

An Autobiographical Memory

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the depiction of the following themes in the *Autobiographical Memory* exhibition, using a psychoanalytical lens: identity, memory, archive, surveillance, and the death drive. The artwork represents a journey that started when I arrived in Winnipeg in 2017: a journey through my memories. Immigration was the trigger for this journey, as the scenes and images of the past started to come back with an intense emotional impact, because in this new context they had started to mean something different. Painting, drawing, video, and collage hence became the tools to make sense of the past in the light of the present and to reconstruct a new self, a new identity. This body of work represents an autobiography in a postmodern context through a blend of near and far pasts, personal and collective memories, and private to public scopes.

Keywords

Visual Arts, Painting, Memory, Narrative, Identity, Gel-transfer

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PREFACE

This series of work represents a journey. The journey which started from when I arrived here in Winnipeg and is still going on: a journey through my memories. As it is, my works near the end of the program, which are presented as my final project are the natural continuation of my earlier works in the program. What triggered this journey was immigration. Coming here I started to reminisce about my days back in Iran. The scenes and images of past experiences, of familiar places and faces, started to come back and to vividly visualize in my mind as if I was reliving them in the present. They came with even more emotional impact because now they have different meanings for me. So, images act as tools for me to reconstruct my memories. The memories that seem to be gone for a while, but they are not, in fact lost.

Why this journey? What was the destination and through which paths was this imaginary journey which started with a real geographical travel from Iran to Canada meant to be? I believe, this is a path I am travelling through and I am reconsidering myself. Trailing this path of memories and images I am critically examining my origins, my beliefs, and my values. By doing so, I am trying to redefine and amend in order to grow to a better self. This all began by arriving here in Canada because this arrival gave me new pictures, new horizons, and new references to consider in relation to my view of self, my origins, and my norms. So, I take this journey as a self-critique, as an assessment of myself, the society I come from, and what has shaped me and my people socially, politically, and culturally. Along this reconsideration and evaluation of myself and my identity, I can surely find endearing items of my origin which I immensely love and would like to hold on to. Conversely, there are dark sides to those pictures of my homeland which are upsetting and I would like them to change. For now, however, I should say I am more focused on the latter. Therefore, as the journey is rooted in my memories and as it is a thorough journey within what has shaped me, let me call the whole series an *Autobiographical Memory*.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY: NARRATIVE AND IDENTITY

"How does one mediate the space between 'self' and 'life' that autobiography would traverse and transgress? One definition of autobiography suggests that it is an effort to recapture the self [...] Such a claim presumes that there is such a thing as the 'self' and that it is 'knowable.' This coming-to-knowledge of the self constitutes both the desire that initiates the autobiographical act and the goal towards which autobiography directs itself.

By means of writing such desire can presumably be fulfilled. Thus, the place to begin our investigation of autobiography might be at the crossroads of 'writing' and 'selfhood'.¹

According to Laura Di Summa-Knoop, the concept of autobiography has much to do with notions of genuine memories presented in the form of a narrative which conveys a personal identity or self.² There, the traditional role of the reader is not only to believe, empathize, and sympathize, but also to judge the content.³ As a result, creating an autobiography resonates with remembering, and also with difficulties and complexities intertwined with the act of recollection.⁴ Nevertheless, the very act of communicating the self, the real self along with the consciousness accompanying it, in other words a telling story of self which can evoke all that empathy and sympathy, resembles a sort of confession and self-revelation. Additionally, those narratives of self are real and relatable, and further they can be anyone else's experience too.⁵ And last but not least, a narrative structure is crucial to autobiography. That is the cohesiveness, the causal relation and continuity of the events, and most importantly the sense of closure or ending as vital aspects of an autobiography.⁶ While, according to Ricoeur, people's tendency to tell the story of their life in that form is the basis for the notion of *narrative self*,⁷ or a cognition of self and identity which depends on narrative-compatibility of life, Di Summa-Knoop posits that "[...] the delineation of identity depends upon our ability to see our lives as unfolding stories".⁸ More precisely, the narrative feature of the autobiography; namely, its being consolidated of a series of cohesive and coherent accounts of life which lead to a situation where one can assume that "something has been learned", or "that a portion of life has reached its conclusion" signifies the *narrative self-constitution view*.⁹ Supported by some scholarly works, this theory states that "[...] the construction of a diachronic narrative is at the basis of our ability to self-evaluate ourselves according to what [...] could be summarized]

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1. Shari Benstock. "Authorizing the Autobiographical," in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 1998), 145-46.
 2. Laura Di Summa-Knoop, "Critical Autobiography: A New Genre?", *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 9, no.1: 2, <https://doi.org/10.1080/20004214.2017.1358047>.
 3. Di Summa-Knoop, "Critical Autobiography", 2.
 4. Di Summa-Knoop, "Critical Autobiography", 2.
 5. Di Summa-Knoop, "Critical Autobiography", 5-6.
 6. Di Summa-Knoop, "Critical Autobiography", 6.
 7. Majid Heidari, "Praxis, Paul Ricoeur, Self," October 10, 2020, YouTube video, <https://youtu.be/AAN6n9fcavU>.
 8. Di Summa-Knoop, "Critical Autobiography", 6.
 9. Di Summa-Knoop, "Critical Autobiography", 6.

as being the “four features” of identity, namely, moral responsibility, self-interested concern, compensation, and survival.”¹⁰ Here, with regards to ideas of self-evaluation and moral-evaluation, we could again see that autobiography connects with the moral and ethics, hence, confession and integrity:

“Finding the narrative that underlines our lives is then equivalent, in these memoirs, to finding moral closure; it is what we need to ascertain who we have become and to further assess—and often accept—each step, each chapter of life.”¹¹

MEMORY

To speak of memory is to speak of imagination even if one does not attempt to connect it with the realm of imagery and visual arts. According to Ricoeur, in everyday language, “the presence in which the representation of the past seems to consist does indeed appear to be that of an image. We say interchangeably that we represent a past event to ourselves or that we have an image of it, an image that can be either quasi visual or auditory”.¹² Other than that and above that, a philosophical tradition tends to “consider memory the province of imagination”¹³. In fact, memory is often reproached due to its adjacent realm imagination, being believed to concern fantasy and emotions rather than facts.¹⁴ However, this conceptual weakness is not the only problem of memory when it comes to factuality:

“[...] remembering, [...] is not a matter of simple recollection. Memories change over time, and memorization is prone to subjective remodeling. At times remodeling can be a form of protection; we tend, for instance, to remove or mitigate painful memories from the past to the point to which we might even deny having lived through them. Other times, the alteration of memories is dictated by the need of “making sense” of what happened;”¹⁵

10. Di Summa-Knoop, “Critical Autobiography”, 6.

11. Di Summa-Knoop, “Critical Autobiography”, 6.

12. Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Translated by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 5.

13. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 5.

14. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 5.

15. Di Summa-Knoop, “Critical Autobiography”, 3.

Memory and Imagination

As was pointed out, memory and imagination go hand in hand with each other, but further, if one is to consider image and work of art in relation to memory, factors other than imagination also should be considered. In short, according to psychoanalytic texts, the works of art stand at the intersection of memory, imagination, and archive, and the evil instinct which persists in all of them as humane entities; namely, the death-drive.

Ricoeur has drawn on the dual conceptualization of memory in the Greek philosophical tradition to distinguish the two dimensions of memory: first, the cognitive type which he later calls *simple evocation* or *pure memory* and pertains to memory as it resides in the mind and its capability to pop up automatically (mneme). It is the outcome of an outside stimuli. Second, the pragmatic type which in brief could be called the *effort to recall* (anamnesis).¹⁶ It should be noted here that the second type is a process and surely contains a memory of the first type which one deliberately attempts to remember.¹⁷ He also denotes that the act of recollection necessitates a human subject and something (a memory, a perception, a knowledge) which has happened for or experienced by this subject some time in the past.¹⁸ In fact, the very existence of a happening in the past is the feature both types of memory share and it is what distinguishes a memory from other processes in mind, such as perception and conjecture which correspondingly are dedicated to present and future, and most importantly from imagination.¹⁹ Then Ricoeur proceeds by remarking that the original affection or perception which is caused by something exterior to human body in the past creates a lasting effect in human soul.²⁰ He calls it “eikon” and introduces it as something that bears the *otherness* of the original affection, quoting Aristotle.²¹ Now, as opposed to simple memory which exists and comes back out of habit or necessity, recollection is a deliberate search or seeking of what is learned or known within the human entity.²² It can be done either because one decides to do so or because something which is reminiscent of the eikon or the original affection is

16. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 4, 15, 17, 18, 19.

17. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 15, 20, 21, 51.

18. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 5, 15, 18, 20, 21.

19. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 15, 18.

20. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 16-17.

21. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 16, 17, 20, 51.

22. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 17-18.

perceived.²³ But to do so one must be able to measure the degree of pastness or the time elapsed between the reference point, which is the time of recollection and the time of the memory happening.²⁴ This is what human-kind's time perception allows for and it is done by one's continuous detection of physical happenings in the surroundings and marking the time dimension by remarking those incidents.²⁵ Therefore, by estimating the temporal distance attributed to the memory, the mind goes back over the timeline in search of the attempted memory and catches it.²⁶

As was stated before, memories come back in the shape of images. It follows that the final phase of the process of recollection should be the image-making process of memories or the creation of a *memory-image*.²⁷ However, the type of imagination that occurs here is different, in that it is based on reality and is bound to time.²⁸ In other words, imagination here comes in as the magical power of the mind. A power which enables the mind to knit clothes of imagery for otherwise unattainable and vapory memory. This way the memory becomes virtually visible to the mind; it comes to the surface.²⁹ Here are some of the expressions Ricoeur has used to explain that process: "carrying memory back into a region of presence similar to that of perception"³⁰, "visualization function of imagination"³¹, and "placing before the eyes" as is done in fine arts, according to Aristotle.³² However, Ricoeur quotes Aristotle when he says that the picture or image constructed in the mind is "[e]ssentially virtual, it cannot be known as something past unless we follow and adopt the movement by which it expands into a present image, thus emerging from obscurity into the light of day".³³

As final remarks in distinguishing memory from imagination, Ricoeur points out that the object of pure imagination is rooted in nothingness, and imagination compensates for that absence by way of creating an object as one desires or thinks of it; whereas, imagination in terms of

23. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 51-52.

24. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 16, 18.

25. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 16.

26. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 18.

27. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 7, 50, 51, 52.

28. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 50.

29. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 52.

30. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 52.

31. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 52.

32. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 52.

33. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 52, 54.

memory-image or recollection is related to reality and perception, it accords with a “given-now-in-the-past” object and not a “given-in-its-absence” one.³⁴ It could be concluded that *memory-image* is the concerted product of memory and imagination.

All that said, psychoanalysis speaks of notions, beliefs, joys and thrills, that are memories in brief, which may not be personally experienced but are bound to a certain image, associated with a memory, or traceable in time, but reside somewhere in mind or human psyche.³⁵ They go back to an early stage of a human individual's life, a “primitive phase in our mental development”, or in some cases to the early times of human race.³⁶ Here are some of the terms Freud has used describing them: “what was once well known and had long been familiar”,³⁷ infantile anxiety,³⁸ “the castration complex”,³⁹ “childhood complexes”,⁴⁰ “the animistic phase in the development of primitive peoples”,⁴¹ “primitive fear of the dead”,⁴² “fantasy of living in the womb”⁴³ or the “man’s old home”,⁴⁴ “repressed desires or [...] superannuated modes of thought belonging to the prehistory of the individual and the race”.⁴⁵ To these semi-memories we will come back shortly after.

Memory and Archive

Why to speak of archive here? The simplest answer would be that an image, or more specifically a work of art has much in common with an item in an archive. An item of visual art, say a painting, is a collection of signs inscribed on a substrate. It might not yet have attained the status to be placed in a museum or gallery with exquisite pieces of renown artists; however, it is still a piece, and by

34. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 53.

35. Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” in *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2003), 124, 140, 143, 147, 149, 150, 151, 152, 155.

36. Freud, “The Uncanny,” 124, 140, 143, 147, 149, 150, 151, 152, 155.

37. Freud, “The Uncanny,” 124.

38. Freud, “The Uncanny,” 141, 151.

39. Freud, “The Uncanny,” 140, 150.

40. Freud, “The Uncanny,” 155.

41. Freud, “The Uncanny,” 147.

42. Freud, “The Uncanny,” 149.

43. Freud, “The Uncanny,” 150.

44. Freud, “The Uncanny,” 151.

45. Freud, “The Uncanny,” 152.

being so the arts institution has the authority to categorize, criticize and to interpret it based on its content and characteristics, quite like what archives do when selecting and managing their items.⁴⁶

The primary reason for describing archive here, however, is because of the shared characteristics of archive and memory, and most notably because of the connection between archive and human psyche, according to a psychoanalytic phenomenology of archive posited by Derrida. To start, Derrida points to the differences between archive and memory and suggests that archive could only be considered as an exterior model of memory: “[...T]he archive [...] will never be either memory or anamnesis as spontaneous, alive and internal experience. On the contrary: the archive is situated at the place of originary and structural breakdown of the said memory. *There is no archive without a place of consignation, without a technique of repetition, and without a certain exteriority. No archive without outside*”.⁴⁷ He further underscores that archive could be taken “as accumulation and capitalization of memory on some substrate and in an exterior place” and that the mechanical model Freud has proposed was intended to represent on the outside the memory as an internal archivization system.⁴⁸ Yet towards the end of his analysis Derrida writes:

“Taking into account the multiplicity of regions in the psychic apparatus, [the mechanical model proposed by Freud ...] also integrates the necessity, inside the psyche itself, of a certain outside, of certain borders between insides and outsides. And with this domestic outside, that is to say also with the hypothesis of an internal substrate, surface, or space without which there is neither consignation, registration, impression nor suppression, censorship, repression, it prepares the idea of a psychic archive distinct from spontaneous memory, of a hypomnesis distinct from mneme and from anamnesis: the institution, in sum, of a prosthesis of the inside”.⁴⁹

Although intended to a greater end, to which we will attend shortly, this quote suggests even more similarity between the human mind and archive on the one hand, and the possibility of a place for unconventional types of memory to which I alluded at the end of the last section, on the other hand. Nevertheless, the climax of the story, or the greater end I pointed to, is yet to come.

46. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 2-3.

47. Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 11.

48. Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 12-13.

49. Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 19.

Death Drive: Man, Memory, and Archive meet

In *Archive Fever*, which was frequently cited in the last section, Derrida takes Freud himself as an exemplar of the human psyche and instincts. He also takes the institution of psychoanalysis as an instance of archive.⁵⁰ By reviewing excerpts of Freud's writings introducing his then-new finding,⁵¹ namely, the *death drive* – also called the *destruction drive* or the *aggression drive*⁵²– Derrida shows how the demonic instinct prevails over every other instinct and overrides every other principle, among them the *pleasure principle* throughout the entirety of human's life.⁵³

Before the official introduction of the book in which Freud introduced his new finding, he wrote in his *The Uncanny*: “In the unconscious mind we can recognize the dominance of a *compulsion to repeat*, which proceeds from instinctual impulses. This compulsion probably depends on the nature of the drives themselves. It is strong enough to override the pleasure principle and lend a demonic character to certain aspects of mental life”.⁵⁴ In *Archive Fever*, Derrida shows how intensely Freud himself had become affected by the death drive. Freud who remembered himself as being reluctant to accepting the existence of such instinct,⁵⁵ had become so fond of it that he announced the advent of it to the psychoanalysis society with much joy,⁵⁶ yet he knew that the result of his finding would be the destruction of the archive as it has been and rebuilding of a new one.⁵⁷ Derrida then suggest that the death drive is so subtly and silently at work that it does not leave any trace or archive of itself behind.⁵⁸ It follows that:

“[... the] destruction (Destruktion) drive, [...] not only incites forgetfulness, amnesia, the annihilation of memory, as mneme or anamnesis, but also commands the radical effacement, in truth the eradication, of [...] archive, consignation, the documentary or monumental apparatus as hypomnema, mnemotechnical supplement or representative, auxiliary or memorandum”.⁵⁹

50. Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 8-11.

51. Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 8-10.

52. Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 9-10.

53. Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 8-10.

54. Freud, “The Uncanny,” 145.

55. Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 10.

56. Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 9.

57. Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 9-12.

58. Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 10.

59. Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 11.

Then Derrida reaches to a key paradox, which is also one of the main points of his lecture:

“[I]f there is no archive without consignment in an external place which assures the possibility of memorization, of repetition, of reproduction, or of reimpression, then we must also remember that repetition itself, the logic of repetition, indeed the repetition compulsion, remains according to Freud indissociable from the death drive. And thus, from destruction. Consequence: right on that which permits and conditions archivization, we will never find anything other than that which exposes to destruction, and in truth menaces with destruction, introducing, a priori, forgetfulness and the archiviolithic into the heart of the monument”.⁶⁰

Therefore, the conclusion is that the very existence of archive necessitates its destruction and this doom desire eradicates every other intent; namely, any archival desire. So, it is to be called “Archive Fever”.⁶¹ Derrida later extends this to human mind and its finitude where these ideas coincide with Freud’s “thought about the unity of life and death [...]”,⁶² as Kees Vuyk quotes and interprets Freud:

““[T]he end (here as: aim, target) of all life is death”. If life wants to return to former situations, then in the end it should want to return to the situation before life, the inorganic state of pure balance. Basically, life doesn’t like to live. Life is a detour to death.”⁶³

Given all that, the most attractive point of the whole discussion for the realm of art is still remained for us to attend to:

“As inheritance, [... the death drive] leaves only its erotic simulacrum, its pseudonym in painting, its sexual idols, its masks of seduction: lovely impressions. These impressions are perhaps the very origin of what is so obscurely called the beauty of the beautiful. As memories of death”.⁶⁴

“The death drive tends thus to destroy the hypomnesic archive, except if it can be disguised, made up, painted, printed, represented as the idol of its truth in painting”.⁶⁵

60. Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 11-12.

61. Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 12.

62. Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 14.

63. Kees Vuyk, “Aesthetics of Horror, Freudian Theory of Art and Death Drive,” *Jaarboek Voor Esthetica* (2002): 4,
https://www.academia.edu/43095984/AESTHETICS_OF_HORROR_Freudian_theory_of_art_and_death_drive.

64. Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 11.

65. Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 12.

A transaction is thus in action between the death drive and pleasure principle, between love and death, between beauty and death.⁶⁶ However, Kees Vuyk believes that Freud's conceptualization of the death drive is to some extent loose and somehow vague, and so is his representation of death drive within the beauty or in the work of art.⁶⁷ He attributes those problems to Freud's some strategic decisions in terms of the stance and future of the psychoanalysis institution, as well as some shortcomings in the fundamentals of the Freudian psychoanalysis. All in all, the bottom line was that at last Freud concluded that the life drive, or the sum of human traits which are meant to sustain and guarantee the life and the continuation of the human race were the main drive, or principal, and that the death drive was secondary, in relation, and not the other way round.⁶⁸ Now, Vuyk suggests that Žižek has solved the problem and has the key to the mysterious relationship of the death drive and the arts. Let us take a brief look at the principals of the human mind in Lacan's view, since his understanding of the human psyche is central to Zizek's philosophy⁶⁹, also because we will need to refer to Lacanian system of thought in the following sections.

The Real, The Symbolic, and The Imaginary

Lacan suggested that the human mind is the result of the juxtaposition of three *spheres* or *orders*.⁷⁰ ⁷¹ The first one, *the real* includes the world and everything in it, as it is; however, the problem is that *the real* is unattainable for the human subject;⁷² and that is because our only way to think of and to describe the real world is through language, which is a contractual system of signifiers and significances. It means that every word refers to another and so on; and the language, hence our understanding of *the real* is nothing but a causal chain or network of words.⁷³ *The symbolic* is the reality as we know it through language. The language itself, culture, ideologies, moral values, social contracts and order, and law fall into this category. We are defined inside the symbolic order. We are part of that impersonal system, as long as we live in the society.⁷⁴ This whole system is

66. Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 12.

67. Kees Vuyk, *Aesthetics of Horror*, 5.

68. Kees Vuyk, *Aesthetics of Horror*, 4-5.

69. Tony Myers, *Slavoj Žižek* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2003), 15.

70. Tony Myers, *Slavoj Žižek*, 20.

71. Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (London: Granta Books, 2011), 8.

72. Tony Myers, *Slavoj Žižek*, 25-26.

73. Tony Myers, *Slavoj Žižek*, 23-25.

74. Tony Myers, *Slavoj Žižek*, 23.

based on the language's chain of signification or the signification law.⁷⁵ The consequence: *the real* is meaningless and inaccessible to us, so we try to understand *the real* through language based on *the symbolic*;⁷⁶ but *the real* always eludes *the symbolic*; yet if it was not because of the significance chain and its shortcomings, *the symbolic* would have completely overlapped *the real* and every human subject would become like each other, like machines.⁷⁷ So we have the *real* order that, if we are to morally evaluate, is superior to other spheres,⁷⁸ and then we have *the symbolic*, which is based on *the real*, but never matches it and is just a mental reality.

Finally, there is *the imaginary*, inferior to other orders, but still with us everywhere, as long as we find ourselves a unit in the human system, as we find a self, or ego in Freud's expression, inside. *The imaginary* is the result of a departure from the unity of the world, and that is why the humankind is always after the real self or her identity.⁷⁹

The Other

The other is another expression that alludes to the symbolic order. It either points to part of that giant symbolic system of order, say the law as is experienced by the individual human subjects, or to the real and human entities which represent and enforce that order, say a policeman.⁸⁰ *The other* could be seen as the humans' second nature, it controls and directs our actions and words.⁸¹ As we speak, in fact we are following the symbolic order of language, thus following *the other*, but more than that, we are also following the necessities of many social pacts and contracts both consciously and inadvertently.⁸² As we tend to evaluate and measure ourselves, our acts and sayings against the symbolic order of *the other*, it becomes an independent being, a unique one, which monitors our deed from high above; yet, and despite its superiority and power, *the other* only exist as long

75. Tony Myers, *Slavoj Žižek*, 23.

76. Tony Myers, *Slavoj Žižek*, 26.

77. Tony Myers, *Slavoj Žižek*, 28.

78. Tony Myers, *Slavoj Žižek*, 21.

79. Tony Myers, *Slavoj Žižek*, 21-22.

80. Tony Myers, *Slavoj Žižek*, 23.

81. Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan*, 8.

82. Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan*, 9.

as the human subjects collectively assume it and behave themselves in front of it, which is virtually everywhere since it is not a real thing and exists merely in our heads.⁸³

Art, Fantasy, and the Death Drive

Now, regarding the death drive and its connection to the arts:

“If Žižek says that all drive is death drive, this could also be understood in this way that everything in nature that is touched by the thing that death drive stands for, breaks adrift and turns into drive. From a fairly predictive, regularly working, biological mechanism it becomes an unpredictable, essentially boundless, possibly destructive force that needs to be checked and bound - in other words that is in need of culture [;]”⁸⁴

This means that under the effect of the death drive a human being tends to indulge, in terms of almost everything and her every instinct, to the point that she would overturn those instincts into harmful or even deadly traits. In other words, the death drive cuts the threads that bond human, like other animals, to nature, and this liberty is unbearable and deadly.⁸⁵ Here is where culture, with its roots deep in fantasy, comes in and plays the role of the moderator, or humans’ wit, according to Žižek.

“[...] fantasy is the hidden core of every culture. When culture is the framework that gives humans the possibility to separate order from chaos, to build an idea about reality and - with the help of this idea - to distinguish reality from fantasy, then at the origin of this culture lies a fundamental fantasy, hidden from realistic thought, no subject of discussion, repressed from consciousness, only accessible through its symptom, that is culture. No culture without fantasy. That is why every culture according to Žižek is inevitably ideological.”⁸⁶

Freud believed that art was a special form of fantasy. Žižek adds to that by suggesting that fantasy within the works of art does not just appeal to the artist but absorbs all humans. Kees Vuyk has elaborated the matter in comprehensible terms:

“With fantasy humans have to fill the gaps which death drive strikes in their existence and which makes that without fantasy they would not be able to give direction to their

83. Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan*, 9-10.

84. Kees Vuyk, *Aesthetics of Horror*, 7.

85. Kees Vuyk, *Aesthetics of Horror*, 11.

86. Kees Vuyk, *Aesthetics of Horror*, 8.

lives. With drive alone man cannot live. Drive has to be domesticized through fantasy. In this process drive turns into desire.”⁸⁷

Therefore, art is a product of human fantasy, but not the only of its kind. All matters that fall into the category of *the symbolic* or *the other*, e.g., religion, ideologies, ethics, and even everyday morale are there. As stated before, in Lacan’s terms we can only experience *the real* through the fantasy,⁸⁸ that is, *the symbolic*. While fantasy is mostly hidden throughout the life, with art it can reveal itself. As Vuyk suggests, Žižek believes that “art is a way of “going through the fantasy””,⁸⁹ and that, “In art sometimes we see fantasy as fantasy [; ... which] means that in art sometimes death drive itself can be experienced.”⁹⁰ The importance of art then comes from its ability to demonstrate the function of fantasy in human life.⁹¹

THE WORKS

Each of the works in the exhibition entails a desire to change, or a modified reality, a fantasized past. In this regard, the overall atmosphere of the project can be described under the constant presence of a will towards the partial destruction and rebuilding of self, of identity, and of reality. This is in concordance with my research of the death drive, the undistinguishable element of life as is known to us, with my pieces being considered as cultural-artistic endeavors to contain it and to return it back to the thriving stream of life.

The *Autobiographical Memory* series are comprised of three main subseries: 1) *Letter to a child never born*, 2) *#anyhopefornature*, and 3) the final subseries, *Autobiographical Memory*.

Letter to a Child Never Born⁹²

I am an Iranian married woman. I was born and raised in a nonreligious family, which is common among the Iranian leftist minority. In spite of that upbringing, which might suggest a liberated personality, once I arrived in Canada, I found that I was far from being an independent free woman.

87. Kees Vuyk, *Aesthetics of Horror*, 8.

88. Kees Vuyk, *Aesthetics of Horror*, 8.

89. Kees Vuyk, *Aesthetics of Horror*, 8.

90. Kees Vuyk, *Aesthetics of Horror*, 8.

91. Kees Vuyk, *Aesthetics of Horror*, 12.

92. The name of a book by Oriana Fallaci

This had a devastating effect on my self-esteem. My attempts to resolve this apparent contradiction led me to a specific conclusion about myself: working at home as a housewife pushed me to follow traditional customs; it transformed the interior into an isolated space and captivated me with illusions of agency and satisfaction.

In a broader view, failure to recognize women's labour as a valuable, productive effort compounds the situation of the individuals, especially in developing countries. I realized that the self-censorship inherited and internalized by many Iranian homemakers is a complicated process with deep historical roots: it is not only a product of religious fundamentalism, but rather it is the outcome of individuals' family background, role models, social class, economy and other factors too.



Figure 1. *Untitled from Letter to a Child Never Born* Series, 2019, Acrylic on Canvas, 18" × 25"

Moreover, a scarcity of feminist activity due to the continuous crackdown on social activists in the public sphere and in academia, combined with the lack of the freedom of speech in the media were factors that I found contributing to women's self-suppression. As an instance, I was discouraged from focusing on those issues during my studies and artistic career in Iran, and my exposure to Western artistic and academic traditions was largely limited to developments before the 1960s, eras that dominated current Iranian art pedagogy even to the extent of the exclusion of more contemporary approaches from public arts education. The result has been a lack of distinct socio-political positions and lack of anti-hegemonic approaches in Iranian art generally and in my own creative path as well.

After leaving Iran, I became frustrated with this background and its influences on my work, no longer content to hide myself in a safe shelter of largely apolitical formalism. I realized that I needed to have a culturally rooted political voice alongside my formal and technical approaches, while I maintained my commitment to painting and interest in the possibilities of two-dimensional surfaces.

Letter to a child never born is inspired by the restricted identity of the homemaker women. It is an illustration/investigation of those lives through a feminist lens. I have used my personal perspective and experience as an Iranian woman, newly immigrated to Canada and not financially independent, to illustrate how cultural norms and gender specific expectations demand certain roles and lifestyles from women in a traditional society. To expand this idea, I have used either my portrait and figure as a painting model, or used my interior space (art studio and home), to both help myself and others to make sense of the situation, and also to raise awareness about the demands, limitations and expectation placed on women.

Surveillance Video: Surveillance and Gaze

In my country, many homemaker women, who might also have a career outside, have somehow internalized all those expectations and ideals. The norms and values of others who demand what the women should be doing and how they should be. So, even when they are all alone, it is as if they are being watched all the time in their private life. Moreover, they are also restricted in their movements and locked in their unchanging, repetitive routines.

This sense of being monitored or the surveillance theme is very common to my works. In the *Letter* series it is most prominently seen in the *surveillance video*, where the angle and in some views, the perspective, quality, and tone of the picture resemble a CCTV shot. I can best ascribe the surveillance sense to the idea of *the other*, where an omnipresent nonhuman entity seems to screen people and monitor their acts. This has been beautifully put into visual arts vernacular by Lacan, introducing the *gaze* phenomenon:

“Lacan challenges the old privilege of the subject in sight and self-consciousness (the I see myself seeing myself that ground the phenomenological subject) as well as the old mastery of the subject in representation (“this belongs to me aspect of representations, so reminiscent of property,” that empowers the Cartesian subject). [...T]he Lacanian subject is fixed in a double position, and this leads Lacan to superimpose on the usual cone of the vision that emanates from the subject another cone that emanates *from the object*’, at the point of light, which he calls the gaze. [...So T]he subject is also under the regard of the object, photographed by its light, pictured by its gaze: thus the superimposition of the two cones, with the object also at the point of the light (the gaze), the subject also at the point of the picture, and the image also in line with the screen.”⁹³

It seems that by *screen* Lacan means that the subjects (both the artist and the viewer) pass the pure reality through the filter of *the symbolic* to make it understandable and accessible for the human mind. Hal Foster, however, finds the notion of the screen a bit vague. For explanation he adds:

“Call it the conventions of art, the schemata of representation, the codes of visual culture, this screen mediates the object-gaze for the subject, but it also protects the subject from this object-gaze. That is, it captures the gaze, “pulsatile, dazzling and spread out”, and tames it in an image. This formulation is crucial. For Lacan animals are caught in the gaze of the world; they are only on display there. Humans are not so reduced to this “imaginary capture”, for we have access to the symbolic-in this case to the screen as the site of picture making and viewing, where we can manipulate and moderate the gaze.”⁹⁴

In short, humankind has the ability to negotiate the real picture and disarm it, so not “to be blinded by the gaze or touched by *the real*.”⁹⁵ In fact, Lacan considers *the real* or the *gaze* to be intimidating to the extent that not taming it can lead to paranoia or even death.⁹⁶ Foster has explained this by quoting Philip K. Dick who claimed an analogy between the characters of his works and our human ancestors who were in the constant fear of being monitored and preyed. Quoting Leo Bersani,

93. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1996) 138-39.

94. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 140.

95. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 140.

96. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 140.

Foster suggests that paranoia is, in fact, where the subject who cannot bear the *gaze of the real* takes shelter to save herself and her independent entity (or identity) from the harsh attack of the unbearable Real. However, by doing that she loses the reality as others see it. To put it differently, she invents her own assumed reality.⁹⁷ Foster also finds notions of paranoia in other models of visibility. I find that his theories of the male gaze and surveillance are particularly related to my work.



Figure 2. *Surveillance Video* from *Letter to a Child Never Born* Series, 2019, 5:13, original sound

While most of the works of art are focused on dealing with or negotiating between *the real* and *the symbolic*, on the image-screen dimension, some others are focused on the *gaze*, or the rupture of *the symbolic* by means of *the real* in viewer's mind.⁹⁸ However, *the real* is not accessible to us, humans, by definition; because it is the "negative of the symbolic" and always eludes us.⁹⁹ The result is that *the real* can only blink through the surface of some works of art and poke the viewer. Foster finds this to be well explained by Barthes in his *Camera Lucida* when describing rare

97. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 265-66.

98. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 132, 140-141, 145-146.

99. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 141.

photographs which have a strong strange effect called *punctum*. It also coincides with Lacan's *tuchè*.¹⁰⁰ It is the opposite of that normal aspect of a work that gives information, that invites to the topic, which disseminates into *the symbolic*; the feature Barthes calls *studium*,¹⁰¹ and Lacan names *automaton*.¹⁰²

Unfinished: Immigration and Narrative

In the *Surveillance Video*, I have tried to focus on the *gaze* and presence of *the other* (through the form and the gestures of a human character, myself, who seems to be unaware of being photographed or monitored). However, the *Letter to a child never born* series entails other aspects for me, as well. The canvas piece depicted in the *surveillance video*, which is being rubbed, scrubbed and then vacuum-cleaned by me, is a work in progress in the pictures and will remain unfinished forever, as is so included in the exhibition. The unfinished quality of the work is meant to show an ongoing process and continuity alluding to one of the main themes of the whole series and to the starting point of the project: immigration. Immigrating to Canada closed a chapter in my life and was the inception of another which is in progress. The *Unfinished* also shows my working process which is stressed in other pieces of the series and in the *Letter to a child never born*, as well. This was also one of the main points in my mind when working on the layout of the exhibition.

The *Unfinished* is one of the early works in which I have used the gel-transfer technique. This has become one of my main techniques to the point that only few works lack a transferred element; the drawing version of the *Women's Wedding Hall* being one of those few. The gel-transfer technique, like its name which points to change and translation, creates a form within which some information might be lost in comparison with the original picture, but some qualities might be added in the process, as well. Some information could also be left behind. In other words, the layering of images that transfer technique allows for can resemble translation and transfer from one cultural and symbolic sphere to another, and this is what immigration did to me, in a sense: I was detached from a context, from a particular symbolic sphere, and transferred to another, where

100. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 132.

101. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: The Noboddy Press, 1981) 25-27.

102. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 131, 138.

I needed to rethink and reconsider many issues. Conversely, I have also started to reminiscence about my family and many other pleasant memories which I have lost in immigration and translation, as I cannot express them in English. This loss is depicted both through the damaged quality of the transferred photos here and there, and particularly by leaving the work unfinished and blank.



Figure 3. *Unfinished* from *Letter to a Child Never Born* Series, 2019, Gel-transfer on Canvas, 36'' x 48''

Finally, in another respect, the *Unfinished* is a grid-like work showing some oriental patterns on a Persian rug. The grids, which are another recurring form in the works I have created using the transfer technique, point to repetition, collection, and consignment, similar to archives. In concordance with the traditional patterns, the work can recall the reliving of the traditions within the status quo in my home society. However, going back to the *surveillance video*, the acts of scrubbing and vacuum-cleaning I have done under the gaze of the camera are meant to show signs of denial and the will to change the traditions. It is as if I am trying to spot the naked reality of the

predefined roles and norms, and point to the fact that any action, even art creation, needs to be done freely and as the result of a free will; without pressure, without suppression, and without limitation. The beauty of the traditions could also be realized when they are practiced deliberately and freely. As the closing remark, the scrubbing and cleaning along with the areas left blank in the *Unfinished* can evoke the senses of reluctance, denial, pausing, and rethinking, in a way. Assuming that the history of my country is to a great extent the outcome of same actions, same values, and same narratives, a change or an improvement in any matter would only take place if we stop doing the same thing and rethink the drives and consequences of the recurring events. The *Unfinished* also signifies that pause and that *gaze of the real* that may give way to better thinking of the past and present and to hope for a better future.

Shopping Cart: The Uncanny

Here I have superimposed my self-portrait onto a picture of a shopping cart, using multiple techniques throughout the different versions of the work. The first impression of such a blend would be a direct analogy: a lady is likened to a tool of her job, meaning that she is reduced to her everyday chores and domestic tasks, as is the reality in many cases. A second glance could suggest that she is also entrapped in her closed environment.

A deeper interpretation, however, is also possible with regard to psychoanalysis where the *uncanny* is introduced as the terrifying object which is related to what once was known and had been familiar and perhaps tame for a long time.¹⁰³ This creature then is dumped into complex labyrinths of human mind, where we have known as the place of unconventional memories, beliefs, and thrills. An area which go back to the early stages of life or even human race. It is surmounted or repressed in psychoanalysis term, as is concealed and buried. Now the next time it is evoked due to an external stimulus, an image in our case, it comes to surface as something strangely unfamiliar, ferocious and frightening.¹⁰⁴

103. Freud, "The Uncanny," 124, 126.

104. Freud, "The Uncanny," 147-48.



Figure 4. *Shopping Cart* from *Letter to a Child Never Born* Series, 2019, Mixed Media on Canvas, 36" × 48"

The figure of the *Shopping Cart* is *uncanny* in various ways. First and foremost, it resembles a body with cut limbs. Freud believed that such a figure could evoke the infantile castration complex.¹⁰⁵ It is also a shopping cart with a human head on it, which again gives a living feature to something inanimate and lifeless. Here the infantile belief that all dead corpses (e.g., dolls) can become alive is buried and resurrected as a fear of the *uncanny*,¹⁰⁶ as Freud believed that any

105. Freud, "The Uncanny," 150.

106. Freud, "The Uncanny," 140-41.

buried emotion can come back in the form of fear from the *uncanny*.¹⁰⁷ So, that which is concealed comes into the open and is no longer homey but is uncomfortable and unrecognizable. That is why the *heimlich* (homey) coincides with the *unheimlich* (not homey) in German literature¹⁰⁸.

In a sense, the *Shopping Cart* figure also gives the perception of a human body being entrapped in a closed place or buried alive. This time the sense of *uncanny* is rooted in the pleasure of floating in a womb having been surmounted and converted to fear of the closed places.¹⁰⁹ Whichever of these fear-awakening figures we consider to be prominent in the *Shopping Cart* work, I have tried my best to bring out the ghost and reimagine the memory of the suppressed wills, desires, choices, and little joys of life, which is certainly the real story of many women in the developing countries. That depiction, I assume, could do as an act of bringing out the dead body, or putting forward the ghost and making it available to be examined, as opposed to when it is forgotten or overlooked and is doing what it does silently in the background, as such is the case in terms of many fears of the *uncanny*.

To be more precise, the *uncanny* creature is an unnatural type (from humans' point of view) which is highly reluctant to come into existence the way humankind does: the *uncanny* cannot bear the restrictions, limitations, and opportunities of being a human; it cannot bear culture, fantasy, mortality and normal physical existence (in humane terms). The *uncanny* is lured by the freedom and appeal of a pure materiality, which seems to be extremely metaphysical, uncertain, odd, hence intimidating to human.¹¹⁰ The extremity, the purity, and the perfection of the *uncanny* in whatever it is, either power or logic or else, and its complete accordance with its existence is what terrifies us. The *uncanny* is fantastic and could be beaten only by fantasy because that is exactly what the *uncanny* lacks.¹¹¹ The *Shopping Cart* is only different from the *uncanny* in that what has transformed it is not the lack of fantasy. It is not situated on the extreme of the reality like other fantasized creatures. Rather, it is the extremity of the symbolic sphere, the heavy and unbearable demands of the society that has disfigured its body and transformed what used to be a human subject into a dull object of everyday life, a simple machine.

107. Freud, "The Uncanny," 147.

108. Freud, "The Uncanny," 134, 148, 151.

109. Freud, "The Uncanny," 150.

110. Kees Vuyk, *Aesthetics of Horror*, 10.

111. Kees Vuyk, *Aesthetics of Horror*, 11.



Figure 5. *MY palimpsest*, Qajar Dynasty 1794-2018
Canada, Acetone Ttransfer, Shopping Cart,
Transferring Gel, Screen Print, Acetone Transfer, Qajar
Dynasty 1794-2018 Canada, *My Palimpsest* from *Letter
to a Child Never Born* Series, 2019-2020, Light Box,
36" × 58"

In another sense however, the figure of the *Shopping Cart* resembles a kind of *consignation* or *gathering under the same sign*¹¹² in terms of the human body; the same as what happens in an archive and similar to Derrida's reference to circumcision in the archive fever.¹¹³ The society and the culture here have left their signs on the body by exercising extreme forms of suppression on it.

Different versions of the *Shopping Cart* depict my various experiences with different materials within the same conceptual area. In the lightbox version, however, the concept can be viewed as illuminated, bold, and large as possible, like a street billboard. Here the unwanted, buried reality is not kept domestic and private as it is in reality. Rather, it is dragged into the public and showed openly, the homey is not homey anymore.

***#anyhopefornature*¹¹⁴: Repetition and Traumatic Reality**

The work has been created under an intense rash of emotions. First, because I have friends and acquaintances among the imprisoned conservationists in Iran. Second, because the suspicious death of Kavous Seyedemami, the chief of the conservationist, in detention was extremely unjust and heartbreaking; and third, because I find many similarities between the family, culture, and narrative I grew up within, and that of Kavous's children and some of the other conservationists in prison.

#anyhopefornature is roughly the repetition of a Kavous's family picture while camping. I have used various effects and added defects here and there using Photoshop. I found the photo on the Instagram page of Kavous's son. I have hopelessly repeated the picture, a loving memory of one who is no longer with us; a memory which is very familiar and so dear to me that looking at it I can easily imagine myself and my family in a similar photo and in the same setting. At the time of creation I was imagining that it could have been my dear father, or any one else's among my cohorts, or my friend's, the dearest of the people who have the most in common with me. This could be any father who shares the same high hopes, the same defeats, and the same dreams with Kavous, who has departed. Of course, those kinds of reminiscences will not bring him back and

112. Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 3.

113. Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 20.

114. The name of a hashtag in social media for remembering and to support the eight Iranian jailed environmental activists and their families in Iran

will not change his unfair and disastrous destiny, but can surely bring out his memories, hopes, and values for us, the survivors. The artwork can prevent his name and way of life being forgotten.



Figure 6. #anyhopefornature, 2018, Gel-transfer on Canvas, 32" × 32"

Freud's idea about the compulsory repetition is known to us: "to repeat a traumatic event (in actions, in dreams, in images) in order to integrate it into a psychic economy, a symbolic order."¹¹⁵ So the repetition of a scene, even a disastrous one could be pacifying. However, Hal Foster analyzing the function of repetition in Warhol's artworks suggests that there is something else in those works, which is different from mourning. In *Marilyns*, to be exact, in Warhol's variations on color and form there, Foster has detected "an obsessive fixation on the object in melancholy", a

115. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 131.

melancholic “wish-psychosis”.¹¹⁶ Now I understand that in the same way in *#anyhopefor nature* I was after a way to express my sorrow, regret, compassion and sympathy for Kavous and his family in my work. Foster further improves his analysis using Lacan’s system of thought: a traumatic event is “a missed encounter with the real”; and since we cannot catch *the real*, we cannot represent it either. The result is that the repetition of the traumatic event is not equal to its reproduction.¹¹⁷ But Foster believes that “Warhol repetitions not only reproduce traumatic effects; they also produce them.” Therefore, Warhol not only guards us against the severe effect of the trauma, but also, he produces the reality behind the traumatic effect again.¹¹⁸ But how is that possible? More than anything, Foster suggests, Warhol’s technique has that agency: all those color variations, croppings, stains, ““floating flashes” of the silkscreen process, the slipping and streaking, blanching and blanking” and the “repetitive “popping” of the image”.¹¹⁹ That is how Warhol creates his *punctum* or *tuchè*; all those seemingly accidental defects, and effects act as “visual equivalents of our missed encounters with the real”.¹²⁰ Instead of representation of the traumatic by simple repetition of a scene, Warhol connects the subject (i.e.; the viewer) with the “real understood as traumatic” and lets his repetitions to *rupture* “the screen of repetition” and to strike the subject.¹²¹

In *#anyhopefor nature*, using a low-resolution image – actually a screenshot of an old defected family photo published in a social media page – and the gel-transfer medium has produced random defect and decay effects, similar to those in Warhol’s repetitions. Also, like his silkscreens, Photoshop and gel-transfer function as random mechanical interventions here. I have tried to interrupt the familiarity of the scene which disguises the underlying reality by means of conscious painterly interventions, sometimes to the point of extensive covering of the images, especially in terms of the magnified feeding hand in the middle. Those effects are meant to create my own *punctum* in the work, mimicking Warhol’s tear on the woman’s face in the *Ambulance Disaster*, as an instance.¹²² I have also used other randomly generated errors, such as not matching or missing

116. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 131-32.

117. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 132.

118. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 132.

119. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 134-36.

120. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 132-34.

121. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 132.

122. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 136.

grids, to interrupt the plain repetition and to turn the plain *studium* into a more touching, lasting effect. I wanted to get as close as possible to the reality of the violence happened to that peaceful image and to those in it.

Autobiographical Memory Subseries: Photographs

My investigation of the photograph as a symbol is not limited to this last collection used in *Autobiographical Memory*; however, my choice of photographs here is more inclined towards the public and social, rather than personal, as are my narratives tending to be more collective or even global.

Since the advent of photography, photos have inspired the work of many artists both content-wise and formally; particularly through creation of different pictorial effects like flatness and distortion.¹²³ Extensive usage of photography could specifically be viewed in the works of Pierre Bonnard and the *Nabis group*.¹²⁴

We are surrounded by photographs, and much of our daily experience is mediated by digital screens displaying images. Photography simultaneously retains the implicit authority of reality and truth: we trust photographs to tell us the truth. Strategic use of photographs in the work of art allows one to speak to a more inclusive base of audiences. Photographs not only offer easy points of entry for the viewers to understand and make sense of the works, they also allow for better conveyance of multiple aspects of a subject matter.

Women's Wedding Hall

Freud's account of the self proposes that towards the later phases of the completion of the ego a part of it starts to diverge and reorient as an internal authority within the ego with the ability to observe, criticize, and censor. Upon the completion of its evolution it has become the so-called conscience. However, high degrees of divergence of that part of ego to the level that could be called a complete detachment would be diagnosed as a pathological case.¹²⁵

123. Katie Larson, "Snapshot: Painters and Photography, Bonnard to Vuillard," *caa.reviews* (2013), <http://dx.doi.org/10.3202/caa.reviews.2013.53>.

124. Larson, "Snapshot: Painters and Photography, Bonnard to Vuillard".

125. Freud, "The Uncanny," 142.

Ricoeur's conceptualization of self, however, is more elaborate and complex. In his view, to speak of oneself is to speak of another human entity. He suggests that one's self is defined based on other known individuals to one, to the extent that it is impossible to think of oneself without thinking of others. The visual analogy of this phenomenon is the reflection of one in the mirror: when one views oneself in the mirror, it is as if one is watching someone else. Others, in Ricoeur's view are not some random individuals, but rather the people we know a little or quite well. Both directly and indirectly, those people play an important role in shaping what we know as ourselves. The role of others in this regard is highly influential to the extent that it is impossible to think of ourselves without thinking of the impact the others have on our lives. Without the others, there will not be a me. If there is no other, there will be no self.¹²⁶



Figure 7. *Women's Wedding Hall* from *Autobiographical Memory Series*, 2020, Charcoal on Canvas, 67" × 50"

126. Majid Heidari, "Praxis, Paul Ricoeur, Self," October 10, 2020, YouTube video, <https://youtu.be/AAN6n9fcavU>.

Women's Wedding Hall is the continuation of my study of the characteristics and situation of women in the contemporary Iran. However, inspired by the aforementioned notions of identity and self, I have gone a step forward to consider a rather public scenery. The work is a drawing of the portraits of a small number of women (my family members) of different ages, dressed in their traditional dresses and scarves (*hijab*), in a formal gender-exclusive wedding party. The drawing is based on a photograph in which these women are posing for a family picture, looking towards the lens of my camera. I am also in the picture, because my picture is reflected in the mirror at the back while I am taking the photo, as if I am also looking at the viewer.

The source of the work is my choice from a family album, taken a few years ago. My picture in the mirror could be anyone else's, but knowing that it is me makes a difference for me, a *punctum* maybe. At the same time, it seems that my extended family members in the picture are observing me, as I am singled out and isolated at the center. I witness how they are viewing me as a fit or a misfit perhaps, a role-model or a bad example; notions which are far from being unreal, because while they are my relatives, I do not share the same culture with them. They are raised in countryside, within a traditional community with deep roots in religion. Whereas, I am born and raised within an urban, yet conservative society, which has relentlessly tried to detach from its traditions, at least to the extent it concerns the family culture I come from. Two points are noticeable here: first, my identity which should presupposedly be reflected by the narratives and identities of those women in the picture, and in spite of that, the gap in the symbolic sphere which vastly divides us politically and culturally; second, the *gaze*, i.e., social dogmas, ideologies perhaps, and judgments which are invisibly floating in the air in multiple directions.

The work is a large size charcoal drawing on cardboard. I have tried to inject a sense of decay, indefiniteness, and contingency by using strategies such as manipulating and blurring faces and the objects, leaving blank spaces, and excluding parts of the scene. The work is meant to vaguely narrate the story of a day and/or a history period in my homeland, leaving some room for the discretion of the viewer to complete the scene or make sense of what it is telling. The completion of the blank spaces is, in fact, a matter of the historical trajectory of my society. The women in the picture are mostly middle-aged or elderly and from a traditional community. The little girl in the picture is a symbol of the future; however, given the drawbacks of the fundamentalist government for the society, especially in terms of the women's rights, the question

of future bears no distinct answer in my mind, as that matter could be affected by multiple uncontainable parameters.

In the transferred version of the work, however, I have inserted my share of imagination into the memory-image and manipulated it in favor of my wishes for the good, by transferring the portraits of the contemporary female icons of Iran onto the canvas, using the hollow space of the table in the original work. The table itself is a positive cultural sign of my home-country, which is implicitly opening its way into my recent works; it is a sign of openness and invitation: here I am, come in, join me and see what I have to offer.



Figure 8. *Women's Wedding Hall* from *Autobiographical Memory Series*, 2020, Gel Transfer and Charcoal on Canvas, 67" × 50"

While I wanted to keep portraits on the table recognizable, I had no choice but to partly cover most of them due to formal considerations. To compensate for that, I googled each woman whose portrait is in the piece and presented the QR codes of the search results on the walls of the gallery. The portraits displayed on the table are present as the objects of fascination, role-models perhaps. If fantasy and culture are meant to rescue us at last, we would be better having good examples at hand. The scene, however, becomes blurry, denoting the difficulties of compatibility between the real and the fantasized, the difficulties of changing the rigid symbolic order. Here, in a way, the process of recollection in Ricoeur's view is reversed in terms of the direction of time. I have transferred the nowness of the viewers, and the pastness of the scene for myself, into the future of fantasy and fascination.

Women's Wedding Hall also bears a sense of *uncanny* because my picture reflected in the mirror gives the effect of an identical double: the *uncanny* effect is there because the benevolent role of such doubles (e.g., as signs of immortality) is surmounted and reversed in the psyche, as Freud suggested.¹²⁷ One can assume several reciprocated gazes in this piece. It is as if I am looking at my double; or perhaps I am there in the picture, as an object, as a copy of my figure, as an intruder to my own memory-image, spying on myself and others, like a dream, where you watch the scene from a third person's point of view. After all, the picture in the mirror has a good reputation in the realm of the visual arts in terms of the multiplicity of ways it allows for interpretation (e.g., Velázquez's *Las Meninas*), and I assume it is also working well in terms of this particular work.

TP-Ajax

Arriving in Canada, my husband and I started to figure out the severe situation of our country and ourselves as citizens of that country in the world. Soon people started to protest back in Iran. In response, we started to obsessively study our contemporary history. A while later, returning to Iran I noticed that poverty had become massively obvious with the currency rate having dropped into 10% of its former value in only two years. Middle-class families, mine amongst them, had joined the lower-class. In the street, people saluted the father of the last king of Iran, who is believed to

127. Freud, "The Uncanny," 141-43.

be responsible for the modernization of Iran in the early 20th century. The solution to me was the urge to dig even more into the history and sociocultural roots of my country.

Background

Political relationships between the US and Iran has been volatile and hostile for the last forty years, due to the general anti-imperialist pose of the government in Iran, as well as a few incidents; i.e., invading the US embassy in Tehran and the position and commitment of the US in favor of the attacking party (Iraq) during the 8-year Iran-Iraq war.¹²⁸ Nevertheless, the clergy leaders of the government in Iran, to whom the anti-west, anti-American slogans of the revolutionary Marxists are bequeathed, have hardly ever admitted the righteousness of the nationalist movement and its role in nationalization of the oil industry in Iran in the 1950s.

Therefore, currently in Iran, we have a regime which promotes a censored, magnified account of the resistive movements in favor of the religious forces in the pre-revolutionary Iran, to the point that the Anglo-American coup d'état which ousted the national cabinet of *Premiere Mohammad Mossadegh* in 1953¹²⁹ is mostly omitted in their narrative. In fact, the only occasion in which they recognize that issue is when dealing with the US, trying to bargain and to ethically put the opponent in a defensive position¹³⁰.

On the other side, we have the US government which reluctantly admitted the key role of the US administration in the coup after fifty years. They have partly released the relevant documents periodically since then with much important information having been redacted or

128. Ervand Abrahamian, *The Coup: 1953, the CIA, and the Roots of Modern US-Iranian Relations* (The New Press, 2013), 1.

129. Ervand Abrahamian, *The Coup*, 2.

130. Saeed Kamali Dehghan and Richard Norton-Taylor, "CIA admits role in 1953 Iranian coup," *The guardian*, August 19, 2013, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/sites/default/files/media_mentions/cia_admits_role_in_1953_iranian_coup_world_news_the_guardian.pdf.

censored^{131 132}. We have also the UK government which has never admitted the role of MI6 and British agents and militants in planning and operating the coup^{133 134}.



Figure 9. *TP-Ajax* from *Autobiographical Memory Series*, 2020, Gel-transfer on Canvas, 60'' × 78''

131. Ervand Abrahamian, "The 1953 Coup in Iran," *Science & Society* 65, no. 2 (2001): 182-83, <https://doi.org/10.1521/siso.65.2.182.17762>.

132. Kamali Dehghan, "CIA admits role in 1953 Iranian coup".

133. Ervand Abrahamian, *The Coup*, 6.

134. Kamali Dehghan, "CIA admits role in 1953 Iranian coup".

All that said, the accumulated information until now, especially after the last round of US secret information release in 2017, clearly shows the role of both governments in the 1953 coup^{135 136}. Having cleared the questions of *who* and *what* in terms of the coup, researchers have started to go after detailed answers to the questions of *how* in that matter¹³⁷.

The benevolent and positive role of the US government in the world, which was the case until after the WWII, started to change into a meddling, aggressive role under the pressure of the cold war on one hand, and the imperialist, capitalist strategies of mostly far rightist politicians in power on the other hand. The first major materialization of those strategies was the take-over of the British planned 1953 coup in Iran and its operationalization under the code name TP-Ajax by the CIA.¹³⁸ It continued in the form of a few coups and military operations in other third world countries around the world, as well as aiding and facilitating dictatorships and totalitarian regimes in those countries until the 1970s¹³⁹. In Iran as well, the role of the US manipulation went on with establishing and educating the political police force named SAVAK, along with many other political, economical, and military aids with the aim of bolstering the absolute militant monarchy of the King M.R. Pahlavi.^{140 141} The coup, the vast imprisonment, exile, and execution of the political activists and forbidding political parties and activities, in brief the social and political oppression which came after, led to a dark, despairing atmosphere of sociopolitical depression for the next 25 years.

In fact, the only time-window during which Iran has had a real democracy under a legitimate publicly elected administration was at the time of Premiere Mossadegh in 1951-53. In addition to nationalizing the oil industry, he tried to restore Iran's constitutional law, which had been derailed by the King and his father for long.¹⁴² Even if one considered the coup to have happened far before, supposing its irrelevance to what is going on in Iran, one should know that it has become an

135. Kamali Dehghan, "CIA admits role in 1953 Iranian coup".

136. *Coup 53*, directed by Taghi Amirani, (Amirani Media, 2019).

137. *Coup 53*, directed by Taghi Amirani.

138. Abrahamian, "The 1953 Coup in Iran", 197.

139. *Coup 53*, directed by Taghi Amirani.

140. Ervand Abrahamian, *The Coup*, 1-2.

141. *Coup 53*, directed by Taghi Amirani.

142. Abrahamian, "The 1953 Coup in Iran", 195.

undistinguishable component among those comprising the thing we may name the Iranian identity today¹⁴³, as it represents our defeat in reaching freedom.

The Work

In *TP-Ajax*, the narrative goes beyond local-personal level and becomes historic. The background images while singularly facilitating the *studium* by means of their incidental, cultural, and historic factuality, at the same time each represents a vivid, valid memory, thus collectively compose a genuine historic narration.¹⁴⁴ They all either show a real scene on the day of the coup, August 19, 1953, or display an incident directly related to the coup before or after it. Here my goal is to contradict the official account of the history, which is a fake or censored one in both the Islamic Republic's and in that of the Anglo-American governments. As Ricoeur stated: "*There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory*".¹⁴⁵

The figure in the foreground, although central to the composition, is affected by the images in the background and detached from its real surroundings. It is a picture of my spouse playing with his instrument while lying down at home. It was taken without him having noticed. The angle of the camera, the perspective and posture of the figure altogether relay a strange feeling of contingency, or perhaps surveillance, again. This is where, in my mind, the reality meets the mentality behind it. What is going on today in Iran is in many ways similar to what has happened before; terror, dictatorship, imprisonment, bigotry, treason, discrimination, and execution are abundant. Only the portraits are changed, and the formation of the society is a bit different now. Other than that, the same story is revolving because the symbolic order or the mental scheme has remained the same. To understand now, one needs to go back in time. We might have not practiced our lessons enough, I would suggest. We might have not been touched by *the real* enough. We might have not experienced the traumatic (*the real*), or our memories might be weak. Instead of remembering the bad and ugly and trying to avoid it, instead of transferring our nowness to the past and reimagining the bitterness, the fear, and the horror frequently enough, we might, I assume, have dumped the past. We, in fact, have abandoned our present by forgetting what our nation has

143. Ervand Abrahamian, *The Coup*, 2.

144. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 4, 12, 54.

145. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 4.

lived through, and by not learning from it. So, what I have tried to make here, and in my series in general, is a conscious recollection of the past. Again, I am trying to relive the ghost, the memory of what once was familiar. I am trying to relax the powers of recollection and imagination for the viewer, for better, for future perhaps; and to help her to witness what seems to be gone but is still shaping the present.

Njideka Akunyili Crosby: Medium, Technique, Process

As is seen, most of the works in the exhibition include figures of my family members in the foreground, superimposed on a background of collaged or gridded photos from family albums, or from historic incidents and media coverages. Those images are meant to collectively construct my account of my-*self* and/or that of others who I know best. While the background collages present small narratives similar to an actual documentary footage, I am trying to build a contrasted view of myself and people close to me, at the front. While my manipulations are meant to produce a *punctum* effect, the mere selection and assemblage of the photos should be able to get close to the discrepancies and problematics my country and those in the foreground are facing.

The usage of the photos along with the gel-transfer medium technique in the series were originally inspired by works of the Nigerian artist, Njideka Akunyili Crosby, who resides in the US. She is basically focused on the literature and history of her country, and her tremendous figure-grounds, as well as other formal aspects of her works has also been the source of motivation for me.

I had the chance to interview her a while ago and her most important piece of advice for me was that the specificity of the work and having something genuine in it is crucial to work of art. Looking at *My Secondary School* work she suggested that even a piece of clothes which is exclusive to students of your country can make a difference and render the work as yours. She also said that no matter how much I am inspired by her work, or have in common with her (e.g. we are both immigrated women at almost the same age from developing countries with a Muslim majority and vast oil resources) my work will not grow like hers, because we are from different cultures with different narratives.



Figure 10. Njideka Akunyili Crosby (b. 1983), *Before Now After (Mama, Mummy and Mamma)*, 2015. Collection of the artist; Courtesy Victoria Miro, London. Source: <https://whitney.org/exhibitions/njideka-akunyili-crosby>

I might gel-transfer the images at any point during the process of making a piece. However, the most important part of the process for me is the sequence of decisions regarding the formal and physical aspects of the work. The sense of freedom in deciding those aspects and the fact that I allow fantasy and my attitude to decide the course of the creation are most appealing to me. As the American painter Amy Sillman has said in an interview, “the process of painting is really slow, and it involves change and the sequence of snapshots. You can see this radical shift. It’s both knowing, deciding and rejecting things. Emotionally hating thing and reversing thing and then remaking them and being surprised. It’s a kind of devotion to a procedure of transformation.”¹⁴⁶ The process of painting, which could be endless and incomplete in some cases, is crucial to me. Playing with different surfaces and patterns which creates a sense of figure-ground is a discovery process; a process that makes painting enjoyable for me. Also, I like playing with the audiences’

146. ICA Boston, “Studio Visit: Amy Sillman,” May 21, 2015, YouTube video, <https://youtu.be/eRmaq4hAcTg>.

eyes. The figure-ground process is game-like and encourages the audience to look at the piece longer and with more attention.

It's a Real News



Figure 11. *It's a Real News* from *Autobiographical Memory Series*, 2020, Mixed Media on Canvas, 67" × 45"

It's a Real News is not inspired by the story of the 1953 coup, yet it is not quite detached from it. The TP part in the codename TP-Ajax stands for *Toudeh Party*, the name of Iran's major communist party before the 1979 revolution. It was banned after the coup and its members, among them many Army officers, were jailed, exiled, and executed, while others were either in self-exile, or in a hide, or on the run, constantly in fear of the political police. It was in part under the falsely induced fear of *Toudeh Party* and their supposedly inevitable take over of the political power that

the public in the US were persuaded that a harsh action against the Iranian administration was inevitable¹⁴⁷.

My father, an infant at the time of the coup, became an active member of one, among many others, of the Marxist parties and spent some years in prison because of that, before the revolution. After the revolution, all parties, which indeed took part in overthrowing the monarch, were banned. As a result, my father became politically a bystander, and started to run his own business and support his family. But as time passed, he felt flooded and overwhelmed by the political, social, and cultural reality, to the point that even continuing an industrial production business was no longer possible in his eyes. Creating a business abroad became his priority from then on, but it was also impossible, mostly because his eyesight had started to deteriorate rapidly. He is still trying to build something out of his life; he has been in retirement for years though. He feels more and more deranged, detained, and distressed witnessing what is going on in the country. He follows the news on multiple TV channels and on the internet, but to me the only place he can live the life he dreamt of is in the glorious kingdom of dream. After all, this is the only way we can stop the world, our world, from motion, hence stop time, and put everything in order. So, here is the picture of my father on his couch in his sweet home, asleep, with the remote control over there on the table, while whatever there is outside is turned off, and he does not need to worry about it. And the irony is that the apartment where I took that photo is not there anymore. It was destroyed some years ago and replaced by a *new* building, as it is what we do well in Iran. We demolish and substitute as if nothing was there before. Nevertheless, what is built instead is in many ways similar to its predecessor, and as fragile as it was. My work then tries to keep remember and present what has been there for a long time; something that still exist, although invisibly at some points.

INSTALLATION

I have tried to set up the works in a salon-style mode. Block of works are assembled, and some works are coupled to disseminate the weight almost evenly amongst the walls. Size, medium, and material are not meant to differentiate the works in installation, and I have tried to rebuild my working space (i.e., studio) within the gallery. Fluctuation of the sizes invites the viewer to go back and forth to strike a balance in terms of having both the entire picture and the details in view.

147. Abrahamian, "The 1953 Coup in Iran", 182, 190.

The content of the works swings from private to public, and from personal to collective but the works are not sorted in that regard. The complete works, laid off ones, and etudes are all represented equally as if the audience has entered my private space, as some of the works represent a private setting.



Figure 12. Bird's Eye Exhibition View in the School of Art Gallery, 2020



Figure 13. Installation View, East wall



Figure 14. Installation View, South West Corner



Figure 15. Installation View, South Wall



Figure 16. Installation View, South Wall



Figure 17. Installation View, Detail of the Vitrine Table (TP-Ajax Archive)

CONCLUSION

Autobiographical Memory, in my view, is conceptually cohesive since it concerns my *real image* and what has surrounded me; as my surrounding have *gazed* at me;¹⁴⁸ as the real me blinks through *the symbolic* and *the imaginary*. I have tried to reflect the *punctum*,¹⁴⁹ the *tuchè*, or the traumatic real, rather than a tranquilizing representation,¹⁵⁰ and I have tried to do it through each visual media, as I am being hit by *the real*. I started from the private and have ended up in the public, and even the global. I go back and forth between the personal and the social. I repeatedly go into details and come back to focus more on the whole picture. The sizes of the works are seldom the same; they are rather highly variable. The viewer is invited to get closer and go farther in order to keep

148. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 139-40.

149. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 25-27, 43-44, 51-59.

150. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 132, 134, 136, 137.

the whole picture in view, and not to miss the details. Most importantly, the entirety of the series is much more like a collection of independent, episodic stories of different lengths and atmospheres, rather than a coherent continuous narrative, as are contemporary approaches towards the autobiography in the literature. Di Summa-Knoop states:

“Critical autobiographies are challenging the confessional nature of autobiographies, they are questioning the need for a causal narrative structure that is capable of achieving emotional closure, [...]”.¹⁵¹

“[T]here is no true form to tell a life: there is no available narrative”.¹⁵²

“[A] narrative attitude toward the events of our lives, despite helpful, need not correspond to the notion of a narrative self [...] Not only narratives are not necessary for identity, [...] they are unrelated to our ability to hold and express moral values, and, lastly, [...] the tendency to see our lives as narratives is not, as the “narrativists” argue, a widespread cognitive mechanism. [...] An alternative approach could be] to see us as episodic selves [...], namely as subjects that gain [...] “self-knowledge in bits and pieces””.¹⁵³

I believe *Autobiographical Memory* truly reflects not only me, but the society that has nurtured me; where the omnipresent public sphere invades and annihilates the private, penetrating the most private zones of one's life. Conversely though, the public zone is the chaotic scenery of contradicting personal desires. The gap between the social classes is ever-growing and middle-class families are either dispersing into the lower classes or immigrating. The people are servants of the institutions and, more broadly, the government. Order is nothing but extremely temporal balance of the private deals between the richest and the most powerful. The law is defined spontaneously and interpreted according to personal or group inclinations. The society is more like a shipwreck and ordinary peoples' endeavors are, at best, just enough to stay afloat. Having been situated in such a chaotic atmosphere, I am trying, through my work, to make sense of where I come from and what I have experienced, first; and then, to get familiar with the good causes, and hopefully to follow the pioneers of a better tomorrow, either in my homeland or in my new home here in Canada.

151. Di Summa-Knoop, “Critical Autobiography”, 7.

152. Di Summa-Knoop, “Critical Autobiography”, 9.

153. Di Summa-Knoop, “Critical Autobiography”, 9.

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