27).

This process is related to figurative painter **Marlene Dumas**. She believes paintings are not images, and that by using photographs; the painter is more interested in images than actual lived experience. Dumas embraces the ambiguity of the image, and states that the photograph can only come to life through the viewer, and through the process of looking (Rugoff 121). She describes her works as ‘second-hand images’ that can generate first-hand emotions. Although she never paints directly from life, Dumas expresses life in all its complexity on the canvas. In an age dominated by the digital image and mass media, Dumas cherishes the physicality of the human touch with work that is a testament to the meaning and potency of painting (121).

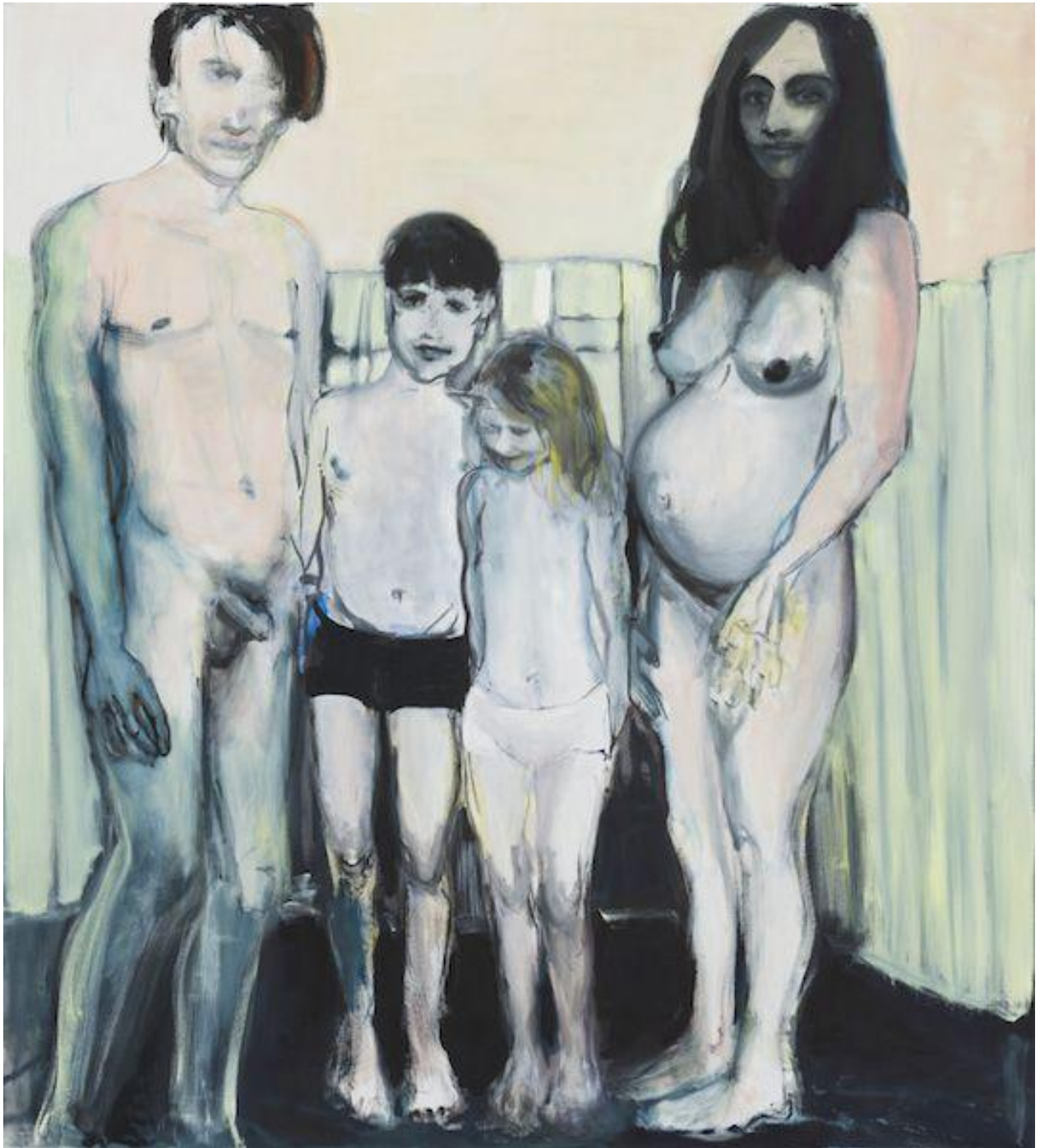


Figure 6: Marlene Dumas, *Nuclear Family*, 2013 oil on canvas, 200 x 180 cm

In *Memory of Place: the Phenomenology of the Uncanny*, Dylan Trigg states, “A photo is found, at once is familiar and unfamiliar. A gaze, a place or a person is returned, but now conditioned by a fundamental absence, full of empty pathos. Yet the emptiness is the movement in itself, generating a dynamic animation” (Trigg XXII). Through found photographs, the anonymity and strangeness comes from its familiarity as well as its ambiguity, which constitutes its ability to turn the mundane into the extraordinary.

Barthes discusses the *new punctum* – which is of time and the lacerating emphasis of the *noeme* – the essence of the photograph, containing ‘that has been’, in its pure representation (Barthes 96). The photograph contains purity in the sense that it *was* a pure moment in the past; one that could never be retrieved or re-experienced in the same way. Thus, there is a sense of loss, a melancholy surrounding found photographs, and photographs of the past – isolated images removed from their narrative arcs. Placed in stasis – they are fixed and preserved in time. This lost image contains the semblance of major themes such as youth, leisure, the passing of time, and death, which instills a melancholic longing for times past. Barthes claims this *new punctum* contains the awareness of our own mortality.



## RELATIONSHIP TO PHOTO-IMAGES

My use of analog photographs as a source for my paintings stems from my relationship to images and their value in the modern world. As a result of digital technology, the high volume, consumption and production of low quality images corrupts our association with photographs as precious objects.

My choice to use analog photographs comes from their temporal/candid disposition, an effect seldom found in the digital world. Today, family photographs are hidden in digital files, where pictures of children and friends often seem contrived in their digital state. This mass accumulation disconnects us from the romantic practice of developing photography, a manual process that came with the uncertainty of proper exposure and development. There is a true candidness found within analog photographs – a process that predates instant gratification and the privilege of isolating and deleting unacceptable parts of our lives, controlling the reality of how we are perceived.

Image-makers attempt to reflect the world, as they perceive it. Both painting and photography have the ability to crop, alter, adjust, and redefine the content within the image. Elements within single images can be seamlessly deleted, moved, emphasized, juxtaposed and even joined with other photographic fragments (Urry and Larsen 174). Thus, the accountability of an image will always remain in question. Both painting and photography can be manipulated to create different versions of reality; a fictional realism based on true moments and events involving people interacting with some aspect of the known. The truth of an image would side with the photograph as more accountable to the reality it depicts, than a painting, as Susan Sontag explains, “A photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image), it is an

interpretation of the real; a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask; While a painting, even one that meets photographic standards of resemblance, is never more than the stating of an interpretation” (Sontag 154). But what of a combination between the photograph as *real* and the painting as *interpretation*; does this grant the ability to manipulate the meaning into its own account?

By painting the photograph, I have the ability to augment reality; I can separate myself from fact and construct my own interpretation. Sometimes I do not wait for the ‘detail’ to reveal itself like Barthes’ punctum – I find that the most mundane photograph requires the least intervention. Either the ‘detail’ is already present within the photograph, allowing me to work directly from the source. Or I compose the ‘detail’, by adjusting the image in Photoshop, or moving people and objects around to offset the composition. Like in the painting, *Exterior Scene* – where the pointed roof of the house aligns itself to frame the girl’s head. I manipulate the content, thereby forming a new narrative, or perhaps to indicate a memory that has skewed over time.



Figure 7: Veronica Murawski, *Exterior Scene*, 2015, oil on canvas, 40 x 50 cm

Consequently, by distorting the image through paint, the reality or content within the image is changed. This action, in a way, separates the image from the source and becomes a

thing on its own – a thing that amplifies the photograph, where in its physical, therefore ultimate state, ends.

I believe figurative or representational painting has more capacity to persuade the viewer to accept its reality – not in an attempt to manipulate the viewer, but perhaps to manipulate the reality within the image. Many figurative painters have come to understand photography as material acquisition or an aid when it comes to painting the representational world. “Through image-making and image-duplicating machines; we can acquire something as information, rather than experience. The importance of photographic images as the medium through which more and more events enter our experience is only a byproduct of their effectiveness in furnishing knowledge dissociated from and independent of experience” (Sontag 121). Brian Dillon’s article, *The Painting of Modern Life*, discusses how painting responds to photography and how the revival of representation steered the painter’s attention to the readily available material. “The painting appropriates (or repudiates) the clarity (or obscurity) of the photograph, restages (or refuses) it’s fleeting engagements with the real, approaches (or blanks) its embrace of the instant” (Dillon 93).



Figure 8: Johanna Kandl, *O.T. (out of fashion)*, 2009, oil on tempura, 30 x 42 cm

**Johanna Kandl** uses images from her gigantic photographic archive. She believes that photographs, ‘as themselves’ are too static, boring, or slow, but believes they make great material for painting – although once interpreted, Kandl’s paintings lose the accidental quality of the original snapshot (Kandl qtd in Rugoff 151). Kandl states, “My paintings often portray scenes in Central and Eastern Europe; for some people, these paintings seem to create lost or damaged memories” (151).

I consider my source material as a partial archive. As a closed system it functions like an archive (i.e. no photos have been added since the early 90s), but its lack of cataloguing and jumbled, unsystematic arrangement make it seem more like a collection. This partial archive is

the material evidence of family memory, and my fascination surrounding archives comes from longing, and the practice of preserving memory, identity, and time through the accumulation of personal family photographs, all of which provide a rich foundation for painting.

Photography came along to memorialize, to restate symbolically, the imperiled continuity and vanishing extendedness of family life. As ghostly traces, photographs supply the token presence of dispersed relatives. A family's photo album is generally about the extended family – and, often, is all that remains of it. Many photographs portray joyful moments and familial togetherness with no trace of sadness or friction, and we often look to family photographs as a means of returning to a former time, whether it is within our own lives, such as a former home, or to one's family life through imagination (Urry and Larsen 180). The core desire is the sentimental yearning for a former time and place, where popular "Kodak Moments" enable families to story their experiences and transport themselves to the sunshine and freedom, again and again (172).

Images provide an imaginary possession of the past – one that can be unreal, disconnected, or ceases to exist (Sontag 9). I take this position as a generationally removed family member. Without the historical context, I can only assemble a vague narrative from evidence and assumption, but I also buy into nostalgia. There is a certain romantic idea of the past, an escapist element that I willingly embrace. Like a mini-vacation, I pretend to live in another time because our current time can be too much to bear. Through photographs, I look to the past as I only see moments of joy. It is a fabricated joy though, as I am ignorant of emotions occurring outside of these images, political unrest, and their own desire to escape their current state.

## THE GAZE: FAMILY, TOURIST, AND FEMALE PERSPECTIVE

*“The gaze demarcates an array of pleasurable qualities to be generated at particular times and spaces. It is the gaze that orders and regulates the relationships between the various sensuous experiences while identifying what is visually out of the ordinary, what are relevant differences and what is the ‘other’ (Urry and Larsen 14).*

Through our voyeuristic relation to the world, images have changed how we perceive reality, and the act of capturing subjects cannot exist without its relationship to the viewer and their role as the voyeur. The act of photographing is more than passive observing...it is a way of at least tacitly, often explicitly, encouraging whatever is going on to keep on happening. To take a picture is to have an interest in things as they are, in the status quo remaining unchanged (Sontag 12).

When rendering the figure in my paintings, I immediately acknowledge the role of the audience/voyeur. I have the ability to distort the viewer’s perspective by manipulating the composition through certain framing and cropping techniques. “These techniques create the conditions for screening and narrative conventions, giving the spectator the illusion of looking into a private world” (Sontag 12).

I situate the gaze to simulate the effects of nostalgia as a method of escape, this concept correlates to Larsen and Urry’s writings of the *tourist gaze*. The *tourist gaze* is associated with the act of capturing pleasure, holidays, tourism and travel, and how, for short periods of time, people leave their normal place of work and residence to travel (Urry and Larsen 1). Berger discusses the viewer’s *ways of seeing*, that is framed by individual culture, personal experience,

and how memory affects the ways in which we perceive the thing captured as “we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves” (Berger 1972 qtd in Urry and Larsen 9).

My works contain the *family gaze* which suggests how much tourist photography revolves around producing loving family photographs set within distinct visual environments (Urry and Larsen 20). Such a gaze can be captured in a photograph, printed on postcards, recorded as video, and for me, painted.

Through painting I daydream, my mind travels to the site of the image. I recreate the essence of the scene in a way that emphasizes how it’s affected by memory over time (i.e. the paint mimics the cross-processing<sup>3</sup> effects of film; the tones alter and blend to saturated hues with higher contrast, which suggests camera blur and overexposure).

Sight was long viewed as the noblest of the senses, the most discriminating and reliable of the sensuous mediators between humans and their physical environment (Urry and Larsen 18). The subjective gaze within my paintings is shaped through the perspective of the female figure; as she navigates her familiar environment we observe her interactions with other people, animals, and the natural landscape. Our understanding of the environment and her character can be felt through her interactions, and the way in which the environment shifts to absorb her in return. “Scale, space, stories are all anthropomorphic. Here curiosity and the wish to look intermingle with a fascination with likeness and recognition: the human face, the human body,

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<sup>3</sup> Cross Process – There are two types of colour film chemistry: C-41 (for colour negatives) and E-6 (for colour slides). Cross processing is, essentially, dunking unprocessed film in the “wrong” chemistry for its film type. When colour slide film is cross-processed in C-41 chemistry, the resulting images have deeply saturated colours and high contrast – both photographic qualities coveted by Lomographers worldwide. (Unknown)



the relationship between the human form and its surroundings, and the visible presence of the person in the world” (Mulvey 17).

These works are seen from a female’s perspective – my personal and cultural perspective. Being raised predominantly by women, it is my most familiar position/perspective. In the realm of feminine relationships – mother, sister, daughter and friend – I wish to honour them as a network of support within my own personal life. As a result, the figures in my paintings are mostly the adolescent female: my mother.



Figure 9: Veronica Murawski, *Canopy*, 2015, oil on canvas, 96.52 x 142.24 cm

In a way, I address the “gaze” from a feminine perspective, not in the sense that ‘voyeurism’ objectifies the women within the paintings, but as a way of reinterpreting the definition of the “male-gaze,” by dismantling the dominant order or structure in the “ways of seeing and pleasure in looking” (Mulvey 15). As a female figurative painter, I am reclaiming the gaze from its masculine connotation to embrace a feminine point of view. I paint the feminine subject as the protagonist within my works, and we observe her with charm. She is kind hearted and boyish, holds an air of confidence, and is free as though on summer break. I reinterpret the traditional depiction of the female body in the history of painting and reverse it to face back at the audience. My intent is not to depict the female as the object of the directed gaze, but as the main subject within the event – a protagonist that liberates her role within a picture. She manifests the experience, and the way in which we navigate the painted landscape is guided through her presence.

## WHERE I STAND: PAINTERS OF MODERN LIFE, POST WAR, AND NEW EUROPEAN PAINTING

The most important aspects of my work are my relationships to personal family photographs, found images, and the investigation process in which I explore the photograph through the medium of oil paint. In terms of relating my practice to contemporary artists, I believe my work closely aligns itself with a group known as the *Painters of Modern Life*. A movement that arose in the 1960's, and includes painters such as Gerhard Richter, Elizabeth Peyton, Luc Tuymans, and Marlene Dumas. These painters believed in appropriating photography as direct material reference in order to pay attention, capture, and reproduce the fast changing world around them. This approach stemmed from the French poet/critic Charles Beaudelaire's essay, *the Painter of Modern Life*, which challenged contemporary painters to take up the role of capturing the "transient, fleeting, and contingent" aspects of modern day life (Rugoff 12). During the time of Greenberg, when non-referential modernist art dominated the scene, painters of modern life sought to free themselves from modernist trends by breaking away from abstraction towards a more figurative or representational take on reality. The idea of 'making pictures' was a shift that occurred when painters began appropriating images from newspapers, advertisements, historical archives, and amateur snapshots, diving into a world of contemporary archives and limitless subject matter. The painters of modern life discovered a way of balancing traditional modes of painting and concepts found in modernism and the avant-garde through the appropriation of found modern-day sources, granting them the ability to contextualize modern day reality as they witnessed its unfolding.

In my own work, I do not necessarily desire to break free from modes of abstraction, since there are certain undeniable abstract qualities found in analog photographs, such as the flatness and the lack in depth of field that I capture through painting. Needless to say, I believe that figurative painting still holds prevalence in contemporary life, and I have a strong desire to participate in its revival.

For the same reason, I do not wish to conceal the process in which I use the photographic image as an aid in my practice. Many representational painters of this movement did not hide or discredit the role of the photograph, but instead embraced the processes and devices used within their paintings. While acknowledging the nature of the source, I believe that in order to witness the deeper complexity of an image, it must be translated into a painting. Even the most mundane subject matter contains layers worth investigating.



Figure 10: Elizabeth Peyton, *Jackie and John (Jackie fixing John's hair)*, 1999, oil on board, 35.6 x 27.9 cm

**Elizabeth Peyton's** image selection process begins with her choosing images from a collection of pictures that she can't shake from her mind. These images reveal an aspect of the subject that is elemental to that person within their context/time frame. Peyton is interested in the mundane events and activities of the subject's lives, since it says so much about them and their current condition. Through her selection process, Peyton believes that certain images/paintings have the ability to contain emotions that can be distilled over a period of time.

I can relate to Peyton through this manipulation, as there is power in appropriation, a power that employs manipulation as a tool to tell an entirely new narrative that changes the picture's reality.

I have come to realize that the process of translating inevitably changes the meaning of the image. As Rugoff states, “(there is) the action, and consequences, of translating imagery from one medium to another...Rather than simply drawing on photography as a source of subject matter... but examining how the meaning and information content of a photographic image inevitably changes when it is reinvented as the subject of a canvas” (Rugoff 13). This change does not necessarily dismantle its relationship to photography, but blurs the lines of depiction, and modifies the reality of the image; unveiling a deeper understanding of its content.

The process and concepts in my paintings deal with images from my family's past through the appropriation of historical archives and photography. This closely aligns to the process and materials of New European/ Post War painters. The movement emerged in the 1980s in Europe and in the United States, and continues to create a new dialogue between historical archive and figuration. This newer form of painting relates to the parallel practice of turning personal and historical photographic archives into art, and appropriating new and old materials through photography and oil painting. The major New European and Post War painters of this era show strong engagements with the personal and general painful shared history, memory, and existence after WWII. Artists such as Gerhard Richter were part of the first wave that emerged. A second wave included painters such as Luc Tuymans and Marlene Dumas, and a third wave came with painters such as Michaël Borremans.

In a way I imagine my practice aligning itself with a fourth wave of New European Painting. As a first generation Canadian, I am far removed from the context of Post WWII memory, but share the same interest in culture, subject matter, and appropriation of historical photo sources. This stems from my fascination with family history, and how I am indirectly associated with its framework. Like many New European/Post War painters, my source images stem from past photographs – old family archives, amateur snapshots, and in my case, a stash of loose pictures in tin boxes that have been in my family’s home for decades. I have always been aware of these pictures. I remember shuffling through them, and attempting to distinguish the content. They are mainly comprised of recreational snapshots, certain milestones and everyday occurrences of my family's life in Warsaw (under communist rule).

I believe that there is a similarity linked to painting and analog photographs in a number of ways. One is through physicality, which permits us to collect and stow images. I refer to images as both photographs and paintings, in numbers. Also, working with the physical photograph means working with, and preserving its delicate nature. As Sontag states, “photographs are fragile objects, easily torn or mislaid” (Sontag 4). My sentiment towards analog photographs is how they provide us with a glimpse of a former time. There I took the opportunity to revive the lost image and reinterpret it for modern eyes. In my paintings, the materials work together in unison to achieve these grounds. Where photographs provide an unlimited amount of source material for painting; painting slows down the process by which we experience the image, establishing the firm connection between physical interactions, genuine emotion, and memory.



Being surrounded by the works in *Uncertain Memory*, I reconnect to childlike imagination and play. Where my past interactions allow me to see, feel, and respond to emotions of the subjects, and sense the environment within the image. Painting allows me to participate in the experience. I reflect as I portray their stories. There is a sense of inclusion or closeness to the individuals in the pictures, along with a heightened sentimentality or longing for human relationships (especially for those captured in the *family gaze*). The intent in *Uncertain Memory* is to convert experience into an image, and to bridge the gap between subjective and universal experience. “I democratize experience by translating them into images, in an attempt to capture knowledge and experience in order to make shared or familiar experiences accessible to all” (Sontag 7). *Uncertain Memory* can be seen as preserving the past. I see it as a way to reflect on our present state, to bring an awareness of the self, and how we interact with the things that have always been around, but distant to us.

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