

When memory dissolves

Memory traces explored through self-portraiture

In the digital age, memories are captured at the click of a button, preserved and accessible at any time. No longer do I need to solely depend on my memory as technology allows me to flip through photos or virtually walk through streets on Google Maps to revisit the past. However, it is not entirely a replication of what was, but merely a trace. Nothing can adequately recreate the details or the sensory experience of a moment. Time and distance can slowly erode memories especially the details I never thought were significant. Wanting to remember my grandmother's wrinkled hands as she prepared food or the floral print on my childhood blanket are finer details that I didn't expect to escape me. It never occurred to me that it would make a difference, but it does. Memory anchors us to the past to contextualise our existence regardless in which format it appears.

In *Vestige*, Jacques van der Merwe explores the memory traces of his life in a series of self-portrait sculptures. As a migrant to Australia, he experiences the tension between remembering and forgetting of a life he once had in South Africa. When mobilised, not all memories translate with great detail and can eventually become hazy, while other moments retain absolute clarity. He creates sculptures from an in-between space where clarity and dispersion of memory constantly pull at each other.

Van der Merwe's sculptures represent how the artist sees his own body as a keeper of memory. Instead of attempting to recreate specific memories of the past he rather looks back at himself to witness his private struggle. I consider the process of creating and re-creating images of himself a means to uncover and preserve memories. However, despite each attempt, the memories are frustratingly fragmented. The faces of the sculptures are suggestive of a death mask, a historical tradition of making a cast or impression of a corpse. With closed eyes and slightly parted lips, it is a fitting connotation to capture the fade and demise of memory. Unlike the smooth finish of a death mask, the sculptures have a rough texture with gaping holes that expose bandages, cotton wool, and wax. It is achieved by packing cottonwool, bandages and plaster into a mould made from a clay self-portrait. This re-enforces that the artist views himself as a composition of imperfect memories.

The sculpting materials imply a need to heal and preserve precious moments despite the challenges. Plaster, bandages, cotton wool, and wax are materials used in the medical field. In a key work, *Selfportret/Self-portrait (Return)* 2019, the bust is enclosed in a glass tank that slowly fills with water until the sculpture is fully immersed. Once filled, the water slowly drains away again and the cycle repeats. With each cycle, plaster residue gradually turns the water murky leaving traces on the glass. Water is a life force and used as a material references the revival of memory. In contrast, the submerged head with slightly parted lips and swaying pieces of cotton wool unsettles

me. I am haunted by an image of a person drowning and desperately gasping for air. The water refraction also causes the sculpture to appear larger than reality and reflect a mirror image of the face looking in on itself. Collectively the materials applied in this body of work emphasises the artist's perseverance to heal and preserve every morsel of memory.

In each re-assembly of himself, Van der Merwe faces what is slowly slipping away. There may be moments where connections mend but regrettably, some memories remain faint and fragmented. Images of the past are mere traces and imitations of a moment. Paging through photos or virtually walking through the streets of my childhood does not always fill in the gaps. Recollection is especially challenging if the memories pre-date the digital era. I find that these types of memories are often best recalled with my eyes tightly shut while I search for mental images. Van der Merwe's portraits also take on this pose as he seeks to reach his memories. In his multiple efforts to portray his fascination and frustration with the vestiges of memory, a compelling collection of sculptures were born in the studio.

Words by Annelize Mulder