

Fragments
of Memory



Fragments of Memory highlights artists who explore how past events imbue present experiences. Memories are incomplete renditions of the past—composites crystallized around slivers of recollections that evoke the emotions behind moments. The material form that memories can take, like ephemera pressed in a scrapbook, can also be a kind of splintering. The featured artists reference family albums, archival notes, and keepsakes to reimagine how we might access beloved remembrances and fraught histories. The exhibited drawings, all from the museum's collection, were created from the mid-20th century to recent years. They represent different ways that artists reanimate the past and propose new understandings of our present.

For Sari Dienes, customary objects and occurrences—like street detritus or a chance rendezvous—were endless inspirations. In *Letterbox*, made over several decades, Dienes fused artwork, community portrait, and alternative archive inside a found display case by juxtaposing personal correspondence from her friends and creative circle. Gael Stack also culled from the daily flotsam of life, such as jotted grocery lists and her children's doodles. These layered texts and images form the visual ground in her compositions, presenting a picture of consciousness as chaotic as it is contemplative. Barbara Chase-Riboud channels the past into her work by honoring people whose historic contributions are often dismissed. In her *Monument Drawings*, she exalted the Queen of Sheba, a legendary woman of power, and Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges, an acclaimed biracial composer in 18th-century France, among others. Chase-Riboud's work counters prominent narratives that diminish or even erase such important forebears to today's communities of color.

Memory, and how it fragments as time passes, is a foremost theme in the works of Luc Tuymans and Jasper Johns. Tuymans's *My Door I-VI*, 2013, is a set of watercolors depicting a figure observing a waning sun. By fracturing the scene into six similar but distinctly different perspectives, Tuymans challenged any claim to a complete or accurate depiction. In the 1960s and '70s, Johns made a body of work dedicated to poet Hart Crane that invoked his imagery of a periscope. A central symbol in Crane's poem "Cape Hatteras,"

a periscope is an observation device made from a series of angled mirrors inside a tubular structure. In Crane's text, viewing an object through a periscope becomes akin to revisiting the past, where distance provides clarity but also unexpected divergences:

... while time clears
Our lenses, lifts a focus, resurrects
A periscope to glimpse what joys or pain
Our eyes can share or answer—then deflects
Us, shunting to a labyrinth submersed
Where each sees only his dim past reversed ...

Johns's homage to the poem, *Periscope*, 1977, presents stenciled letters amid a sea of ink that slicks across the surface. The words are legible yet are seen as though through the prismatic lens of a periscope—transposed, inverted, and broken. Much like how a periscope cannot provide a direct line of vision, memories cannot give more than an oblique view.

For other artists, the idea of the fragment surfaces in their exploration of identity and elegy. Wardell Milan looks to editorial photography and jarring cinematic effects to compose his collages. In *Pulse*, 2019, Milan recalls the 2016 deadly mass shooting at an Orlando nightclub that targeted the city's queer and Latin American communities. Milan's decision to depict the would-be victims in the midst of a vibrant dance celebration is a staunch message of resistance against extreme, calculated violence. Danh Vo's *2.2.1861* is an ongoing project in which the artist's father transcribes the last letter of the 19th-century missionary Théophane Vénard, who was executed for proselytizing in present-day Vietnam. Vo's conceptual gesture restages the entanglements between family, postcolonial history, and spirituality, illuminating both the past and present in tender ways. Vo and Milan, as do other artists in this exhibition, demonstrate a desire to permeate the present with more than what personal ephemera, historical accounts, and selective memory leave behind.

Fragments of Memory is curated by Kelly Montana, Assistant Curator, Menil Drawing Institute.

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PUBLIC PROGRAMS

All programs will be held at the Menil Drawing Institute unless otherwise stated.

WORKSHOP

Writing Workout with Inprint

Saturday, October 5, 11 a.m.–1 p.m.

This event has limited capacity. Register at inprinthouston.org.

ARTIST TALK

Wardell Milan

Thursday, November 14, 7–8 p.m.

MUSIC

DACAMERA Stop, Look, and Listen!

Saturday, December 7, 3–4 p.m.

All public programs are free and open to everyone. Additional programming information can be found at menil.org/events.

Menil members enjoy additional events.

To learn more and join, please visit menil.org/support.

Exhibition Dates

September 20, 2024–January 26, 2025