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2019

Graphic Content Warning; Personal and Political Traumas

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Painting and Printmaking Department at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Abstract

The written portion of this thesis work is meant to address and further investigate the visual work created using mediums of print and found video. This artistic research has been interested in examining varying associations with truth, recollection, and evidence. This includes the recollection of public histories and news-media narratives as well as my own history and trauma. Through this work my aim was to create a deconstruction and revolt against how associations are formed, and how to understand imagery as information. This thesis first discusses my relationship to appropriated imagery, then connects and examines it through the addition of poetic elements and events from my own lived experience.

Keywords

Memory, appropriation, public memory, personal memory, embossing, printmaking, video, multimedia, trauma, violence

1. Introduction

In addition to the placement in time our minds associate with certain mediums and procedures, my artistic research has been interested in troubling their varying associations with truth, recollection, evidence and violence. This includes the recollection of more public histories versus what I experience as my own personal events. I wanted to deconstruct proof and documents, revolt against how associations are formed, and understand imagery as information as well as the events, people, and technical processes they represent. Use of subtle mark-making on paper and different materials, an appreciation for which I gained from practice in printmaking, became the chief means through which I began to examine the power of imagery as well as photographic images' deconstruction as information. Though understanding what is taking place in an image is a key part of my thesis work, so is understanding certain images as completely neutral information, in an exercise to rob them of their impact. Ultimately this attempt was a failure, as even the ghost print or shape of an image has aesthetic and ethical significance. This paradox of photography, as well as the medium of print, was a way to decode as well as code the images, many appropriated from media and internet news and streaming outlets.

The restriction and censorship of information and imagery is a relevant circumstance of contemporary life as well as technological changes that make sharing information easier. Contrasted with what is often discussed as a contemporary and new situation of image and information dissemination, it became clear that this circumstance is neither unique to our time, nor is it limited to images. Despite a state of ubiquitous contrasting perspectives disseminated

through online media, this is only a revolutionary alteration to the state of politics and indoctrination in the sense of technological change. I don't consider myself a photographer, but interested in photographic technology and its implications for art-making, and responding to the impact of it on visual culture.

2. [Re]appropriated Images and Video; *Caretaker*, *NYC Pipe Bomber* and *Stills*

At the outset of this inquiry, I sought to utilize research related to historical and political themes as a context in which to express ideas about ideology, propaganda, and image-making. Video provides the most active dialogue of current events. With these works I became interested in appropriating “amateur” or randomly collected video (CCTV cameras or accidentally captured scenes) as a means of connecting formal ideas about imagery with my interest in public narratives and histories. I wanted to do this not only as a means of understanding history, but also the *historicization* of events recent enough to be considered current. This includes politicized videos that frequently function as a document or proof of an event. This information becomes subject to advanced means of manipulation, and is used for the advancement of ideology. Despite not having reached conclusions about the implications of the footage, I wanted to analyze why certain imagery was so affecting, and how what I was seeing actually defied the narrative lens through which the events taking place were contextualized.

This footage has a deep association with violence. Though motion picture imagery is not strictly categorized within the context of print media historically, it nonetheless encounters many of the same philosophical questions when considering its potential for reproduction, distribution,

and remixing. Video works in the syntax of print in many ways, as well as challenging some philosophical conclusions about photography and film. It is essential to understand the technological and historical precedent of all the mediums I've worked in so far. This for me, includes technological histories that are essential for understanding the role imagery plays in our everyday lives.

The medium of video has become relevant to me as an artist because of the theatricality of the subjects depicted as well as its growing ubiquity. Much of the work I've created throughout my research is in conversation with the technology that produces "amateur" footage, such as phones, body-worn cameras, and CCTV or other small, lo-fi portable cameras. The precedent for this work includes video and archival works by the Atlas Group, and Chris Marker's *Stopover in Dubai* 2011. Both also deal with parafictional narrative, and video documents. (Lambert-Beatty 2009). Walid Raad's *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English Version)* 2001 was part of an elaborately constructed fictional narrative, with various narrative and structural elements that analyze the media situation surrounding the abduction of Terry Anderson by Islamic militants in 1985. This experimental documentary offers a Lebanese perspective in contrast to that of European and American media, and invents a third Arab hostage whose testimony is recorded in Raad's video. (Raad 2002) ("Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English Version) Video Data Bank).

Appropriating these videos is an effort to confront memory and how information is collectively and personally remembered via images and other recording technology. As technology stores more and more of our range of perception, we begin to use terms in which machines store information to refer to our own perception of the past. Using found footage from

CCTV cameras, I want to examine the role of digital surveillance, our sense of political and personal violence, and ideology and its personal effects on our sense of self. Marker's video *Stopover in Dubai* appropriates security footage released by the United Arab Emirates government intended to expose the execution of a former Hamas militant by Israeli agents, and criticize Israel's covert and illegal actions. (Footage Supplied by The Media Office of Dubai Government... Gulf News). Marker's version fictionalized the account, and emphasizes its theatricality and editing. (Marker, 2011).

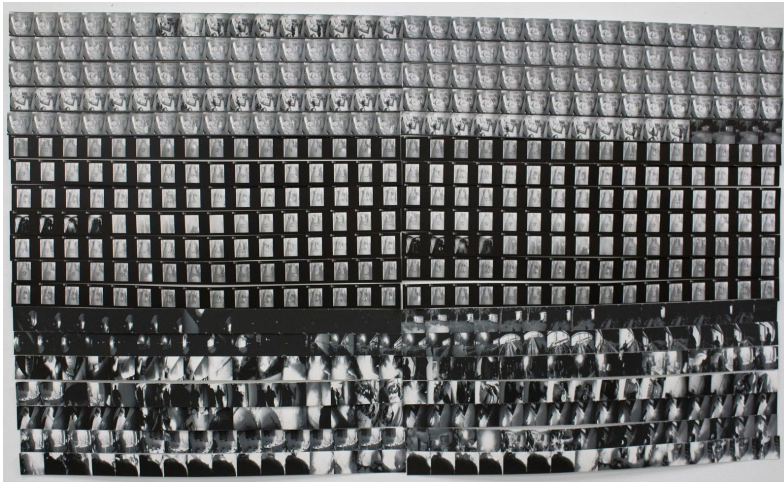
The first of these works examining video was actually interested in deconstructing the narrative of short, politicized footage by presenting it as a massive series of still imagery. In the first iteration I chose four videos. The individual narratives of these interested me because not only did they present imageries of what are normally unseen realities, but they portray narratives of shifting power dynamics, and raised several questions to me as a viewer about circumstantial footage. They also all include a relationship of caretaker/charge and a victim/perpetrator, but ultimately show the interchangeability of these roles. Rather than making a judgement about what the ultimate roles and violations of the actual actions of the people in this footage are, it is an examination of how the people are presented in the footage, the ambiguity of their position in the videos, and the role of editing.

There are numerous factors that seem to signal to a viewer what they are watching is real, or took place exactly in the manner in which they are seeing it reproduced. An important one seems to be the context in which the footage is presented, as well as the narrative that is set up before viewing it. Each of these four videos (entitled, "Adult Caregiver Arrested For Abusing 93 Year Old Woman," "Security footage shows 2017 NY pipe bomb attack," "Bodycam shows

arrest of man accused of abusing child.” With the exception of “Bodycam...” which is filmed from a police-worn body camera, these were all captured on CCTV security cameras. These cameras sit and collect footage, the vast majority of which is mundane. When they capture something unusual, or some kind of disruptive calamity--in these cases, actual incidences or possible incidences of violence--they become the evidentiary framework from which the incident is judged via the platform it is released on. In this circumstance, the platform is a video-sharing website with fairly lax rules about explicit content; more so than most mainstream platforms. How violence is judged is generally left to algorithms that can acknowledge the most literal forms of bodily violence, but cannot account for more subtle situations. The life of the footage prior to that is unknown, but the manner in which it is posted suggests that it has been used as actual legal evidence, all or in part.

Rather than making a judgement about what the ultimate roles and violations of the actual actions of the people in this footage are, I am making an examination of how the people are presented in the footage, the ambiguity of their position in the videos, and the role of editing. My role in this was as an editor rather than a creator, but in that sense I am a creator of a particular narrative. In isolating each video into hundreds of tiny sequential stills, the moment of the incident is masked, and the potential of editing to hide or change this becomes apparent. They also become physical prints rather than digital information. In the first iteration of presenting these stills, two videos (*Caregiver* and *NYC Pipe Bomber*) were placed sequentially at eye level around an exhibition space, with an audio recording that a viewer sits and listens to in the center of the space, while surrounded by these tiny images (approximately 1.5”x1.5” each). The recording was *Testimony*, a personal recollection of my experiences of the difficulty of

being a caregiver put in the position of having to make moral compromises at the expense of others. This was meant to inform the reading of the images, and nudge the viewer into thinking that what they see may not be the complete story, or simply a portrayal of an intrinsically evil or guilty party committing violence against other persons.



Stills (detail)

Both of these incidents were captured in CCTV footage in their respective locations. One can be clearly identified as a New York City subway station. When isolated into stills, this video the most vastly changed narrative of all the videos. Among the stills, the activity of the bomber becomes unintelligible, and as he is lying on the concrete after his device explodes on his body, he is approached by police and emergency workers in a manner that makes him appear he is the victim of their actions. In this scenario the police and EMTs are the caretakers of this terrorist's illness and the fallout of his attempted attack.

In the stills from *Caregiver*, the incident of the narrative is more protracted. More so with this footage does a violation seem to be identified, and the camera is placed to theoretically capture these incidents. Examining the stills however still relocates the events, and assumptions guide the reading more than the footage itself. Because the setting is someone's bedroom and not a public space, this video also speaks about the state of privacy. Cameras are installed in nursing homes purportedly to catch exactly what is claimed to be taking place here--that a nurse or nurse's aid is not doing their job properly or abusing patients. There are several complexities alluded to here--one is the actual interaction the viewer sees taking place. This is relatively unclear and involves care as well as roughness. The worker tries to lift the patient off the floor and drops her. At a later point she carefully changes the bandages on her ankles, after she is positioned comfortably in the bed. It also speaks about the labor conditions of this situation. This worker's daily activities are being surveilled by a lens that criminalizes their actions. The labor reality is that most caregivers are low wage workers, some requiring no or few qualifications.



Caretaker (detail)

The editing and repeated viewing of these incidents became difficult for me, particularly the footage from the nursing home. The inadequacy of categorizing loaded material based on the outright gore present is outmoded and usually fails at stopping this kind of footage from being shared, posted, or downloaded. In other words, it becomes public. Cameras are ubiquitous, the footage they capture is also ubiquitous in the sense that it is unprotected. Many WiFi connected security cameras are relatively insecure. This is a liberating development as well as a problematic one, as cameras can offer a document to a degree. However, violence perceived as real is still charged and extremely effective at manipulating its audience, even if this manipulation is simply to stir up anger and despair that is senseless or directed at something tangential. It is essential to understand the syntax of imagery such as this, as well as the historical precedent.

The second iteration of this footage involves the edited video clips being shown as videos with text added that introduces an alternative narrative, and by its very introduction translates the footage into something read as more fictional. Lines from Julia Kristeva's *The Powers of Horror; An Essay on Abjection* are added and appear as the narrative begins to play out. The font mimics the time and date stamp by also appearing in a courier font, but is clearly not read as part of the original footage. It is obvious that this has been added, and due to the associations with courier adds a kind of theatricality one might find games or similarly edited video. The text contrasts and offers a meditation on being and abjection.

“These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty the on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit--cadere, cadaver. If the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything.” (Kristeva 1982)

The addition of this text is meant to remove the viewer somewhat from their perception of the video as reality. It is also meant to link the video within the context of the modern and post-modern history of art-making that deals with abjection by depicting violence, difficult or horrifying scenes or imagery. Kristeva continues, “Abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it--on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger.” (Kristeva 1982)

NYC Pipe Bomber also plays in the exhibition with an added text. The video plays through its entirety without any contextual information with the exception of the timestamps of the CCTV cameras, and the Liveleak.com website watermark. This is important information nonetheless, though it does not provide much context regarding what is taking place within the videos. The text is written as if from the perspective of the bomber himself.

“...but I could not have known/ with that weapon; the metaphysical arming of the unarmed/ and in turn naming their guiltiness/ in a manufactured cause/ my rational defense became berserk/ turned to entropy/ and slaughter/ but this attempt was a failure”

This text (appearing on-screen corresponding to the line breaks) is credited to a book entitled *Insurgent Lives: The Paradigm of Extremist Ideology From the United States*, published in 2008 by author A.D. Simmons. No document of this kind exists, and the text was written by the artist. The author’s name was gathered from unverified information about a study of Islamic extremism and terrorism as a threat to “Western society”. No specific information about this author could be found, and their only title *Who is the Radical Islamist? And Why?* was published by Outskirts Press, a self-publishing platform based in Denver, CO most famous for accidentally publishing the work of Canadian serial killer Robert Pickton. (Stuek 2018). Internet based research often leads down these wormholes of verified and unverified information available in all formats, including printed books available to buy in online stores alongside legitimate research titles. Though this obscure book does not exactly pose much of a threat of

misinformation, its citation is unlikely to be investigated by some viewers, and this is a key tactic of the spread of biased or incorrect information.



NYC Pipe Bomber (detail)

The inclusion of this parafictional device is meant to further trouble the legitimacy of my edit of the found footage, while suggesting the perspective and motivations of the bomber himself are worth investigating. Without doing so, it becomes more difficult for viewers to combat manipulation from all sources. The inclusion of a fake book also points out that misinformation is not limited to the culture of the Internet. Video in particular seems to offer great precedent for parafiction as a medium through which to examine fact, fiction, and the legitimacy of information.

2. Recollection of Personal Events; *Testimony* (sound recording, 6:58)

In examining the role of my own subjectivity and the struggle to relate certain experiences of individual trauma, I've begun to expand the way I consider shared trauma experienced via imagery and writing. Examining the medium and viewers' associations with it as well as how this affects recollection have become key questions. I'm interested in the way information is revealed and withheld, altered, and informed.

Testimony consists of several accounts of memories written and recorded by myself, in as much detail as seemed necessary to relate the personal violence of each occurrence. It is an audio recording of about seven minutes. The delivery is even and unemotive, as if I needed to relate the information in the clearest manner. However, many details in the actual stories are missing, incomplete, or possibly contradictory. Consequently, the exact details of each situation are fragmented accounts of memories, with some details intentionally left out, or details from other people's experiences included as my own. These situations and the pain of their memory continue to evolve, both personally for me and for the other people in the stories. This impacted my ability to relate the accounts in an unaffected manner; there are some points where this begins to falter, but never a point where the speaker has an emotional breakage.

In trying to understand my need to muddle truth, depiction, and recollection, I decided to look toward my own experience as opposed to a more historical or publicly understood series of events. This is where one learns to sort out pain and justice to begin with. I ultimately have rejected the narrative of guilt in these events and consequently that there can be some sort of justice. Whoever is determined to be the guilty party becomes irrelevant, and the concept of

retribution is meaningless in the face the complexities of people's situations are really examined. The people and children in these stories are victims of victims, and perpetrators themselves.

The first account is a recollection of an incident in which a child in foster care, who has been traumatized by neglect and abuse (to put it in the most inadequate terms) is locked in a room and then tries to escape via the second story window. In the account, the speaker cannot recollect whether she was locked in the room as a form of punishment, but thinks that perhaps this was the case. The speaker then explains they are unsure of whether it was a suicide attempt or whether the child was just trying to get out.

Well, the first. This happened last summer. We had a girl there--seven or eight--she had jumped out a window. There were circumstances around this. She had behavioral problems, and slept walk. One day, she had to be locked in a room upstairs. She wouldn't sleep. Later she was wandering outside. I didn't know what to make of this because she had been locked in. She seemed shell-shocked. I went up to look and saw that she had jumped out the window. It was decided we shouldn't call anyone, because the whole home would be investigated. She seemed ok--I think she had fallen onto some bushes--so we didn't contact the hospital. But she was suicidal--we still didn't call anyone for the sake of the safety of everyone.

The second recollection in the piece--told by the same speaker--relates more closely to the *Caretaker* video, and was written to connect it to this footage in an exhibition setting. This account details an orderly or aid worker's experience with an elderly woman who repeatedly asks them to take her life for her. The speaker talks about how they had been "warned" about

caring for this patient, and her mental state which makes her a particularly difficult patient for the workers in the facility. Then the patient goes through some of the same motions as the woman in *Caregiver*. It is meant to be unclear whether this recording is discussing that exact situation, because how much the narrative lines up with the footage is questionable.

This was later. Someone had warned me, don't listen to her, she talks a lot and says very disturbing things. I had to go, I had to go help her use the bathroom. It was early in the morning, maybe five. Still dark. She wasn't woken by day, but by a knock. The lights were off, I could smell that she had defecated in her room, she had fallen out of bed. I had to put her back in bed--no one else was there at the time so it was hard. She was small but it was still a struggle. I had to turn on the light to see, so I could clean up. When I lifted her up and shoved her on the bed, she took my hand and she said, I don't know, something like, "Please kill me. We are one. God sent you here to kill me." I didn't know then, that touch meant everything. Touch in general I mean. I thought she knew she was being funny. I don't know if she knew.

The piece ends with a more abstracted statement concerning the role of the orderly. This comes after a long pause, in which the speaker can be heard slightly shifting their body and breathing (normally, though too closely) into the recorder. This text diverges from the others and is an inner rumination about the events that they just stated. At once the speaking absolves themselves of their role in abusive situations and condemns themselves with regard to a situation that seems to have no answer or resolution.

*“Orderlies” there never fitted themselves with rage, with rape
simply resentment, guilt,
and the justifications of those activities need to kept secret, that secret power and desperation
These could never be called crimes,
because crimes can be accounted for,
in theory corrected
They know these actions put their soul on a border
of being uncomprehended but seen, known but not
felt, an invisible passing death [or visible]
felt anger that they were there and had to
taste cruelty;
not that they committed.
There was no act per se,
only a human belittled from the start
who can barely maintain in their system
and must be tended there [or untended]*

Personal violence connects to political violence. Any given event is still experienced on an individual scale, though with war or terrorism there seems to be some sort of explanation or intervening factor. My own experience of loss and caretaking has offered me an alternative understanding in which the actions that lead to an act of violence have to be understood. The concept of psychological pathology and innate guilt and innocence are at odds with each other.

Pathologizing violence and the experience on its victims is also an inadequate and alienating response, however it is also necessary to a degree for making accommodations needed to survive. In this way *Testimony* is a piece exploring this concept using my own personal experiences rather than the politicized imagery of other works.

3. Recollection of imagined events; images made from dust, ash embossings

These works present a morbid and fragmented reproduction of a figure, suggesting trauma and discomfort. In my recent work, processes of production play an important role in addition to the traumatic figures portrayed. The images are shaped on the paper via laser-engraved printing panels, and dust traces of the original image are left. Some were pressed with ash and portions hand-painted with ink. These images are entirely created from the shape of the plate, the burnt dust that remained after the engraving process, ash pressed into the printing plate, and ink after they have been printed.

Technologically speaking the laser engraver is a precursor to a 3D printer. Though it does operate dimensionally, any images it creates are still 2D. Reading from a grayscale, it creates a depth cut into material based on how dark the area is, as well as adjustments to the power and speed settings of a laser. When it engraves a complex digital image, an odd truncation occurs because it creates cuts along an x and y axis. Truncation occurs because it is also creating the image via depth, ultimately creating the image through an illusion that our eyes read as perfectly flat. This very illusion is based on the digital language of photography and video that predates this machine. As the laser cuts the image into the wooden printing matrices,

a precise reproduction of the grayscale is created via depth and burn, and leaves a thick dust residue that is imperceptible.

Using a traditional blind embossing process, these plates can be used to create a shaped image on paper or fabric. The burnt residue combined with the embossing of the image can create an uncanny print of dust. Since some detail is lost in this process, the beginning image has to be extremely high quality for it to be relatively intelligible in its embossing. Using this technique, as well as adding other materials such as photographic ash and ink, I created several works that examine image-making and digital illusion using recent technology as well as using one of the oldest techniques of image reproduction (woodcut printing press).

Several print shops and artists in the 1970s began using processes that utilized mechanized processes (including the initial versions of laser cutters) and began creating works that combined the matrix and printing material. (Tallman 1996). The International Institute for Experimental Printmaking and Tyler Graphics created prints with artists such as Frank Stella who used a completely mechanized process to create woodblock prints. Michelle Stuart also used embossing in her work *Tsikupuming* to merge substance and image. (Tallman 1996).

After several attempts to perfect the materials and settings, the first successful series of these were four large-scale prints (2x4') using eight cedar panels to create the matrixes (together the panels create a 4x4' modular image). Because of the size of the image, it had to be divided into a grid to accommodate the size of the laser engraver as well as the size limitations of the press. *Lee* comprises of the cedar panels themselves, as well as the dust prints pulled from these. The image is of a female figure lying in a contorted position on fabric sheet. The pattern of the grain of the panels interacted with the photographic pattern of the fabric to create a background

in which the surface seems to blend with the wood in an intelligible manner, some moments in the figure also resulted in ambiguity between what was carved into the material, and the already existing grain. The mechanical process of engraving an image both suggesting a traumatic incident, and the disconnection created through the parallel mechanisms of trauma and digital and analogue image degradation. The ambiguity of the figure was inspired by an incident in Franz Kafka's *The Castle*, in which the main character K is shown a photograph by his landlady in which there seems to be a figure "lying in the sand" (Duttlinger 2007). On further examination, it is actually an early photograph of a high jumper. This is referencing one of the earliest series of photography taken in California in the United States, which became widely available during Kafka's lifetime. In my photograph, the figure is modeled off of the positioning of this figure--where it is unclear if they are falling through the air or lying on the ground. (Duttlinger 2007).

The process of digital photographic engraving fits with this repeating narrative of photographs in Kafka's work. Essentially, this is that more questions are raised by the cropping and processing of photographs than answered, and ultimately what is being seen is an image (object) rather than an actual reproduction of a specific moment.

"Although a snapshot offers a scientifically correct image of reality, it nevertheless runs contrary to the parameters of human experience. In unmediated perception, discrete moments are perceived only as part of a temporal continuum; by eliminating time from the resulting image, the snapshot simultaneously eliminates the subject from the realm of perception." (Duttlinger 2007)

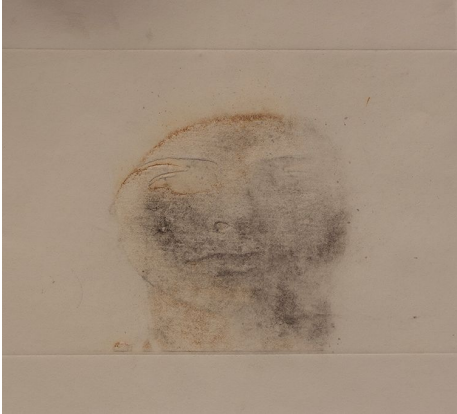
The figure engraved in the cedar panels--particularly as the image itself interacts with the wood grain--is not clearly lying or falling. The image is of an extremely dear friend who I have known for nearly a decade, who is also a domestic abuse survivor. The reality of this experience defies the clean psycho-medical definition of "survivor" as with many people who have experienced abuse from family members, they have a complicated and continuing relationship with them. Though the image and subsequent engraving and prints are open to the viewer's interpretation, the choice to reproduce them with dust--a reproduction which looks highly mechanized, in which the figures eyes and features and limbs look slightly flattened and truncated--is meant to speak to the difficulty of recollection of certain traumatic incidents. However, I think it's not completely necessary for the viewer to understand this relationship, but to detect an undertone in which the figure seems off, or vulnerable in a discomfoting way.



Lee

The first set of two prints pulled from four corresponding panels (each 2x4') have the strongest layer of dust visible. The embossing delineates the image more in the second set of prints, and the random action of the dust met with the soaked embossing paper creates some moments between the action of the hand and the action of digital image-engraving. The more prints pulled, the fainter the image becomes, until only the shape of the original image remains with increasingly tiny bits of residue left. If one were to continue this process, the plates themselves would also degrade substantially, as they were already beginning to lose some of their crispness after only two printings. The resulting products are extremely fragile, and if the dust or other materials isn't affixed, it would be possible to brush the image away, though it is stable enough to withstand some contact after being pressed into the wet paper.

The second series of images also required that the resulting images in the prints remain somewhat ambiguous because of the process. The originating photographs for these are also from extremely high quality digital photos whose detail is lost through the printing and engraving process. However, because it is from such high definition image, a certain uncanniness remains with the image when it is embossed on the paper. These are two portraits of a head--one in profile and one facing forward, similar to a mugshot. The image truncation that occurs inhibits the clarity of certain features, as well as some stretching and alteration that took place in readying the image to be engraved onto the wooden plate.



Remains I



Remains III

5. Conclusion

Obfuscation of imagery has been something I have been exploring since the outset of this research. Beginning by etching images on clear glass, I wanted to think about images in a deconstructed manner; since they cannot be read without certain circumstances of light or a dark background. They are obscured and exist as a certain type of information, having been engraved

following a digital process. *War Glass (Iraq 2001, Chicago 2016)* consists of three glass panels. The first is an image of a bombing carried out by US forces in Iraq in 2011, the middle panel is an anti-war protest in Chicago in 2016, and the last is the inverted image of the bombing. This work was intended to show the relative absence of culpability for continued violence there, and the near transparent presence of an anti-war movement. Working on glass was a way to conceal imagery and basically make it exist as a description, as an encoding. Though this was a latter piece created during my master's work, the images collected were among the first and date from a time, while living in Chicago, political discord and violent political improprieties began to touch my life not only internationally, but locally; personally.

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