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# Reflection: The Structure of Memory

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# REFLECTION: THE STRUCTURE OF MEMORY

by

ETIENNE JACKSON

Under the Direction of George Beasley

## ABSTRACT

The research and body of work collected in this document address the relationship of my memories to specific physical visual forms. These representations form the basis of how the mind structures relationships between specific objects and memories. Through reflection associations are created that activate the mind to recall these memories via mnemonic visual references. These mnemonic references are objects of familiarity that create a concrete relationship between form and memory experiences.

INDEX WORDS: Memory, Mnemonic devices, Reflection, Structures, Memory experience

REFLECTION: THE STRUCTURE OF MEMORY

by

ETIENNE JACKSON

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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2009

REFLECTION: THE STRUCTURE OF MEMORY

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May 2009

## DEDICATION

This document is dedicated to my family, present and past, for providing me the strength, support and drive to push forward in pursuit of my dreams. Their presence and impact on my life have provided a wealth of experiences that have created the memories and inspiration for my work and shaped my inner being. I love you all.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all of my instructors and friends for their encouragement, support and assistance in making this body of work a reality.

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## CHAPTER 1.

### INTRODUCTION

This work is grounded in a group of memories that evolve out of experiences within my family. Through the process of reflection I have associated these memories with objects that evoke memory relationships. The total composition of the installation is about evoking the essence of memory through the associative relationship of memories to visual forms. These associations provide a frame of reference for linking memories to a visual form that performs mnemonic function.

In this work I have created a collection of objects reminiscent of those within my home that continually remind me of my past experiences while simultaneously creating new memories associated with the same objects. The home has always represented the seat of memories—personal and familial. Home is the place we associate with our strongest memories by creating personal connections and concrete associative relationships with objects of familiarity. In utilizing the idea of the home as a point of departure, elements are brought together to evoke the essence of home and the creation of personal space. The stud-frame structure, table and vessel; reflective surfaces, stone line, picture frames, and circle—each element is brought together to reflect upon the experience of home and memory through direct and indirect relationships.

We do not experience the world directly. Instead, our perceptions and experiences are always partial and incomplete. The recall of past events takes the form of memory fragments rather than complete narratives on the unfolding of events.<sup>1</sup>

Our collective memories are the result of a combination of personal, familial or social recollections. Collective memories exist partially outside of personal experience, but we assume ownership of them within a collective social context. Contextualizing and reflecting on the relationships between collective memories and social context is the means used to re/create and remember events within our collective histories. Regardless of how memories are captured, documented or archived an associative element often evokes memory and allows one to remember aspects of specific memory in construction or reconstruction of the past. Such constructs take on different forms in visual art, but always establish the relationship of object to memory.

The relationship between memory and objects is further complicated when material objects of various media, operate as vehicles of memory. Memories also create relationships between objects and words.<sup>2</sup> Our ability to remember depends on the perceptual relationship between objects, images and words. The relation between the three is interdependent, but each functions differently in the processing of remembered experience. The reflective process allows remembered experience to coalesce into a story activated mnemonically by a specific visual or auditory relationship. These exchanges take the form of mnemonic relationships. The

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<sup>1</sup> Dena Elisabeth Eber, and Arthur G. Neal, eds., *Memory and Representation: Constructed Truths and Competing Realities* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Press, 2001), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara A. Misztal, *Theories of Social Remembering* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Open University Press, 2003), 12.

relationship to the device is relative to the user and can be any object or visual aid identifiable to the individual wishing to harness the memory or evoke individual experience.

“Mnemonic devices are of two main types: organizational mnemonics and encoding mnemonics. These two types of mnemonic devices reflect the two main activities of human memory; unitizing and symbolizing.”<sup>3</sup> Encoding mnemonics insure a mental relationship is established with a symbol for the information to be memorized, and organizational mnemonics creates organizational relationships of the symbols within memory. These symbols act as mental cues for the recall of specific mnemonic relationships.<sup>4</sup>

Mental cues consist of four properties: constructability, associability, discriminability, and invertibility. Constructible mental cues are easily retrievable from memory. The context and mental environment must first be activated before the event can be recalled. Associable mental cues must be associated with information the learner wants to retain. The information retained becomes cross referenced through association with a mental reference. Discriminable mental cues discern relationships with distinct visual patterns. The ability to discriminate between bits of information creates a more concrete context for the memorization of that information. Invertible mental cues acknowledge the existence of a bidirectional association between a mental cue and the new information associated with it.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Mark A. McDaniel, and Pressley Michael, eds., *Imagery and Related Mnemonic Processes* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1987), 35.

<sup>4</sup> McDaniel, *Imagery and Related Mnemonic Processes*, 36.

<sup>5</sup> McDaniel, *Imagery and Related Mnemonic Processes*, 35-46.

Memory takes on many different forms and allows one to process tasks, events and the past in different ways. Within the context of this work *autobiographical* and *cognitive* memory determine formal relationships. Autobiographical memories are not always accurate; they are however congruent within the concepts of one's sense of self, self knowledge and life themes. We communicate our stories from autobiographical memory constructs.<sup>6</sup> Autobiographical memory becomes defining, offering context for one to evaluate the depth and impact of personal and collective familial experiences. Cognitive memory requires that a person, who remembers an event or thing, must have met, experienced or learned of it in the past primarily through sensory experience.<sup>7</sup> This past experience creates a concrete perceptual mental relationship for establishing connections with new and past memory experiences creating memory schemas.

Schemas are organized knowledge structures in memory that can be thought of as generic concepts representing objects, persons, situations, events, sequences of events, actions and sequences of actions. A memory schema is activated when information similar to its content is processed by the cognitive system. Once activated, the schema influences the processing of the new information and provides a mental context for it.<sup>8</sup>

Cognitive memory activates the memory schemas that allow us to sequence experiences during recall and reflection. The relationship between cognitive and autobiographical memory comes into play when a specific object or set of events initiates recollection of memory sets.

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<sup>6</sup> Misztal, *Theories of Social Remembering*, 10.

<sup>7</sup> Misztal, *Theories of Social Remembering*, 10.

<sup>8</sup> McDaniel, *Imagery and Related Mnemonic Processes*, 38.

Memories become activated by the object interacted with; this interaction performs mnemonic function creating relationships that establish memory relationships.

## CHAPTER 2.

### THE STRUCTURE

Some of my most vivid memories are of working with my father in construction, assisting him in building houses and remodeling residential and commercial spaces. The best part of the entire process is after the foundation is set and framing begins. The continual linear composition created by the framing represents barriers defining individual spaces within the composition. The linear stud walls identify places where positive solid mass will soon be present while simultaneously existing as a still navigable and permeable transparent layer. Once these open walls are in place, the necessity of engaging other processes develops: installing electricity, plumbing, and drywall; finishing, painting, and trimming—at the end of the process a finished capsule remains, defined and designed to accommodate a specific functional space within a physical structure.



Figure 1. Etienne Jackson, *The Structure*, 2009; view #1



Figure 2. Etienne Jackson, *The Structure*, 2009; view #2

The structure references the creation and recreation of memories. Memories like physical structures are erected, demolished and refurbished, much like the personal physical structures we inhabit. Each moment we experience within these structures creates memories, some more important than others. Memory structures are built and erected like physical structures based on components we retain or re/construct from autobiographical and cognitive memory schemas. Unique and individual memory structures draw upon references retained from our environment and experiences. The resulting memories become organized around places and objects suggesting a concrete connection between remembering as something that occurs in the world of things and involves our sensory experience of physical objects.<sup>9</sup>

A cognitive map contains information about the spatial relations of objects in one's environment and results from experience with these objects. For example, knowledge of the positions of familiar objects and buildings in one's

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<sup>9</sup> Misztal, *Theories of Social Remembering*, 16.

neighborhood forms a cognitive map. Without this cognitive map a person could not move efficiently from one familiar place to another.<sup>10</sup>

The division and allocation of space are reminiscent of rooms divided to contain a specific function. This notion is further reinforced by the placement of objects within these spaces. The structure remains exposed for the audience to ponder but also penetrate allowing easy visual and navigational associations between the spaces. What becomes essential is how the audience makes choices about how to navigate the space; clearly defined openings are available or they may penetrate the transparent barrier imposed by the stud walls. These elements are transparent and opaque, physical and imagined, partitioned and conjoined, creating an experience of containment and openness simultaneously and throughout for the audience.



Figure 3. Etienne Jackson, *The Structure*, 2009; view #3

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<sup>10</sup> McDaniel, *Imagery and Related Mnemonic Processes*, 47.



Figure 4. Etienne Jackson, *The Structure*, 2009; view #4

Memory acts as the impetus for artistic visual creation in a number of instances. Contemporary artists form complex relationships with the notion of memory and the use of objects within sculpture and installation as a means of articulating their personal memories and the evolution of their own visual language. Elements that compose these languages have allowed them to address and conceptualize the past through memory and to reflect upon its impact in personal and social contexts. These forms often encapsulate an audience within the depths of their personal recollections.

Within the work of Joseph Beuys it became imperative for him that a language of materials, fat and felt, reflect his memory experience of being saved by the Tartars in Crimea during World War II after his airplane was shot down over Russia.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Mark Rosenthal, with Sean Rainbird, and Claudia Schmuckli, *Joseph Beuys Actions, Vitrines, Environments* (Houston, Texas: Menil Fondation, Inc. 2004), 10.

But I must have been propelled through the windscreen as it flew off at the same speed as the plane hitting the ground, and that saved me, although I suffered serious skull and jaw injuries. Then I was completely buried in the snow. That's how the Tartars found me a few days later. I remember voices saying 'voda' (water), then the felt of their tents and the dense and pungent smell of cheese, grease, and milk. They covered my body with grease to help it regenerate warmth and wrapped me in felt as an insulator to keep the warmth in.<sup>12</sup>



Figure 5. Joseph Beuys, *Sled*, 1969

Beuys's memory of this experience had such a profound effect on him that his formal language and materials directly reflect that experience. The materials fat and felt continually represent and reiterate the experience that became the transition point that allowed him to begin the process of healing the emotional wounds inflicted during the War.<sup>13</sup> These materials and their presence continually recall and instigate the memory of this experience for him and the audience alike, allowing the audience to establish a connection with his experience through the

<sup>12</sup> Lucrezia De Domizio Durini, *The Felt Hat Joseph Beuys A Life Told* (Milano: Edizioni Charta, 1997), 20.

<sup>13</sup> Rosenthal, *Joseph Beuys Actions, Vitrines, Environments*, 10.

material. The collection of these materials represents the site of the memory experience. Through the acceptance of his memory experience as created in the work, the audience becomes a participant within the autobiography.

### CHAPTER 3.

#### THE TABLE AND VESSEL

The family is another group that plays a crucial role in the construction of our memories. As long as the family jointly produces and maintains its memory, its cohesion and continuity is ensured. The content of the shared family's narrative, symbolic of family unity across generations, reproduces family traditions, secrets and particular sentiments. These memories objectified in old letters, photographs and family lore, are sustained through family conversations, as past events are jointly recalled and co-memorized.<sup>14</sup>

Throughout my life the table has been representative of the center of the home. Tables were places of fellowship and food and where family stories were shared. My fondest recollections emanate from my grandmothers' houses. They include numerous holiday dinners, playing cards with my grandmother and brother, and hearing the latest family gossip. My grandmother conveyed vivid recollections of her youth in Morgan City, Louisiana. Stories almost fanciful, some too elaborate and funny to be true, her recollections of the core memory experience always remained consistent, characterized by family, community and community politics in the segregated south. Big momma's (my maternal grandmother) house was a little different. Being the youngest grandchild for more than a decade afforded me the spoils associated with that title. Her house was always activated with family and friends visiting. The table in her home was a place for dining, preparing food and a place for storage. The space under

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<sup>14</sup> Misztal, *Theories of Social Remembering*, 19.

the table was cavernous and navigable by her in short order. She stored dry goods, her homemade plum wine and fresh vegetables from her garden by the bushel. The most productive crop of the garden was black-eyed and purple hull peas. My cousins and I were charged with the duty of assuring that all got shelled; some summers I believe that was all we did.



Figure 6. Etienne Jackson, *Table and Vessel*, 2009; view #1



Figure 7. Etienne Jackson, *Table and Vessel*, 2009; view #2

My memories are surrounded in nostalgia, with the idea that life was always wonderful. “We create the world through our perceptions of it and then seek to maintain the world in a style and manner consistent with our beliefs about it.”<sup>15</sup> When reflecting on numerous memories I realize that times were not always good, but we made the most of what we had. These experiences have now translated to my own home where the table has become the focal point of family activity, for sharing with friends and the creation of new memories around this centralized mnemonic device.



Figure 8. Etienne Jackson, *Table and Vessel*, 2009; view #3

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<sup>15</sup> Eber, *Memory and Representation: Constructed Truths and Competing Realities*, 4.

Comparatively, looking at the work of Louise Bourgeois offers another view. The experience she recollects and uses in her work is very different than my own. “Symbolic meanings are derived from human consciousness and include the contents of our perceptions of the events in which we are engaged.”<sup>16</sup> Her experiences are less romanticized and nostalgic than mine. For Bourgeois, memory associated with objects can be negative. For example Bourgeois focuses on the trauma she experienced with her father and later articulated in the work *The Destruction of the Father*.



Figure 9. Louise Bourgeois, *The Destruction of the Father*, 1974

Now for the purpose of *The Destruction of the Father* was to exorcise the fear. And after it was shown...I felt like a different person.... Now, I don't want to use the term *therapeutique*, but an exorcism is a therapeutic venture. So the reason for making the piece was catharsis. What frightened me was that at the dinner table,

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<sup>16</sup> Eber, *Memory and Representation: Constructed Truths and Competing Realities*, 3.

my father would go on and on, showing off, aggrandizing himself. And the more he showed off, the smaller we felt. Suddenly there was a terrific tension, and we grabbed him – my brother, my sister, my mother – the three of us grabbed him and pulled him onto the table and pulled his legs and arms apart – dismembered him, right? And we were so successful in beating him up that we ate him up.... The recall was so strong, and it was such a lot of work, that I felt like a different person.<sup>17</sup>

Her narrative captures the fear she felt at the table with her father. That fear affected not only her, but her siblings and mother. The resulting mental image of their collective dismemberment of her father represents the only imaginable act they could collectively engage to overcome that fear.

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<sup>17</sup> Ortega, Carlos. *Louise Bourgeois: Memory and Architecture* (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centgro de Arte Reina Sofia, 1999), 32.

## CHAPTER 4.

### THE REFLECTION

Reflections are a point of concentrated thought relative to a past memory experience. The duality of reflection is that it is also the way light waves bounce off of a polished or mirrored surface. These dual processes of reflection allow for the analysis of memories relative to visual and mental representations of our physical being and environment.

Personal memories allow us to develop a framework for the evaluation of the world around us within the context of personal experiences. Some experiences are personal and unique, relative to the individual; others are much broader characteristics of social and cultural schemas; regardless of context experiences allow us to create structural frameworks through which we evaluate and comprehend various social and personal environments. Mnemonic relationships are created within these environments through the process of reflection for the evaluation of memory.

The most powerful object for memory of self and the evaluation of physical being is the mirror or reflective surface. Reflections provide false indirect representations, but periodically have the power to instigate recollection of the physical changes we experience with the passage of time. Physical changes are noted and periodically re-associated with their cause creating active mnemonic relationships and activating memories. “Because the past is frequently used as the mirror in which we search for an explanation and remedy to our present-day problems,

memory, is seen ‘as [a] cure to the pathologies of modern life.’<sup>18</sup> Metaphorically each surface represents a point of critical reflection, a place where one simultaneously ponders self within the context of their current physical surroundings and associative memory experiences.



Figure 10. Etienne Jackson, *Table and Vessel*, 2009; view #4

Reflective surfaces within the exhibition are sites of evaluation of the surrounding environment and of one’s self. Each reflective surface is meant to provide a point for evaluation of one’s reflection, and for viewing one’s self against the surface quality of the material within the surrounding environment. Reflections are not always clear; they are distorted and hazy, like these complex surface textures. Memories are much like these reflections in that clarity is not always immediate. One must often concentrate on a fixed mental image that may be hazy and distorted in order to re/create the specific memory to be recalled.

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<sup>18</sup> Misztal, *Theories of Social Remembering*, 13.



Figure 11. Etienne Jackson, *Reflection*, 2009; view #1

This process of recollection, remembering things of the past to make them usable components within the context of our lives, has shaped who I am and has had a lasting impression on my life, world view and the means by which I understand the world around me.



Figure 12. Etienne Jackson, *Reflection*, 2009; view #2

## CHAPTER 5.

## THE LINE

The line consists of individual tiles each representative of two days of the year. The tiles are arranged in a horizontal line referencing a time line and the linear cataloguing of events in accordance with calendar dates. Calendars have been a means of organizing events and experiences into a structured order for remembering and observance of their repeated occurrence. This mnemonic device affords people with a context for the organization of time into a concrete structure. This concrete time structure allows us to catalogue changes in seasons, births and deaths of family and friends, and religious and social events pertinent to our culture. The means of capturing the experience is mnemonic. The relationship established from tracking the days and indicating these events creates instant recall regarding these events, purposes and associative behaviors relative to a particular date or event.



Figure 13. Etienne Jackson, *Line*, 2009; view #1



Figure 14. Etienne Jackson, *Line*, 2009; view #2

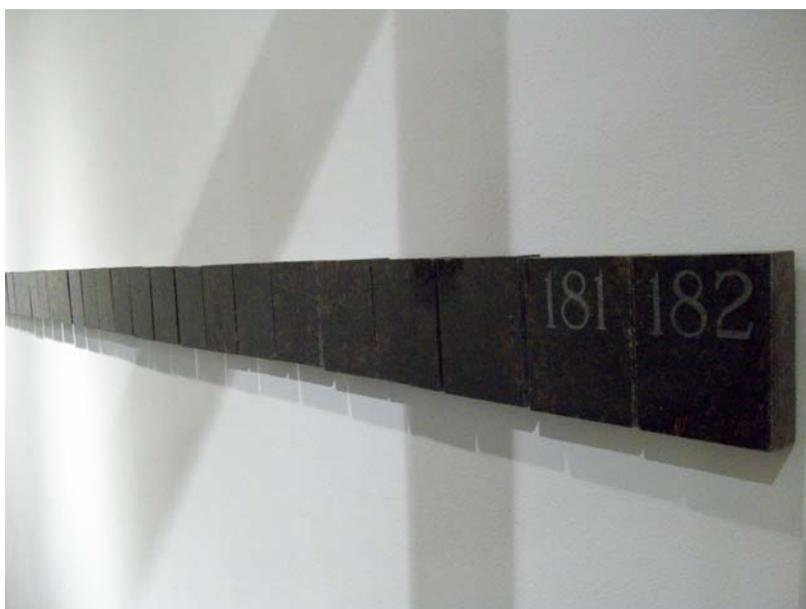


Figure 15. Etienne Jackson, *Line*, 2009; view #3

The works of On Kawara also reference the use of the date and calendar relationships in his *Date Paintings*. “A *Date Painting* is simply the painting of the date on which it was made. The language of the text, as with the subtitles, is that of the place where it was made, with the exception of those places, such as Japan and Hong Kong, where roman type is not used for the first language. In these cases the artist resorts to Esperanto”<sup>19</sup> The works in this series reflect a strong sense of history, capturing current events, isolating certain instances from each day and capturing them in a container, a vessel of information pertinent not only to Kawara and his location at the time of publication and documentation, but the social context of the country and city in which the work was created and the newspaper clipping captured and stored. The process under which the works are stored is reminiscent of an archive.



Figure 16. On Kawara, *MAR.20,1974*, 1974

<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Watkins. *On Kawara* (New York: Phaidon Press Inc., 2002), 67. Esperanto: an artificial language, invented in 1887 by Dr. L. L. Zamenhof, based on the Latin roots common to most of the Romance languages.

## CHAPTER 6.

## THE CIRCLE

The Circle is a symbolic form representing the point of revelation, the place where the evolution of time and the comprehension of memories lead to understandings of oneself. These sites of revelation are often intangible, but relative to the individual processing of memories over time. Each point of revelation is connected to the previous providing a deeper understanding of the context of how memories impact our being and their encompassing effect.



Figure 17. Etienne Jackson, *The Circle*, 2009

Looking at a circle is like looking into a mirror. We create and respond irresistibly to circles, cylinders and spheres because we recognize ourselves in them. The message of the Shape bypasses our conscious mental circuitry and

speaks directly to the quiet intelligence of our deepest being. The circle is a reflection of the world's –and our own- deep perfection, unity, design excellence, wholeness and divine nature.<sup>20</sup>

The Luba of Zaire employ complex mnemonic devices to evoke memory, history, and spirituality. These mnemonic devices are richly encoded with culturally symbolic relationships and only decipherable by certain members of the community. The complex formal relationships established between the forms of the *Lukasa* (memory board) are unique to the Luba and culturally specific to the interpretation of their collective history.<sup>21</sup>



Figure 18. Memory Board or Lukasa. Luba, Zaire

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<sup>20</sup> Michael S. Schneider, *A Beginner's Guide to Constructing the Universe* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 4.

<sup>21</sup> Nancy Ingram Nooter, and Robert H. Nooter. *MEMORY: Luba Art and the Making of History* (New York: Prestel-Verlag, 1996), 126 - 132.

“Symbols are arbitrary in that there is no necessary or inherent reason for a particular symbol to represent any particular object or event. We construct meanings through the symbols we use because it is practical and expedient to do so.”<sup>22</sup> This allows us to attach meaning to physical and visual relationships. The symbolism and memories attached to a particular form create opportunity to remember a cognitive activity or an autobiographical event.

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<sup>22</sup> Eber, *Memory and Representation: Constructed Truths and Competing Realities*, 3.

## CHAPTER 7. THE FRAMES

These cast aluminum picture frames are simple objects characteristic of the home. They represent the place where we store images of family and items of importance. These items are displayed; often they are pictures of family and friends hanging on a wall for us to view and create visual references to the people, places and events that we value. Their context is autobiographical in the sense that they speak to some relationship to the person and a collective past.

I have chosen to display the frames as a pair. The pair is meant to create a relationship between the patriarch and matriarch of the family. Intentionally the space inside the frame is concave to reinforce a sense of depth and containment. The emptiness keeps the frames anonymous for the audience to contextualize that space within their own frame of reference.



Figure 19. Etienne Jackson, *Picture Frames*, 2009; view #1

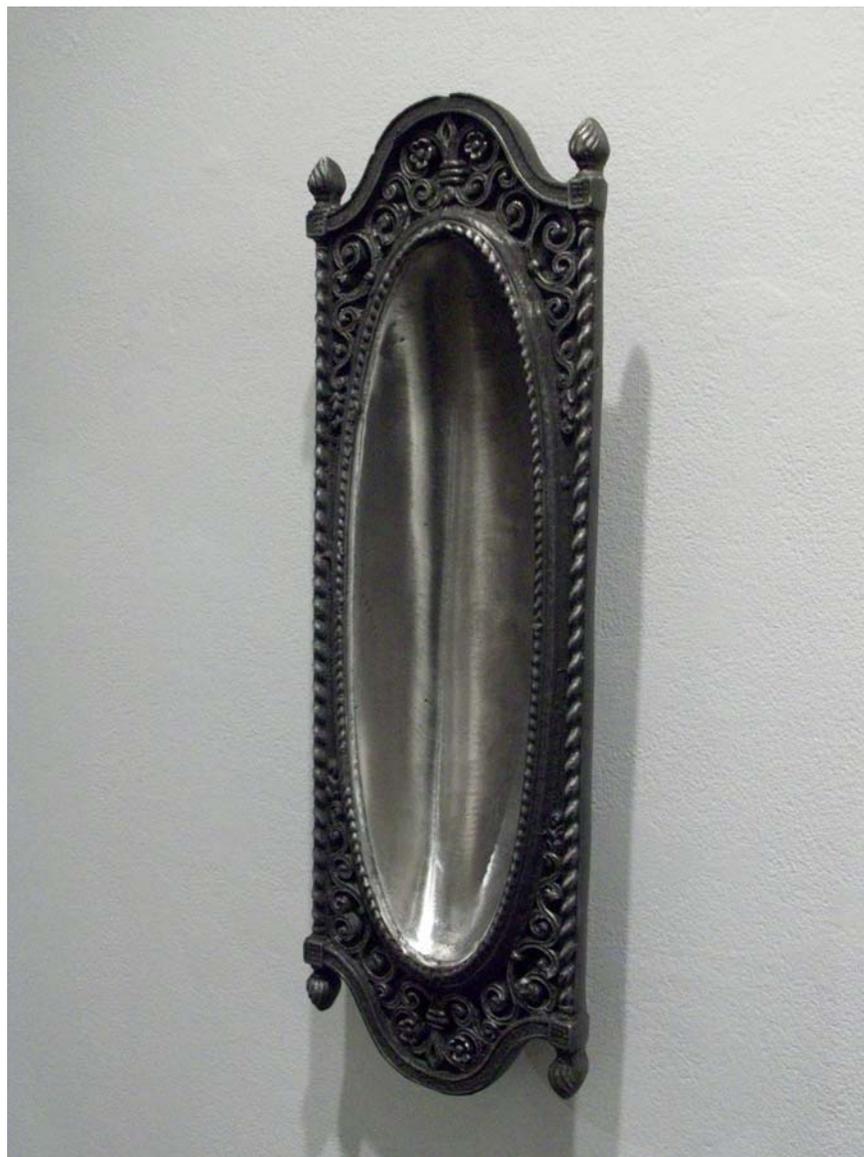


Figure 20. Etienne Jackson, *Picture Frames*, 2009; view #2

## CHAPTER 8.

## CONCLUSION

Memory experiences are much stronger when they establish a concrete relationship with environments that we are familiar with. Reflection on my memories through mnemonic associative relationships with familiar forms has afforded me the opportunity to reflect regularly on past people and experiences. The spirit of those experiences is infused into objects that I interact with regularly. These regular interactions maintain active memory relationships that coalesce with new experiences creating the multilayered autobiographical memory experience.

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