

ROOTED: Connectivity through Memory

By

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This body of work, developed through a combination of ceramics, painting, and mixed-media collage, reflects my ongoing exploration into the science and psychology of memory. My memories have shaped who I am, connecting me to the places I called home throughout childhood, and informing my sense of identity and belonging. Each piece reconstructs fragments of memory, guided by home videos, family photographs, and retellings of shared narratives. Through them, I celebrate the landscapes, homes, and moments that continue to ground me. Despite a mobile upbringing, I have discovered a deep and enduring sense of stability through alternate means – leaving me to feel *rooted*, nevertheless.

Rooted: Connectivity through Memory

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By

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INTRODUCTION

When beginning new work, I am typically drawn to topics pertaining to my family and our shared life experiences. As an adult, I have crafted a world for my children that is the opposite of how I grew up. It often feels surreal to reflect on how different my childhood was from theirs, and to compare these two chapters of my life.

When I tell my daughters stories from my youth, they are both intrigued and slightly annoyed — wishing they could experience some of the same adventures. Although moving frequently presented challenges (a result of both my father's occupation and my mother's free-spirited nature), this lifestyle offered incredible opportunities as well. From an early age, I was able to see the country and quickly adapt to new communities. I am intrigued by the qualities of resilience and adaptability that emerge through such constant change. My family provided the only consistent sense of stability during these years, grounding me amid the uncertainty and chaos of relocation. While I never had the typical childhood home filled with physical memorabilia, I preserve that sense of place through fragmented memories, home videos, and photographs.

My current body of work offers a glimpse into this multi-faceted past and serves as a metaphor for what it felt like to grow up in an ever-changing environment. This exploration led me to study the science and psychology of memory while creating works that reconstruct personal moments through collaborative, reflective storytelling with my family of origin. The ways in which our stories shift—or are remembered differently—further deepened my interest in how memories are formed, stored, and recalled.

This research examines how memory shapes personal identity and how that identity can be expressed through visual art, combining insights from contemporary artists with my own

creative experimentation. I will continue by describing the technical and conceptual specifics of several works within this memory-based field of study.

THE SCIENCE OF MEMORIES

My journey into this line of inquiry began with the question of how to define memories. More specifically, how are they formed, and what is the science and psychology behind them? By answering these questions, I hoped to learn more about how memories are stored and backed up in the brain, as well as whether it is possible to recall a memory without altering it in some capacity. John Hopkins Medicine explains that “memories are formed as a result of connections between neurons in the brain. New connections (synapses) are formed each time a new activity is learned. The more a person participates in a particular activity, the stronger the synapses and associated memories tied to the activity become” (“Science of Memory”). This makes sense when relating it to learning new material, say in school, however, I wonder how this pertains to one-off experiences? Could the fact that memories occur like this typically (versus repeated in the same exact way) add to the way in which memories feel dream-like and vague? The potential for stronger synaptic connections to occur simply does not happen due to the lack of repetition. “In its simplest form, memory refers to the continued process of information retention over time. It is an integral part of human cognition, since it allows individuals to recall and draw upon past events to frame their understanding of and behavior within the present. Memory also gives individuals a framework through which to make sense of the present and future. As such, memory plays a crucial role in teaching and learning. There are three main processes that characterize how memory works. These processes are encoding, storage, and retrieval (or recall)” (“How Memory Works”). With each new social interaction or experience of an event, we are able to begin building background knowledge that can help to inform future decisions. It is then evident that the memory of these experiences can shape us into the individuals that we become, thus, our memories instill in us a sense of identity. This is where retrieval of memories

plays an important role. “Functional magnetic resonance imaging findings (fMRI) shows that remembering reactivates some of the same neural circuitry as original experience. Recalling a place evokes a different pattern of brain activity that includes the parahippocampal gyrus, an area that lights up when people view images of landscapes and other scenes. Reactivation of specific hippocampal neurons is involved in conscious experiences of memory retrieval. Hippocampus pulls together various aspects of memory residing in different regions of the neocortex and binds them into a coherent scene in the mind’s eye, enabling us to vividly remember and envision possible futures. Memory retrieval can be strengthened, weakened, or altered each time recalled” (Miller 31). Of particular interest to me is the explanation of how the brain lights up when you see pictures of landscapes. I can relate to this since depictions of the land have played a strong role in my creative process. I find myself transported to another moment in time whenever I see these images of places that I have lived and traveled through, leading me to question how memories enable a sense of identity; and what are the psychological components associated with memory?

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF MEMORIES

In terms of identity and its role in memory, “psychologists focus most on the episodic component of declarative memory when studying the relation between self and memory because retrieval from episodic memory is assumed to have a self-referential quality thought to be largely absent from other types of memory thought to involve re-experiencing events from one's past, thus providing its owner with content by which he or she is able to construct a personal narrative (his or her life stories). Semantic memory is composed of two different kinds of self-related memories: semantic factual knowledge of the self and semantic self-knowledge” (Klein). Much of who we are was shaped by our memory of our experiences and either the people we shared them with, or the places that they took place in. I often associate songs and movies with moments in my own personal history too. I’ll hear a song and feel I have instantly traveled back to the time frame that I first heard it. Like many people, I can recall who I was with and what we were doing. These memories, be they positive, negative, or somewhere in between, often combined with the re-telling of these moments by those that experienced it, can evolve over time and continually form and re-shape a sense of oneself. It is so ingrained in us that “our own personal identity and continued existence, as far back as we remember anything distinctly... we know immediately, and not by reasoning. It seems, indeed, to be a part of the testimony of memory. Everything we remember has such a relation to ourselves as to imply necessarily our existence at the time remembered” (Klein, 678). For artists and craftspeople, personal narratives are often themes that are illustrated based largely in part on years and years of memories and shared storytelling. This realization led me to visually represent my own memories as a means of sharing the story of my upbringing.

MEMORY-BASED MEMOIRS

ARIZONA

I began my creative research by developing a series of ceramic reliefs that depict a few of the states that I have lived in. Within each of these artworks, I added a root system to emphasize that while I do not possess “roots” in a traditional sense of the word, I feel rooted to the places I have inhabited, nevertheless. Although fleeting, my experiences in each location were impactful and led to a unique sense of belonging.



Plate 1: *Desert Flower*, Hand-built Ceramic Relief, Cone 05, Amaco Velvet Underglazes on Sedona Red Clay, 2022.

Desert Flower illustrates my connection to the state I was born in. My family lived in Arizona for six years. The flowers that are situated just below the scenic landscape are symbolic of my parents referring to me as the “desert flower” of the family. I am called this since I am the only one of my siblings to have been born out west. Being the third of five children, and a true middle child, I could sometimes get lost in the shuffle. This nickname gave me a sense of identity, however, amidst this large and lively family. Silly as it is, I always felt like that was my

one special thing that set me apart from the rest of my siblings. My parents always validated these feelings in the way in which they would tell stories of our time spent out west and allude to it being *my* place. It's crazy to think about how a nickname can make one feel individualism and a connection to a place on the other side of the country, one which they can vaguely remember, but that is what the name "Desert Flower" does for me.



Plate 2: *A Time Well Spent*, acrylic paint, photocopies, maps, and joint compound on stretched canvas, 5'x6'

A Time Well Spent is a mixed-media collage which shows a modern-day view of myself reflecting on the memory of yesteryear. I came into possession of the collection of home videos from my childhood. This discovery led me to begin digitizing our inventory. In doing so, I stumbled upon a video I had not watched in almost thirty years. Written on the VHS label in my dad's familiar handwriting (slanted to the right, all upper-case letters, and always in black ink), was "Saguaro Park/Jerome, AZ." This footage confirmed my longstanding view of my mom and dad. They always loved exploring new places and trying new things regardless of toting children along. Within this video, we go on picnics in both a crowded park and the isolated desert. We explore the old city of Jerome, popping into coffee and ice-cream shops, and a non-descript

playground, prior to meandering into a potter's studio where my dad works with the potter to describe the process of wheel throwing and firing to his curious young daughters. It was a simple day trip without many bells and whistles, but through it I saw how much my parents loved and cared for us. They were so wholesome, kind, and always ensured that my sisters and I were safe, comfortable, well-fed, and happy. The home video footage reaffirmed the memory of my upbringing and served as a resource for the images that are collaged within *A Time Well Spent*.



Plate 3: Hand-built Desert Sculptures, Cone 05, Speedball Underglazes on White Clay, 2024-2025.

I built a series of loosely interpreted ceramic cacti sculptures as a continuation of my reflective self-portrait. I sculpted the vegetation to work in unison with the mixed-media painting as its backdrop. As a continuation of the desert flower theme, and blooming wherever it is that you are planted, several pieces depict flowers at various stages atop the cacti. I incorporated a cactus wren and saguaro cactus blossom, the Arizona state bird and flower, respectively, as well as the prickly pear.



Plate 4: *My Desert Heart*, Hand-built Ceramic Sculpture, Cone 05, Amaco Velvet Underglazes on Sedona Red Clay, 2023.

My Desert Heart merges the saguaro cactus and blooms with an anatomical heart, symbolizing that this is where life began for me. The arteries serve to simultaneously convey a continuation of the rooted concept. With an emphasis on variety and texture, this piece utilized hand-built methods such as pinching, coiling, and carving. In addition, I carved the blossom out of linoleum to serve as a sprig mold to more quickly produce the appliqués.



Plate 5: *Uproot*, Hand-built Ceramic Relief, Cone 05, Sedona Red Clay, wood, spray paint, photographs, 2022.

Uproot illustrates how the course of my life was altered upon the first official move I would experience. Conveyed is the earth-shattering and broken feeling that you could have as a child learning that you are about to be uprooted from everything that is familiar to you. The monochromatic palette combined with the fracturing of the landscape builds a sense of discord. The photographs that are situated within this scene are symbolic of “firsts”: the image of the house shows my first childhood home, with the picture of my younger self illustrating, according to my mother, the first time I left home by confidently prancing my little self to a neighboring house as she watched from a short distance with intrigue. This action of leaving home would foreshadow something that would be more familiar to me as time goes on.

The heart represents life, love, and heartbreak—all components of the adolescent experience. The arteries of the heart symbolize the idea of feeling rooted to a place; however, this time, the fracturing portrays an uprooting taking place.

TENNESSEE



Plate 6: *Dream of the 90's*, Mixed-Media painting with acrylic paint, joint compound, antenna, white clay, underglaze transfers, clear gloss glaze, and charcoal. 2025.

Dream of the 90's is a fusion of what any given Saturday morning would look like for my family during the 1993-1995 range when we were living in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. My dad was working hard in the nuclear power field, and my mom was a homemaker after several years as a Social Worker. On the weekends when my parents weren't collaboratively creating their "Big Daddy Breakfast," from scratch, one of them would run to Dunkin' Donuts to grab an assortment of doughnuts for us to eat instead. Any number of things could be taking place on these weekend days. My mom could be grinding up grains to make homemade bread, while my dad would be blasting Edie Brickell or Steely Dan on our new five-disc cd changer as he stretched out on the shag carpet of the 70s era shingled home we were renting. Somehow, he was able to leisurely read amongst all the noise, while occasionally breaking for whoever ran through next to "walk

dads back.” My dad is a big guy, so a few of us giggling and tip toeing (sometimes hopping!) all over his back made very little impact.

It was a constant party at our house. Friends were always over, music blasting, video games being competitively played, and the sounds of laughter (and sometimes sibling scuffles) permeated through the walls. We loved to pop the camcorder on the tripod and perform our favorite songs and dances in front of it. There was a piano that none of us were qualified to perform on, but by-golly we did anyway! When the noise inside had become too much, we would bundle up and go outside to ride bikes and jump on the trampoline, as our beloved dalmatian, Princess, followed us around everywhere we went. She was our built-in babysitter when we roamed around outside.

NORTH CAROLINA



Plate 7: *Meet me at Parson's*. Acrylic and photocopies on Canvas. 2025.

Upon moving from Tennessee to North Carolina, we became fully immersed within a close-knit community in the small town of Wadesboro. This ended up being a remarkable place to be. It felt safe and as though we had gone back in time. *Meet me at Parson's* illustrates the storefront of a pharmacy that is situated on a corner within this sleepy town. Princess would continue to escort us here and there, quickly becoming a favorite dog among the locals. I collaged in bicycles strewn about the sidewalk to depict the memory of meeting up with my friends and cycling to get frozen yogurt and candy at Parson's. My younger siblings share the same fond memories of this simple act that provided so much joy to each of us prior to relocating to Wilmington, North Carolina some years later.



Plate 8: *Futch Creek Dysfunction*. Mixed-Media Combine with Sedona Red Clay, joint compound, acrylic paint, beach glass, seashells, watercolor, linoleum relief print, fabric, and photocopy. 2025.

Futch Creek Dysfunction was created in response to the memory of a very difficult time during my adolescence while living in Wilmington. Surrounding the kayak, which is filled with shattered glass, are oyster beds from varying perspectives and its accompanying muddy slush. This combination felt like it was going to engulf my little boat (and maybe me with it) as I had failed to monitor the tide thoroughly in my haste to escape my reality for a moment. The hand holding the clamshell represents strength and resiliency during times of fragility.



Figure 9: *A Wave Came Crashing*. Sedona Red Clay, Amaco and Mayco gloss glazes, Cone 05, 2024.

A Wave Came Crashing illustrates that overwhelming feeling you can have if you are held underwater for too long after an enormous wave has taken you down. In my personal experience, this was a result of dealing with depression and the dissolution of a marriage abruptly colliding like a wave to a child in the ocean. I achieved this through gently folding and overlapping layers of a long clay slab, prior to glazing with a variety of blue glazes. I painted some areas thinly to allow the clay body to show through like sand being stirred up as the wave churns and gains momentum.



Figure 10: *Pelican*. Sedona Red Clay, Amaco Velvet Underglazes, Cone 05, 2024.

Pelican represents an abstracted bird of the same name. The creature is in a curved pose, as if slumped over and looking down. Its posturing, that of disarray and confusion, is done in such a way as to indicate an overall sense of sadness amidst chaos. However, through its melancholy stance, there is also this hope that the pelican symbology will prove to be true, and that any hurdles we face can, in fact, be overcome.



Figure 11: *Coral*. White Clay, Sax underglazes, Cone 05, 2025.

Coral reflects the process of emerging from difficult times and feeling a sense of joy again. This piece consists of pinch pots that are varied in size, stacked, and attached to each other. Different textures were then carved into each section, followed by the addition of assorted plant life via slab and coiling methods. I then painted this piece with vibrantly colored underglazes, resulting in an artwork that exudes vitality and growth indicative of an overall sense of unity and interconnectedness that occurs between those with a shared life journey.

INFLUENCES



Figure 1: *Monogram*

Many of my artworks consist of ceramic sculpture which work in unison with two-dimensional surfaces that have been painted and collaged. This technique was inspired by my studies of Robert Rauschenberg. He is known for *combines*, or the merging of two- and three-dimensional materials into one piece. I have a background in painting from my undergraduate studies and have always enjoyed mixed-media collaging with photographs, assorted papers, and other found materials. I appreciate how *combines* can help convey a message through a multi-layered approach. In Julia Blaut's 1997 essay, "Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective," the author explains that "the celebrated Combines, begun in the mid-1950s, brought real-world images and objects into the realm of abstract painting and countered sanctioned divisions between painting and sculpture. These works established the artist's ongoing dialogue between mediums, between the handmade and the readymade, and between the gestural brushstroke and the mechanically reproduced image" (Overview: Life and Art, 1997 as cited in Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, para. 1-2). While all works do not call for it, I do find that *combines* can enable me to expand upon certain concepts more thoroughly when needed.



Figure 2: *Gods and Ghosts*

Julie Elkins is a contemporary sculptor, puppet maker, filmmaker, and educator. Her work has informed my approach to sculpting through her complex carving of intricate detailing, serving to suggest a personal narrative. “In the intricate world of my porcelain sculptures, I delve into the tapestry of life, exploring the threads of grief and the inevitability of mortality. My artistic journey has become an exploration of the haunting beauty and intangible mystery that surrounds the human experience” (*Julie Elkins*, n.d.). As I learned more about Elkins, I found that she also draws inspiration from personal experiences and locations to create her pieces. “The scenes I sculpt are reflective of the places, people, and events that have left an indelible mark on my soul” (*Julie Elkins*, n.d.). Embedded in her work are architectural and natural components which pay homage to her home state of Virginia. I appreciate that Julie Elkins’ work holds personally symbolic meaning in an oftentimes surreal approach, serving to add another dynamics layer of interest.

CONCLUSION

Through my research into the science and psychology of memories, I have gained an understanding of the degree of accuracy memories maintain when they are recalled. By evaluating how memories work and exist within each of us, I was able to connect that inquiry with my own sense of identity. This was achieved through creating ceramic relief carvings and sculptures, mixed media *combines*, and paintings, which are each embedded with personal symbolism based on my adolescence. The digital and print media from my past have assisted in both triggering and further confirming my recollections. By utilizing neuroscience as a point of reference and inspiration within my process, I have demonstrated how both sides of the brain can work together to strengthen each field, respectively.

In Portuguese culture there is a word, *saudade*, that cannot be translated into English but is best described as a nostalgic longing to be near again to something or someone that is distant, or that has been loved and then lost. For me, this feeling exists in reference to the places I grew up and the people I have a shared history with. While I sometimes feel homesick for a place that does not exist, I realize too, that I can relive that feeling through my memories. My art has placed these moments into a physical format. The interconnectedness between my memory of family, friends, and physical locations has collectively given me a sense of identity. I feel *rooted*.

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