

## **Remembering**

By Aram Moshayedi

*This story is already over. A few seconds more and it will finally be frozen forever, a past in marble like the garden carved in stone . . . this mansion, its rooms now deserted.*

Last Year at Marienbad (1961)

If memory has a structure, it is that of the proscenium—its arch delineates between stage and spectator, maintaining an arena for representation, a space filled of potential. It is scripted by a narrator who brings characters and objects to life within its void. Think of Alain Resnais' film *Last Year at Marienbad*, the film that takes on the task of creating a visual language for recollection. In it, a man tries to remind a woman of their love affair a year prior. The mansion in which the film is set correlates with the theme, its landscape is symmetrical and vacant; it is in a French style, "rectilinear, formal, devoid of mystery." Characters inhabit the landscape as objects, their bodies frozen in time, only to be animated by an approaching camera. Bodies are sculptural, motionless on a theatrical stage. Then the panning camera reaches its desired vantage point, and then like strings pulling on marionettes, like fragments surfacing through memory, those bodies become mobile and discursive.

Remembering is the first in a series of three exhibitions to take place in the Sweeney Art Gallery, located on the campus of the University of California, Riverside. Curator Charles Gaines brings together 12 artists for the gallery's series, which will attempt to engage the audience of the Inland Empire with Los Angeles. Remembering, which was on view from October 1 to December 11, is the first of many conversations between Southern California's urban center and the suburbs of its periphery. It is, in some senses, a reversal of the flooding which plagues interstates 10, 60, and 91 during the early morning commuter traffic, pouring into Los Angeles each day.

In Remembering what we come to realize is that the visual language of memory is a stage for a potential performance. The representation of memory within the symbolic order attempts to congeal the absence by which the past/transmutable object or event is defined.

It is no mere coincidence that Gary Simmons' *Ballroom 1* (2003) and Adia

Millet's *Records of Self-Perception* (2002) are installed in close proximity to one another. Perception of space is confounded as the viewer makes the shift from Millet's miniature maquettes to Simmons' large format lightjet print. In both cases, the viewer encounters a scene of inaction, an empty room in which the elaborate patterning and candelabra dominate. Both baroque and docile, these are the vacant spaces in which the fragmentation of memory reaches its rupture; in both cases, the hyperactive decoration develops into banality and familiarity.

In a similar work by Kira Lynn Harris, interior space takes on a performative role of its own. The use of image and text in *From Inglewood to Harlem* (2003) is threefold: to retrace Harris' move from West to East, to recount her relationship with Charles Gaines, and to record the dynamism of a room devoid of subjectivities. The text retraces her introduction to Charles Gaines as well as to her new apartment in Harlem, while the images avoid documentary illustration. The unrefined copies of Polaroid photographs, instead, document Harris' apartment as it responds to the light entering through the east and south facing windows and treatments. Each photograph carries exact composition as light and shadow move across the still frame-inhabiting space and providing character. Like the uninhabited interior environments of Simmons and Millet, Harris extracts narrative from a setting's illusory inactivity.

Within the exhibition the thread of the vacant stage carries over into exterior landscapes as well. Apparent in works by Terry Chalkup, Connie Samaras, and Glenn Ligon, it is perhaps most notable in Chalkup's *Recollections* (2004). A video loop with accompanying sound, *Recollections* attempts to restrain the memories of some desolate mid-western location, while a flooding whiteness tends to saturate and degrade each banal landscape. Unavoidably similar images are consumed by a homogenizing whiteness, which mirrors the process of forgetting.

As a whole, what is perhaps most successful within *Remembering* is an avoidance of didactic reconstruction. Even in works such as Matthew Buckingham's *The Truth About Abraham Lincoln* (1992), a lesson in history is an unsettling sour one. Buckingham filters through the fact and fiction of historical narrative. Voice-over recounts the life of Abraham Lincoln in a series of true and false statements, while artificial sets filmed in 16mm dramatize this relationship between image and sound. History and memory are nothing other than narrative fabrications that, even when consciously engaged, can be nothing other than inherently false.

Dee Williams' *Untitled (Daguerreotype Project)* (2000) is a beautifully succinct piece that attends to history's role in the shifting of thought and meaning. In the piece, photocopied pages from medical journals—containing the same image—are accompanied by a text that reveals the discrepancies which emerge from each publication's rendering of the event. Taking the captions, which surround an image at their highest value, an image of 19th

century medicine performing for the camera is extracted from various publications to reveal the multiple meanings that an image—like a memory—carries. Assuming a seemingly passive role in the construction of the image's false objectivity, it remains unclear which publication is most accurate, if accurate at all. The image shifts among its contexts as it is described by the publications as etherisation, public operation performed with the aid of etherisation, reenactment, actual surgical operation, early operation using ether, third operation using anesthesia, surgical patient under ether, et al. Williams posits each publication of the image against its captions, noting the object's name, its identification, its date, its location, the individuals identified, the photographer, and the collection to which it belongs.

The stretch of University Avenue between the 91 freeway and UCR is, perhaps, the abandoned landscape of memory. Or, better yet, is it of forgetting? It is fragmented, sparse, and illusory. Passing the abandoned car wash at University and Kansas, or any of the other countless empty storefront windows, listless histories emerge. The space that these structures inhabit is destructive, but there are no signs of the wears, no clear communication of time. The glass which divides the empty parking lots from the vacant interiors of store fronts—that are probably still open for business—is also that of the proscenium arch; each window looks onto a vacant stage from which countless narratives emerge, all of them failing in their portrayal of what actually happened at some date, at some time. This must have been what attracted curator Charles Gaines to the task of Remembering.