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Holding On and Letting Go

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A Collection of *Memory* at the Westport Arts Center We are a world obsessed with memory. And rightfully so, because in the end, this is what we are left with -- an intangible of all the tangible photos, videos, letters, souvenirs, newspaper clippings, charms, and other keepsakes that we collect throughout our lives to remember our own journey and document it for those that we have walked with and sometimes never will meet. Just as paper yellows, edges fray, and video warps, so too do our memories blur and fade with time. By their very nature, the details of memories lose their significance and what is left, at the core, is a feeling.

Westport Arts Center curator Helen Klisser During confronts this struggle of capturing these fugitive ephemerals from the past, releasing them into the exhibition *Memory*. Bringing together sixteen artists' works, international and local, Klisser creates a collective memory of their experiences and reflections

on World War II and the Holocaust, which complements the Westport Country Playhouse's fall production of *The Diary of Anne Frank*. In addition to works by those directly affected by the war, there are photographs and sculpture and other representations that speak to the fleeting and fragile tendencies of memory in general, whether ravaged by Alzheimer's, technology, or simply by time. Do all these artifacts, tokens of love and loss, revert back to just that, physical tokens with no emotional significance? Or do they act as a source of life, fountain of tears, or volcano of anger, urging us to remember the people and events and resurface the feelings buried in our distant pasts?

One of the most recognizable images greets visitors on entry to the Westport Arts Center: David Seymour's *Teresa, Poland, 1948*, an iconic photo of a young girl disturbed and shattered by war, looking wide-eyed, surprised and anxious, her breath on pause as she asks, "What are you doing here?" Invading her private thoughts and space, her home of chaotic chalk lines scratched on a blackboard, I apologetically begin to excuse myself, passing onto the next work, wondering at how easily erasable, lost into dust, her work would have been if it had not been eternalized by Seymour.

Around the corner is a center photograph of two smiling U.S. army men surrounded by pencil sketches and illustrations by Tracy Sugarman, a Westport native and author, who served as a lieutenant during WWII. While serving abroad, Sugarman wrote letters to his wife along with the illustrations, which depict a massive storm, wild waves crashing against vessels and throwing men overboard, swallowing them into the sea, reminding me of Jonah and the whale. The center snapshot shows faces with no signs of worry, a relaxed bravery, but in actuality, we learn the truth of suffering and internal turmoil through the drawings and Sugarman's compulsive need to express this fear before it consumed him.

Directly opposite Sugarman's open letter to his wife is a different sort of love letter. Cryptic in nature, Sophie Calle's installation *Take Care of Yourself* is a hybrid "Dear John" type of letter and suicide note from a lover to his mistress. Attempting to decode the language, the artist brings it to a clairvoyant to understand the hidden message. The tarot cards are laid out in the form of a cross as the words behind the glass cast shadows on the wall. I begin to question the lover's sincerity as his manipulative language is interpreted by the cards and words can be lies -- but whose words? One question leads to another: Has he truly taken his own life? Whom can we trust? Will we ever know the truth? Whose life was truly taken? Will there ever be a return of good memories, or will these words haunt until the end? When will it end? The heartache is exhausting. How can one possibly take care of oneself after reading such unsettling words? When seeking answers, we find more questions. By the wall is a podium with copies of the letter for visitors to take and decipher again and again. I consider this but decide to let go quickly and move on.

The next series of works is by Leo Kok, a Dutch Jew who was imprisoned in Westerbork, a transit camp in the Netherlands used to assemble Jews and then transport them to German concentration camps. Kok's memories are mostly of people and place. Forlorn watercolor landscape images -- of the camps, smokestacks, and train yards -- are cold and barren, depicting a quiet misery. The artist's charcoal and pencil portraits are of other imprisoned Jews as well as Nazi soldiers, usually asleep, kidnapping a moment of peace. One of his unfinished portraits of Rolf Rosenthal, a tenor who tried to escape his destiny through his operatic talent, shows just the singer's eyes; the space where his mouth would have been drawn is blank, leaving Rosenthal voiceless. Included in Kok's drawings are portraits of his 19-year-old wife, whom he met and married in the camp. Kok died at the age of 22. I think about the human capacity to find love in the darkest moment of our lives even when we feel the most forsaken. During's father, who is a Holocaust survivor, learned that Kok was her father's first cousin; Kok's wife, Kitty Nijstad, who had also survived, held an exhibition of Kok's work at the Jewish Museum in Amsterdam, inviting the During family to attend.

In an offset corner of the gallery are photographs of Charla Boteler's "stack" sculptures, taken by her daughter, Alison Boteler. Charla has been suffering from Alzheimer's disease for over a decade, but elements of her creative past as an artist emerge in these spontaneous stackings. She fits found objects of tea kettles, spoons, feathers, flowers, and other "stuff" together by color, texture, and space creating whimsical still-life arrangements. In the stillness of the room, I am distracted by a periodic "sshhh" sound coming from a laptop featuring Hye Rim Lee's graphic video, *Eye in J'Adore Perfume Bottle*. The video examines how scents and smells can trigger memories. By engaging all of our senses, we are capable of recalling memories from decades ago. Inside the perfume bottle are spheres, like molecules of memories changing color and sporadically an image of lips appears among the floating beads. We make connections to our past everyday through the recognition of sounds, smells, textures, tastes, and words that we keep stored in our mind and set free through our hearts.

In the center of the gallery are sculptures by several artists, including *Urchin* creatures by D. Dominick Lombardi. Sculpted sand childlike bodies, Lombardi's sculptures remind me of baby dolls. Found objects from the seashore make up parts of these creatures' bodies and personalities as if carrying all of the treasures they have ever collected throughout their lifetime. Again, Lombardi gives significance to the insignificant and focuses on how important our childhood memories affect our identity as adults and the relationships we form with others. One of his urchins' heads is made of a plastic net that resembles a bullhorn that seems to be speaking to Mayer Kirshenblatt's painting of a woman listening to an entire orchestra through a gramophone.

Kirshenblatt's colorful narrative paintings of his childhood memories in pre-war Poland emerged through conversations that he had with his daughter over forty years later. A forgotten part of his life, the paintings depict everyday life and Jewish culture of prayer and family. Kirshenblatt uses vivid colors to portray dark memories. His painting *Slaughter of Innocents* tells the story of how his grandmother was lashed to a tree as she was forced to watch Nazi soldiers annihilate her family members. Side by side, within the same painting, during this act of violence, is a group of three figures embracing each other. Kirshenblatt's grandmother believed that by physically holding each other together, they could help each other survive. The image leaves a hole in my core and I recall Pope John Paul II's words during one of his visits to Auschwitz: "This is what happens when the world forgets God." After viewing works by Nina Bentley, Constance Old, Anselm Kiefer, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Christian Boltanski, Alan Lomax, and Ursula von Rydingsvard, I feel unsettled and prepare to leave when I notice that I missed the very first photo by the door because I had been drawn in by *Teresa's* gaze. The image is a vintage print by Larry Silver of Eva Katz remembering through ritual and completing the lighting of Shabbat candles at the Jewish Home for the Elderly in Fairfield, CT. Surrounded by a glow of a hundred candles, Katz lights another as if bidding me to "go in peace." - *Michalina Docimo*

[Westport Arts Center](#) 51 Riverside Avenue, Westport, CT (203) 222-7070 HOURS: M-F 10am - 4pm; Sat 10am - 5pm; Sun 12 - 4pm Artists in *Memory*: Mayer Kirshenblatt Leo Kok Anselm Kiefer Christian Boltanski David Seymour Ursula von Rydingsvard Henri Cartier-Bresson Sophie Calle Alan and Elizabeth Lomax D. Dominick Lombardi Constance Old Hye Rim Lee Charla Boteler Tracy Sugarman Larry Silver Nina Bentley

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