

MEMORY-SCAPES: STATIONS OF THE MIND

by

Justin W. Dahl

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Thesis Advisor: Dr. Halide Salam

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_____ Dr. Halide Salam Thesis Advisor	_____ Date
_____ Dr. Steve Arbury Committee Member	_____ Date
_____ Zheng L. Feng Committee Member	_____ Date

ABSTRACT

There are images related to the memories of our lives that often seem concrete in our minds. However, when asked to conjure up an image, it appears to be abstracted to such a degree that it looks nothing like the image that we remember. It does, however, carry the mood of the memory. There are many facets to our memory. My memories deal with the facet of event-specific knowledge. These memories deal with the remembrance a particular specific event. I address the following questions: why are these memories important? How are they recalled? To what extent can they be recalled? And how do they change as I mature?

Justin W. Dahl

Department of Art, 2011

Radford University

DEDICATION

Throughout my life, there have been many people who have pushed me to strive for a higher learning. I often recall in hard times the words of my father, “just do it,” or “quit feeling sorry for yourself.” When I was a child, I would get very irritated and upset with him. I think back on those days and wish that I knew then what I know now. It is simple words such as those that have always gotten me through the hard times. We all go through times in our lives when we feel like things can’t get any worse and then we find that this is precisely when they do. It is at this time that I think back to these words and realize whatever it is that I’m going through is not as big of a deal as I believe it to be. It is a note that I received inside of a birthday card when my life seemed to be falling apart that I remember the most. It says, “Hard work doesn’t always pay off quickly. Have patience and the world will be yours.”

When others have shared their experiences with me, it has always helped me to get through tough times. As I grow older, I am thankful to be able to share the experiences of my trials and tribulations with others because it is these experiences that help me with all future endeavors.

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Both Lin Xia Jiang and Constance Payne were my painting professors in my tenure at SUNY College at Buffalo. Through their extensive training in the classical fine arts medium of painting, I was given an advantage when conveying my ideas and concepts as a graduate student artist.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO “MEMORY-SCAPES”

In our lives, we all take different paths. Some of us make conscious choices and try to be a more “guaranteed” kind of person, others allow life to take its course and place less importance on who we become and more on who we are. Some of us are forced to question why we exist in the first place; this question is often more appreciated as children before we reach the age of adolescence. Often, we become enveloped in ourselves more often forgetting to ask why.

As a child I was often told not to overthink things. I remember instances where I wondered: Why do things happen? Or why do I exist? As we acquire more experiences, both good and bad, there is a trend to more often answer to our own subconscious when making future decisions. There is a sort of angst associated with the thought of continually asking ourselves why we exist, why we choose the life we choose, or why we continue on the path we have chosen for ourselves. In the end, the life we lead, the path we take, and the choices we make shape the memories we remember most.

At times, I will recall vivid memories. These memories are usually of a life-changing experience or a moment where a lesson was learned and can be triggered by a smell in the air, a certain temperature, the feeling of the sun, or even the touch of a surface. It is not a specific memory that I can recall so much as a particular time in my life, or a simple feeling that I can relate to, a moment where I reached a goal or was conquered by an event. When I try to recall my memories; more often than not I cannot summon a clear image of them. When an important thought arises, I begin to imagine

what it looks like. Often I see my surroundings: buildings, the earth, fields near my house where I grew up, the view of the neighborhood from the roof, the woods where I would go play, etc. Location is a significant aspect within each memory. As I continued into my adulthood years the images changed and adapted to my situations. Time and the quantity of memories within the mind act as a filter to continually abstract the originally memory. In my early adult years, events seem to carry more weight, their importance increases; they range from my deepest secrets to my highest achievements. As I paint the memory of a particular event, the image is not the main importance. Rather it is the impact of that memory translated into a particular mood. It is this mood that dictates the application of paint by guiding my hand in the same way that music changes a person's mood. When the memory contains thoughts of angst or fear a motion is related to the feeling. The hand is moved, varying in speed and pressure. Each painting is a memory of an episode in time.

Memory is often a player in the work of artists, but why are these memories important? How do we recall them? To what extent can we recall them and how do they change as we mature?

My search for answers to these questions began as I was working on a series of paintings where I chose the memories from my life that I seemed to recall most often. When deciphering the mood of these images I began to draw images of what the memory looked like to me (fig. 1).

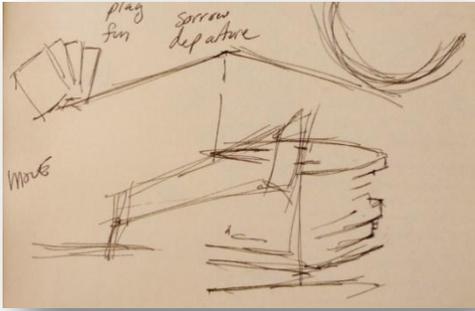


Figure 1. Justin W. Dahl, *Untitled*, 2011. Pencil on paper, 4" x 7"

Along with the drawings, I used word association to solidify the quality of the air, the color of the sky, the type of lighting, the smells, tastes, temperature, etc. After beginning several of these works,

I noticed that all of them were from a very specific time in my life. This point in my life was a period when I went through great changes, distress, anxiety, and grief. It was also a time when I learned more about life than I have in all of the rest of my life combined. It was at this time that I found, through research, that little experimentation has been done on the reason why primary memories fall into a particular time of one's life. Therefore, I decided to create an experiment that could give me some answers. The basis of this experiment is to use a list of generic words (see Appendix A) to see what memory comes first to the subject's mind. Each participant in this survey was given a fair opportunity to receive a debriefing of the survey's purpose.

My memories first fit into the category of autobiographical memory, or a memory system that consists of episodes recollected from an individual's life. This includes personal experiences, specific objects, people, and events experienced at a particular time and place.¹ Many artists have focused on their memories in the past,

¹ David Rubin, "Current Directions in Psychological Science," *A Basic-Systems Approach to Autobiographical Memory* 14, no. 2 (2006): 80.

addressing objects from their memories while others have strived to show a sense of place. It is not my inclination to attend to either of these but to stay within a subcategory of autobiographical memories to concentrate on event-specific knowledge.

My work falls directly into event-specific knowledge. My memories are strictly turning points in my life. I chose six specific memories before I began my research and discovered later that they all systematically fell into the realm of event specific knowledge. The memories all relate to circumstances that were dire. Why do we remember these types of memories so vividly? There may be a good reason why most people remember exactly what they were doing when tragedies happen, like September 11th or the JFK assassination, but have a hard time remembering birthdays and anniversaries. It turns out that remembering the cruel times just comes more naturally. Within my own research, when my test subjects were asked how many of their memories were of a “good” nature and how many were of a “bad” nature, the results came out to 32% good nature and 68% bad nature. Why would we lean towards bad-natured memories? A new study suggests that we recall bad memories more easily and in greater detail than good ones perhaps for evolutionary reasons.² Researchers say negative emotions like fear and sadness trigger increased activity in a part of the brain linked to memories. These emotionally charged memories are preserved in greater detail than happy or more neutral memories, but they may also be subject to distortion. For example, eyewitnesses to a shooting often report seeing the gun vividly, but they

² Louise Chang, “Bad Memories – Easier to Remember,” *Better Health* (August 2011): 32.

may not remember precise details of their surroundings. “These benefits make sense within an evolutionary framework,” writes researcher Elizabeth Kensinger of Boston College in a review of research on the topic in *Current Directions in Psychological Science*. “It is logical that attention would be focused on potentially threatening information.”³ Researchers say studies using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) have shown that negative events stimulate activity in emotion-processing regions of the brain.⁴ The more these emotional centers are activated by an event, the more likely an individual is to remember specific details linked to the emotional aspect of the event. The individual is less likely to remember more mundane details like a street address. Researchers say this technique of preserving bad memories may have evolved as an evolutionary tactic to protect against future life-threatening or negative events, which makes complete sense. Think of the first time you burnt your hand because you touched a hot stove or when you had a bad relationship because of an abusive partner. This made you think twice the next time reaching for something hot or getting involved in a relationship. It is important to remember that we can’t let the past determine future, but at the same time we must remember which of these memories is important to hold onto.

³ Elizabeth Kensinger, “Sleep’s Role in the Consolidation of Emotional Episodic Memories,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 19 (October 12, 2010): 294.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 292-93.

CHAPTER 2: PREMISES, THEORIES, AND CONCEPTS

It was not until graduate school that I was asked why I paint the images I do. My first year was spent repeating what I already knew and was comfortable with. I painted many landscapes, either on site (fig. 2) or from a photo or drawing. I learned the



Figure 2. Justin W. Dahl, *Deadmon*, 2009. Oil on Canvas, 12" x 16"

techniques involved here as an undergraduate practicing the techniques of the old masters. Into my second year of graduate school I was often asked why I painted these landscapes. I began to paint directly from memory and found myself

habitually painting cityscapes in as much detail as my mind could conjure (fig. 3). This series of work quickly faded for me. The paintings were tedious and it showed. To me they were proof that I could visually depict a place from my memory. I later found a specific relevance to these locations and retained the process of working in many layers of colors. When conjuring images from my mind, I learned that many layers of color and texture were needed to allow the work to evolve. This process of layering colors gave the work a different sense of light and color, which I



Figure 3. Justin W. Dahl, *Bidwell*, 2009. Oil on canvas, 24" x 36"

am able to utilize in my current work.

For example, when starting with a thin, warm, dark layer and moving to lighter color, the form evolves out of darkness. Adversely, when a dark layer is put over a dry, cool layer, the paint takes on a smoke-like quality.

In the later part of my second year, I began an experiment of a different sort that was unlike anything



Figure 4. Justin W. Dahl, *Untitled*, 2010. Oil on canvas, 4" x 7"

that I had ever tried before. This search began by questioning the rules which I had learned in earlier years. The idea arose from the fact that I could mix anything that I could think of with my paint. After looking around my studio and home I gathered items such as: motor oil, gasoline, detergent, bleach, sand, dirt, water and sawdust. I began to question what I thought I knew of as truth. A friend of mine had been using emulsions, or a combination of two or more unmixable liquids, to create varied textures and color separation with paint. As I began testing the limits of the paint and the medium, I expanded on this idea and applied both paint and large amounts of medium directly on the canvas. The medium floated on top of the paint and did not mix. Previously I had mixed my medium with the paint before applying it to the canvas. This process dictated that the work be completed horizontally and allowed to dry over time.



Figure 5. Justin W. Dahl, *Untitled*, 2010. Oil on canvas, detail.

(There are many mediums that can be used in the process of painting and they all have their own drying times. Varying textures are achieved as a result of the speed of evaporation from the canvas.)

I began by using large amounts of turpentine and paint which caused the paint to have similar qualities to the effect of watercolor painting (fig. 4). The outcome created many forms that intrigued me. The forms had an organic nature that returned me to the forms and shapes created through nature, which is a major influence in my work. My next tests involved the mixture of large amounts of thinner and liquin.⁵ This mixture was the consistency of glue with a more transparent quality. This allowed me to mix colors off the canvas and drip them directly into the medium permitting the paint to move into the medium and suspend itself and create a mixture that had similarities to certain stones. The effect was controlled through the height from which the paint and turpentine mixture was dropped in relation to the canvas (fig 5).

Next, I began to work with linseed stand oil, which had already appealed to me in the past. Stand oil has a much glossier sheen than that of Liquin or turpentine, both of which can result in a dull lifeless sheen. When oil paint is wet it has a color richness that cannot be obtained with other mediums. When stand oil is used alone it is similar

⁵ Liquin is a quick-drying medium for oil and alkyd paint. Used as an additive in many forms of artwork, liquin is produced by Winsor & Newton and has a number of uses.

to painting with honey or tree sap. Not only does it carry this consistency but also a higher richness. However, there is a problem with stand oil in its thickness and drying process. I soon thought about cooking and how the viscosity of oil changes as it is heated.



Figure 6. Igniting oil with propane torch

It was then that I took prepared canvases outside and set them on fire (fig 6). I lost control of some canvases and they burned out of control unable to be extinguished, but I soon found a correct combination of stand oil and thinner that would burn at the proper heat and burn itself out. The mineral spirits evaporated quickly and left the oil scarred by heat and fire. The thick paint became burned and blistered from the high temperatures. The colors and forms of these tests began to resemble what I saw as a landscape (fig 7). This process led to more development in my work. The fire often needed to be extinguished as it did not go out on its own. This event was exciting in



Figure 7. Justin W. Dahl, *Untitled*, 2010. Oil on canvas, 4" x 6"

itself. When water is thrown into burning oil the flames are not effortlessly extinguished (fig 8). More often than not, it is the force of the water that would extinguish the fire, which is easily seen in many of my paintings. In fig. 9, it is easily seen that

direction and force become an important element. Through the same investigation with fire and water came another discovery. The process of a burning painting extinguished with water and left to dry creates a new exciting



Figure 8. Oil being extinguished with water. 2010



Figure 9. Justin W. Dahl, *Untitled*, 2010. Oil and liquin on canvas, 36" x 24"

texture. When the water evaporated off of the wet paint it would leave a crater-like texture resembling the surface of the moon (fig. 10). After much experimentation, I decided to use these test paintings by going back and painting directly on them with a brush. Each time I tried this I

unknowingly painted a landscape (fig.

11). It is now that I began to see the relevance of these places that I was painting. I began to see that every place I was painting related to a time in my life where I endured great hardship and even greater changes. It was the end of youth that seemed to recur in my images. It was then that I became very interested in why this time in my life was

of such great importance to me. I began to study the brain and science of memory to look for answers to this question. I later painted these memories while allowing my technique to come out of the method and process learned through experimentation.



Figure 11. Justin W. Dahl, *Distance*, 2010. Oil on canvas, 24" x 38"

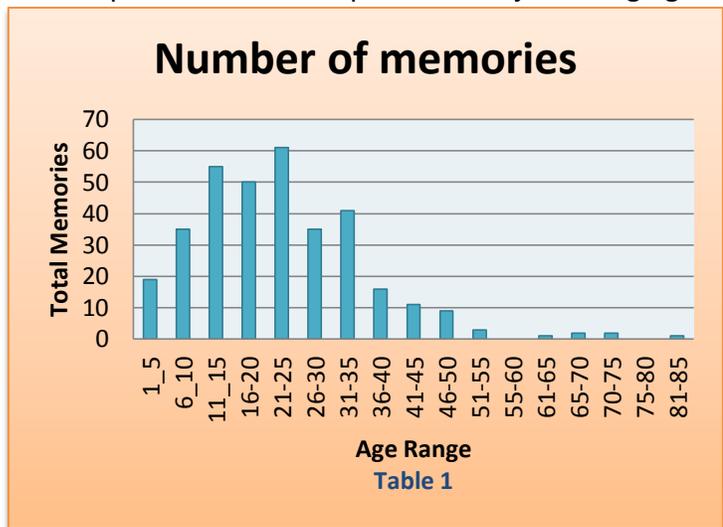


Figure 10. Justin W. Dahl, *Untitled*, 2010. Oil on canvas, 16" x 12"

CHAPTER 3: A QUALITATIVE STUDENT AND THE DISTINCTION OF MEMORIES

After realizing that many of my memories at age 32 fell into the range of late youth, I could not help but wonder about the rest of the population’s memory experiences. I decided to create a survey that would help to determine this (Appendix A). I chose a list of generic words that would not fit into a single age group modeled after “Find Your Memory Bump.”⁶ The survey was sent out to over 200 people. Slightly more than 100 responded. My data shows that the majority of people, regardless of age, remember a time in their life when large changes happened. It is most often during youth that the subject would have this correlation with memories, but there are a few cases where this does not apply (Table 1). After realizing this, I contacted the subjects with the variance and found that their lives went through dramatic changes at a point in their life other than adolescence. The experiment was composed of subjects ranging

from ages 20-80. After receiving all of the data, I removed the necessary overages so that every age range had equal numbers of participants. It is fascinating to see that nearly all subjects,



when asked to recall a specific memory based on each individual word, recalled a list of

⁶ Postit Science Corporation, “Find your Memory Bump.” Last modified December 22, 2010. <http://www.positscience.com/test-your-brain/memory/find-your-memory-bump>.

memories that were from a short period of time in their lives. There were a few exceptions to this rule, however. I can only believe that these variances must be related to an outside influence. For example, there were a few people who misunderstood the experiment and tried to think of their earliest memory rather than the first memory that came to their mind. There were also just 2% whose memories were random throughout their lives. I am not interested in what caused this. My intention is to show that our strongest memories are from a short period of time in our lives.

Through other investigations into the science behind our memories, I came upon the phenomenon of *déjà vu*, or the instantaneous awareness of familiarity of some environment.⁷ Many of my memories relate to a *déjà vu* experience many times later in my life. These new experiences recur in a moment. This is NOT the concept of *déjà vu* (although the concept of *déjà vu* does have a particular interest to me that seems to play a small part into my work). The problem is that your mind already has countless memories in it. Simply to maintain your sanity, your brain "forgets" most of the memories, even though they are still recorded somewhere in your brain. These "forgotten memories" are a well-known phenomenon in all of us. Therefore, if you are in a familiar environment and you get a feeling that you "had experienced this before," the reality might be that you actually had. When your brain sees a pattern in an experience, it seems to have the ability to recall forgotten memories that have a very similar pattern in them. This can therefore seem like it is a *déjà vu* experience. The

⁷ C. A. Johnson, "Theory on the Deja Vu or Déjà vu Phenomenon," <http://mb-soft.com/public/dejavu.html>, 2011.

memory may have “spooky” familiarity, but the explanation is very mundane: simply a forgotten thought from years earlier. Because forgotten memories are common in all of us, if you are in a familiar environment when you get a sensation that you think believe is déjà vu, it is actually far more likely that it was simply a forgotten memory instead. Therefore, the credibility of a déjà vu being valid hinges on it happening when you are in an environment or situation that you may have never experienced before.

My memories have this same “déjà vu sensation” but do not fall in the criteria required. Therefore, what category do they fall into? Most of our memories are autobiographical. However, autobiographical memories are “knowledge of the self, used to provide information on what the self is, what the self was, and what the self can be.”⁸ What are the sub-categories of autobiographical memory? Autobiographical memories are made up of lifetime periods, general events, and event-specific knowledge.

The lifetime periods are composed of general knowledge about a distinguishable and themed time in an individual’s life, such as a period spent in a job, or the time spent at a college or with a significant other. Lifetime periods usually have a characteristic beginning and end but are often unclear and overlap. These periods contain thematic knowledge about the attributes of that period such as activities, relationships, and locations, as well as the chronological order of the duration of the period.⁹

⁸ M.A. Conway, “Memory and the Self,” *Journal of Memory and Language*, (2005): 53.

⁹ David Rubin, “A Basic-Systems Approach to Autobiographical Memory,” (2006): 81.

General events are more specific than lifetime periods and encompass representations of repeated events or a sequence of related events.¹⁰ General events are grouped into clusters that we base on a common theme. When one memory of a general event is recalled, it cues other related events within the scope of our memory. These memories often fall into categories of achieving or failing to achieve certain personal goals. It is the memories that fall under the category of “first time” that have a particular vividness. We all tend to remember our first kiss or our first day of school. These memories usually stay with us our entire life and carry that same vividness.

Event-specific knowledge consists of vividly detailed information about specific events, often in the form of visual images.¹¹ The high level of detail of event-specific knowledge (ESK) fades very quickly. ESK memories that resist memory decay are originating events, turning points, anchoring events, and analogous events. Originating events consist of events that mark the beginning of long term goals. Turning points change our lives in a way that are always remembered; they often vary from virtuous to horrific. Anchoring events establish an individual’s beliefs and goals. Analogous events are past events that help to direct our current behavior.

As a painter, I have chosen to portray memories. Unintentionally they all fit into the realm of this event-specific knowledge. Therefore, it is easy to understand their level of abstraction due to the filter of experience and time. Also, it is now easy to see

¹⁰ Ibid., 83.

¹¹ M. A. Conway, “The Construction of Autobiographical Memories in the Self-Memory System,” *Psychological Review* (2002): 262-263.

why they naturally come from a short period of my life as they are mainly memories tempered by difficult times in my life. I am not alone in this as other artists have looked to their memories for inspiration.

CHAPTER 4: INFLUENTIAL ARTISTS AND THE DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN THEIR CONCEPTS AND MY OWN

In my early years as a student, I admired the work of the great technicians of landscape painting of the late 18th Century. The technical skills that I acquired as an early student allowed me to excel in landscape and still life painting. As an early student of painting, I admired the work of George Inness, Asher Durand, Fredrick Church, and the paintings of the Hudson River School. Mostly from this group I admired the work of George Inness (fig. 12). Throughout his life, Inness adopted his own personal style, which became simplified, freer, more intimate, and richer in color. In his landscapes of the late 1880s, edges frequently dissolve into the air, merging in a painterly haze. His work covered a wide range of light effects becoming a vehicle for the expression of a romantic mood.¹²



Figure 12. George Inness, *October Noon*, 1891. Oil on canvas, detail.

I often ask the question, “How many artists have addressed their memories, which memories were addressed, and how were they addressed?” Susan Rothenberg, Anish Kapoor, and Mike Kelley have all attended to their memories in one way or another. Susan Rothenberg paints from a moment of remembrance. In her early career, she paints horses through a strict autobiographical filter. She doesn’t paint a particular

¹² Louise Minks, *The Hudson River School: The Landscape Art of Bierstadt, Cole, Church, Durand, Heade and Twenty Other Artists* (Saugerties: Hope Farm Press, 1999), 32.

memory but rather paints specific objects that she remembers. She will often try to show us an object such as serpent from near her home or a view of her studio, not as a memory of a place or event but rather as an object that calls for a moment of recollection. This varies from my work as I pull from the feeling associated with a moment of remembrance. It is this feeling, rather than the direct images of memory, that I paint. Rothenberg has recently painted experienced events such as a near fatal bee sting, walking the dog, and a game of poker.¹³ Her painting *The Chase* is a frozen moment in time showing the playfulness of her dogs (*fig. 13*). These scenes come from her daily life and, whether an unfortunate event or a moment of remembrance, they come to life through her nervous and thick layered brushwork. One theme in her



Figure 13. Susan Rothenberg, *The Chase*, 1999.
Oil on canvas, 91" x 93"

later work that specifically deals with memory is her vantage point. She seems to always be located high above the ground. In an interview with PBS, Rothenberg states that this is from living in the city as well as often working on a large scale causing her to see the world from above.¹⁴

¹³ Joan Simon, *Susan Rothenberg*, (New York: MacMillan, 2004), 17.

¹⁴ "Art21.Susan Rothenberg.Biography.Documentary Film PBS",
(www.pbs.org/art21/artists.Rothenberg/2008)



Figure 14. Anish Kapoor, *Memory*, 2008. Cor-ten steel

Anish Kapoor is a British sculptor of Indian origin who creates large-scale sculptures that are often site-specific and meant to entice the viewer. His work is made up of reflective surfaces, powdered pigment, and often, natural

elements. He usually does not deal with memory. However, his installation entitled *Memory* (fig. 14) is centered on the space that it encompasses. Patrons within the gallery have a memory etched into their minds of what a gallery should be. Kapoor warps this memory by allowing the wall to be penetrated on one side by his sculpture. When moving to the other side of the wall, a window is created into the concave form that is now created with the interior. This corten steel structure seems to be squeezed into the space of the Guggenheim Gallery in New York as if it were bent and squeezed like a balloon into a small space.¹⁵ It is to the viewer's surprise after moving from room to room and being afforded only a small view of the sculpture through each doorway to come upon what appears to be a black two-dimensional painting on



Figure 15. Anish Kapoor, *Memory*, 2008. Cor-ten steel.

¹⁵ Jan G. Castro, "Anish Kapoor at the Guggenheim: The Dimensions of Memory," *Sculpture* (July 2008): 26.

the wall (fig. 15). This confuses the observers as they approach the square and their eyes begin to adjust. The viewer begins to see that this is not a two-dimensional object but rather a hole in the wall looking into the sculpture from the previous room. Kapoor's sculptures not only entice the viewers but also leave them with their own memories of the experience made through his alteration of the space he works in. He is not speaking from his own memory but rather erecting a memory in the minds of others. As Kapoor enters a space that will become the location for one of his works he tries to access the importance of the specific area. He uses his work to describe the experience of the site. The Guggenheim to him was a "process of passage" and he wanted to use this sort of "maze-like" construction to further make the viewer aware of the spaces that they walk through.¹⁶ As in my own work Kapoor shows an abstraction of a known space. He creates an experience through his alteration of space. My work consists, more specifically, as a modification personal to myself altered through time.

Mike Kelley's work has always been of a humorous nature using performance as well as drawing, painting, sculpture, and writing. It wasn't until recently that his work related directly from his personal experiences. Kelley's ongoing pseudo-autobiographical project, *Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction*, begun in 1995, is a planned compendium of 365 sculpture and video works inspired by mundane yearbook photos and an examination of his own selective amnesia. Kelly had chosen not to recall his memories since the time when he was in high school. His work was

¹⁶ Ibid., 26-27.

recalled through the examinations of his past. In this way we share a common bond in our work. Our work is used as a sort of diary of our youth. However, Kelley uses direct imagery to show us his past. This installation was directly influenced by his work *Educational Complex* (fig 16).

Educational Complex was made as a direct reconstruction of the schools that Kelley attended as well as a model of the home he grew up in. Kelley simply left out the information that he could not remember. This is a reconstruction of the memory of his



Figure 16. Mike Kelley, *Education Complex*, 1995. Acrylic, latex, foam core, fiberglass, wood, 8' x 16' x variable height; 51" maximum.

adolescence as well as his young adult years. Kelley was able to simply remove the filter of age and the acquisition of new memories. These are the memories that Kelly could directly recollect.

From *Educational Complex*

came the video *Day is Done*, where Kelley takes from images of his old yearbooks to restage high school rituals with his own comic twist. He uses surreal elements such as donkeys, devils, cheerleaders, and eerie music that he creates himself.¹⁷ It is this recreation that is a reconstruction of a time in his own life that most can relate to.

Unlike Kelley's representational elements, my work is a depiction of what remains of my

¹⁷ "Art 21. Mike Kelley. Biography. Documentary Film PBS," (2008), www.pbs.org/art21/artists/kelley

memories after they are sifted through my personal mesh of time. Space and color become my tools to orchestrate an abstracted image representing my state of mind during these events.

Many artists draw on their memories or use memory as a concept in their work. The lives, friends, family, places, things, and events are all filters within the artist that change the reality of the event. It is this reality filtered through the artist that becomes the art work.

CHAPTER 5: "MEMORY-SCAPES" AS A SERIES OF PAINTINGS

Recently a dear friend of mine asked me if I think that every miniscule decision we make, every person we meet, and every place we visit makes us who we are or is it predetermined for us? I am now 32 years old and it has been a long road. It is not often that I stop to think about my origin. Sometimes I believe that I am who I am because of the people I have met. Maybe it is my parents, my friends, and acquaintances. My "person" may be shaped by the experiences I have had, my successes and failures in my life. Maybe we are all predetermined to be a certain way. Paint is used as an emotional response to the memories that I have. Physically the paint is able to mix in an unlimited amount of ways. The hand is used as a vehicle to portray shape and form. The mind is a filter in which aids in the movement of the hand. How is the image of a memory portrayed in a two dimensional form? What is the significance of the memories?

"Memory-Scapes" is a series of paintings created directly from the memories of the personal experiences of my youth. Each subject that I used had a specific connotation. The series of paintings as a whole came from a specific time in my life. It is this time in my life that is of interest to me when looking back. *Humiliating Status Quo* is an example of one the moments that I recall when I think of what I would paint (fig. 17). I must give a quick background into the story to show where I am coming from.

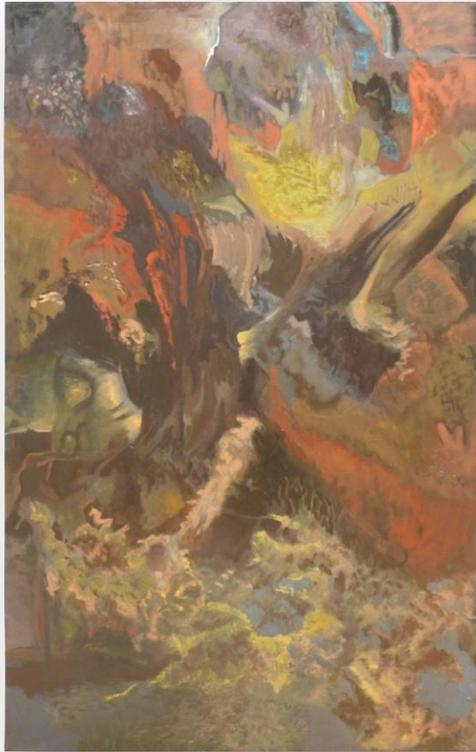


Figure 17. Justin W. Dahl, *Humiliating Status Quo*, 2011. Oil on canvas, 10' x 5'

I was living in a lower income part of town in Buffalo, NY in a small two bedroom apartment that I had made into a very nice place to live on the inside. On the outside, though, it was a different story. The neighborhood was a constant parade of thieves, drugs, prostitution, and fighting right outside my door; sometimes the occasional gunshot was heard. Low-income city living seems to go hand-and-hand with many of these things.

I quickly found out that if you do not pay your utility bills, they will be shut off. Seems like a simple, common sense kind of concept but the naivety of youth will argue with that. I quickly found myself in an apartment with no heat or hot water in the middle of winter in Buffalo, NY, where the weather is blistery and cold with little breaks of sun for about five long months of winter. The picture of my apartment changes rapidly at this point. I am alone here. I have taken all of my belongings and put them into one room where I had a space heater that was running almost 24 hours a day. The bathtub was no longer for showers as I couldn't stand the frigid water anymore. Living alone in this situation of freezing cold temperatures with just one room that was

bearable (the other rooms were simply a mess) was one of the wretched moments of my life. Clothes, furniture, and belongings were all in disarray. As I would sit in my one room huddled in front of my space heater, I could not help but wonder how I had gotten to this point. It was not out of laziness, but limited resources; working 40 hours a week and attending class full-time quickly took its toll.

Before I reached this state, my father had recently had open-heart surgery and had come to stay with me. He was not here long. It is this situation that this leads up to the memory that stays with me. On this day my father and his partner were in the city. My father had decided to stop by my house and pick up some of his belongings that he had left behind. I was not there and he let himself in. I was spending time with my mother. The phone rang; it was my father. I was embarrassed by my living conditions and ashamed to share my adversity with anyone. My father, whom I admired and respected, just walked into my lowest of times. Eventually, with the help of my family, I was able to improve my living conditions and move on to a better life.

It is from these moments of remembrance that my work evolves. The memories are often gloomy in nature but have a bright side to them when looked at in the greater picture of life. It is the past that helps us to determine the future and it is the future that takes precedence over the past. This period of my life seems to be the same turning point that people remember, as I indicated earlier. My memories during this time involve sleeping in a car for a good amount of time while showering in the college locker room and still attending class (fig. 18). At this time in my life I pushed the envelope. It

pushed back. However, it is not these instances that always influence the way I choose to paint. It is often the outcome, the lesson, the feeling of the moment, the sounds, or the smells that are brought back. As I paint, I recall the moment. The recollections are vivid; however, they do not carry precise information regarding surrounding imagery. The method for recollecting items by attaching them to imagined images is the artificial memory. In the classical model of the mind, impressions are taken to retain meaning.¹⁸ It is the impressions rather than the image that become important.

When beginning a painting, there are many things to consider. I begin with a quick sketch of what I see as the memory (fig. 19). This sketch is not a blueprint. It is a simple idea on a visual plane. When sketching, I remember, with as much intensity as I can conjure, to envelope myself within the time of the emotion. Each line is my hand responding to the sensation of the memory. This sketch is used when starting the painting but evolves significantly (fig. 20).



Figure 18. Justin W. Dahl, *Dangerous Slumber*, 2011. Oil on canvas, 7' x 10'

¹⁸ Francis Yates, *The Art of Memory*. (city: publisher, 2006): 27

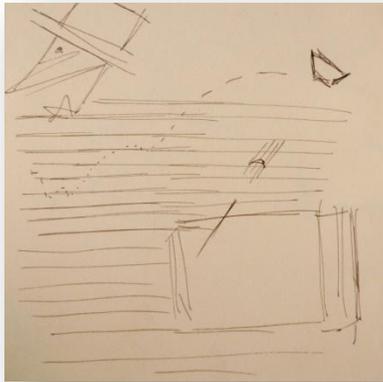


Figure 19. Justin W. Dahl, *Untitled*, 2010. Pencil on paper, 4" x 4"

As I relive this memory the feelings of discomfort that encompass me are the source of my work. Initially, shapes are formed by applying a thin layer of paint to the canvas. The under-painting evolves through use of color and value to create depth. It is this depth of space, created through use of contrasting values and

complementing colors, that portrays my state of mind within each memory. The lack of white in my paintings creates an enclosing space. This feeling is common in the memories of my youth; being trapped within the confines of naivety.

The scale of the painting is an important element. It is necessary for my process to be a size in which the entire body is used as an extension of the brush. This large scale also acts to completely fill the vision. During the process of working it is important to be able to remove all outside influences on the canvas. Peripheral vision moves beyond the canvas but

our vision is quickly blurred as it moves from our point of focus. When we concentrate on a single spot we cannot see far beyond it.



Figure 20. Justin W. Dahl, *Regretful Assessment*, 2011. Oil on Canvas, 5' x 10'

Stop and look at one word at the end of this sentence and try to observe the color or the shape of objects surrounding you. If you do not move your eye could a clear reproduction of any of your surroundings be duplicated? I use this peripheral view to examine the shapes and forms as I construct them. The form is molded from the shapes contained in the same vein that our outlying vision contains. The configurations are combined together to cause a movement around the canvas.

Another specific necessary element in the recollection of a memory is color. It defines many things: the quality of the air, the sensuality of shadows, the light and the way it bounces, texture, temperature, etc. Color temperature is decided often by the effect of the warmth or cold on each other rather than creating a temperature based on the reality of the moment of the memory. Whether it was a warm sunny day or a cold night is not as important as the relationship of the colors with each other.

Surface texture and luster help to push the level of depth within the canvas. More texture is used in areas that appear closer. A smoother surface will create a glass-like appearance allowing vision to travel farther into the surface. This concept adds to the traditional methods of creating atmospheric perspective within a two-dimensional plane. All of these elements are used in conjunction with each other to resolve the concept of the memory.

As an artist I am showing my memories of a time in my life filtered by the experiences throughout my life to present day. These specific memories are shown through their moment. It is a feeling represented through color, texture, form and

space. The final series of paintings is meant as a diary of my thoughts as well as my feelings from the time in my life when I learned the most about life. This diary is filtered through all of my experiences in the time between now and then, tangible and ethereal. The people I have known, the friends I have lost, the places I have been, as well as the experiences I have had, the mistakes I have made, and the tribulations I have endured are all filters that have changed the image. What I see after allowing the filter of my life to remove almost all representational images from my indelible experience is what I paint.

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APPENDIX A

Memory Study Survey

1. Below there are a list of words. You will need a sheet of paper and a pen or pencil. For each word, I want you to think of the first memory that comes to your mind and write it down. The memory can be from any time in your life but needs to be the first thing that you think of. It will not necessarily be the first memory in your life but should be an important one. The memories can be anything you think of. You should not be sitting and thinking too long. The one stipulation with this memory is it needs to be specific. For example, if the word "water" makes you think of fishing it needs to be a specific fishing trip that you can pinpoint to a year of your life. After you finish all of the words scroll down and you will see the next step.

HAND	BIG
WATER	LETTER
LIGHT	WALK
HOUSE	MUSIC
ANIMAL	FISH
PLANT	POWER
STORY	FLY
PICTURE	

2. Now that you have finished writing down a single memory for each word go through your list and for each memory write the age that you were when the event happened.

3. After you have finished, tally up the number into a list separating them into groups of 5 years. 1-5, 6-10, 11-15, 16-20, 21-25, 26-30, 31-35.....etc. If you could, just email me this list. After emailing me the list, I will reply and let you know what it is all about. If you share this with anyone please do not let them know any outcomes before they do the first step but please share with as many people as possible. I cannot stress how important this part is. The emailed list should look something like this depending on your age:

1-5, 5 6-10, 4 11-15, 0 16-20, 3 etc.

This is just an example. Everyone's should be different and there is no right or wrong answers. Thank you for all of your help and contribution. It is a great help to my research. Feel free to forward this to anyone that you think would like to help. The more results I get the better.

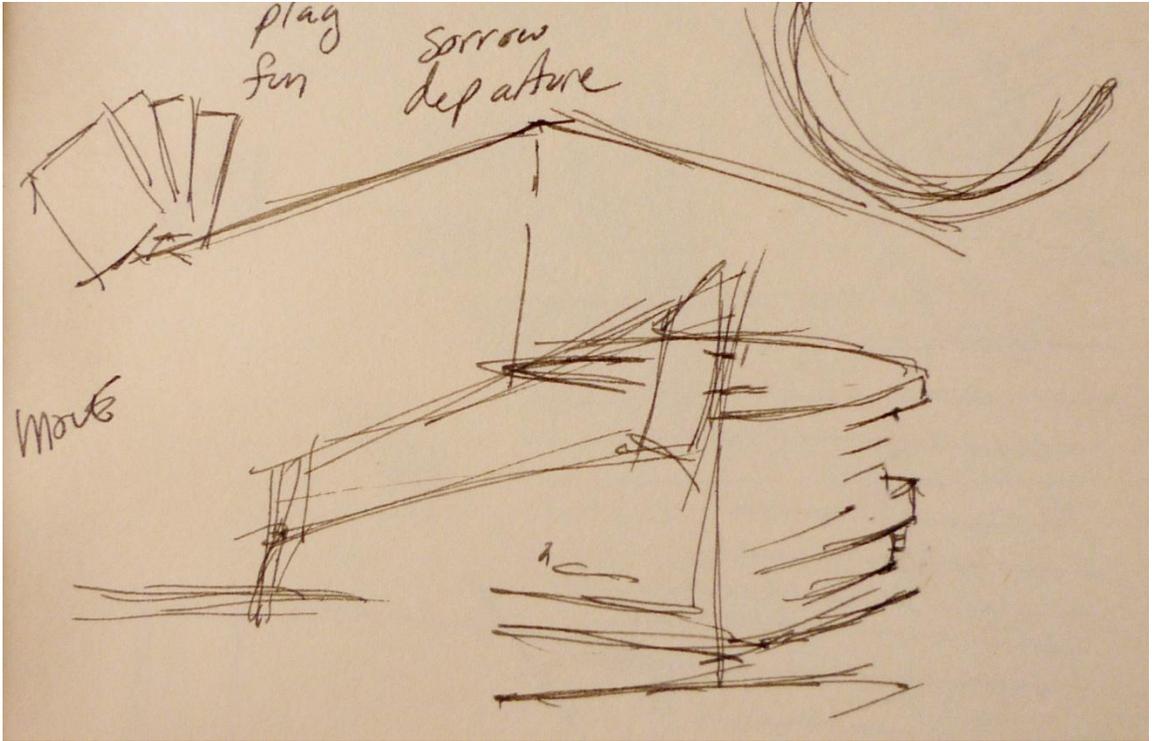


Figure 1.

Justin W. Dahl, *Untitled*, 2011. Pencil on paper, 4" x 7"



Figure 2.
Justin W. Dahl, *Deadmon*, 2009. Oil on canvas, 12" x 16".



Figure 3.

Justin W. Dahl, *Bidwell*, 2009. Oil on canvas, 24" x 36"



Figure 4.
Justin W. Dahl, *Untitled*, 2010. Oil on canvas, 4" x 7"



Figure 5.
Justin W. Dahl, *Untitled*, 2010. Oil on canvas, detail.



Figure 6.
Igniting canvas with propane torch.



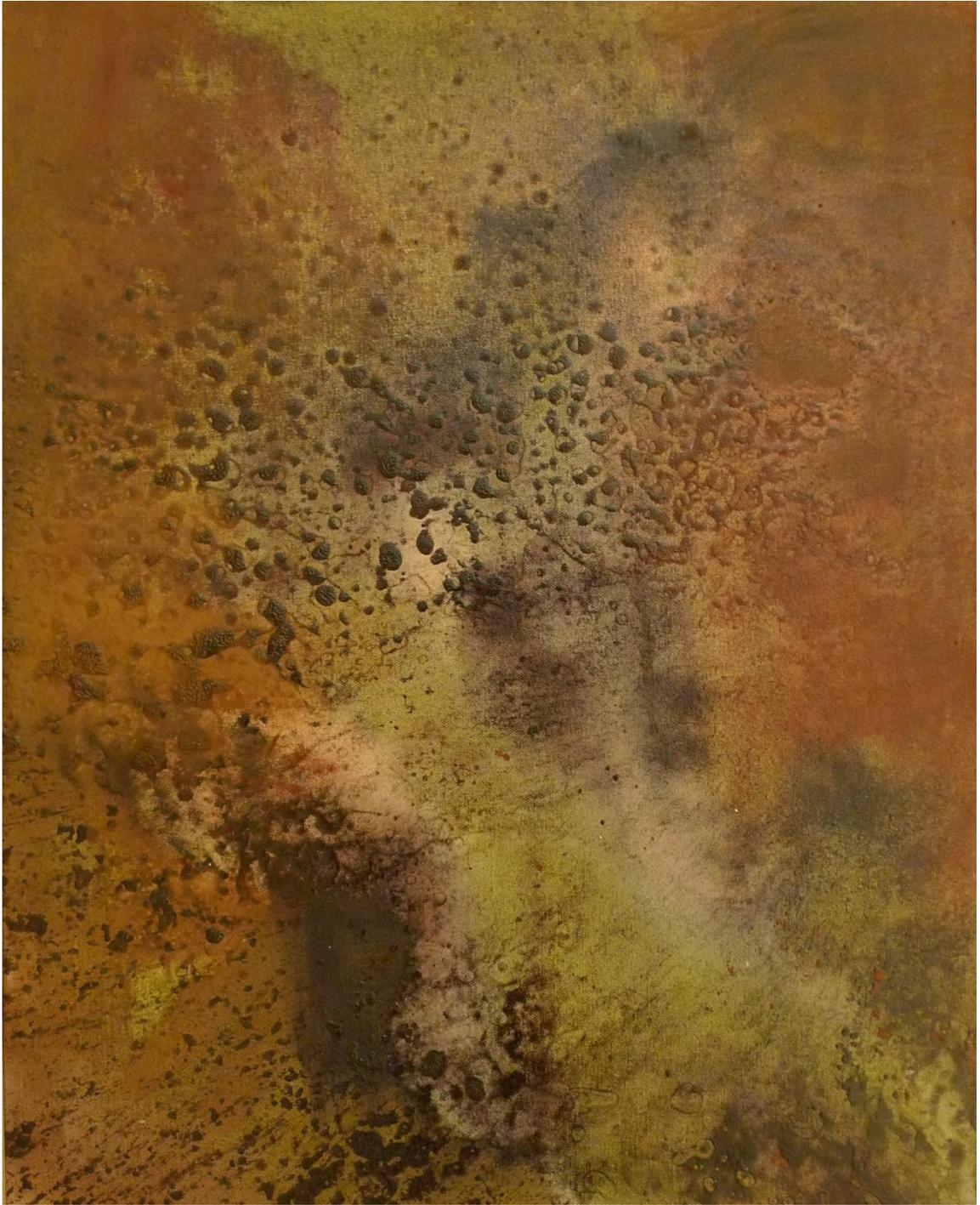
Figure 7.

Justin W. Dahl, *Untitled*, 2010. Oil on Canvas, 4" x 6"



Figure 8.

Oil being extinguished with water. 2010



Justin W. Dahl, *Untitled*, 2010. Oil and Liquin on canvas, 36" x 24"



Figure 10.

Justin W. Dahl, *Untitled*, 2010. Oil on Canvas, 16" x 12"



Figure 11.

Justin W. Dahl, *Distance*, 2010. Oil on canvas, 24" x 38"



Figure 12.

George Inness, *October Noon*, 1891. Oil on canvas.



Figure 13.

Susan Rothenberg, *The Chase*, 1999. Oil on canvas, 91"x 93"



Figure 14.

Anish Kapoor, *Memory* 2008. Cor-ten steel



Figure 15.

Anish Kapoor, *Memory*, 2008. Cor-ten steel



Figure 16.

Mike Kelley, *Educational Complex*, 1995. Acrylic, latex, foam core, fiberglass, wood, 8'x 16'x variable height; 51" maximum



Figure 17.

Justin W. Dahl, *Humiliating Status Quo*, 2011. Oil on Canvas, 10' x 5'



Figure 18.

Justin W. Dahl, *Dangerous Slumber*, 2011. Oil on canvas, 7' x 5'

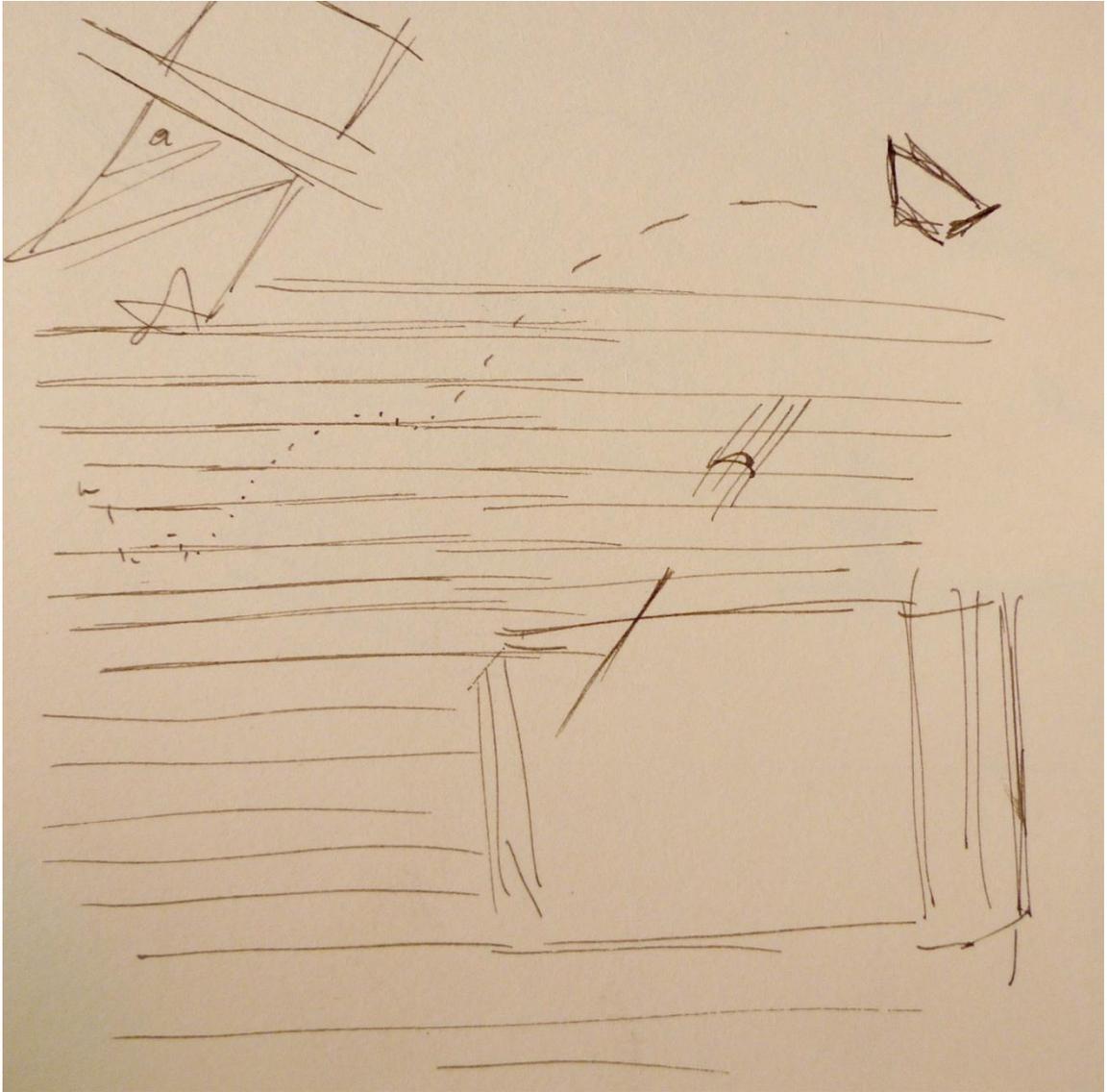


Figure 19.

Justin W. Dahl, *Untitled*, 2010. Pencil on paper, 4" x 4"



Figure 20.

Justin W. Dahl, *Regretful Assessment*, 2011. Oil on Canvas, 5' x 10'