



Memory in photography

Case Studies: Hollie Askew, "Belongings" and Yasmin Robinson, "Family Portrait".

Oxana Bischin (School of Languages, Cultures, Art History and Music)

Memory in Photography

With examples from Hollie Askew's "Belongings" and Yasmin Robinson's "Family Portrait".

The photographs in this pack were produced in workshops delivered at Sandwell Colleges as part of the AHRC-funded project *Post-Socialist Britain: Memory, Migration and Political Identity among German, Polish and Ukrainian Immigrants in the UK*.

Since its inception photography has been used as a medium and tool for showcasing, recording and remembering, thus memory sits at the very core of this practice. As such the connection between "memory" and photography is not a new one but in fact one that is as old as the medium itself.

Key terms for the discussion of memory in photography

Traces (in photography): the term has many meanings and applications. In the context of photography, the word "trace" (as defined by the 2012 Macquarie Dictionary) means "a mark, token, or evidence of the former presence, existence or action of something; a vestige". The verb "to trace" implies a deliberate action, that is, to follow. It may also refer to a fragment of something or an impression left by something (Nevin, 2013). When considering photography, we can think of photographs as traces but also of traces as a subject of photography (e.g., a photograph of a fossil, a footprint in the sand or a shadow is a trace of a trace)

Discussion: Think of and name a few other examples of traces in photography.

Further reading: Daniel Nevin, [Photography and the paradigm of the trace](#)

Indexicality (in photography): indexicality refers to the physical relation between the object photographed and the image finally created. The image on the photographic negative derives from the transformation of light sensitive emulsion caused by light reflecting off the object photographed, filtered through the lens and diaphragm. "Indexicality" involves a continuing sense of the relation between the photograph and a pre-existing reality (Gunning, 2004).

Further reading: [Tom Gunning, What's the Point of an Index? or, Faking Photographs.](#)

Truth-claim: in photography, "truth-claim" is a term Tom Gunning uses to describe the prevalent belief that traditional photographs accurately depict reality. He states that the truth-claim relies on both the indexicality and visual accuracy of photographs.

Discussion: Thinking about the "truth-claim" – discuss in class what you consider to be arguments for and against it.

Personal/individual memory: individual memory is defined as a personal interpretation of an event from one's own life. It is good to note that although the term

“individual” does imply that the personal outlook is the only one contributing to memory formation, it is better to refer to it rather as the “principal or main one”. As social beings, for an outlook to be the “only one” contributing to memory formation is virtually impossible. The social groups with which the individual identifies unquestionably influence their opinions, beliefs, and attitudes (Brandon 2010). When it comes to personal memory and photography, an easy example that comes to mind in the era of social media is the “selfie”, but we might also think about personal archives. Experiences documented by people through photography can also easily be classified as an example of personal memory.

Discussion: Family albums – are they representative of personal memory or collective memory and why?

Further reading: [Sara Hanneman, Individual vs. Collective Memory](#)

Collective memory: refers to the shared pool of memories, knowledge and information of a social group that is significantly associated with the group's identity. Collective memory can be constructed, shared, and passed on by large and small social groups. These groups can include nations, generations, and communities, among others (Roediger and Abel, 2015; Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi and Levy, 2011; Hirst and Manier, 2008).

A good example of photography impacting collective memory is that of photojournalists documenting events that have had a profound impact on a group of people and their collective experience. Another good example is represented by photography archives which are often established and organised by a group of individuals in the effort to preserve the collective memory of an event that affected a group of people. Such resources also often comprise materials gathered from the community directly impacted by the event (e.g., the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum photo archive).

By documenting these experiences and reproducing the photos depicting them, documentary photography and photojournalism can sometimes produce images that later gain through association and repetition a symbolic or iconic status in relation to the events they depict. A good example is that of Robert Capa's “Falling Soldier” (depicting a republican soldier dying in one of the battles taking place during the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939) which came to symbolise this war in collective memory.

Postmemory: “postmemory” is a notion introduced by Marianne Hirsch that refers to the belated, indirect and non-experiential responses to a range of traumas, usually by the second generation (Hirsch, 2014). Hirsch first coined the term to describe how children of Holocaust survivors were indirectly influenced by the experience of their parents or even grandparents, including through the sharing of photographs. (Roca Lizarazu, 2020).

Further reading: [Maria Roca Lizarazu, Postmemory](#)

Case Studies

Next we will take a look at two case studies where photographers have integrated the theme of personal memory in their work while examining how they address this through their technical and compositional choices. These photographs were produced by two students as part of “Memory in Photography” workshops delivered to Sandwell Colleges in 2022, based on the ideas presented in this resource pack.

Case Study I: Hollie Askew, “Belongings”



FIGURE 1 – © HOLLIE ASKEW, “BELONGINGS #1”, INKJET PRINT, VARIOUS SIZES, 2022



FIGURE 2 – © HOLLIE ASKEW, "BELONGINGS #2", INKJET PRINT, VARIOUS SIZES, 2022



FIGURE 3 – © HOLLIE ASKEW, "BELONGINGS #3", INKJET PRINT, VARIOUS SIZES, 2022



FIGURE 4 – © HOLLIE ASKEW, "BELONGINGS #4", INKJET PRINT, VARIOUS SIZES, 2022

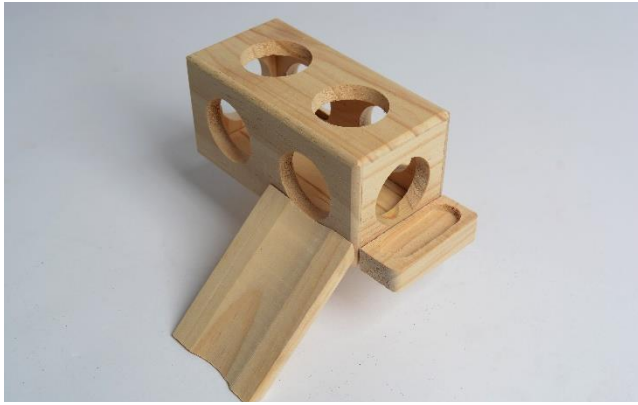


FIGURE 5 – © HOLLIE ASKEW, "BELONGINGS #5", INKJET PRINT, VARIOUS SIZES, 2022



FIGURE 6 – © HOLLIE ASKEW, "BELONGINGS #6", INKJET PRINT, VARIOUS SIZES, 2022



FIGURE 7 – © HOLLIE ASKEW, "BELONGINGS #7", INKJET PRINT, VARIOUS SIZES, 2022



FIGURE 8 – © HOLLIE ASKEW, "BELONGINGS #8", INKJET PRINT, VARIOUS SIZES, 2022

In the photography series presented above, Hollie Askew addresses the theme of memory by photographing objects belonging to her pet hamster in a studio setting.

Askew chooses to address her connection with her animal companion by placing (most of) the objects connected with the pet's "rituals" (playing, eating, sleeping, etc.) in an intentionally sterilised environment (with a neutral usually "cold" colour in the

backdrop). The objects are not showcased in their normal placements in the house/cage but represent a metaphor for the space and time limitations faced by our and our companions' existence. As such the intangibility and volatility of connections to others is evoked by Askew's style in this series, which resembles that of forensic photography.

In Askew's photography not only are the objects presented in a barren environment, they are also themselves presented as if sterilised. The viewer may notice that the things photographed look devoid of traces and other signs of an indexical nature. Marks and dents are hardly visible while dirt is close to non-existent. This creates a tension between the viewer's expectation and what is presented, they may ask themselves whether this pet actually exists and, if so, is it still alive?

In this way, the series explores the alienation the author has felt from her own personal memories of owning a pet she was forced to put up for adoption.

Group discussion:

Task one:

Discuss which type or types of memory can be identified in the works of Hollie Askew. (e.g., personal/individual Memory, collective memory, postmemory)

Task two:

With this example in mind, consider what other photography subjects could address the topic of memory.

Case Study II: Yasmin Robinson – “Family Portrait”



FIGURE 9 – © YASMIN ROBINSON, “COLLAGE #1”, FROM “FAMILY PORTRAIT” SERIES, INKJET PRINT, VARIOUS SIZES, 2022

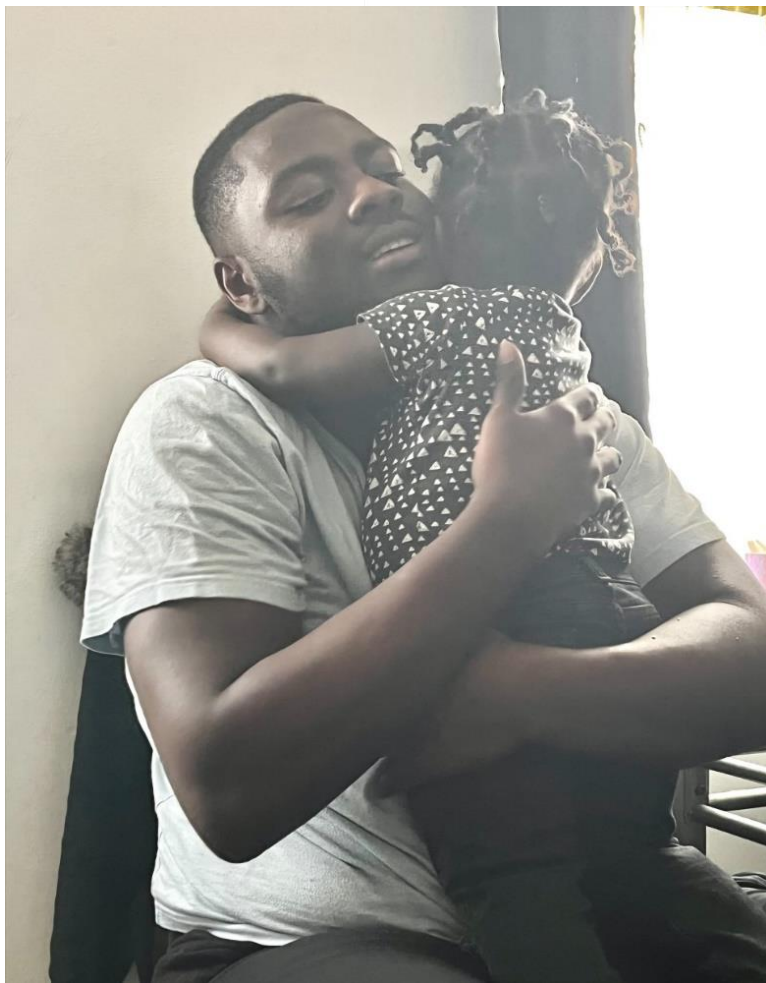


FIGURE 10 – © YASMIN ROBINSON, “PORTRAIT #1”, FROM “FAMILY PORTRAIT” SERIES, INKJET PRINT, VARIOUS SIZES, 2022

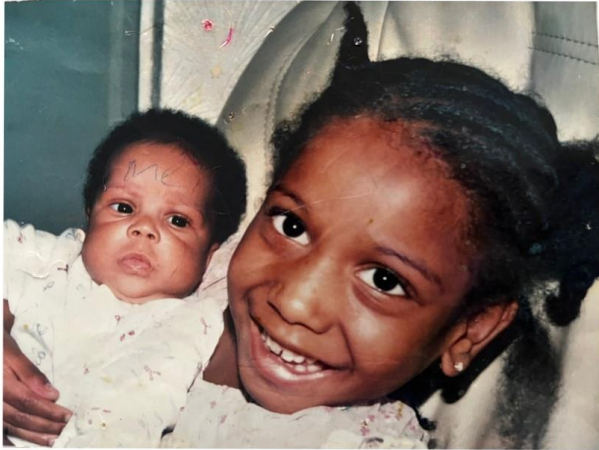


FIGURE 11 – © YASMIN ROBINSON, “COLLAGE #2”, FROM “FAMILY PORTRAIT” SERIES, INKJET PRINT, VARIOUS



FIGURE 12 – © YASMIN ROBINSON, “SCAR”, FROM “FAMILY PORTRAIT” SERIES, INKJET PRINT, VARIOUS SIZES, 2022

While our first case study addressed the memory of something tangible (an animal companion) in this second case study we will look at the memory of “something intangible” – more exactly: a family unit, a third entity, cumulative of emotions, events, moments, etc.

Showcasing mementos of her family life and re-memorialising these experiences through archival photos juxtaposed alongside present-day images, Yasmin Robinson explores the connection between past and present, individual and collective memory as well as the nature of photography as a medium of remembrance.

As Yasmin starts to compose this intriguing and complex portrait of her family, one thing becomes clear along her journey: that a family is more than the sum of its members and as such, it takes on a new form, becoming almost an intangible entity where humans exist along relational lines and experiences, forming something greater than just a small tribe.

To illustrate this, the photographer engages with different creative techniques. She makes use of the potential of archival material; she juxtaposes and, in some cases, attempts to recreate past moments in a contemporary context with new family members. This approach works particularly well in highlighting aspects such as cyclicity and change within a family unit. Furthermore, these moments are punctuated by photos such as those depicting a scar, where an event is alluded to without having's its mystery revealed.

Group discussion:

Task one:

Identify which memory concepts can be found in the works of Yasmin Robinson.

Task two:

With this example in mind, and reflecting on the materials presented in this pack, discuss:

- a. what decisions does a creative practitioner need to make before starting a project?*
- b. what creative choices can a photographer make in order to highlight or pinpoint certain aspects of a subject?*

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Figures:

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