

PALIMPSEST

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ABSTRACT

PALIMPSEST

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Change is constant. We constantly change ourselves. This personal “overwriting” is similar to a tradition called palimpsest, which is the incomplete erasure of text from books to make room for new text and ideas on the same surface. Here, I have embraced this as a metaphor and applied it to the palimpsest of self, or the building up of an individual over time. We are seemingly born a tabula rasa, or blank slate. Over time we are molded by our experiences and influenced by our environments. We make mistakes, we change our tastes and as we grow we cover over and “rewrite” what no longer suits us. However, there are always remnants of our old selves that persevere. A large determining factor in my personal journey has been the geographical and cultural influence of place, and it also influences each method of this work.

I have visually represented palimpsest of self through three different and visually distinct methods. The first method is demonstrated with a constructed wall. The wall piece, a literal stand in for the self, is an assemblage that implies erasure through overlay and describes palimpsest of self through charting the impact of my personal geography on building my individual palimpsest of self. For the second method, I drew on top of and cut out sections from preexisting maps of places I have lived, redacting pertinent

information to the point of abstraction. For the third method I manipulated old family photographs with software adding imagery from more recent photographs. Viewers of this work most likely have very similar family photos, have handled maps and have seen layers of patterned wall coverings. These are all rather common experiences to share. This allows them to imagine the work being about their personal palimpsest, or at least to consider how we all exist as layers of imperfect and re-written drafts of ourselves.

I am interested in semiotics and in our reliance on signs to filter information to make sense of our worlds. Specifically, I play on the expectation of the audience who are looking for some explanation or purpose when confronted with imagery which is traditionally understood through conventional data interpretation, in the case of the maps, and which might imply a narrative, in the case of the family photos. When the sign hierarchy is reconstructed the message is confused, and often completely obliterated. I achieve all of this by interfering with textual and numerical signs, as well as facial expressions as sign. I remove them, cross them out, cover them up, or transform them to expose new relationships. This reduces the imagery to its formal base and allows the viewer to participate aesthetically, while also pondering origins and references inherent within common information.

Part of this research brings attention to the idea that by not completely obliterating it from vision, but instead intentionally leaving behind a trace of that which has been erased, what is missing becomes a focal point. Instead of eliminating it this has the opposite effect. The ghostly remnant of the text that has not been meticulously rubbed out is now what attracts attention. That which has been removed, but leaves behind a trace,

implies importance and relevance. The act of erasure acts as a sign to point to that which has been partially eliminated.

PROLOGUE: HISTORY OF PALIMPSEST

Palimpsest has its origin in the re-inscribing of ancient manuscripts. Parchment was a scarce commodity and the surface would be scraped off and overwritten with new manuscripts, but fragments of the original document would accumulate in the borders where it was poorly erased.

The most referenced example of palimpsested manuscripts is the *Archimedes Palimpsest*. This medieval parchment resurfaced at a private auction in 1998, when a private collector purchased it and gave it to The Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, Maryland. It is a Byzantine euchology, or prayerbook, with imperfectly erased layers of text that speak of the history of that surface. Included in the erasures that have been written over were seven treatises on science by Archimedes, extensive writings by Hyperides the Orator from as far back as the 4th century B.C. and commentary on Aristotle's *Categories* from the 3rd century A.D. (*The Archimedes Palimpsest*)

The term palimpsest has crossed disciplines and is now used to describe anything which has changed over time which still shows evidence of its history. Palimpsest is utilized to describe everything from neighborhoods with layered socio-historical identities to old billboards with peeling layers of old advertisements.

INDIVIDUAL AS PALIMPSEST

In my thesis exhibition I have broken from the traditional notions of the term palimpsest and applied it metaphorically to the palimpsest of self. Palimpsest is most commonly understood as the overwriting of books or the influences of old architectures on new translations in urban planning. In each of these instances the original structures are broken down and reorganized, allowing new information and relationships to form, but also retain fragments of the old information. This work is intended to provide a platform of contemplation for the audience to consider how we each build ourselves and author our personal narratives through time. By overwriting and tearing down that which no longer seems relevant and retaining that which is steadfast in our characters we create our personal palimpsests.

Erasure is used to create the palimpsest surfaces. With the wall piece it is erasure, not by removing the old, but by covering over the old with the new. Overlaying is different from erasure in that each layer remains intact, but is made invisible on the surface. When I consider how I attempt to rewrite and represent my personal palimpsest overlay is a concept that speaks well to the process in that it is impossible to eradicate past experiences that shape who we are, but we can attempt to cover them over with new influences.

I was living in Upstate New York for over a decade amidst hundred year old farm houses and historical downtowns making a living as a housepainter. I have repaired drywall and removed layers of wallpaper from hundreds of walls. I was always curious about what each of those layers of renovation over time said about the histories of those

walls. Each time someone had decided that the previous layer was unwanted, outdated or dilapidated to the point of causing them to cover over it with new.

Similarly, I am drawn to the patterns collectively carved and written by students on desktops that have endured generations. I enjoy the old billboards forgotten along less traveled highways, with peeling layers that fall off in strips, revealing the even older advertisement that preceded it. They all depict an immediate physical encounter with the changes through time evidenced on their surfaces. These influences make the wall piece the most direct representation of palimpsest of self through creating a surface that displays its changing history over time.



Figure 1: Streetwise Cycle. May 31, 2010. Public Domain. A dumpster with extensive graffiti, in downtown Los Angeles, as an example of palimpsest influence. http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dumpster_with_graffiti,_Los_Angeles.jpg

With the maps it is an erasure of signs by physical removal, by cutting out and writing over, that renders organized data into a purely aesthetic experience. The maps that I have used each depict an area in which I have lived that has had a major impact on me. This erasure reorganizes the sign hierarchy with all of the textual information painstakingly cut out with a blade and all of the numerical information systematically written over with ink. This is a metaphoric handling that replicates how we constantly change how we portray ourselves to others for them to read. The maps push the idea of erasure to the point of abstraction. As Lucy Lippard states in *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*:

For most of us the map is a tantalizing symbol of time and space. Even at their most abstract, maps are catalysts, as much titillating foretastes of future physical experience as they are records of others' (or our own) past experiences...(a) map can be a memory or anticipation in graphic code. (77)

The maps symbolize recording my past, and specifically the influence of these particular places on the building of my personal palimpsest and by rendering them unreadable by conventional terms I am relating them metaphorically to overwriting and removing parts of my past that no longer represent me.

In the family photos it is an incomplete erasure that leaves clues to what came before, clues that start a dialog with the new imagery to create a narrative of the history of each surface. They stage a narrative, but provide only incomprehensible pieces. To quote Lucy Lippard again:

Most old family photographs are simultaneously tantalizing and unsatisfying. I can spend hours perusing mine, extricating the fragments of narrative, knowledge, and empathy that are left for me. Yet I am struck by their unbridgeable distance, their consistent failure to represent what I really want to see and know about the past. It seems as if “the wrong pictures” always got taken. (56)

We all have similar family photos that preserve a moment out of context, a fragmented narrative. By overwriting them with imagery from a different time I am attempting to bridge that distance by overwriting the past with the present.

In the family photos I have overwritten my own history with imagery from recent experiences and am presenting them as an invitation for the audience to consider, again, how we each construct ourselves; layering our surfaces with new experiences and perspectives while simultaneously erasing what no longer feels relevant.

Each of these three separate methods of process provide different pathways for the viewer to come to an understanding of how I am reinterpreting the conventional use of the term palimpsest to serve as metaphor to illustrate how we create, reauthor and represent ourselves as personal palimpsests.

THE WALL

The exhibit can be broken down into three sections visually. First, there is a wall constructed of 2 x 4 lumber framing, rough wooden planks, old bricks with mortar, drywall and assorted vinyl wallpapers. The wall piece is an autobiographical transformation meant to communicate the impact of place within the palimpsest of self. I am authoring the rewriting of my own history and inviting the audience to consider how their personal history is constructed and influenced by the regional cultures associated with the places that they have lived or travelled. Each address in the title:

- ~~1. 2496 Victor Dr. Cocoa, FL (born)~~
- ~~2. 858 Honeysuckle Dr. Rockledge, FL~~
- ~~3. 82 Georgia Ave. Cocoa, FL~~
- ~~4. 246 Lee Ave. Rockledge, FL~~
- ~~5. 10 Liberty St. Adams, NY~~
- ~~6. 21 Wardwell St. Adams, NY~~
- ~~7. 24873 Freeman Crk. Rd. Rodman, NY~~
- ~~8. 12 B Church St. Ilion, NY~~
- ~~9. 164 Moose Track Lane Remsen, NY~~
- ~~10. 182 Co. Rt. 193 Pierrepont Manor, NY~~
- ~~11. 94 Co. Rt. 189 Lorraine, NY~~
- ~~12. 28 5th Ave Adams, NY~~
- ~~13. 1178 Wright St. Rd. Adams, NY~~
- ~~14. 18 Co. Rt. 104A Sterling, NY~~
- ~~15. 134 E. Cayuga St. Oswego, NY~~
- ~~16. 186 Cemetery Rd. Oswego, NY~~
- ~~17. 13426 St. Rt. 178 Adams, NY~~
- ~~18. 2000 Tay St. Indian Land, SC~~
- ~~19. 169 Stedman Rd. Cullowhee, NC~~
- ~~20. 78 Switchback Ridge Cullowhee, NC (today)~~

represents relocation in domicile, and each is represented by a different wallpaper pattern. The amount of trace of a particular paper left visible represents how much influence a place or era had on shaping me as an individual. This speaks to the notion of taking authority over the authorship of my personal history.



Figure 2: The Wall



Figure 3: The Wall (Detail)

THE MAPS

There are three 19 x 19 inch maps that have all of their textual and numerical information removed by crossing and cutting out. In *Latitude 35N 17' 26.682" Longitude 83W 9' 9.2448"* I carefully eradicated every word on the map with a blade, leaving behind an absence that leads the viewer to wonder why that piece has been removed and forcing them to relate to the map in a purely abstract way.

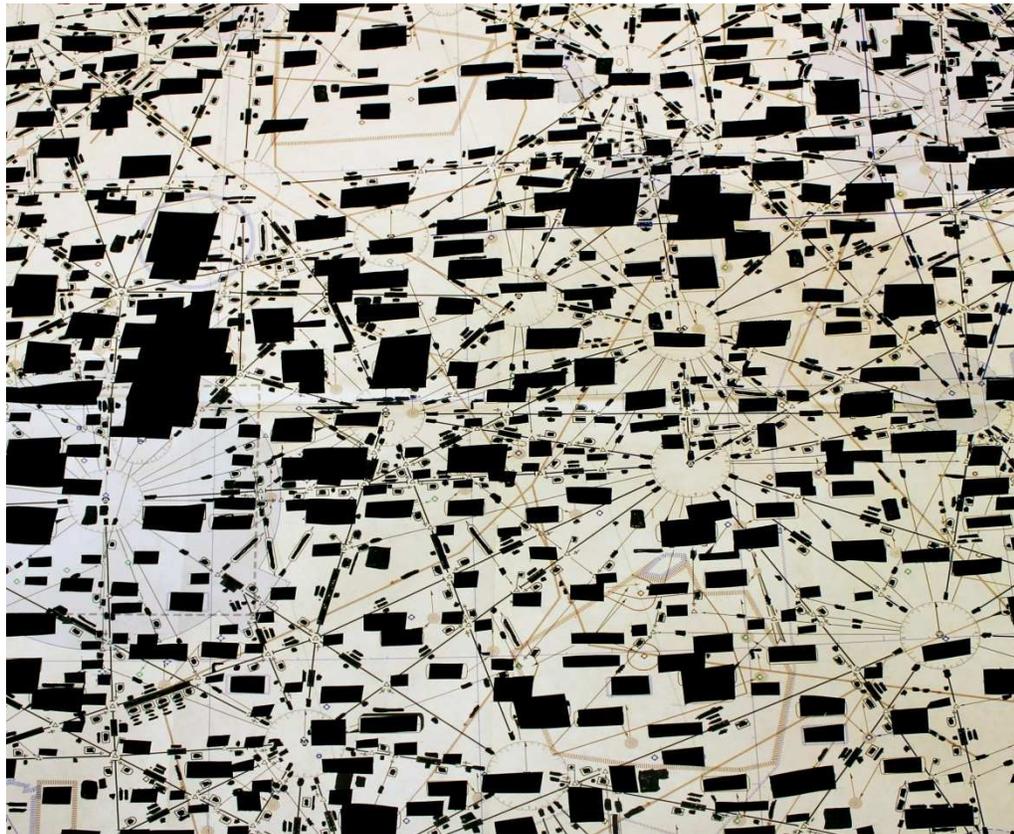


Figure 4: Latitude 35N 17' 26.682" Longitude 83W 9' 9.2448"

The audience cannot decipher the typical information expected from these sources. They are instead forced to experience the maps aesthetically. However, because the map is such a historical document symbolizing power hierarchies and the drawing of political boundaries it is impossible to eliminate connotations that may be formed around the removal or rewriting of information on each surface. Similar to how people will bring personal interpretations of my individual character, which I edit through time by reconstructing the image I portray publicly, I am curious about the different ways people react and the explanations they suppose for what the intent may be in redesigning the maps.

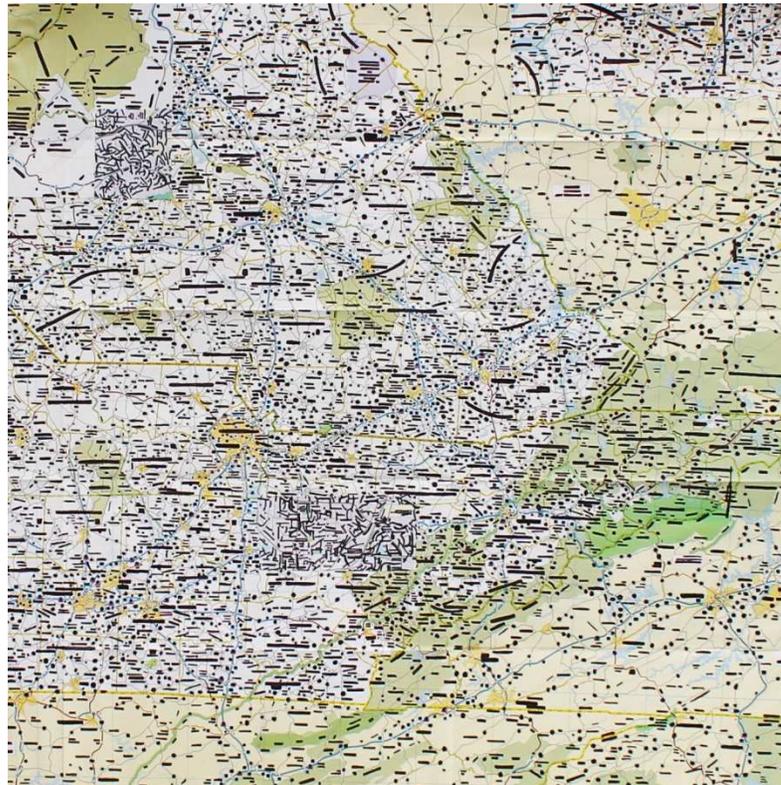


Figure 5: Latitude 28N 18' 43.2894" Longitude 80W 44' 17.5374"



Figure 6: Latitude 43N 48' 45.036" Longitude 76W 1' 14.649"

THE FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHS

Finally there are two digital collages from family photographs of children at play that have been reworked with digital software to obliterate the child from the old image by covering over them with new imagery. They measure 20 x 19 inches and 20 x 24.5 inches. These are based on the original dimensions of the photograph.

Palimpsest is about covering the old with the new. The snap shot moments preserved by my parents with a polaroid camera and a 35mm film camera in the 1980's have been scanned into the computer and digitally manipulated with modern design software and then printed out on a self-adhesive and repositionable fabric paper.

The image of the child playing on the seashore is of me at age 4. It was the first time that I can remember being at the ocean, and is on the east coast where I grew up. It is meticulously erased and replaced with grains of sand. The sand is from a photograph I recently took on a personal and poignantly introspective solo trip to the west coast. I have palimpsested the old image with the new to represent important developments in myself influenced by place.



Figure 7: May 18th, 1984

The image of the child playing with the cat in a residential yard is my sister at age 6. My sister and I are very close and I consider this image self-referential. I again worked her out of the image by overlaying new imagery. This time I used a photograph of her well-manicured, housing-association-issued lawn to contrast the scruffy unkempt yard that we played in as children in our parents' impoverished yard. This overlay of new imagery that leaves visible parts of the older imagery demonstrates a visual history on a unified surface.



Figure 8: August 26th, 1983

By obliterating the facial features of the children there is no way to read their expressions. The removal of the children, while leaving a trace to define the space that they once occupied creates an eerie sense of wonderment about what happened to them. This sets up a narrative that may lead the viewer to assumptions. It is not relevant that the audience know my story or the specifics that led me to choose this particular imagery. They are meant to be universally accessible and reinforce the idea of building a personal palimpsest.

THE ROLE OF PLACE

While it is not important to me to have the audience know this personal information, it is my intention that they will serve as a platform for contemplation of how they have been transformed by place in the building of their own personal palimpsests of self. The impact of place on collaging together a person's individual attributes over time is a recurrent theme throughout each piece within the exhibition Palimpsest. The wall piece is entitled all of the addresses at which I have lived since birth, each crossed out with one black line except for my current address; it effectively charts my personal geography. The map pieces are entitled the latitude and longitude coordinates of three places that have had a major impact on molding my personality through pivotal experiences I had while living there. The family portraits are titled with dates, but visually palimpsest the memory of my childhood with imagery from recent experiences of significant impact on me from the influence of place.

Each of these processes draw on the metaphor I have created and provide multiple interpretations to coax the viewer to follow along with me in considering how individuals are continuously reconstructing themselves and authoring the version of themselves that they display for others to interpret. Each handling of materials stands as an example of how we are all palimpsests.

SEMIOTICS OF EXPECTATION

I am interested in our reliance on signs to filter information to make sense of our worlds. By interfering with textual and numerical signs, as well as facial expressions as sign, I expose new relationships. By drawing on top of maps or digitally manipulating photographs to overwrite facial expressions I am redacting pertinent information. This leaves the imagery incapable of expressing its intended information, but potent with visual possibilities dependent on connotations drawn by each individual viewer. These evident visual modifications move the images to the point of abstraction.

My work gathers around an interest in how people interpret the same stimulus differently. I am curious about how individuals read vague information and fill in the blanks. In my thesis exhibition, *Palimpsest*, I have deliberately played with expectations and left plenty of room for multiple readings. This exhibition explores the process and conceptual connotations associated with erasure through investigating the concept of palimpsest.

I am also experimenting with Derrida's explanation of "unending chain of signifiers", (Lawlor 156) which is a deconstruction of Saussure's Structuralist framework which outlined direct relationships between signifiers and signifieds through binary oppositions:

For Derrida, the particulars arise from what he calls the "play of differences." The text itself contains a system of differentiation which can divide and cut up the same whole into different parts. Thus, each part owes its existence to other parts which it is not. It is what it is by virtue of being different from what it is not, by virtue of the "play of differences." The idea of differentiation is borrowed from

Ferdinand de Saussure, who claims that there are distinctions and differences within language that can generate linguistic concepts not corresponding to any extra-linguistic entities. (Nuyen 29)

By including manipulated imagery of children, maps and a degenerating interior wall the audience is led to seek out the connections between disparate imagery. By positing a statement that portrays palimpsest as a visual documentation of the individual shaped over time, I am inviting the audience to try to link the exhibition's separate components. They will assign meaning based on their personal reactions to the symbols provided. The work creates a space for multiple interpretations and is, in actuality, empty of concrete inherent meaning and instead an investigation of how expectation shapes perception. The erasure used in this work, against its reductive nature, is actually adding to the experience by enticing the audience to wonder what is missing and why the imagery has been removed.

Some of the research that influences how I think about this work includes Roland Barthes ideas on the death of the author. Roland Barthes' revelation that, "(t)o give a text an author is to impose a limit on that text to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing," (Barthes 147) got me interested in the idea that the intentions of the author of a literary piece, and similarly in all communication, are not always clearly relayed and the audience ultimately shapes their individual interpretations based on personal perceptions, shaped by their biases and informed by their personal experiences. There is a space between the intention of author and perception by each audience member.

Each piece of *Palimpsest* does relate to personal experiences that shaped me, it is constructed from actual maps of the places that most impacted me, includes the similitude

of my actual family photos and is constructed from materials some of which have traveled with me to many of the places represented, but ultimately it stands as a platform for the viewers to project their own ideas upon about the construction of self as a palimpsest.

EVIDENCE OF ERASURE: THE TRACE

The work leading up to *Palimpsest* led me to think about the main differences between digital and physical erasure. I thought that one main difference would be that digital erasure does not leave any evidence behind that something has been removed. I had been eradicating every visible pixel of information, nothing to imply that any process had taken place, no evidence. What I found instead is that digital erasure is given an option to leave a trace, and that choosing to leave a trace intentionally can add a beacon that points to that which has been eliminated and creates a psychological response that makes a viewer wonder why it has been eradicated.

One of the works that has had a major influence on this research was Paul Pfeiffer's *The Long Count (Rumble In the Jungle)*. This was his video work where he removes the figure of boxers fighting in the ring, but leaves a ghostly absence of each figure that works as a place holder. Pfeiffer speaks on how he came to work in this manner in an interview for the PBS Art21 series:

What I found is that there was one particular figure in the image (when working on a previous work, *Crucifixion*), that I could not get erasure of that figure. A few months later just looking back at it again I thought in a way there was something interesting...um... and integral to the material about that kind of evidence of the erasure.

This influence was most directly evident in my choices in handling the family photographs, titled *May 18th, 1984* and *August 26th, 1983*. I am interested in how erasure, the removing a presence, can add to an experience by drawing attention to that which has

been removed and the induction of wonder as the viewer imagines possible narratives for explanation. By playing on the innocent and fragile nature of childhood I set up a potentially unsettling response that may lead the viewer to wonder what happened to the children. Ultimately, it is just a play on expectation and the audience's natural desire to find the narrative which may lead them to make one up. It is my expectation that the viewer will wonder why the children have been removed and lead them to again consider the recurring metaphor of palimpsest of self.

In the map titled *Latitude 43N 48' 45.036" Longitude 76W 1' 14.649"* the evidence, or trace, that is left behind is the absence of the surface as I cut out all of the textual information from each map. In the maps titled *Latitude 28N 18' 43.2894" Longitude 80W 44' 17.5374"* and *Latitude 35N 17' 26.682" Longitude 83W 9' 9.2448"* all textual information is written over and marked out with ink and the numerical information is cut away.

The wall piece uses figurative erasure through a process of overlay. The removal of sections of wallpaper and the laying of wallpaper over wallpaper alludes to a history built up over time. The difference between erasing and overlaying is that with overlaying each layer is kept intact, but is covered over and made invisible only on the surface. This handling speaks metaphorically to the impossibility of removal of parts that contribute to shaping us as individuals, no matter how hard we try to remove them.

TEDIUM OF PROCESS

Another recurrent theme that unites this work is the obsessive pointlessness. I became enamored with a deliberately monotonous process to create confused messages that fail to articulate their function. In the research that informed this work I wrote over textual instructions on floor plans, and painstakingly remove one-by-one each textual and numerical signifier within circuitry boards and mechanical schematics.

It is a very physical and immediate gesture to write over all of the text on a map or to slice away with a razor all of the intentional information. I am interested in the tedium of the process and how that can lead to visual assumptions about each map's transformation. The audience encounters these transgressed images to find deeper more personal visual connections.

It was a slow and laborious process to re-render the maps, taking parts away and writing over others to leave behind a reconstructed image. These physical attempts at erasure are a metaphor for the frustration an individual encounters in the portrayal of themselves and the inevitable different interpretations that others will bring.

ERASURE BY PALIMPSEST

Of the seminal contemporary works that have influenced how erasure is being utilized in artwork I focused on Paul Pfeiffer's video work, mentioned in the EVIDENCE OF ERASURE: THE TRACE section above and Tom Phillips' *Humument*. Direct influences on my creation of visual palimpsests include the collage works of Mark Bradford and Kim Rugg.

Tom Phillips' *Humument* is an artist's book that is a physical palimpsest constructed from a book he picked up from a London thrift store. That rare find was the 1892 Victorian text entitled *A Human Document* by W.H Mallock. Phillips systematically embellished each of the 367 pages, overwriting the majority of the original text and leaving only vague fragments visible to recreate original poetry and rich illustrative decoration through painting, cutting away and collage. Phillips cites the influences of John Cage and William S. Burrough and their play with chance in their work.

(*Humument*)

Exploring Phillips' work set the framework for thinking more in depth about the concept of palimpsest as rewriting and allowing parts of the original to remain. This led me to consider how each person has a personal narrative that they are regularly editing. When I considered the origin of the term palimpsest it was clearly a very fitting metaphor for this overwriting of self.

Mark Bradford works in southern California and creates sociopolitical commentary from collected bits of billboard and signage debris that he gathers from his

urban landscape. I am not interested in the message, but the method and visual outcome. The resulting canvases are collages that have been sanded down and painted over, but Bradford leaves visible fragments of the fodder from which they are constructed. He recreates augmented maps and draws attention to the way people interact with them:

Bradford's collages dramatize the idea that maps require their readers to understand various conventions in order to read the information they contain and that maps also create conventions relating to the organization and communication of knowledge about the spaces they represent. (Brown)

These works, specifically but not limited to *Westward Bound*, *Los Moscos*, *Kryptonite and Scorched Earth*, are lavishly layered scraps that collectively create an abstract beauty worthy of contemplation. They are mesmerizing pieces that no longer function as maps relaying information. In my thesis exhibition I have mimicked this redaction of maps which stems from an interest in how he handles materials in these works and the disassembly of closed data systems.

Kim Rugg's work ignites my curiosity in the precision cutting away with a blade within collage work. She works similarly to Bradford with common and familiar sign conventions; newspaper articles, advertisements and branding. Rugg reorganizes them to render their original message unattainable. She reduces the imagery to abstraction through a tedious process of rearrangement as is explained in this passage from Leah Ollman's review of Rugg for *Art in America*:

Matter is neither created nor destroyed in Kim Rugg's work, but surgically, strategically repurposed. Rugg reconfigures familiar printed materials: here newspapers, magazines and maps; previously also postage stamps, comic books and cereal boxes. By altering their forms and tweaking or altogether eliminating their legibility, she slams on the visual brakes, forcing a closer, slower inspection of objects we typically look *through* rather than *at*.

I became very enamored with her newspaper alterations and mapworks in particular. With the newspapers, Rugg meticulously redesigns the layout. She cuts letters out and relays them in new order to draw attention to the revised and impenetrable nature of what was originally a source of information. Rugg's work becomes a purely aesthetic experience, but makes the viewer question her intent. Referring to her mapworks, Kim Rugg reiterates how I employ maps within *Palimpsest*. She says in an interview with Jack Horkings for The Mark Moore Gallery where she is represented:

Maps are very recognizable, and my work relies on the short cut that iconic images afford me. If an image forms part of the bank of images contained in our memory, the transformed image will have the desired impact as it jars with the existing image and hopefully creates a response.

While she does not discuss a building of self with these works, it is her method that I am drawn to. The tedium of process and the resulting disintegration of a closed information system is replicated in my thesis work. Rugg reauthors these source materials similarly to how I edit the maps and family photos to draw attention to how we are all constantly revise our palimpsested selves.

CONCLUSION

My thesis exhibition, *Palimpsest*, invites the viewer to contemplate the common notions of the term palimpsest, which include the overwriting of old texts with new ideas and the influence of ancient architectures on modern designs, and apply these ideas to a building up and redesigning of the individual over time. Focusing on the influence of place and utilizing the process of erasure and overlay this work expects different interpretations from each viewer. This continues the metaphoric theme because it is similar to how an individual attempts to reauthor and represent themselves, changing over time with new experiences and influences and how others will inevitably bring their own individual interpretations to how they perceive them.

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