A shadow of herself – a journey into memory

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Acknowledgments

Memory is a pathway to discovering who one is,
or equally, what one’s art might be.¹

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...finally by group effort they arrived together at a single song: which slowly eroded memory and came to take the place of truth.²

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Abstract

My paper probes the way our memories can be altered. It investigates changes that can take place when our memory creates images that when recalled, may be incongruent to the reality, yet become imbedded as our believable memories. I use this topic to address memory on a personal basis, and it rests in the discovery of my grandmother’s diary, which revealed her to be something of a contrast to the person I remember. This realisation prompted me to question whether my memories stem from the gloss of childhood, or have I simply forgotten her as a person, and has the recent discovery and romance of her diary manipulated my memory? To attempt to answer this question, I have researched the changes that can arise when a recalled memory is influenced by outside sources. I look at memory as a personal identity; the way in which it can be embroidered or underplayed depending on the audience, and the fruition of a memory, that then becomes our narrative; and in turn, becomes our memory. I also investigate the prompts that stimulate our memories. To illustrate the way the human memory can be manipulated, my body of work is based on the complexity of the illusion; when through conditioning and experience our senses recall what is identifiable, but in reality, is an allusion.
Introduction

There is a Celtic belief that the souls of those whom we have lost are held captive in some inferior being, in an animal, in a plant, in some inanimate object, and so effectively lost to us until the day (which to many never comes) when we happen to pass by the tree or to obtain possession of the object which forms their prison. Then they call us by our name, and as soon as we have recognised their voice the spell is broken. We have delivered them: they have overcome death and return to share our life.¹

The above statement by French novelist, critic, and essayist, Marcel Proust (1871-1922) from Remembrance of Things Past: Swann’s Way,² encompasses the essence of my research. This research probes memory and the prompts that stimulate our memories. It also investigates changes that can take place when our recall is stimulated to reshape a person, event, place or an object into a memory that may be incongruent to the reality, yet becomes imbedded as fact. It looks at this new and preferred image that we hold in our memory, which becomes our personal narrative, a narrative that we share as our own story in order to shock, make people laugh, give pleasure or pain.

My research deals with memory from a personal basis, and is prompted by the discovery of my grandmother’s diary which she wrote as a love story for her two daughters – my mother and my aunt. The diary revealed my grandmother to be a person of romance and sentiment, with an inherent strength of character. Her diarised words were something of a surprise to me, and presented her in a new and intriguing light when I compared the character of the person revealed in the diary to the character of the grandmother I remember. Perhaps the grandmother I knew was just a shadow of the person she was as a young woman, or was the young woman a shadow of my grandmother? Reading her account of her married life has compelled me to


question whether my recollections of her stem from childhood memories where she was dearly loved, and to a childish me: ‘just part of the family’. Or as I grew older, did I push her to the back of my mind, as the selfish business of establishing a career and family took priority? She did drift in and out of my memory over the years, prompted by various conversations, objects or sensory stimulations, but in those fleeting memories I do not ever recall her displaying the sentimentality and romance that was expressed in her diary.

Without doubt, the discovery of my grandmother’s diary served as a major prompt to my memory, and its subsequent reading served not only to stimulate my memories further, but it also encouraged me to try to comprehend more deeply the behaviour of our memories with regard to the stimulations and sensors that prompt our recollections. It lead me to question what Romanian literary theorist Marianne Hirsch, labels as Postmemory. Hirsch uses this term to describe the relationship that the ‘generation after’ has to the personal and cultural experiences of those who came before and are remembered not from personal experience, but from the folklore, stories, images, and social customs or mannerisms with which they grew up. Hirsch believes that:

Postmemory’s connection to the past is actually mediated not by recall but by inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one’s birth or one’s consciousness.3

It is not difficult to admit that my grandmother’s diarised words have shifted my understanding of her; and brought about a deepened understanding of the experiences that shaped the person she became. Her diary has altered my memories to such an extent that my grandmother has become something of a hero to me: someone of whom to be proud and whose memory can be recalled at will, or when prompted through narratives that I will inevitably enhance with future telling.

My initial research for this project included a visit to the home that my grandmother established with my grandfather as pioneer settlers. Because

their settlement took place a century ago, I had expected to find no trace of my grandparents’ home. To my surprise, the original home was standing and despite some alterations, totally recognisable from the old photographs I had discovered along with my grandmother’s diary. I also found the gravesite of their son who died at eighteen months of age, and other relics of their life, which I literally unearthed during that journey. These family ‘treasures’ only encouraged me to delve deeper into what was developing into an intriguing, and, after reading my grandmother’s diary, a memory altering, and perhaps predisposed narration.

My research seeks to delve into the senses that act as stimulants through visual images, sounds – a voice, a train whistle; or a smell; a touch or a taste – intangible sensors that act as prompters for our memories. In addition to the sensory motivators, my research investigates the tangible prompts for our memories – deliberate and collected objects that we hold on to as souvenirs or as reminders that we associate with an experience, person, event or place – the objects that evoke our sentiments and in turn, our memories. In The Rolling Pin from Evocative Objects – things we think with, Susan Pollock writes about objects that evoke memories, such as her grandmother’s rolling pin.

*If I close my eyes, I can almost go back to my grandmother’s kitchen.*

...the fragrance of pot roast permeating the air, redolent with caramelized onions, potatoes, and carrots. I can see the golden lemon sponge cake... and I can smell the cups of steaming black tea with sugar... Grandma Tilly’s healing elixir, which could soothe any pain..."}

But my motivation to investigate the changes that can take place in our memories does not come from the smell of my grandmother’s rock cakes fresh from the oven, or from the taste of the milky tea she would make for me; it comes from an object – her diary. Imprudently, I regard her diary as a

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4 In September, 2012 my two sisters and I travelled to the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area in southwestern New South Wales to find the home my grandmother established with my grandfather as pioneer settlers in the early 1900s; and where they lived for most of their short married life.

deception that has tricked my memories, and this deception is what I have represented in my body of work, using the likeness of tangible and recognisable objects but created in clay as allusions.

Is it incongruous or is it uncanny that I should write about my grandmother’s diary exactly 100 years after she was married? Perhaps there is no magic in the coincidence of this centennial date, but being unable to resist the drama of the occasion, I have instilled a sense of the uncanny into my work by creating an installation that acts as a metaphor for my memories. Sitting on the gallery floor, with an audio underlay of a young female voice reading from the diary, are untouched or dishevelled stacks of paper and books, bound and linked by chain. Some are padlocked. These piles represent memories, remembrances that have been amassed and stored, recollections that remain intact or that have been recalled and/or altered. And memories that are linked. These memories are formed in clay, and they act as a metaphor for the memories that we hold from the past. Clay is living, evolving, and forever changing; it is fluid and continually active and changing until it is fired. Like our memories, it is a substance over which we sometimes have little control. Memory is fluid and evolving until we decide to ‘fix’ on our version of events; then memory is solid until something like my grandmother’s diary forces a change.

Until after my mother’s death in 2009, I had no idea that my grandmother’s diary existed, and my mother chose not to divulge the diary or the sentiments it contained. I will always be mystified as to why my mother never spoke to my sisters or I about the existence of the diary. As a result, I remain unaware of my mother’s feelings towards the words my grandmother wrote in her beautiful cursive script, or the passion that drove her to keep a record of her ‘love story’6. Perhaps it is my grandmother’s spirit, or her shadow returning from the past that has prompted my research into the changes of memory, and why it is based on her diary. Is it revealed in the repetition of the paper and books that act as memory icons and form the relational links in my work? Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) believed that we equate things like repetition and patterns with destiny, and that our minds are capable of attaching

6 The first entry in my grandmother’s diary takes the form of a foreword and a message to her two daughters (my mother and my aunt). See p.6 of this paper.
uncanny or magical meanings to what are really, ordinary events. “...the uncanny effect often arises when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred.” For me, Nicholas Royle sums this up in *The Uncanny*: when he writes the uncanny is not only feelings drawn from unfamiliarity or alienation, but can also arise from coincidences or fate:

*The uncanny is not simply an experience of strangeness or alienation. More specifically, it is a peculiar commingling of the familiar and unfamiliar. It can take the form of something familiar unexpectedly arising in a strange and unfamiliar context, or of something strange and unfamiliar unexpectedly arising in a familiar context. It can consist in a sense of homeliness uprooted, the revelation of something unhomely at the heart of hearth and home. It might arise from the seemingly mechanical repetition of a word such as ‘it’. A feeling of uncanniness can come from curious coincidences, a sudden sense that things seem to be fated or ‘meant to happen’.*

In Chapter one I discuss my grandmother and the motivation for my research – the discovery of the diary she wrote during her short marriage, and the way in which its contents altered my memories of her. Chapter two questions memory as a personal identity, and looks at the recall of our past experiences. I question the accuracy of these recollections when they are reconstructed as our narratives. In Chapter three I discuss the role that external prompters and sensory stimuli play in altering our memories, and I investigate the changes that can arise when our memories are influenced by unlikely sources. I also refer to the influence that artist Louise Bourgeois has had on my work. In Chapter four I write about clay: its relevance to, and the significance of its role in the allusions I use as icons and metaphors for our memories. And finally in Chapter five, I identify the works of Cyrus Tang, Emily Joy and William Kentridge, artists who have inspired me to make *A shadow of herself*.

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Chapter 1

Nungy, my grandmother

*I think we loved one another too dearly it was too perfect to last, we were perfectly contented, notwithstanding our many troubles, oh the happy happy days, life’s romance has gone for me, it is now hard facts.*

As I stated in the introduction, my research is motivated by the discovery of my grandmother’s diary. I found it among a collection of family photographs and documents I inherited when my mother died. The diary revealed a part of my grandmother’s life and character of which I was largely unaware; it is a brief memorial account of the short five and a half years of her marriage, years that shaped the path of her life. In this chapter I have included brief extracts from the diary, which she kept as a scant record of her courtship with my grandfather and their eventual marriage. The first entry was written as an afterthought, following my grandfather’s death and prior to the birth of my aunt, her third child, and my mother’s younger sister. The first child died at the age of eighteen months before my mother was born. The following entry serves as the foreword in my grandmother’s diary:

*It is the history of Daddies and Mummies love story, of which there couldn’t possibly be a happier and more perfect love and married life, for which I am more than blessed and thankful. God grant that she and this little one to be, be as happy with more luck than their parents. God bless my little darlings* and guard and keep them always.

*Your loving mother*

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10 ‘my little darlings’ refers to my mother and my aunt.

11 The first entry in my grandmother’s diary takes the form of a foreword and a message to her two daughters (my mother and my aunt).
While my reading of the diary did not prompt familiar memories, because it speaks of events of the years of which I knew little, it revealed an insight into my grandparents’ pioneering life that was spoken of only in passing while my grandmother was alive. What the diary did prompt however, was a new respect and understanding for the person I loved and knew as my grandmother, and this revelation is somewhat contradictory to the images of her that I held in my memory. As I grew up I took her for granted as being simply my grandmother, after all, my friends had grandmothers, so why would I not have one? But I loved her for the role she played in my life as the mother of my mother. She lived only a few streets from our home and in my childhood and early adult years played a prominent role in the routine of our family life. To me she was simply: Nungy, someone to obey and respect; an older female figure who although affectionate and caring, could also be caustic in her criticism and somewhat detached from my childhood activities. I think in fact, that I was a little afraid of her.

On the first day of 1911 my grandmother wrote: “New Years day 1911 – we plighted our troth at Berowra, NSW”. She was nineteen years old. My grandparents were not married until December 1913, and uncannily, or is it coincidentally, I am writing exactly one hundred years later, in December 2013, about their brief married life that was diarised by my grandmother. In her diary, she records her short marriage, most of which she and my grandfather spent as pioneers in south-western New South Wales. Interestingly, the grandmother that I knew is now a

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12 Nungy is the name by which my grandmother was known in my family. It was a name that evolved, as so many names do, from my older sister being unable to pronounce the word Nanny.

13 Suzannah Helen Stewart, Nungy’s Diary, 1920.
disparate shadow of the person who the diary revealed. Her diary made me question whether the person I knew evolved as a result of the struggles, grief and disappointments in her early settler years, or as she grew older, whether she created a shell that shielded any indication of her true self?

Nungy was a caring and loving grandmother, sometimes funny, sometimes strict, proud, always ‘keeping up appearances’: “don’t tell anyone I’m on a pension”. I remember her as constantly quoting ‘codes to live by’, or isms14. The absence of isms in her diary revealed a person of a different calibre from the grandmother who taught me: “don’t sing at the table or you won’t get married for forty years”, or: “all good things come to those who wait”, and that: “a red sky in the morning means a shepherd needs to take warning, but a red sky at night is a shepherd’s delight”. Perhaps she did not need these isms in her married life as my grandfather supplied her with ‘codes to live by’. My life was filled with Nungy’s isms – proverbs and sayings that taught me the ‘proper’ way to live and that: “there is a reason for everything”. I must say her repertoire of isms that punctuated my childhood have rarely come to fruition, which in many ways is probably fortunate.

But perhaps more important than the memory of her life-lesson isms, is the memory of the times she taught me to make shadow puppets on the wall with my hands. As a child I did not realise it, but it exposed a little of the romantic, creative character that Nungy revealed in her diary. I recall lying on her bed where she would tell me stories, and to bring the tales to life Nungy made shadows on the wall with her hands. How or where Nungy learnt to create these shadow images I do not know, I was never told, and for that matter I never asked; but with this trick of her arthritic hands and her patient instruction, she offered the gift of imagination and malleability to my childish hands and mind.

During a discussion with my two sisters, when we retraced our respective memories of Nungy, it was interesting (and indicative of the way in which the

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14 isms are a set of verbalised ideals that constitute one’s goals and actions. My grandmother had a plethora of isms and whenever I hear one of these, my memory is prompted of her recitation of these ‘rules to live by’, and the belief I had in them as a child.
memory of the same event can differ between people) how the three of us recalled varying particulars, with each revealing details that were important to us individually at the time. But this same detail was often not recalled by all three of us collectively. Although memories of our childhood events and family routines did not always correspond, we agreed that our grandmother had a ready sense of humour and quick wit, yet her defensive and guarded nature was more than likely the result of her early struggle for survival as a young single mother following the death of my grandfather. I feel a little sorry that I didn’t know her as the person she was in her younger years.

During my childhood my mother related tales of the hardships her small family faced during the depression of the 1930s, and the ensuing years of World War II. The struggles Nungy faced as a young bride and mother were rarely mentioned during my childhood years, and the joys of her love story never spoken of. While her pioneering story is not unique and only one of thousands that have related to the hardships of Australia’s pioneer settlers in the early 1900s, it is very much a personal tale of love, devotion, and courage. Nungy married Harry15 and left her comfortable life in Sydney with her new husband to set up an experimental poultry farm in the Murrumbidgee Irrigation area in Yanco, south-western New South Wales.

I have included brief extracts from her diary in this chapter:

*Got married on the 4th December (1913). Spent three days at Watson’s Bay and then went by the “Indarra”, lovely boat, to Melbourne for ten days. Had *THE* time of our lives (always have a honeymoon). Left Monday 19th Dec. for Yanco. Very dusty during journey, spent night in Junee, arrived in Yanco on Tuesday, country is lovely though very dry...*16 (see appendix 1)

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15 James Harry Stewart was my grandfather, whom I never knew.

In September 2012, my sisters and I travelled to Yanco in order to find our grandparents’ farm. The property where they originally erected their tent and built a house was easily identified through old photographs and Nungy’s description in her diary. The four-room house my grandfather built was still standing and being lived in.

Nungy’s diary relates the initial hardships they faced while trying to set up their poultry farm and speaks of the isolation they faced during their first months as pioneers: “I didn’t see or speak to a woman for the first six months, but we were blissfully happy, desired no other company.”  

(see appendix 2)

While my grandmother writes about the blissful happiness she experienced with her new husband, their life together encountered much hardship and sorrow. The diary tells of the birth of her first born child, Doogie, his ongoing illness, and the constant illness of my grandfather. It also reflects the no-nonsense ‘get on with it’ attitude that must have been displayed by the pioneers who were forced to face the realities of the inevitable hardships and loss in the early twentieth century:

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Harry got very ill in November suffered frightful agony... he waited until Doogie – Harry William James Stewart – our first-born was born (December 1914) then went in the Leeton Public hospital after three weeks frightful agony. I went home when Doogie was two weeks old. ...Harry still suffering a lot ...hot summer and drought. Fearful dust storms something awful. ...February 1 1915 Doogie took his first heart attack after a terribly hot day and Harry very sick and tired after working hard irrigating. I was bathing Doogie when he took his attack. We were greatly worried. Dr Watkins bluntly told me that Doogie couldn’t live the night, that he had heart trouble ...it was a fearful shock to me, they seemed so dreadfully callous and he explained if he did live he would always have heart trouble.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{18} Suzannah Helen Stewart, Nungy’s Diary, 1920.
They returned briefly to Sydney to seek more reliable medical advice for their son, where they discovered that Doogie had an incurable congenital heart condition. He was classified as a ‘blue baby’:

Took Doogie back to Sydney to doctor and he said it was incurable. Decided to go back to Yanco on the Monday still terribly hot, packed up and Harry was just about to leave with the luggage for Central Station and get the tickets when Doogie went into an attack which lasted hours. Came out of one and went into another. ...we felt terribly despondent and miserable our poor little baby he did suffer so much. Dr gave him three months to live at the most but had an attack regularly every Thursday night at 3am until end of May and then for three months had none and seemed to flourish. He is a little

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*Blue Baby* syndrome or cyanosis heart defect, is when unoxygenated blood from the right ventricle flows into the aorta preferentially because of the obstructed outflow tract into the lungs. Oxygen gives blood its reddish color; cyanosis describes the “blueness” in the baby which results from the pumping of mixed oxygenated and unoxygenated blood throughout the body. For more information see: Dictionary.com, Dictionary.com, Collins English Dictionary, 2013, http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/blue+baby (accessed August 9, 2013).
darling so very happy and good... how my heart aches at his suffering this prospect of life. Doogie got worse in May. ...he gradually got worse and suffered cruelly was terrible to see him.

Doogie passed away 17th June 1916 aged one year and six months. Lost our cow also, broke his neck. Peggy born 4th August 1916.²⁰

Perhaps the previous paragraph taken from one of my grandmother’s diary entries typifies the era, or possibly it is a glimpse of my grandmother’s familiar matter-of-fact attitude. Her attitude was always: “when faced with the inevitable, make the best of it, pick yourself up and carry on with life”. But despite the sorrowful account of the suffering and death of baby Doogie, paradoxically, I find this down-to-earth and macabre entry typical of the satire often displayed by the grandmother I remember. Perhaps this diary entry puts into words the foundations of the strength that was later displayed during her life, employing humour as a coping mechanism.

After my mother was born it appears their luck did not improve and they were urged by my grandfather’s parents to return to work his family’s farm in Berowra, north of Sydney. But Harry died a few years later.

Fig. 5 At the graveside of my grandfather, my grandmother & mother are on the left. (1919)

²⁰ Suzannah Helen Stewart, Nungy’s Diary, 1920.
Harry’s father and mother wrote urging us to leave Yanco. After due consideration we decided to accept and leave... Harry passed away on the 1st May 1919 after five weeks most terrible suffering for him... I didn’t think of the time I put in then, it is a perfect nightmare! And too dreadful to live again even to write... Lord alone knows how I went through it, being in a delicate condition but he was my strength... I couldn’t live without him and it was too dreadful to even think of, it is terribly hard, it seems to us that daddie is better, for he suffered so much in his life ...the best truest and most loving and considerate husband and daddie any woman and child ever had.\textsuperscript{21} (see appendix 3)

Nungy died in 1975, at the age of 83, and along with her diary, I have many family ‘treasures’ to prompt my own memories of her and the life she lived. I am not ready to part with many of these material remains of her life, and I have used some of the metal and wooden storage chests that belonged to my grandparents in my work. These chests hold some of the paper-like pages and books I have fashioned in clay and represent my grandmother’s memories that she stored away in her diary. These are memories she did not reveal, but set aside, perhaps for future generations to discover and explore.

\textit{Baby was born October 7\textsuperscript{th} ... Elizabeth Joyce (Joy) our little Joy who Daddie was so very very anxious about and to see, ...oh my dear, dear husband I miss you more each month and need you more each month. God help me to keep a stiff upper lip and a living for my children, and a dear little home for my girlies how I do love you both my darlings daddy’s and my treasures.}\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{21} Suzannah Helen Stewart, \textit{Nungy’s Diary}, 1920.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid
Chapter 2

Memory as a personal identity

*How can memory traces represent past events or experiences? How can they have content? ...the state or set of states produced by the past experience must constitute a structural analogue of the thing remembered...*\(^{23}\)

It is believed that through our memory we retain information and reconstruct past experiences, most often when we are relating stories that are connected to us – our narratives. Our experiences and events that are long-gone from our memories can be recalled as specific episodes in our lives and these can play key roles when we recreate key aspects of our personal identity. Our memories are enormous reservoirs of personal knowledge, albeit unreliable knowledge, and contribute via subconsciously recalling learned manners and habits that influence the way we behave.

I have no real memory of my grandfather or uncle because they died when my mother was a baby, but I have formed an image of them: I have invented artificial memories of their lives that I have only established from photographs and the words in my grandmother’s diary. If their names were mentioned when I was a child, my immediate recollection of them was totally artificial. I invented ‘happy family’ memories where they were living with my mother, aunt and grandmother, who all aged and changed, but in my mind my grandfather remained a strong young man and my uncle an infant; true to the images that had been implanted in my memory via photographs.

Although no one specific memory could possibly create a personal identity, identity is the result of a desired image that is linked to the process of remembering multiple events, people, emotions etc. Our memories are often immersed in emotion such as love and grief. Some memories are also shaped by language, others by imagery such as paintings or movies. This is complex, in

as much as our memory subconsciously plays tricks and the stories we tell of the events that have taken place in our lives are derived from the images we hold in our memories. The accuracy of the factual aspects of a story are often lost from our memory and replaced by simulated occurrences that can be underplayed, improved, exaggerated or dramatised. According to the audience, these adjusted memories can make our personal identity fluid, an identity that can be enhanced or diminished in the telling or reshaped to fit different contexts and situations.

Psychologist Ulric Neisser writes on self-narratives and episodic memory in *The remembering self*:

_Not all self-narratives are true. Even when people strive for accuracy, what they remember may not be just what happened._

..._what is established in our memory of an event is what is remembered of the particular version of the actual event that is established by the subsequent act of remembering it._

This can be explained by the events or external influences or circumstances that can affect our memories at the time of recall. Neisser writes about self-narratives varying from one occasion to the next, one audience to the next, and one mood to the next. We all know this is true, as the temptation to enhance or underplay an event recalled from memory is irresistible, appealing to the raconteur that is inherent in human nature. As an example, it is a common joke (albeit often the truth), that fishermen exaggerate the size of the fish they have caught to an audience they wish to impress; or a child may underplay the recollection of an event of which he does not wish his parents to know all the details. Similarly in *Memory* Siegfried Kracauer writes about photography as a prompter of memory:

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25 ibid

Memory does not pay much attention to dates – it skips years or stretches temporal distance. ...an individual retains memories because they are personally significant.  

Kracauer believes images that are created in our memory are retained only when they have a significant connection with a particular photograph. As such, they become a forced or constructed memory that is linked to the photograph. But he also believes that “the last image of a person is that person’s actual history.” Often the memory we hold of someone who has died, or we do not know, (possibly an historical figure) may be stimulated by a particular photograph. This photograph could possibly be the last photograph that may have been taken of them, and as a result, and like the photographs of my grandfather and uncle, this representation is the image we hold in our memory.

However, an image involves not only memory: it involves thoughts, desires, feelings and personality. When recollections are related as narrative and in turn chronicled, they become fact and therefore, history. An example of fact derived from memory, along with perhaps desires, feelings and personality, is the autobiography of Australian writer, Albert Facey (1894-1982). Facey chose to reveal much of his life in his book: A Fortunate Life. He writes about his early life in Western Australia, his experiences during the Gallipoli campaign of World War I and his return to civilian life. It also documents his life of hardship, loss, friendship and love. While the account of his life perhaps contributed in a small way to the history of the early settlement years in Western Australia, his account no doubt has influenced the perception of his readers about the harsh realities of life at that time.

Facey wrote his award-winning autobiography when he was aged in his eighties, which indicates that his memory was remarkable. However, it is claimed that Facey wrote his memoirs from the diarised notes that he had made during his life. While the book is a fascinating personal history of turn of

28 Ibid
19th Century life in Western Australia, I find the accuracy of his memories of events a point of conjecture. Facey never attended school to receive a formal education, but as a teenager, taught himself to read and write. A considerable part of the autobiography deals with his early childhood, which begs the question – how accurate was his memory of these events? Were the memories of his early childhood (perhaps diarised in later years from memory) influenced by family folklore; by the physical and/or mental scaring of metered-out punishments, or by the necessity to earn a living at a very early age in the harsh Australian land settlement era? Were his memories influenced by the strength of character and determination he knew he exhibited from his very young years, and the hurtful rejection from his mother, which in turn was overlaid by the enduring love and care of his grandmother?

In the Afterword printed in *A Fortunate Life*, Jan Carter sums up the contents of Facey's autobiography and refers to him as Australia's pilgrim. Carter writes about Facey's life as if it were a journey: “Facey developed and shaped his stories throughout his life by telling an audience.”30 As ponderous as I find the question that hovers over the accuracy of Facey's autobiography, it is a personal memoir, and it must rest as such. Perhaps the following quote from *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*,31 may offer an explanation:

> Memory goes wrong in mundane and minor, or in dramatic and disastrous ways... remembering is often suffused with emotion, and is closely involved in both extended affective states such as love and grief, and socially significant practices.32

In many ways, the memoir of Facey's life is not unlike my grandmother's brief diary memoir. My grandparents were also pioneers at the beginning of the 20th Century and the happiness and hardships they faced during their marriage inevitably helped shape my grandmother's life. She never re-married, and

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32 Ibid
devoted herself to making a living and building a life for her two daughters, living alone for a further sixty years. Unlike Facey, the events my grandmother recorded in her diary were, at the time, current. However, I believe they were later consigned to the recesses of her memory as she worked to cope as an unsupported widow. While she may have retrieved this part of her life privately, to my knowledge these memories never became common knowledge. Perhaps her memories were too suffused with emotion to re-tell.
Chapter 3

Memories, their changes, prompters & stimuli

*Memory has its own ideas; it snatches elements of story from whenever, tries to put them together. It comes back at you from all angles, with all that you later knew, and it gives you the news.*

The people, events, things and places that make up our memories are often not always memories. This statement of course is a paradox. That is because memory is a paradox and can alter the reality. What we remember, we can believe to be the truth as it becomes a reality in our mind. As Susan Stewart observes in *On Longing*: “Memory, at once impoverished and enriched, presents itself as a device for measurement, the ‘ruler’ of narrative”. I believe that Stewart is saying that our memories become our narratives, albeit inconsistent and ranging in factual detail, but are likely to end up to be knotty embroidery of the facts. As we come to regard these enhanced versions of our memories as being the truth, they become our narratives, and as such, our memories. A paradox? Yes, because memory is a paradox.

As I have used the changes that occur in the memory as the basis for my research, clay is an appropriate medium for my body of work. I appreciate and respect the tactile qualities and malleability of clay and its innate memory. Due to its ability to imitate, clay offers me the opportunity to create a familiar object in any shape or size; and in any combination I desire. In my work: *A shadow of herself (2013)*, I have used clay to create works that allude to realistic objects, a likeness to which the viewer can relate – books, sheets of paper, chains and padlocks. By combining these everyday and recognisable

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35 Susan Stewart creates an uncanny link with my grandmother – her name was Susannah (Sue) Stewart.

objects, I construct amassed memories, albeit they are represented as paper and books made from clay, and these memories are told through the narrative of the underlying reading of my grandmother’s diary.

When I questioned why my memories of my grandmother were so changed by what was included in her diary, it led me to look further into the contradictions and changes that can arise when the memory is influenced by outside sources. I discovered that when a memory is recalled it can be rearranged by circumstance and/or any outside influence. For example, memory can be manipulated by the events or conditions at the particular time it is recalled and/or the situation under which it is recalled. There is also a strange relationship between memory, fact and fiction, and while it is an unconscious process, there are also many situations where one can consciously manipulate a memory for a particular purpose. As a result, these influences render the recollection inconsistent with the actual facts – erroneous, magnified and imperfect – a paradox. Yet we believe it to be accurate. Once a new memory has been established and we believe it to be a true account, the original memory can be totally altered and it is then difficult to return to check if the new memory is truthful, because the original memory may be lost. These changes can occur when memory is prompted by any number of conscious or subconscious stimuli. In a decade-long study titled: *Impairing existing declarative memory in humans by disrupting reconsolidation*, its authors Jason Chan and Jessica LaPaglia from Iowa State University, United States of America, found:

...people’s memory, even after it stabilises, once it is retrieved, becomes susceptible to changes again; becomes labile, and becomes malleable again to changes.

The study found that although memories (either long-term or more recent)

37 Jason C K Chan and Jessica A LaPaglia, “Impairing existing declarative memory in humans by disrupting reconsolidation”.

may be imbedded in the brain, when stimulated and retrieved can change, due to any influence that may be present at the time of recall. This study recognised that the brain records the immediacy of the moment of recollection, and transfers this influence (sight, sound, image etc.) to the recollection. As a result, these outside stimuli influence that particular memory. Chan wrote:

If you reactivate a memory by retrieving it, that memory becomes susceptible to changes again. And if at that time you receive new and contradictory information that can make the original memory much harder to retrieve.39

But our memories are not only changed and affected by outside influences; they are also affected by our emotions. Many of the unpleasant or painful times we experience during our lives are overshadowed by preferential thoughts. For example, when a loved one dies, our recollection of them can often be subconsciously enhanced, and their personality flaws and/or malevolence overlooked in our grief. Our minds can be filled with nostalgic recollections of the lost loved one. Conversely, if the one who dies was not greatly loved or highly regarded, the overriding memories may make the recollections insensitive and unsympathetic. Our subconscious treats the memory of trauma in the same manner, and can act as a mechanism to either exaggerate the circumstances, or alternatively, form an emotional defence that erases it from the memory entirely.

Objects of course also have an enormous influence as prompters for our memories. We can associate the memory of an event or circumstance with a particular object that may have entered our life. Objects that are familiar, treasured, or collected, act as souvenirs – prompts for the recall of past experiences, and from these memories we create some of our personal narratives. Sherry Turkle, writes in Evocative Objects40: “The object can hold

an unexplored world, containing within it memory, emotion, and untapped creativity.” Turkle believes that an object acts as an intermediary – it connects generations, stimulates and enhances memories and arouses both emotional and physical connections that have previously been forgotten. I have used my grandmother’s diary, and my changed memories of her as a stimulation and creative motivation for my work: *A shadow of herself*. In this work I use chains created from clay as a metaphor for these connections to our memories and to the relationships that we establish during our lives. But there is also the uncanny inherent in my ceramic chains: they look, feel and sound like metal, and the links that wind through the work give the allusion of strength and connection. I use chains to symbolise the endless variety and significance of the relationships we have in our lives. As chains, they appear to be industrially strong, but because they are made from clay, they are fragile and easily broken, like our relationships and memories. And like our relationships and memories, they can be transformed: they can shatter, shift and alter and may never link in the same manner again. Turkle writes about her connection to objects:

*If being attentive to the details of people’s lives might be considered a vocation, mine was born in the smell and feel of the memory closet and its objects.*

Everyday we are surrounded by images, objects, people, sounds, smells, animals, tattoos, clouds – ‘things’ – a word, symbol, sign or other referents that act as prompters for our memories. These ‘things’ may be recognisable and familiar to us, and our memories are prompted by their familiarity. In *The Comfort of Things*, Daniel Miller writes about Charlotte, who used her body piercings as a means of turning memories into object-like forms, which she could attach or detach from her body. Charlotte used these ‘things’ as a form of

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42 Ibid. 226-230.

43 It is difficult to find an exact definition of ‘thing’ as this word can be used as a synonym for everything... but in the context of this paper it refers to anything that may evoke a personal emotion or memory.

memory control and treated that memory as a thing, an artifact. Charlotte also used tattoos to represent a specific memory: “Every single piercing or tattoo represents a highly specific memory she can look at to remind herself of its origin.”

Miller believes that people think of memory as something they possess inside their heads and can control from within: “When we talk of reflection on things, we tend to think, first, in terms of the medium of the thing...” Conversely, writer Patrick Suskind believes that a powerful memory can control our actions, and refers to the olfactory nerve, that is used in the recollection of odours. In Perfume, he writes about the perfume maker, Grenouillle, who had an extraordinary sense of smell, storing thousands of scents in his memory, and on which he drew to create seductive perfumes, “...your memory, where scents are indestructible.”

During the firing of several pieces of my work I gauged the progress of the reduction using my olfactory nerve; calling on my memory from previous firings, to detect the pungent odour of the flames that forced their way through the spy-holes and chimney of the kiln.

*The smells detected when a kiln is reducing may be gases such as hydrogen sulphide (rotten egg gas) or nitrous oxide (laughing gas). These gases are quite pungent and can indicate the presence of carbon monoxide which is in itself odourless, yet potentially lethal.*

It is believed that smell and taste play a major part in our recall, and with just the passing hint of a scent or taste, strong and emotive memories can be evoked. This is known as the 'Proust effect', named after the writer Marcel

46 Ibid
48 Ibid 221
49 A reduction firing does not refer to the reduction in temperature but to the reduction in the air supply and the draft in the kiln by closing air-ports and dampers, which causes the unburned fuel to remain in the kiln. In a reduction firing, if not enough oxygen is present during combustion, some free carbon is liberated, as well as carbon monoxide. At the elevated temperatures in the kiln, such free carbon and carbon monoxide are chemically active and will seize oxygen from any available source, including some of the oxides from the clay. The carbon may be thought of as being hungry for oxygen. Clive Cooper, Ceramics Technician Sydney College of the Arts.
50 Clive Cooper, Ceramics Technician, Sydney College of the Arts (October, 2013)
Proust. Proust describes this connection between our senses and recollection in the following lines:

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\text{But when from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, still, alone, more fragile, but with more vitality, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, the smell and taste of things remain poised a long time, like souls, ready to remind us, waiting and hoping for their moment, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unfaltering, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection.}^{51}
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In her doctoral thesis\(^52\) titled: *Time Does Not Heal All Wounds: A Longitudinal Study of Memory Biases in Social Phobia*, Nicole A. Browne suggests that it is our senses which tell our brain what we should be seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting or feeling, and it is our brain that stimulates our memory. What our stimulatory senses tell us does not always make cerebral sense to us, so we are often forced to call on a combination of memory, learned or habitual behaviour, and imagination to understand and create our memory, and what we perceive to be the reality. Our senses have stimulated a preferred memory and that then becomes our memory of the ‘thing’ that is the trigger for future recollections.

In the case of extreme physical ordeal or trauma, for example the pain of childbirth, the memory of the pain is replaced by the joy of new birth, as the memory of the physical birth process slips to the recesses of the memory. Memories of pain that are experienced by the body, often carry visible scars as memory prompts. The mind forgets or glosses over pain but the body does not, and when the body is faced with similar or familiar pain, it reacts to an ‘old’ memory. In her thesis Nicole A. Browne writes:

\[^{52}\text{Nicole A. Browne, “Time Does Not Heal All Wounds: A Longitudinal Study of Memory Biases in Social Phobia,” (Wollongong, NSW: Nicole A. Browne, 2005 31st-March).}
...the information stored in the memory suffers decay and distortion with time. ...memory is reconstructive. In attempting to recall events from the past, we remember the overall theme and construct the rest. We supply facts, largely unconsciously, to round out our knowledge. We infer from partial information.53

Artist Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010) explores memory in her work to not only recall the past but to also construct and represent the present. Bourgeois exposes the memories of her difficult childhood as a personal history. By combining recognisably found and made objects, she alludes to her memories where common objects and spaces sit asymmetrically, yet juxtaposed to resemble an unregulated subconscious mind – her memories. She made a series of installations titled: Cells, which she commenced in 1989. Bourgeois wrote:

The Cells represent different types of pain: the physical, the emotional and psychological, and the mental and intellectual. Each Cell deals with the pleasure of the voyeur, the thrill of looking and being looked at. The Cells either attract or repulse each other. There is this urge to integrate, merge or disintegrate.54


54 Rainer Crone, Louise Bourgeois The Secret of the Cells (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 2008), 81
Bourgeois’ *Cells* are a series of enclosures from which the viewer is usually excluded physically, but which he or she is invited to penetrate visually. In the image: *Eyes and Mirrors* (1989-93) (Fig. 6) the eyes convey a sense of force, both inviting and repelling the viewer’s gaze. She uses *Cells* as places where she unravels her memories and emotions. In *Contemporary Art and Memory*,

55 Joan Gibbons writes about Bourgeois’ work, “…in its uncanniness it offers a sense of unfamiliarity that appears at the heart of the familiar.”

56 Other Bourgeois sculptures that have had an influence on my work are *Femme Volage* (1951) and *Untitled* (1950) (Fig. 7), where triangles of wood create the semblance of a human figure, the rough-cut wood and asymmetrical stacking creating and allusion to female form.

I have used the unlikely asymmetry in Bourgeois’ sculptures as an influence for the unfamiliarity, yet familiarity that I wish to evoke in my work. By creating familiar objects: stacks of sheets of paper, pages and books albeit in clay, it is my intention that these recognisable objects metaphorically represent our memories. I have used the combination of these objects and soft

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56 Ibid 18
audio to imbue the installation with an ambience where the objects are eerily familiar, yet as they are made from clay and placed in an unusual setting, they are unfamiliar – they are uncanny.

Sigmund Freud believed that “we experience as uncanny those things that are known of old yet unfamiliar”.57 He believed that to be uncanny is that which is not

...what is most frightening and strange, but what is both close to us and strange and distorted enough to draw us in to evoke memory – objects that are naturally evocative because they are familiar and recognisable.58


58 Ibid. 58
Chapter 4

Clay, the link in the chain

Authentic experience becomes both elusive and allusive as it is placed beyond the horizon of present lived experience, the beyond in which the antique, the pastoral, the exotic, the other fictive domains are articulated.59

While the stories we relate as narratives are a personal choice, so too are the revelations of memories, and an artist's work is their revelation. An ideal, an emotion, a belief, an experience and of course a memory can all be revealed in an artwork, and artists use their art as a conduit for the exposure of their inner selves. As an artist, I have chosen to expose the emotion I experienced when I read my grandmother's diary for the first time, and the subsequent changes in my memory of her that were evoked by her words.

As I discovered from reading my grandmother's diary, and as I have stated previously, memory can be a paradox. I also regard clay as a paradox. Clay can be manipulated to become an allusion to whatever the artist chooses, and can be fashioned to recreate a representation of almost any object. As a natural substance, clay is a medium that can create a presence in any setting, and has the capacity to project a personality of its own. As clay has its origins in the earth and is derived from a living substance; its properties and inherent chemical bodies imbue it with elements that enable it to react to the way it is handled – it has its own memory: a kind of isomorphism that makes up its innate chemical structure. Our bodies also hold inherent memories carried as hidden and superficial scars, spots, wrinkles and internal illnesses, souvenired from previous sickness or mishaps. Similarly, clay carries the scars of its composition and handling. After firing, the many processes that have contributed to the finished object are imbedded in the clay as scars: as memories.

59 Susan Stewart, On Longing: Narratives of the miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection (Baltimore: Duke University Press, 1993). 1717-172
During the course of my Masters’ candidature, and in conjunction with my research into memory, I have used clay exclusively as a sculptural medium. As a result, I have been exhibiting a wide range of chain-based works that I have made from clay as installations in various public exhibitions in New South Wales. Each installation was site specific; and every chain was extruded and interlinked. They were then glazed and fired, and built ‘in situ’ to form an individual configuration and ambiance in each setting – a cemetery, a vineyard and a Jurassic rain forest. In each installation, I attempted to imbue a sense of the uncanny by placing the chains as objects that in their symbolism and familiarity, appeared strong and oppressive; but as they were made from ceramic they were, in reality, fragile and easily broken. Symbolically, each link and chain represented individual and personal connections – a parable of the plethora of associations and relationships that we make throughout our lives; many of which endure, and others that may go or move to the recesses of our memories.

The first of these works: *Passage* (2012) (Fig. 8), was situated in the outdoor sculpture exhibition: *Hidden*\(^6\), at Rookwood Cemetery in 2012. The installation consisted of an entanglement of chains that appeared to have forced their way from under the decaying door of a weather shelter, located among the historical graves and headstones in Sydney’s oldest cemetery. The disgorging chains were made in an array of link sizes.

\(^6\) *Hidden* is an annual outdoor exhibition held at Rookwood Cemetery, Sydney, NSW, in September/October.
lengths and clay bodies; glazed with a range of oxides, and fired under reduction in a gas kiln, which resulted in the appearance and sound that was characteristically metal. My intention was to imbue an allusive credibility of industrial strength and purpose and to create a feeling of the uncanny, evoking an eerie spirituality in the spiritual setting of the cemetery. By installing the chains as a cascading mass, as if forcing their exit from the shed, I intended the installation would represent the intermingling relationships that we form in our lives; while highlighting the power and alliance that our lives as the living, hold in union with the lives of the dead – those who we have known and loved, but who no longer have a physical presence with us on earth. As spirits, the chains streamed from under the door, forging their way back into our lives, embodying the passage of time. They crept across the ground, interacting with the physical and spiritual environments, beckoning the viewer to take the strength of life into death, while offering the peace that is promised in death to those who are left behind.61

For a group exhibition: Sculpture in the Vineyards62, I piled what could be perceived as a conglomeration of old and rusted chains on a tree stump as a site-specific installation – Left behind (2012) (Figs. 9 & 10) These chains formed a mass that spilled over the surface of the stump to escape as unruly renegades falling from the load. Chains were also positioned to extend along a post-and-rail fence in the vineyard and arranged to appear as having been casually left on the old fence, as if of no further use: carelessly

Fig. 9 Penny Philpott, Left behind, Sculpture in the Vineyards (2012).

61 Freud refers to the uncanny as the effect that often arises when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred. For more see: Sigmund Freud, The Uncanny, trans. David McINTock (Penguin Modern Classics, 2003).

62 Sculpture in the Vineyards, an annual exhibition, was held in Wollombi, in the Hunter Valley, NSW in November 2012.
abandoned by the early inhabitants. By placing the loose and individual chains along the fence I sought to create a sense of transience that would evoke a spiritual connection with the first settlers.

Again for this installation, the chains were made from a variety of clay bodies, and glazed with a series of carbonates and oxides, including copper, iron, chromium, nickel, cobalt, titanium and tin, which I used in order to obtain the metallic colouration commonly associated with chains. My intention with both of these works was to evoke a feeling of the spirits of the settlers who it is believed still laze in the historical vineyards.

In an alternative version of *Left Behind* (2013) (Fig. 11), that was installed in *Sculpture at Scenic World*, the chains were piled and arranged on a large moss covered boulder, and spread across an approximate four square metre area, to mingle with the natural ground cover and undergrowth of the ancient Jurassic landscape. My intention with *Left behind* located in this pristine environment, was to recreate an industrial object from clay – a material that

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63 The range of clay bodies was vast and included porcelain, stoneware, earthenware and a conglomerate of recycled clay bodies. Some of the clay contained a percentage of grog in order to achieve the texture of old, rusted metal, while other clay bodies, such as the porcelain, were used to achieve the smoother appearance of a newer chain.

64 *Sculpture at Scenic World* is held annually in the rain forest of Scenic World in the Blue Mountains of NSW. In 2013 it was held in May.
draws its origins from the earth – and return it to the earth, the forest floor. This work, which was located at the base of the cableway that carries visitors into the valley at Scenic World, could only have been created on site, much like the cableway itself that was transported piece by piece into the valley for construction. *Left behind* was laid down as individual chains to blend with the leaf litter and moss covered rocks in the ancient landscape. The chains appeared to have been carelessly left behind by the builders of the cableway, and embodied a strong connection to the environment and the industry that developed the valley as a tourist destination.

In all three outdoor installations, my ceramic chains represented the spirit, strength and endurance of humans in nature. They embodied our connections to the past, and represented the industry of the people who had first settled the land, striking an uncanny,65 and metaphorical link to our forebears. Royle writes: “the uncanny can also be a matter of something strangely beautiful, or eerily reminding us of something.”66 In each of these installations, the chains laid dormant and still, as an entangled mass that fused separate memories to

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65 I have used the word uncanny in this context to refer to the unexpected medium of clay from which I made the chains. After being glazed and fired the chains represented an unlikely and unexpectedly accurate resemblance to metal.

interact, and recreate the combined memories of a significant event or person. Or they represented memories that were loose and individual, retained as a single memory. By installing my chains in silent environments that no longer bustled with industry and activity, they were imbued with the spirit of the former productivity and atmosphere in each location, enticing future generations to discover and create their own narratives from the hidden messages contained within the chains.

My ceramic chains also represent the diversity of chains used in the industrial world. I hold an admiration for the strength and power that is evoked by industry and I enjoy creating work that allows me to embody this mood. Chains suggest a palpable and intrinsic strength, and provide me with seemingly endless creative potential. They offer an opportunity to express my thoughts and arrange and exhibit them as an offering with a substantial physical exposure as identifiable, yet allusive objects.

Charles Dickens describes the chain in the following lines as an exemplified in my work:

\[
\text{Pause you who read this, and think for a moment of the long chain of iron or gold, or thorns or flowers, that would never have bound you, but for the formation of the first link on one memorial day.}^{67}
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Regardless of whether chains may be made from thorns, flowers, metal or even ceramic, to me they stand as a symbol of strength and form a multiplicity of connections, as their very nature is an endless succession of links. But even chains have an end point, and a connective mechanism that adds to their strength. In my work I have introduced padlocks\(^{68}\) made from clay to secure many of the chains that bind the stacks of paper. Once a padlock has been snapped shut it is secure, and ensures safety to its ‘charge’. If it is left open it offers an invitation for the contents of its ‘charge’ to be explored and examined. A padlock basically serves only one purpose – to ensure security.

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68 The *Macquarie Dictionary* describes a padlock “as a portable or detachable lock constructed with a mechanism that has a U-shaped bar, to be passed through the staple of a hasp or a link in a chain.”
For me, a padlock not only symbolises safety and security, it also symbolises power, as it only allows access to the holder of the key or code. It creates an ideal metaphor for the locking and unlocking of personal memories. In my work some of my padlocks are locked; others are unlocked, and along with the chains, some padlocks have been carelessly discarded among the torn papers that represent unwanted memories and are strewn on the floor. The closed padlocks symbolise memories that are shut away, are untapped and yet to be possibly resurrected and recognised. They also symbolise a threat and oppression in the finality of the locking. I also use the secured padlock as a metaphor for our memories of moments of depression and memories that we do not wish to resurrect. But along with their security, padlocks offer the notion of safety; and with safety, they offer comfort. I use the open padlock as a metaphor for the openness and reassurance we find when we recall happy memories.

However, padlocks can represent different things to different people. Although often regarded by municipal authorities as litter; at tourist sites in towns and cities throughout the world, visitors have secured padlocks to fences, leaving their memories behind them, linking onto other padlocks that symbolise memories that have already been locked to the fence. While they are commonly referred to as 'love locks' and are left as a public fixture to symbolise the love between two people, to me, each padlock reflects the person’s or couple’s desire to be remembered, and to leave their ‘mark’.

These clusters of padlocks represent the individuality of each person or couple who visited, and their stories and memories, albeit in combination with
every individual’s memories and stories of the particular place. While visiting the Hungarian town of Pecs in 2010, I took a photograph of a huge mass of padlocks that had been locked to a fence, which is located in its town square. I imagined that as the padlocks were locked to each other and as the volume grew, they were connecting the thousands of visitors who wished to leave a part of themselves and their memories in Pecs. For me, by connecting and interlocking their padlocks, the visitors were also offering a token to the town of Pecs: a memory that was left as a tangible object, a memento from each individual traveller.

I believe that if clay is prepared with care, it is accommodating. If it is treated carelessly, it may not return the desired result. Clay demands respect. Like our memories, clay can be manipulated to express our mood and articulate our narrative. And like our memories, clay can match our creativity with a result that can be both sensuous and open to delicious exaggeration and exploration.

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69 In my practice, I have proven many times that if my attitude and approach to a work was not ‘fair dinkum’, when the kiln was unpacked, the result that I was anticipating did not take place. ‘Fair dinkum’ is an Australian slang expression meaning fair and true. When working with clay I associate a fair dinkum attitude to having the appropriate enthusiasm and plan for a work, along with faithful and adequate preparation, construction and firing of the clay body.
Chapter 5

A shadow of herself, inspirations

...it is in the very limitations of shadows that we learn. It is in the gap between the object and its representation that the image emerges, the gap we fill in.\(^{70}\)

To illustrate my research and the relationships that external influences have on our recall, my body of work is based on the illusion, the trick of memory. An illusion results when through conditioning and experience our visual sense relays to our brain that what we are seeing is familiar. But what we are actually seeing is a metaphorical shadow of reality – a shadow that serves to change our perception of the object and in turn, our memory.

As stated previously, for me, clay was an obvious choice of materials for my body of work: A shadow of herself (Figs 13 14 & 17). Clay is significant because it can be used as a deception. It also carries an entity of its own, and each clay body has its own characteristics. When used to create an artwork, clay has the power to arouse an emotion, and to create a mood through its contours, colours and structure. It can be formed to include any amount of detail and texture, or any characteristic the artist requires.

Apart from my grandmother’s old wooden and metal chests, I have primarily used clay to represent memories in my work. The ripped pages form a ceramic carpet for the stacks of paper-like pages that are placed in random piles and at varying heights. Many of the ceramic books are open to display the reproduction of the sepia-colored, hand written, pen and ink cursive text that my grandmother wrote in her diary. This beautiful text is printed on what appears to be the surface of the sheets of paper, as if embedding her presence within my work. Some of the stacks of paper are bound in chains and padlocked, as memories that remain untouched and secure; while some stacks have their chains broken or unlocked and the papers appear to have been searched through, and discarded as memories that have been forgotten. Lengths of ceramic chain connect and link the stacks of paper. They intermingle with the books that fall randomly from the chests that once held my grandparents’ possessions. Adding a gentle underlay of sound, the soft voice of a young female, reminiscent of my grandmother as a young woman, recites the words from her diary. I have used the voice of a young female to recreate these words with the intention of beckoning the viewer to visibly wander among the work and engage with the narrative contained within the memories on the paper.

When undertaking my research for this body of work, I found the installations of sculptor and ceramic artist, Emily Joy to be a major influence. Joy’s work examines loss, absence and trace, through her investigations into childhood memories. Through her work Joy suggests symbolic objects such as
photographs, the written word and objects, to represent an interaction with the memory of a significant person or place. She creates these icons as a personal vision of her experience through transience and loss, which she believes is inherent in the act of remembering. Joy’s work is rooted in Derrida’s theory of trace, where the uncertainties of visual signifiers act as symbols for memory.

*...exterior materiality is not molded to the demands of either pre-given objective reality or already constituted meaning; it resists and imposes its own constraints on the production of meaning.*

Joy’s work and her reference to the illusion has been an influence on my work where I similarly investigate the way our memories can be recalled through the allusion of a visual recollection, in this instance, the written word is printed on my pages and books.

I have also investigated the work of sculptor, Cyrus Tang. Although Tang works in a number of mediums, it is her ceramic work that for me reflects the nostalgia of memory. Many of Tang’s works reveal the paradox that clay can present as a representation of an object. When using clay, she constructs imagery that is made from distorted childhood memories and fantasies of her homeland (Hong Kong). Tang says: “My art practice reflects my examination of the paradox of reconstructing ephemeral mental images and sensations in

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Tang’s work has also inspired my work through the uncanniness she has instilled in her ceramic objects such as books and paper, and by creating recognisable objects that she employs to represent the nostalgia of memories.

As illustrated in the allusion to objects that are represented in both Joy’s and Tang’s works, our mind often registers things that we believe we see; when in reality, we have been deceived. Our emotions and imagination influence us to see what is familiar – what we want to see. The list of deceptions that our mind plays on our senses is interminable. In my work the viewer is able to witness the embodiment of familiar objects combined with the drama of a natural shadow cast by the stacks of paper, books and the chests. These shadows stand as a metaphor for my memories of my grandmother, that is, a suggestion, or allusion to my memories.

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Fig. 16 Cyrus Tang, Frozen Moment, book, porcelain paper clay, 35 x 25 x 20cm (2003)

Fig. 17 Penny Philpott A shadow of herself (detail) (2013)
South African artist William Kentridge whose work, “both in its thematic preoccupations and its very material existence, stands firmly on the side of the production of memory”\(^{73}\), is a master of the allusion. His animated film: *Shadow Procession* (1999) (Fig. 18), depicts a parade of silhouette puppets seen in profile, marching across the screen. This film, in its shadow imagery has had an influence my work primarily in the way Kentridge captures the allusion. Kentridge based this work on Plato's allegory of the *Cave*\(^{74}\), which tells the story of prisoners who were shackled and unable to move, although they could see shadows along the wall projected through a fire. One prisoner sets himself free and climbs into the light to realise that the shadows were just

![William Kentridge from Shadow Procession (1999)](image)

that – shadows. Kentridge uses this allegory to argue that art elevates the image above the truth, using his shadow figures to inspire the viewer to use their life experience, memory and/or imagination to create the image, or, the illusion. He believes that art is an exercise in “finding the mediated space between ‘it is’ and ‘it seems to be’”.\(^ {75}\) It is my intention that the viewer find the mediated space between ‘it is’ and ‘it seems to be’ in *A shadow of herself.*

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\(^{75}\) Ibid
Conclusion

Most people think that shadows follow, precede or surround beings or objects. The truth is that they also surround words, ideas, desires, deeds, impulses and memories.76

In my body of work A shadow of herself, I have sought to embody how the discovery of my grandmother’s diary acted as a catalyst for my examination of my complex memories of her, which were evoked when I read the diary that she wrote during her short five and a half year marriage to my grandfather.

Having a surprisingly sentimental reaction to the uncanny coincidence of the interval of exactly a century between my grandmother’s marriage that she recorded in her diary, and my writing about my memory changes, I have searched for ways in which I can suitably represent my feelings in my work and incorporate the overwhelming feeling of the uncanny. Nicholas Royle states in The Uncanny, “A feeling of uncanniness may come from curious coincidences, a sudden sense that things seem to be fated or ‘meant to happen’.”77 Is it possible that my grandmother’s shadow, her spirit, uncannily made her words available to me? Perhaps. I will never know. Regardless of the driving force behind my body of work and research into the changes that can occur in our memories, I have sought to resolve my work with paper and books made from clay, overlaid with the cursive handwriting of my grandmother. I have sought to make my installation appear as a metaphorical pretext to represent untouched, shattered and changed memories. I have endeavored to enhance the uncanny by underlying the work with the ghostly spoken words that were written in the diary. Royle writes:

…the uncanny is intimately entwined in language, with how we conceive and represent what is happening within ourselves, to

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77 Nicholas Royle, The uncanny (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003). 1
ourselves, to the worked, when uncanny strangeness is an issue.\textsuperscript{78}

My paper probes the way our memories can be altered. It investigates changes that can take place when our memory creates images that when recalled, may be incongruent to the reality, yet become imbedded as our believable memories. I use this topic to address memory on a personal basis, and the realisation of my changed memories of my grandmother that prompted me to question whether my memories stem from the gloss of childhood, or have I simply forgotten her as a person. Has the discovery and romance I exposed when I read her diary manipulated my memory? Or has it proven that our self-identity is fluid; has my grandmother's diary shown me that my own sense of self has shifted by knowing a little more about her?

To endeavour to answer these questions, I have researched the changes that can arise when a recalled memory is influenced by outside sources. I have examined memory as a personal identity; the way in which it can be embroidered or underplayed depending on its audience, and the fruition of a memory, that then becomes our narrative; and in turn, becomes our memory. I have also investigated the prompts that stimulate our memories.

During the course of my Master's candidature I explored a range of readings that would be relevant and significant to my research; and I searched inwardly for a suitable representation of what the changes that took place in my memories of my grandmother symbolise to me. As stated previously, I settled on stacks of paper pages and books all made from clay, several of which spill from chests that had held my grandparents' possessions. Some of the stacks of paper are bound by chain and padlocked; others appear to have been opened and are dishevelled with their torn paper strewn across the gallery floor to represent discarded and shattered memories. Chains weave through the installation, connecting my metaphorical memories and reinforcing the strength and connectivity of our personal relationships. The lengths of chains are made in clay and serve to bind the paper or wind across the gallery floor like data cable, in a connecting link. My intention is to symbolise the link between our memories and the strength of our family ties;

\textsuperscript{78} Nicholas Royle, \textit{The uncanny} (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003). 2
while at the same time, represent the fragility of our relationships through the tenuous and fragile nature of clay.

In my work I have made familiar objects to which the viewer can relate – paper, books, chains, padlocks. As they are made from clay, they are only an allusion, and like our memories, these objects do not have a practical function. To me, these icons of common objects represent the plethora of memories that we accumulate in our lifetime; but specifically in this work, my memories of my grandmother. I have attempted to make an evocative image of the connective chains and ‘parcels’ of paper to create what I believe is a powerful allusion to the bond and renewing strength of my memories.

While *A shadow of herself* depicts a shadow of my memories of my grandmother, the elements of the installation do not literally cast a recognisable shadow either individually or in combination: they create a symbolic shadow. As tactile objects, they create an allusion to memories. But unlike the chains I have used in many of my previous installations that appear to lie dormant, my memories are not; and like any shadow that can alter and shift with external influences such as light and movement, my memories have altered and shifted, albeit with the words of my grandmother’s diary. My memories have been changed to create new shadows, and new images of my grandmother.

*The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) which we do not suspect.*

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Bibliography


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Appendix

No. 1 Page 9
Got married on the 4th December (1913). Spent 3 days at Watson’s Bay and then went by the “Indarra”, lovely boat, to Melbourne for 10 days. Had THE time of our lives (always have a honeymoon). Left Monday 19th Dec. for Yanco. Very dusty during journey, spent night in Junee, arrived in Yanco on Tuesday, country is lovely though very dry. Every shade of brown in the wheat shuttle, took the coach to the accommodation house and Harry rode the bike up. I am in love with the place, strikes me as very fascinating. We had the choice of 3 farms 557, 558 and 559 and also 560. But after consideration Harry decided that 558 was the best and most suitable for a poultry farm. We arrived out at 558 on Thursday 22nd December bag and baggage. Rigged up tent. Harry built a little crib for us out of iron and fixed tent for storing our things made things very comfortable and nice. ...spent 3 months in the camp while Harry built our first home. What a tremendous pleasure we had in planning and building it. Harry designed and built it, 4 rooms and hall with bay windows and verandahs all around and bathroom and laundry at the back. Was such a dear cozy nest.⁸⁰

No 2 page 9
I didn’t see or speak to a woman for first 6 months, but we were blissfully happy, desired no other company... we planted 5 acres of Lucerne and 3 fruit trees and put rest in wheat. Harry built one large fowl house and started 20 pens for the fowls. Had bad luck with fowls, had a very hot journey... more were delayed. Arrived with cholera and 50 Plymouth Rocks dead. We dosed every one separately with a pill, every day. Had 48, lost all but 20. We then got ducks, 10, which all strayed in the night. Got a trio of turkeys, which got black head and died. Was great drought, and wheat crop a failure, so lost it. Lucerne got a bad start.⁸¹

No 3 page 11
...had an auction sale and sold all fowls, implements, furniture... felt terribly upset it was a great wrench for us to part with our first home and the farm for which we had such great hope ...were very miserable and disappointed. We couldn’t help thinking of our little darling up in Leeton, how we would have loved him to be there and our last Xmas with him at Yanco ...we were worse off than when we started.

"February 1918 Harry built another beautiful bungalow home for me. We are perfectly happy and did enjoy and appreciate our own home, there is nothing like it.

"Pneumonic Influenza, very bad all over the world. Do hope daddie doesn't get it. He is very off. Thank God Peggy is strong and well and getting a big girl. ...Harry caught Spanish Flu on 25th March, he put in a terrible week, but had to go down to it on Sunday if only he had at once it may have saved his life... Poor

⁸⁰ Suzannah Helen Stewart, Nungy’s Diary, 1920.
⁸¹ Ibid
old boy he was dreadful, by Friday he was very septic and was having a bad time. Continued to feel bad for 2 weeks and then collapsed on 12th April and was terribly bad. Collapsed every day for a week and then never regained consciousness, lived a most agonizing terrible 3 weeks after, when he passed away on the 1st May 1919 after 5 weeks most terrible suffering for him.

“I didn’t think of the time I put in then, it is a perfect nightmare! And too dreadful to live again even to write... Lord alone knows how I went through it, being in a delicate condition but he was my strength... I couldn’t live without him and it was too dreadful to even think of, it is terribly hard, it seems to us that daddie is better, for he suffered so much in his life ...the best truest and most loving and considerate husband and daddie any woman and child ever had.

“Baby was born October 7th ... Elizabeth Joyce (Joy) our little Joy who Daddie was so very very anxious about and to see, ...oh my dear, dear husband I miss you more each month and need you more each month. God help me to keep a stiff upper lip and a living for my children, and a dear little home for my girlies how I do love you both my darlings daddy’s and my treasures.”

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82 Suzannah Helen Stewart, Nungy’s Diary, 1920.
A shadow of herself (2013) ceramic, dimensions variable.
A shadow of herself (2013) ceramic, dimensions variable.
A shadow of herself (2013) ceramic, dimensions variable.
A shadow of herself (2013) ceramic, dimensions variable.
A shadow of herself detail (2013) ceramic, 150 x 300 x 450.
A shadow of herself (2013) ceramic, dimensions variable.
A shadow of herself (2013) ceramic, dimensions variable.
A shadow of herself (2013) ceramic, dimensions variable.
Penny Philpott

Master of Fine Arts

A shadow of herself –
a journey into memory

December 2013
A shadow of herself (2013) ceramic & antique chests, dimensions variable.
A shadow of herself (2013) ceramic & antique chests, dimensions variable.
A shadow of herself (2013) ceramic & antique chests, dimensions variable.
A shadow of herself (2013) ceramic & antique chests, dimensions variable.
A shadow of herself detail (2013) ceramic, 150 x 300 x 450.
A shadow of herself detail (2013) ceramic & antique chest, dimensions variable.
A shadow of herself detail (2013) ceramic, dimensions variable.
A shadow of herself detail (2013) ceramic & antique chest, dimensions variable.
A shadow of herself detail (2013) ceramic, dimensions variable.