I Remember...

Jessica Scott-Felder

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I REMEMBER…

by

JESSICA MARIE SCOTT-FELDER

Under the Direction of Cheryl Goldsleger

ABSTRACT

_I Remember…_, a series of drawings, is based on personal social experiences starting from the age of thirteen. This series begins with a memory of the first time I had to speak to a room full of people and the unexpected events of that followed. My own relationship with one of the primary subjects, the chair refers to memories of being raised in a home where certain furnishings were “off-limits.” Even more important is the presence of a cryptic narrative, fractured and dreamlike, similar to the style of writing created by Alain Robbe-Grillet.

It has been a lifetime goal to create drawings that are interactive with the viewer. The baroque embellished chairs and piano provide a point of departure encouraging contemplative involvement by the viewer conceptually through imagery and physically through scale. Also, showing multiple viewpoints of the object simultaneously creates an atmosphere that is dreamlike and ghostly.
INDEX WORDS: Drawings, Charcoal, Large, Large-scale, Dark, Baroque, Chairs, Piano, Past experiences, Photographic memories, Present reflections
I REMEMBER…

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I REMEMBER…

by

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For my mother and grandmother.
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I humbly thank all of the family members, friends, and educators that have left a positive impact on my life and artistic career. I am truly blessed to have such a strong support system.
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CHAPTER 1: FORESHADOW

Cause

When I was thirteen I was asked to speak to an audience of over a hundred people. This kind of event was, and still is, an intimidating prospect. As it came closer and closer to the time that I would speak, I managed to forget what I was going to say. Then, before I knew it, my name had been called.

“And now, for our winning story,” the hostess announced, “Jessica Scott-Felder!”

Applause greeted my approach to the front of the room.

Anxiously moving at a fast pace, I tripped as I climbed up the three steps leading to the stage. The inward gasp produced by the audience enveloped me as I slowly fell to the ground. There was a pause, and then a strange alteration occurred in the climate of the room. After getting back up and approaching the microphone, all of my audience had magically disappeared. Darkness, no, emptiness traveled like a fog and slowly covered the vast space. There was silence. The only things that I remember after that point were the baroque embellished walls, doors, and chairs.

I had never felt so alone in a room full of people.

December 1994
**Effect**

As an undergraduate, I produced a lot of large figurative work. I focused on various narratives, often using my sisters as models. Eventually, I felt compelled to eliminate the figure and find another way to suggest a human presence. While working on a drawing that referenced past relationships, I discovered that a chair could serve this purpose. I initially drew myself sitting in a chair with my back turned. I began with the chair and soon realized that it alone would work to evoke a human presence.

I chose a baroque style chair because it appears as both inviting and unapproachable, due to its real and implied value and its historic reference. My sense of its inapproachability is derived from growing up in a home where there were certain rooms that were “off limits.” Entering these rooms was forbidden and they were not used unless there was a special event, and even then it was required that our shoes be removed to prevent marking the floor. The seats of the dining room chairs were wrapped in thick plastic and were very rarely moved even if the table was being used to hold gifts.

For me, the power of the baroque chairs also relates to the embarrassing event mentioned earlier that occurred at the large public speaking engagement, where the people vanished and only the details of the objects in the room are remembered. Through their placement, whether for a large audience in a ballroom or a small arrangement in a living room, chairs can dictate how we perceive a space. In the case of my semi-traumatizing fall, the vastness of the auditorium after everyone “disappeared” is what left the deepest impact on my consciousness.
Figure 1. Interior, 2008. Charcoal on paper. 10’ x 10’.

My parent’s dining room contained certain objects that continue to stand out in my memory: my mother’s piano, a pink chair; the silver-plated platters and tea sets; an original floral painting and lastly, the dining room chairs. I was never told exactly why the dining room and its contents were off limits, there just always seemed to be an unspoken understanding that everything in that room was expensive, could be easily broken and would be hard to replace.

The space around the chairs is the intended focal point of the drawings. The chairs simply are a point of departure that triggered exploring other memories, their respective spaces and objects
related to those memories. In this paper, I explore how this body of work developed into a series that attempts to recreate spaces of personal significance.

Figure 2. Accent, 2008. Charcoal on canvas. 4’ x 4’.
CHAPTER 2: CONTENT

The image of that room is etched into my memory to this day.

How do we interpret reality? Is it based on what others perceive as correct or true or is it based on personal perceptions? Reality is initially interpreted on one’s own terms. Because my drawings are created through the veil of memory, they may appear unreal, illusionistic or even surreal. Yet, my work explores assumptions about objects and places that have existed, but the introspective experience the drawings attempt to convey creates a sense of duality within the work somewhere between the real and the unreal.

Several questions arose while creating this body of work: What is perspective; how does it affect what we see; and most importantly, what role does it play in how we interpret reality? I found possible answers to these questions while teaching atmospheric perspective to my drawing class. In my chair drawings I noticed how there were chairs that faded into darkness, thus giving the drawings the illusion of depth. Additionally, the vastness of the space fostered a dreamlike quality in the work. I attempted to understand this phenomenon while I was reading Styles of Thought by David Weissman.

Weissman writes that interpretation is based on projected significance and “[knowing] is ambiguous: things are known as they are interpreted (12).” Interpretation is abstract. Memories are based on interpretation; one’s own grasp of reality can only be interpreted by one’s own terms, so in actuality our memories of reality are abstractions of space and time.
In my work I explore how situations and objects are visually and conceptually abstracted in the mind. I create an opportunity for a narrative to be developed based on personal perceptions of the space surrounding the chairs. Edward Hall confirms in his essay, "Visual Conventions and Conventional Vision," that when based on visual terms, the dissemination of reality and illusion is a personal experience (119). When subtle information is provided, personal perceptions and narratives can be brought to the work.

Figure 3. High Chairs, 2008. Charcoal on paper. 5’ x 8’.
CHAPTER 3: CREATING AMBIENCE

*A reality reinterpreted creates an open threshold.*

It has been a lifelong goal to create interactive drawings. The chair, simply enough, is a point of departure. Through what is considered a mundane object the distorted chair, numerous forms of contemplative involvement with the viewer are possible conceptually through imagery, and physically through scale. Also, showing multiple viewpoints of the object simultaneously create an atmosphere that is dreamlike and ghostly.

![Figure 4. Chairs, 2007 – 2008. Charcoal on paper. 15’ x 10’.

As I drew, I gradually discovered abstraction and the emotional power in the negative space. In my first piece, *Chairs*, the charcoal gradually builds the ambiguous space through an overabundance of marks (see Figure 4). The empty space also allows for personal contemplation
and interpretation. This approach is continued in *Chairs Two*, only in this piece the surrounding negative space consumes more of the composition (see Figure 5).

![Figure 5. Chairs Two, 2008. Charcoal and acrylic wash. 10’ x 10’.](image)

After *Chairs Two*, I began to think about other objects that carried emotional significance for me. I immediately thought about a piano and how my mother used to make my sisters and me take piano lessons. Other than these instructional sessions, we were not allowed to touch the piano. I thought about the chords that I memorized even while I was drawing the twisted keys on the piano. Through my imagination, I was once again touching each key, climbing under and around the foot pedals, even feeling the smoothness of the black wood just as if I were thirteen again.
Understanding that the piano was another object in the forbidden room that I could not touch without supervision, I was able to connect it to the first drawing that I did of Chairs. Together the two drawings, The Piano and Chairs could develop into a panorama drawn to occupy real space (see Figure 6). And much like Robbe-Grillet’s novels, which attempt to recreate an ambiance, I suggested an atmosphere through objects, which is based strongly on abstracted memories.
CHAPTER 4: PROCESS

As if enveloped by a fog of darkness the familiar forms reappear.

Recalling my own encounters with the forbidden objects within specific places, I started with imagery that related to my memories of specific rooms. Using my grandmother’s room as a point of departure, I imagined the distance between each piece of furniture or fixture. In the studio I attach large pieces of paper together to form a larger than life support for my work. After the paper is prepared, I create a mix of ebony water out of black acrylic, charcoal and water.

Using my grandmother’s room as a point of departure, I seek to recreate baroque-inspired spaces through the use of large-scale drawings. The work invites the viewer to explore forbidden spaces of living rooms and hallways of a house, a vestibule and ballrooms of mansions.

Reaching over for a large brush, I dip the bristles into the black paint. Mixing the brush into the bowl, a dark substance starts to develop. Once the mixture is a deep black I spread the wash over the large paper hung on the wall. Starting with the top and working downward, the drips race toward the bottom of the page forming a stream-like pool on the floor. This forms the background for the drawing. My brushes have the chance to explore, investigate and search through the furniture and room I was not permitted to get near to as a child.

In Chairs Two I decided to start with my grandmother’s chairs in the living room. While drawing the contours of each object I imagined myself touching each chair. No longer were these objects
forbidden. In my imagination, I was in both rooms and able to touch the chairs in the living room and in the ballroom where I fell.

After sketching each chair, I used charcoal to darken the surrounding space until all that is left are the silhouettes of the chairs. With a chamois, I begin to blur their contours and liberally apply
charcoal, filling in the negative space. It is at this point that the objects begin to dissipate into space and transform into ghostly forms. By working through their intangibility, I also reference the nature of memory, and the idea of a “fleeting thought.”

Details, such as the baroque embellishments are applied to areas where the objects feel more developed or exist in the background of the picture plane. This is also the point in which I find that my body needs to move back and forth while I work. First, I walk towards the drawing to define the details, then rush down the ladder and run back to view how effective the illusion of depth is in the negative space.

The scale of the works forces me to exert more physical effort and that helps my body reinterpret the reality of the room into the conceptual space that I am remembering. In Vestibule, the viewer must make the same action looking upward as standing in a space with high-domed ceiling (see Figure 8). This ceiling references a similar one in Alain Robbe-Grillet’s film, Last Year in Marienbad and was chosen because it resembles my childhood memory of the ballroom (see Figure 9).

I used the rush that I am experiencing while drawing as the mechanism that tells me if the drawing is working. There is a need to feel as if I can immerse myself within the drawn spaces from afar while simultaneously being drawn in to see the hatchings, drips and details when I stand close to the work. Once the surge dissipates during the process, I know that the drawing is near completion.
Figure 8. Vestibule, 2009. Charcoal and acrylic wash on paper. 8' x 6'.

Figure 9. Last Year at Marienbad. VHS. 1961.
CHAPTER 5: PERCEPTIONS

*I embrace the idea that the viewer is the witness to an occurrence or is present in the room.*

Once most of the drawings are complete, my mind begins to create additional scenarios for the objects placed in the room, which is reminiscent to the objects in Alain Robbe-Gillet’s stories. In the *Labyrinth*, for example, there is a vague relationship between two neighbors. The woman whose name is only identified through her first initial, “A”, has several isolated, yet suggestive encounters with a married man, identified as Franck. Although they rarely touch or speak, the characters’ body movements and interactions with objects suggest a perplexing and fractured undercurrent of attraction.

Robbe-Grillet is known as a “new novelist,” one of a group of writers working in the 1950s that questioned the traditional interpretation of literary realism. Robbe-Grillet’s experiment was to “keep man from participating in… fabrication (Barthes 24).” *Commonalties within this movement include ambiguous points of view and fractured states of time and space, thus graying the space between reality and illusion. This approach encourages re-reading and re-interpretation.*

In *Piano*, the object is what projects an atmosphere through the use of a life-sized drawing. In order to maintain focus on atmosphere I remove personal symbolism from the objects; a piano is simply a piano, a chair is but a chair within spaces. This technique is also similar to the “New Novel” style. Roland Barthes states that in Robbe-Grillet’s writing, “the object has no being
beyond phenomenon… (13)” As a medium for communicating a feeling of a ballroom, I needed to sever the objects from metaphor or meaning. If I were transforming the objects into symbols with an underlying meaning, the viewer would be displaced from the “to-be-there-ness” of the space. Much like the drawings themselves, the assumed usefulness of the objects leaves a false impression and the optical extensions are the only aspects of the drawings that are real.

Figure 10, Above, 2008.
Charcoal on paper. 3’ x 10’.
CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I begin to realize that the usefulness of my grandmother’s chairs or my mother’s piano, both forbidden, is only an illusion. This was why these objects and the space around them intrigue me. I now understand that there is a chance that the antique chairs could not support anyone’s weight, houseguest or not. The strings in the piano could have been out of tune or cut and the instrument could not play a single note. Unless an object has been touched, the only aspect that I could substantiate is simply their visual presence. *I Remember* encapsulates past experiences, photographic memories, and present reflections.

I am able to develop an implied narrative by including objects from past experiences. The chairs, in particular, thrive within these familiar spaces. Upon attempting to re-enact places through drawing, I am taken on a constant search for new resource material that resembles my recollections both in perceptual and the physical attributes of the space. Images from photo albums, films such as *Last Year in Marienbad*, and antique catalogs serve as aids in rebuilding my visual encounters.

It is through my present reflections that I am able to delve deeper into the memories and perceptions of preceding atmospheres. By incorporating my understanding of philosophy, perception, and memory I am able to re-encounter these spaces through my drawings by a much more evocative, experiential, and sophisticated means.
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Last Year in Marienbad. Dir. Alain Resnais. VHS. Cocinor, 1961.
