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The Ephemeral and the Eternal

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THE EPHEMERAL AND THE ETERNAL

A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Art

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Indiana University of Pennsylvania

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I am interested in how memories of moments seen, heard, and spoken define relationships and influence a person's identity. My work attempts to visually record these recollections, using the skin as a medium for mark making. I exploit the properties of skin, including its ability to communicate through touch and its tendency to become marked by our interactions in the physical world. Using video, photography, and performance, I document the process of marking the skin and the way it heals. I challenge the boundaries of what is considered public and private imagery. My work asks the viewer to observe the intimacy of personal relationships, and reflect on memories that have impacted their own personal identity.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Ephemeral and the Eternal examines how memories define relationships and influence identity. My research uses the skin as a medium to explore memory, which plays a significant role in the development of one's identity within relationships. My work exploits the unique qualities of human skin to reflect on memories that shape a person's sense of self. Through the utilization of text, this exhibition seeks to reify memory, giving material presence to otherwise immaterial phenomena.

Within our relationships, we make assumptions about our partners, our values, our worth, and ourselves. *The Ephemeral and the Eternal* challenges these assumptions about love, loss, desire, and relationships. By displaying personal and often private imagery, the exhibition makes the viewer question the work by placing them in a voyeuristic role. The text displayed in the work becomes visible memoirs that create patterns upon the skin. I created text on the skin by having my models press their bodies into wooden blocks that I generated using a laser engraver. These blocks have raised text that transfers to the skin when a person applies pressure on the block. This imprinted text creates a pattern on the skin that references traces of the past left by scarring, bruising, and other forms of mark making. The skin acts as a biological record by marking literally on the surface and metaphorically alluding to memories from one's past.

Chapter II examines philosophical influences integral to the formation of principal concepts behind the work in *The Ephemeral and the Eternal*. This chapter discusses the role of autobiographical memory and the utilization of photography in the formation of self-identity. Chapter III explores the human skin as a visual surface of memory and

identity. Key artists, such as Ariana Page Russell, Tracey Emin, Duane Michals and Marina Abramovic will be examined and discussed in Chapter IV. Each of these artists address key concepts relating to memory, identity, and the body. Chapter V concludes with my reflection on the thesis exhibition *The Ephemeral and the Eternal*, as well as the evolution of my work and artistic practice.

CHAPTER II

RELATIONSHIP IDENTITY

Autobiographical Memory

Autobiographic memory is a type of episodic memory comprised of specific personal events. Some examples of autobiographical memory may include the memory one has of meeting their spouse for the first time or a fight with a partner (Vick 2-3). These memories play a significant role in the construction of one's personal identity and define future interpersonal relationships. Memories also serve as markers or examples of how to engage with others. They can create patterns of behavior; sometimes negative ones that are difficult to break. Memories can also be triggers; for example, a certain smell can transport you back to a specific moment in time. Finally, memory is an essential part of understanding one's self and it would be difficult to understand who we are without it.

In his essay "Concerning Human Understanding," John Locke argues that conscious memories constitute personal identity, not the body or soul. Locke identified the self with memory, asserting self-knowledge is based within an individual's memory (Locke 102). Our identity is constructed through our ability to reproduce our past experiences from memory. Identity is built not only from these experiences, but also from the reflection of these experiences:

Consciousness always accompanies thinking, and makes everyone to be what he calls 'self' and thereby distinguishes himself from all other thinking things; in this alone consists personal identity, i.e. the sameness of a rational being; and as far as this consciousness can be extended

backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person; it is the same self now that it was then; and this present self that now reflects on it is the one by which that action was performed. (Locke 105)

I am particularly interested in how autobiographical memories define relationships and what kinds of memories influence a person's identity. Psychologists Nicole Alea and Stephanie C. Vick refer to autobiographical memories that impact relationship identity as relationship-defining memories. They believe that these relationship-defining memories shape present and future interpersonal relationships. These relationship-defining memories act in the same way that self-defining memories shape an individual's coherent sense of self over time. These memories are often recollections of what one has seen, heard, and spoken. Alea and Vick described these memories as highly specific and emotionally rich recollections of a fleeting moment (Alea and Vick 730-32).

Experimental evidence conducted by Psychologists Nicole Alea and Susan Bluck suggest that remembering these events can increase intimacy or create tension in a relationship. These memories have an effect on relationship satisfaction and influence how individuals progress in future relationships (Alea and Vick 732). People who have experienced highly stressful or traumatic events often experience involuntary intrusive memories that can affect the way they interact in social situations and develop their future relationships (Berntsen 138-141).

The work presented in the exhibition *The Ephemeral and the Eternal* reveals relationship-defining memories through the utilization of text. The text is a recollection

of a past conversation that is imprinted onto the skin of volunteers and then photographed to create narratives related to the idea of love, loss, and memory. I attempt to recreate pivotal moments within my participant's personal relationships. I selected text that references a relationship-defining moment in these individuals' relationships and imprinted it into the skin, which I then photographed. These photographs seek to capture a fleeting moment from one's past and speculate on how this memory has transformed their relationship identity. By sharing the autobiographical memories of others, I encourage my viewers to reflect on memories that have impacted and changed their personal identity.

Photography and Identity

In her text "Prosthetic Culture: Photography, Memory and Identity," Celia Lury examines how photographs and the manipulation of photographs redefine our relationship between consciousness, the body, and memory to create a prosthetic culture that threatens humanity. The significance of the visual image in understanding one's self has become increasingly important in contemporary society. The photograph has become a staple in understanding personhood, self-knowledge and truth. The photograph has taught us a way of seeing and this has transformed contemporary self-understanding. Lury states, "The photographic image plays a key role here in that it is one of the techniques that enables a refiguring of the conventional relations through which the previous self-understanding of the possessive individual had been secured. It does this through its abilities to frame, freeze and fix its objects" (Lury 3).

Images possess the power to indirectly transform self-identity, expressly because of their ability to repress or trigger memories. Lury claims that the photographic portrait

plays a significant role in the development of self-understanding (Lury 76). Photography merges the subject and the object by turning living things into objects and objects into living beings (Sontag 98). “Photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe” (Sontag 3). Visual imagery helps put oneself in relation to the world creating a false sense of knowledge and power.

Photographs furnish evidence that a given event happened through a narrow selective transparency that alters our perception of reality (Sontag 3-6). Within contemporary society photography has become a social rite and a tool of power. Photographs are often used as a means to document experiences, but they can also be used to manipulate or distort reality. “Photography has become one of the principle devices for experiencing something, for giving an appearance of participation” (Sontag10).

Taking photographs has created a voyeuristic relationship in the way we experience the world. Since these images are linked to the past, they seek to put the past in order. Photography is not only a medium used in self-understanding, but it is also used as a tool to gather information about another person’s identity. Photographs become a series of unrelated freestanding moments captured in a thin slice of space, as well as time (Sontag 77). Photographs give others the ability to peek into a personal memory to gather information about another’s past.

I am recreating and sharing relationship-defining moments, making a private memory very public. The line between public and private is currently being transformed in contemporary society (Lury 82). The exhibition *The Ephemeral and The Eternal*

investigates the boundary between public and private imagery by confronting the viewer with photographs that recreate narratives about relationships.

CHAPTER III

SKIN

Our skin is one of the most important organs, as it is one of the most versatile parts of the human body. Although our skin is used as a safe guard for our internal organs, it is also used as a tool to gather information and interact with others (Jablonski 3). Within my practice, I use the camera to record the skin's ability to change in response to the physical world. In her text *Original Skin: Exploring the Marvels of the Human Hide*, Maryrose Cuskelly stated,

Through our skin we contact the world; with it we touch and are touched.

The skin alerts us to texture, temperature, pressure, pain and pleasure...

Freckles, dimples, wrinkles, scars, stretch marks, and moles occur like features on a landscape and the skin itself can range in color from the milkiest white to an intense blue-black. Eruptions of boils, shingles, or pimples may mar its surface, causing pain and embarrassment.

Alarmingly, it bruises and bleeds. Blistering and flaking, puckering and stretching- and feeling, always feeling- the skin is in a constant state of response, altering the body to the conditions that surround it. (Cuskelly 5)

Human skin contains a vast network of nerves that give us the ability to communicate through touch (Jablonski 97-98). With our skin being in a constant state of response, it is of equal importance in social interaction, as well as verbal communication. I am specifically interested in the skin's ability to become marked by the physical world. Skin reflects traces of the past through scarring, bruising, and other forms of marking. These marks allude to autobiographical memories from one's past.

Our skin is a visual surface of our memories. If our skin is touched, it brings us into the immediate present, but the surface of our skin reveals the remembered past. Our skin is a record of time, remembering race, age, sex, and detailed life histories. The skin constitutes a biological record that remembers both, literally, upon its material surface and metaphorically. In their writing, *Thinking Through the Skin*, Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey address the skin as visual surface of memory. “In its colour, texture, accumulated marks and blemishes, it remembers something of our class, labor/leisure activities, even (in the use of cosmetic surgery and/or skin care products) our most intimate psychic relation to our bodies. Skin is the body’s memory of our lives” (Ahmed and Stacey 52).

CHAPTER IV
ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

Ariana Page Russell

Photographer, Ariana Page Russell manipulates her skin by drawing patterns and text by scratching the surface of her skin, which she then photographs. Russell has a condition known as dermatographia. Dermatographia causes the skin to raise and welt when lightly scratched. This condition allows the artist to painlessly draw onto her skin creating an ephemeral mark that becomes the subject of her work. Russell stated, “Rather than being frustrated by my skin’s transparency, I claim it by making art in the crimson hues that reveal my vulnerability” (“Ariana Page Russell”).



Fig. 1. Ariana Page Russell , *Index* (2005), c-print.

Her imagery is used as a platform to educate others and spread awareness about dermatographia and other forms of skin disorders. Russell has created Skintome, a site dedicated to sharing stories of those affected by dermatographia and connect with artists who work with skin as a medium within their practice.

Similar to my own work, Russell uses the skin as a medium for mark-making. My work is influenced by Russell’s ability to manipulate the skin and capture the fleeting

moment before the skin begins to heal to its original state. Ariana Page Russell's *Index* (2005) reveals the skin's ability to become marked by the physical world through the act of scratching. The text written into the skin becomes pattern-like, showing pink shades of her skin's sensitivity.

Duane Michals

Duane Michals creates short photo narratives through the utilization of text and photography. Michals often relies on his history as subject matter and re-creates personal memories in photographic series. Michals uses his handwriting directly on a print, making the words associated with the photo an integral part of the work. The text often becomes a poetic addition that enhances the narrative quality of the piece (Anderson 1).



Fig. 2. Duane Michals, *Things are Queer* (1973), gelatin silver print.

Duane Michals' imagery redefined photography as a medium by integrating a series as a conceptual component of the narrative. Michals successfully created a descriptive story by exhibiting multiple photographs as a whole becoming one piece.

Michals claimed that the stories could not be told in just one photograph. His work attempted to contradict the viewer's expectations of reality. Michals claims, "I don't trust reality. So all of the writing on and painting on the photographs is born out of the frustration to express what you do not see" (Byran 1). In his piece *Things are Queer*, Michals uses a series of photographs to question the perception of photographed reality. With each photograph the viewer discovers the authenticity of each shot is challenged by the next. Michals' ability to obscure the viewers perspective within his narratives influences my practice because I am interested in creating work that asks the viewer to question the presented imagery.

Tracey Emin

Tracey Emin's often sexually provocative work reveals a sense of physical and personal intimacy. Her personal disclosure makes her work both tragic and relatable. Although Emin's work is personal, her pieces evoke the everyday experience and the brutal reality of life (Genta 1). Her vulnerable confessions, which take the form of neon light installations, give the often cold and impersonal medium a sense of intimacy and warmth.

Writing and the utilization of text have always been essential to Emin's artistic practice. Emin uses the emotional pull and power of written language making her work sentimental and poetic. Ali Smith stated, "With Emin, art is about articulation: its questions, impossibilities and, above all, the fluidity and changeability of register" (Smith 1). Emin claims that her handwriting is an extension of her identity. Due to the decision to end her formal education at the age of thirteen, Emin did not develop "proper"

handwriting techniques causing her handwriting to resemble beautiful expressive marks (“Artist Talk Tracey Emin”).

Emin’s neon light installations illustrate the expressive quality of her handwriting and the power of text. Her series, *I Promise to Love You*, used neon lights to illuminate specific emotions leaving the viewer to question the power of love. Her fluorescent hand written words reference raw emotions of heartbreak, failure, and jealousy. In February 2013, this series was displayed in New York’s Times Square. Fifteen billboards were selected to display six pieces from Emin’s neon light series. The series depicts themes relating to passion, love, desires, and fear (Klingelfuss 1). The piece, *I Listen to The Ocean and All I Hear is You*, is beautifully poetic. Her famous love scribbles have become iconic confessional aspect of her work.

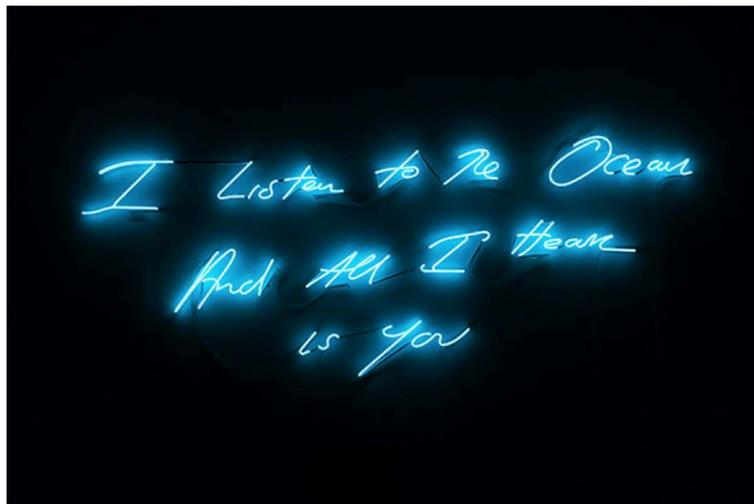


Fig. 3. Tracey Emin, *I Listen to the Ocean and All I Hear is You* (2013), neon.

Marina Abramovic

Performance art emerged in the 1960s as a medium that challenges and violates the borders between disciplines. Within her work, Marina Abramovic often threatens her own body by creating work that, at times, is violent, provocative, and bold. She uses her

body as her primary medium to explore her body's physical and emotional limits. By creating a shared experience between the audience and the performer, her work becomes transcendent ("The Artist is Present").

Curator of the Whitney Museum of American Art, Chrissie Iles, discussed the unique qualities that make Abramovic's performances distinctive:

When you are watching a Marina Abramovic performance you are in engaging with her physical presence, which is very striking. The clear evidence that she has stamina and strength, which the public and its presence gives her... but clearly physically it's innate. She can take sitting still or doing very little or whatever she is doing in the performance for long periods of time, which most people cannot. ("The Artist is Present")

Abramovic and Ulay started their collaborative work in 1976. The group of works known as the *Relation Works* transformed the medium of performance art. The two would engage their bodies often in a confrontational way. Their early work was in response to male and female conflicts and traumatic experiences experienced within relationships.

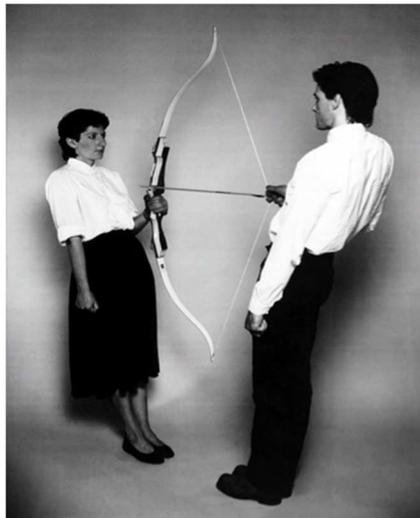


Fig. 4. Marina Abramovic and Ulay, *Rest Energy*, 1980, video.

Rest Energy, recorded in 1980, engaged the body in a life endangering experiment of trust. In the performance Ulay drew a large arrow directed at Abramovic as she leaned backwards to create tension. Microphones were attached to the performers and picked up their quickening heartbeats and irregular breathing (“Marina Abramovic & Ulay”). This piece displayed extreme levels of trust and vulnerability that are present in any deep relationship (Wrobel 1). Abramovic’s explorations regarding the body’s relationship to pain, pleasure, and her use of the body as a medium within her practice inform my work. I am inspired by the vulnerability and honesty that make her pieces captivating and relatable.

Abramovic and Russell explore the element of time within their work and use the body to effectively articulate ephemeral moments. Since the human body is essential in how we understand identity their work influences the way I think about our body in relation to self. These women use their bodies as a tool to express a passage of time and inspire the way I use technology and the body to express time within my practice. Tracey Emin’s confrontational use of text provokes the viewer creating an immediate intimate connection with the work. My work attempts to create the same personal connection that Emin captures in each of her pieces. Duane Michals uses handwritten language within his constructed narratives to enhance his visual stories. Emin and Michals have strengthened my understanding about the power of written language and often deal with themes related to memory, identity and relationships. Each of the artists mentioned above address key concepts that I explore within my work and they help strengthen my artistic practice.

CHAPTER V

OVERVIEW

Conceptual Description

I am interested in how memories define relationships and influence a person's identity. My narratives are recollections of what was seen, heard and spoken. Using video and photography I explore the ideas of memory and attempt to visually restore these recollections. My work questions the boundary of what is considered to be public and private imagery. My imagery asks the viewer to share a private and intimate moment in another individual's personal relationship.

Within my practice, I use the skin as a medium for mark making. I am specifically interested in the skin's ability to become marked by the physical world. I mark the skin with text, photograph the skin, and record its ability to be marked and heal. The text selected becomes a physical manifestation of the memories that define identity. I use couples in my work and attempt to recreate pivotal moments within their personal relationships by letting them select their own text from my curated list. By sharing the memories of others, I encourage my viewers to reflect on memories that have impacted and changed their personal identity.

Formal Description

The Ephemeral and the Eternal was on display in the Kipp Gallery at Indiana University of Pennsylvania from February 6th through March 4th. The exhibition consisted of 10 large format photographs, 3 video works, and a 5 x 5 grid of macro photography shots of the skin.

The large format images displayed exist as separate pieces, but work together to create one experience. Ten 24”x 36” photographs were featured on two walls of the gallery. Dealing with themes related to love, loss, and memory, the text presented in each work enhances the narrative quality of each piece. The piece *I Mistook Lust for Love* (2015) creates a voyeuristic relationship with the viewer asking them to peer into an intimate moment.



Fig. 5. *Loving You Was A Lie*, 2015, photograph on aluminum, 24x36 in.

The text that is imprinted into the skin reads as: “I Wanted To Fuck So I Loved.” This narrative illustrates the harsh reality that can be associated with love and desire.

Something Beautiful With You (2015) shares an intimate moment between a couple that is not often experienced by an outsider. The couple reacts against the stigmas present in our society concerning age and relationships. The text imprinted into the skin reads: “Every Bed Without You Is Broken” and shares a tender private moment between an elderly couple. There are common misconceptions about love after the age of sixty. This piece confirms that you are never too old to find love and have a sexual relationship.

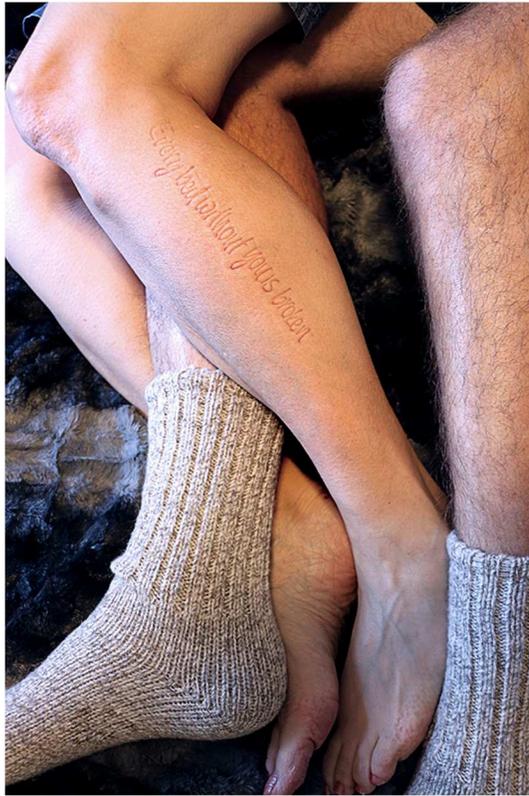


Fig. 6. *Something Beautiful With You*, 2015, photograph on aluminum, 24x36 in.

I Thought it Was Love and I Still Think it Was, But it's Not Anymore (2015) narrates the feelings associated with passion, desire and fear. "Loved Lost Raged Chocolate Next" is imprinted on the stomach of a young woman who is sitting on a bed in her lingerie. This work illustrates the process of going through the stages of heartbreak and coping with lost Love.



Fig. 7. *I Thought It Was Love and I Still Think It Was, but It Is Not Anymore*, 2015, photograph on aluminum, 24x36 in.

The three video pieces featured in the exhibition record the skin's ability to be marked and heal. Text was imprinted into the skin and I recorded the process of the skin returning to its natural state. The videos are macro shots of the skin and reference the act of marking and healing my showing the fading of the text on the skin in real time. *I Always Swore That We Would Never Fall Apart* (2016) records the fading of an imprinted hand. The videos demonstrate the incredible ability of our skin to repair itself after being marked.



Fig. 8. *I Always Swore That We Would Never Fall Apart*, 2015, video still.

The last piece in the exhibition was produced from the interest of depicting zoomed images of the skin as a biological record of time. *A Visual Surface of Memory* (2016) is a 5 x 5 grid consisting of 10" x 10" zoomed images of marks made upon the skin. These pieces reinforce the idea that the skin serves as visual surface of our memories. The skin does this by recording our past through scarring, bruising, and other forms of mark-making. The images presented consist of ephemeral marks, such as, scratches, imprints, and bruises combined with more permanent marks like scars. This

piece highlights the skin's ability to become marked by the physical world. Traces of the past through scarring, bruising, freckles, age spots, and other forms of mark-making are enlarged through macro shots of the skin.



Fig. 9. *A Visual Surface of Memory*, 2015, aluminum prints.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Memories play a significant role in the construction of an individual's identity and our skin is a visual manifestation of those memories. *The Ephemeral and the Eternal* visually restores these recollections that contribute to the discovery of one's self. This work challenges the boundaries of what is considered public and private imagery using photography as a medium asking the viewer to recall their own personal memories.

The exhibition asks the viewer to observe the intimacy of personal relationships, and reflect on memories that have impacted their personal identity. *The Ephemeral and the Eternal* is a visual recollection of self-defining memoirs. By sharing these memoirs about love, loss, and desire, I hope to encourage my audience to reflect on moments that have changed their sense of self.

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