

**Material as Metaphor:  
Finding the Salt of Experience**

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**ABSTRACT**

This thesis details my exploration of salt as the principle material in my studio practice, and how I use it as a physical metaphor for emotional experiences. I borrow from James Hillman's theories in my understanding of how salt exists at all levels of lived experience, through our actions and ultimately in our own capacity for emotion. Although I am interested in exploring the full breadth of salt's relationship to all emotions, my thesis work specifically uses salt as a physical metaphor for sorrow and impending loss.

This discussion of my thesis includes reference to my personal connections to salt and draws upon the artistic practices and concepts of Motoi Yamamoto, Robert Gober and Rachel Whiteread to further provide context for my work. I also investigate the influence of James Hillman's theories on the connection between salt and lived experience, and Roland Barthes' discussion of mourning and loss and how the writers influenced the content of my work. Lastly, I highlight my thesis exhibition in order to discuss the culmination of my artistic growth throughout graduate school and how it relates to the larger themes of memory and loss I am investigating in my art practice.

## INTRODUCTION

My art practice has often been guided by an exploration into the expressive potential of a single material. I find that following this practice allows me to work intuitively and, through reflecting on my investigations, I am able to engage in dialogue with the material as I identify its inherent properties. As an undergraduate, I focused on using pigmented wax in painting, printmaking, drawing, and sculpture-based works. By varying my approach to using wax I was able to identify numerous ways the material supported the content and themes of my work. Although I no longer use wax as my main material, I have stayed true to my practice of identifying a single material of interest and exploring all facets of how that material functions physically and conceptually. The majority of my work produced while in the MFA Book Arts/Printmaking Program at the University of the Arts has explored salt as my principle material.

The art work and processes discussed in this paper will outline how I have come to understand the ways salt can function as a physical metaphor for emotional experiences. In the first section, I outline the development of my personal connection to salt and how I conceived of salt relating to memory through a discussion comparing my work and that of Motoi Yamamoto. I will also detail James Hillman and Roland Barthes' influence on my early work. In the second section I discuss my thesis work and how it focuses specifically on using salt as a metaphor for sorrow and impending loss. I will discuss the work of Christian Boltanski, Robert Gober and Rachel Whiteread and how it relates to and informs my own.

### **I Early Work: Personal Connections to Salt**

My studio practice during my time in the MFA Book Arts/Printmaking program has focused on exploring my fascination with salt as a material and conceptual substance. Through research and experimentation my use of salt has grown from broad explorations to more specific applications of the material as it relates to my personal history. My personal connection to this material can now be defined as being rooted within a cycle of emotions that I grapple with in relation to my mother's history of chronic illness.

For as long as I can remember, my mother has been sick. She has gone through many stages of severity in illness, sometimes requiring several hospitalizations each year. During

each hospitalization I experience a complicated mixture of fear, anxiety and sorrow that accumulates to a heightened sense of impending loss. After each hospital stay, my mother has recovered enough to return home, bringing a sense of relief to this emotional cycle. I reflect upon this experience as a cycle of accumulation and eventual release of these emotions, which is not unlike the accumulation and washing away of salt within my work. This deeply personal connection to salt developed over the course of two years as I explored all facets of the salt's physical properties and more abstract psychological and poetic connections to the material. My research has lead me to discover a number of artists working with similar themes and with salt as a material. Most recently, though, my reflections upon the work of Japanese artist Motoi Yamamoto have allowed me to connect more personally with the material and explore it as a medium for visual metaphor.

### **Salt and Metaphors for Memory**

Yamamoto's work with salt began as a way for him to work through the loss of his sister to brain cancer (*Return to the Sea*). In a video interview produced by the College of Charleston titled *Return to the Sea: Salt Works* by Motoi Yamamoto, Yamamoto describes his use of salt as a way to connect to his memories of his sister. This connection first manifested itself in large, three-dimensional sculptural installations, such as *Utsusemi* (2005) **Figure 1**. *Utsusemi* is a tall, narrow staircase built of out blocks of granulated white salt. The dimensions vary but the work is generally exhibited at about 8' H x 24' L, with the width of the staircase being too narrow to even appear usable. These dimensions, along with being built out of salt, clearly indicate this staircase will never be used. The form is built upon a device that creates a simulated earthquake, causing large breaks to form along the structure **Figure 2**. A common interpretation of the work relates to the devastation of earthquakes, common in Japan, and to a Japanese funerary practice of spilling salt to ward off evil spirits ([www.mymodernmet.com](http://www.mymodernmet.com)), but after viewing Yamamoto's interview I have come to see an additional connection. Yamamoto speaks of his earlier sculptural works as "large memories" related to his sister and if this is taken as a lens to view *Utsusemi*, it is possible to see it as a way to visually express the break in his connection to her because of her death. I read this piece more symbolically in the sense that the memory of his sister as a whole seems too large to hold in a single instance as expressed through the staircase, and it therefore fractures. His connection to his sister founded on his memories begins



Figure 1 Motoi Yamamoto, *Utsusemi (Before Earthquake)* (2005) Salt



Figure 2 Motoi Yamamoto, *Utsusemi (After Earthquake)* (2005) Salt

to breakdown with the weight of his emotions over time. This piece resonates with me because of the multi-tiered readings, but especially because of his ability to conjure a poetic expression and visual metaphor for his relationship to his sister that is changing over time. This speaks to my relationships with my mother and the ways I suggest our changing relationship in my work.

Yamamoto's earlier works in salt represent attempts to use 3-dimensional sculptures to explore his memories of his sister and to maintain a connection to her in spite of her death. While creating these sculptures, however, Yamamoto made a significant shift while trying to create a large, 3-dimensional brain out of bricks of salt. Once completed, he viewed it from above, and imagined the surfaces and textures flattened out in two-dimensional patterns, which was the impetus for creating his most recent body of works (*Return to the Sea*). His large-scale installation drawings in salt, such as *Floating Garden* (2010-present) **Figure 3**, reflect this shift in creating 2-dimensional work that is more impermanent and temporal, which more closely reflects the nature of memory.

*Floating Garden* is a site-specific installation that changes each time it is displayed. Yamamoto creates the work over the course of several days by drawing out lace-like patterns in salt directly onto the floor of the exhibition space. The patterns are made in a swirl, or hurricane-like pattern, extending out or spiraling in to the center. The salt is poured out from bottles with narrow nozzles, which allow Yamamoto great control over the quality of the line created. The patterns of bubbles that form vary in size and density based on Yamamoto's meditations while creating the work. Plans are drawn out ahead of time, but the final work is primarily a response to his internal monologue and meditation upon memories of his sister, as well as the physical constraints of his surroundings. Each bubble is a physical symbol for a specific memory Yamamoto has of his sister, and in this way relates to my attempts to represent memories in salt early in my Master's program with my two works *salt directions* (2012) **Figure 4** and *A grain of salt* (2013) **Figure 5**.

In *salt directions*, I wrote a text based on an imagined scenario of standing out in the open and tossing a fistful of salt grains into the air. The resulting pattern of grains allowed me to create a path to travel along, "point by point." This idea of traveling between grains of salt inspired me to consider how salt has existed in or is related to different locations I have traveled to or place I have called home. For example, I moved to and grew up in Hollywood, FL, which is near the ocean. I moved back to my hometown of Yonkers, NY as a young adult, which was my first time using salt to melt ice and snow in winter. By charting out these locations where the salt





Figure 3 Motoi Yamamoto, *Floating Garden* (2012) Salt

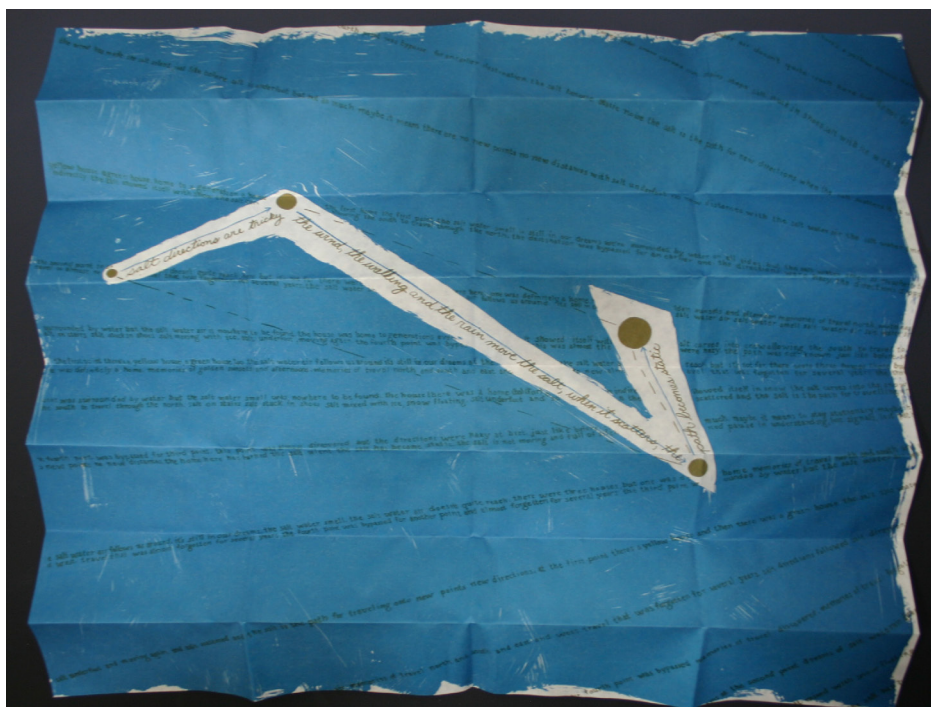


Figure 4 Kara Petraglia, *salt directions* (2012) Offset lithography printed artist's book

had the strongest presence, I created a hand drawn map. The map was created as a one-sheet book printed in offset lithography. The background is a pattern of metallic gold text mimicking lines of latitude or longitude over a watery blue ground; an abstract image is centered in the foreground consisting of four gold points, or dots, representing specific locations I have visited, or lived in, and came to relate quite strongly to my sense of home. The original vision of salt grains orienting my travel provided a starting point to associate salt grains with specific memories. This piece did not get close enough to making this connection for me, and like Yamamoto, I began seeking a more direct way to align salt with memory by using salt as a physical metaphor.

The first piece where I used physical salt granules was in *A grain of salt* (2013) **Figure 5**. In this piece, coarse-ground Himalayan salt granules fill a series of thirteen small glass bottles, each marked with the longitude and latitude for real locations I have visited. Each bottle has varying amounts of salt, with more salt suggesting a stronger emotional tie to the specific location and memory for that bottle. The bottles are accompanied by a pocket-sized, hand-bound journal with entries that correspond to each location. The entries are reflections on memories I have of the locations, and include stories about my family and travels. Also included in the display is a larger bottle holding additional salt, meant to indicate the potential for this collection of locations and memories to grow. The entire piece is displayed within a narrow drawer from a card catalog.



Figure 5 Kara Petraglia, *A grain of salt* (2013)  
Salt, glass, paper, wax. Photo credit: Ken Yanoviak

This piece was my first attempt to directly equate levels of salt concentration to levels of emotional connection to a specific memory. For me, the salt acts as a stand in for my own memories and emotions related to the stories entered in the journal. As such, I am able to collect and store my memories within the bottles. In some ways, I am metaphorically preserving the emotional connections in salt in order to avoid losing my connection to those places and events described within the journal. The salt granules are solid, yet would dissolve if they encounter moisture or humidity. By storing them in bottles capped with wax, the granules are kept safe from dissolution and, in turn, so are my memories. Yamamoto considers his *Floating Garden* installations to also function as a way to freeze his memories of his sister, but his work does this through the process of it being destroyed.

At the end of each installation, salt from *Floating Garden* is gathered up by members of the community where it is on exhibition and poured into the sea in an attempt to begin a cycle of rebirth of the salt (*Return to the Sea*). Yamamoto views this act as part of the cycle of life, which is also reflected in his choice of a swirl, or spiral, for the larger form of the work. The directionality of the swirl is visually reversible, with it moving out from the center or appearing to move toward the center. Yamamoto chose the symbol of the spiral to represent a connection to the cycle of birth, death and rebirth, which he identifies as biological and spiritual. These two different ways of preserving our memories in salt reflect our personal interests, but also speak to a larger human connection to salt, which he and I have identified.

### **Salt and Emotional Experience**

Around the same time I made *A grain of salt*, my research brought me to *Salt and the Alchemical Soul*, a series of three essays by Ernest Jones, Carl Jung, and James Hillman. It was Hillman's essay that resonated most strongly with me as he captured the essence of what I seemed to feel instinctually about salt. Hillman states:

*...salt is the mineral substance or objective ground of personal experience making experience possible. No salt, no experiencing—merely a running on and running through of events without psychic body. Thus salt makes events sensed and felt, giving us each a sense of the personal—my tears, my sweat and blood, my taste and value. (153)*

This text was instrumental in providing a path towards understanding something about salt that goes deeper than simply associating it with physical and external locations, or even strictly related to memory. Considering Hillman's words I was able to identify a connection to salt based on a "psychic" and emotional context. Two works from this period of exploration are *A few words between us* and *The fear of what has happened and cannot recur*, both from 2013.

*A few words between us* **Figure 6** is constructed out of loose sheets of light grey handmade paper with pink and white Himalayan salt inclusions. Inclusions are added after the sheet of paper has been pulled from the vat of paper pulp so that the objects are embedded into the surface of the paper during the drying process. Using coarse-ground salt grains caused the salt to embed into the surface in different ways: Some of the salt is visible on both sides of the sheet; other granules look as if they emerged from the sheet, sitting prominently on the top of the paper; and some are trapped under the fibers, barely visible. Each sheet of paper is roughly four inches square, and there are thirty-three sheets in the series. The grains of salt here allude to a conversation, or several conversations, between two individuals. The concentration of salt builds up during emotional moments in the conversation, and the salt diminishes in moments that are less emotional. As one turns the sheets over, a rhythm is created as the backs of the pages punctuate the "words" or silence from the previous page. Blank sheets and sheets so filled with salt they barely hold together are intermingled with subtler sheets containing a few flecks, suggesting the patterns of conversation.



Figure 6 Kara Petraglia, *A few words between us* (2013) Handmade paper, Himalayan salt

In *The fear of what has happened and cannot recur* (2013) **Figure 7**, I borrow a line from Roland Barthes' *Mourning Diary* to explore a sense of loss and longing. In this piece, I manipulated square and rectangular blocks of marbled pink and white Himalayan salt to evoke loss by changing their strong geometric structures into more organic shapes. Some blocks were manipulated with water, changing the texture along the surface, as well as smoothing the hard edges of the square to rounded, soft curves. One square has a hole worn through the center where water dripped continuously for hours **Figure 8**. Some of the blocks were smashed, with nothing but fine powder and shards of salt remaining. These pieces of salt act as physical metaphors for emotional loss and suggest both the impossible reversal of the destructive actions that caused their change in appearance and the futility of fearing that those actions may be repeated.



Figure 7 Kara Petraglia, *The fear of what has happened and cannot recur* (2013) Himalayan salt

In Barthes' diary entries, he repeatedly speaks of the death of his mother as something that he recognizes has happened yet continues to fear (Barthes 158). Barthes seems to vacillate between accepting the reality of his mother's death, becoming filled with sorrow, and forgetting she is dead, becoming filled with the fear of it happening. This sentiment resonates with my experience of my mother's illness. Instead of a definitive loss, however, I experience a return to the fear and impending nature of this loss each time she returns to the hospital.





Figure 8 Kara Petraglia, *The fear of what has happened and cannot recur* (2013) detail

While *A grain of salt* and *The fear of what has happened and cannot recur* both use salt as a material in the final work, the salt I used was ultimately commercially processed and machine cut. Rather than focus solely on this “found” salt, I dissolved large amounts of finely-ground salt in water to create a highly-saturated saline solution. This solution was used in various ways to interact with, or create, the intended art objects through pouring, dipping, dripping, brushing on, soaking, and any other technique that allowed me to apply or integrate the salt into the final piece. In order for the salt to appear in these processes, a great deal of time is required in order for the water to evaporate and leave the trace of a salt residue, or for the accumulation of granules to collect on the surface of the objects. In addition to the growth of salt crystals on the surfaces of objects, such as salt crystals forming on linen cord in *Salt Memory* (2013) **Figure 9**, different qualities of salt crystals formed in the pans, buckets and containers used to soak the objects. The variations in texture of the different salt growths allowed me to create different visual environments than I had previously done. I transformed a number of the images into paper lithography prints for the series *A house made of salt is always rebuilding* (2013), and further developed the paper lithography prints into the background images for the offset book *(re)building* (2013).

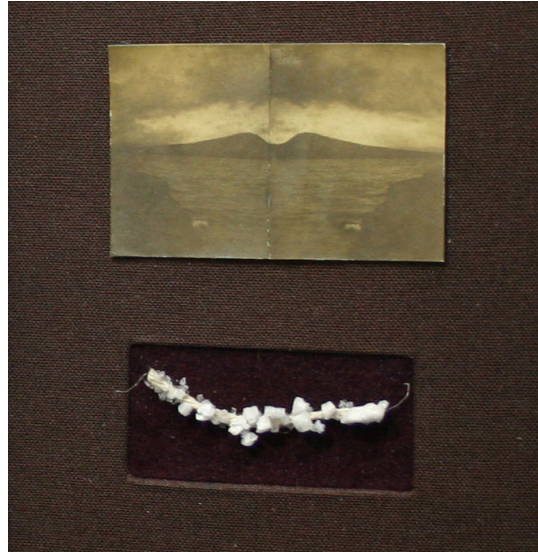


Figure 9 Kara Petraglia, *Salt Memory* (2013) detail

## Salt and Home

In *(re)building* (2013) **Figure 10**, a single phrase of text is written out over two, non-sequential pages in the book and the images used for the backgrounds are all photographs of salt crystal formations created in my studio. There are a total of six page spreads and two end sheets, each with an image of salt. The only text in the book, “A house made of salt constantly crumbles and is always rebuilding,” comes directly from my journaling about the relationship between salt and emotional experiences within domestic spaces. These writings were directly influenced by Hillman’s writing about salt in *Salt and the Alchemical Soul*, and relate to my attempts to define spaces where emotional experiences are concentrated. I have come to recognize home and domestic spaces as places where a high concentration of emotional experiences occur, especially within my own personal narrative. With this in mind, the symbol of the home is a starting point for the metaphors I am developing with salt.

The background images in this artist book were printed as a duotone image, meaning that two layers of color are printed in a partially overlapping way, allowing both colors to exist simultaneously. The two layers used were dark graphite, and a split fountain of a deep rose and deep orange, which mimics the appearance of Himalayan salt. A split fountain allows for the application of multiple colors to a plate, where each color retains its appearance while slightly blending at the edges where it meets other colors.



Figure 10 Kara Petraglia, *(re)building* (2013) Offset lithography printed artist's book; detail of two page spreads

For this split fountain of two colors, they were placed in the inkwell in such a way that each page spread has two veins of each color running through it. The eight image spreads provide a space for the viewer to contemplate the text. It is my hope that the viewer can imagine a structure made of salt that crumbles because of the impermanence of salt, and a structure that is able to rebuild itself as the salt accumulates. The open-ended nature of what causes the damage and the rebuilding is meant to invite the viewer to connect to the piece, and perhaps associate moments of their own sorrow or loss to the act of crumbling and accumulating salt.

As seen in this work, my exploration into using photo-based images involved taking digital imagery and outputting it with mechanical or hand printing processes. Exploring this process for *(re)building* opened up a way for me to incorporate this into my thesis work through the process of polymer intaglio printing.

## II Thesis Work: Memory, Home, and Absence

The polymer intaglio process is new to me, as I had no previous experience using polymer plates in a printmaking method. Intaglio, or processes where the image is incised into the surface of the plate, are traditional to printmaking, but typically relate to using metal plates such as copper or zinc. Because of my experience with zinc intaglio, I am familiar with the physicality required by the printmaker in order to ink the plate for printing. The process of



wiping away ink from the surface of the plate requires a great deal of attention from the printmaker in order to know when enough ink is removed for the ideal print, but not too much has been taken away. In polymer intaglio the inking process is the same as it is for metal plates, however, the image quality captured is based on a photographic process of exposing the plate rather than engraving by hand or with acids. The photographic process allows a greater level of detail to be captured due to the use of transparencies and digital positives. The quality of the hand-printing process creates a dreamlike atmosphere in the image that alludes to memory because of a murkiness or haze that develops. These images recall early photographs, which were often hazy or slightly blurred due to the technical limitations of the process.

### Questions of Memory

*Filling the absence* (2014) is a photography-based polymer intaglio print series of five images. The images are landscapes, but the quality of the printed image creates a dreamlike atmosphere, which invites the viewer to invent his or her own narrative. Three of the images are very similar which asks the viewer to go back to each image and consider what has changed between each image. This recognition of differences within similar images alludes to a function of memory where one is not sure of changes in recollection over time. Through remembering we focus on different details and as we move further away from the original event, we may change slight details or remember things differently. This break in the continuity of memories is suggested both by the similar images and the image quality of the prints **Figures 11-13**.



Figures 11, 12, 13 Kara Petraglia, *Filling the absence* (2014) Polymer intaglio prints, Individual details  
Photo credit: John Bernardo Photography

When installed in the gallery space, the prints are mounted on a PVC board that is 1mm thick. Recessed magnets placed within the PVC board allow the prints to hang flush with the wall. This way of installing the prints is important to maintain a low profile for the printed image, allowing them to be uninterrupted by frames or matting, and thus, enable them to function like small windows into other places. Each print is approximately 3.75”x 5,” with three of the prints oriented vertically at 5” H x 3.75” W and the two others oriented horizontally. The prints all incorporate a depiction of water with its surface referencing the patterns and textures created during the process of salt crystal formation and the other works installed in the exhibition. The small scale, along with the haziness of the image, evokes a feeling of searching, similar to what is felt when attempting to recall a memory that is just beyond your grasp. In this way, I see this piece functioning similarly to Christian Boltanski’s *Les 62 membres du Club Mickey en 1955* (*The 62 members of the Mickey Mouse Club in 1955*) (1972) **Figure 14.**

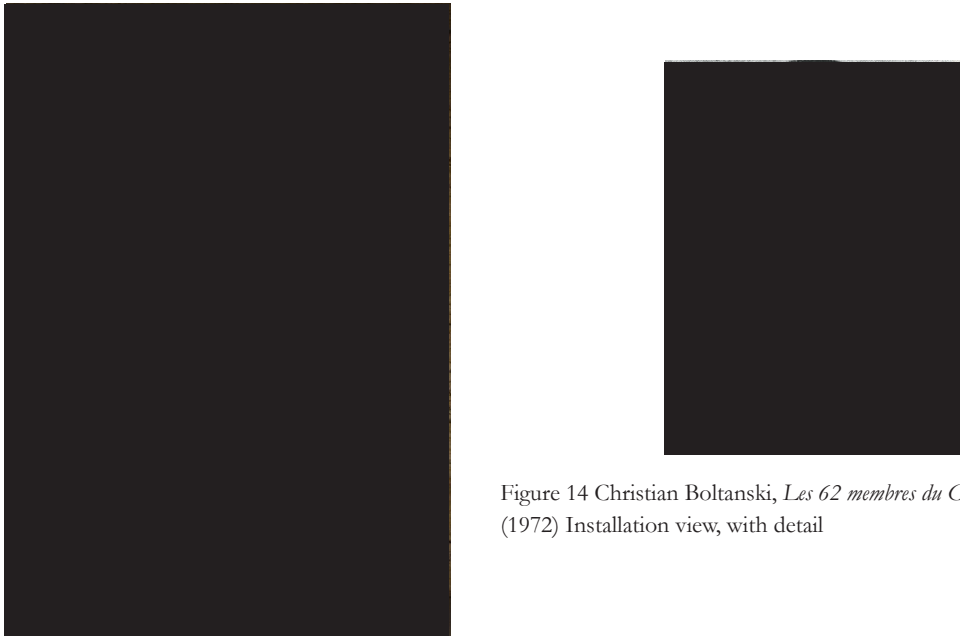


Figure 14 Christian Boltanski, *Les 62 membres du Club Mickey en 1955* (1972) Installation view, with detail

In *Les 62 membres du Club Mickey en 1955*, Boltanski presents a series of 62 photographed portraits of children. The images are black and white photographs of images printed in a magazine, measuring approximately 12” H x 8” W and are presented in tin frames. Through the process of rephotographing and enlarging the magazine images, Boltanski emphasizes the objectness of the image: The prints are blurred and somewhat distorted because of the translation from magazine printing to enlarged, photographic reproductions. This process

eliminates the ability of the photograph to act as a window that allows a clear reading of the children (Solomon-Godeau 8) and as such, the viewer is invited to invent his or her own narrative in a way that is uncommon with photography.

I believe my prints work towards a similar conversation as *Les 62 membres du Club Mickey en 1955* but they function differently. My images printed for the series are clear enough to identify as landscapes and this provides an access point for the viewer, which is not how Boltanski's images function. My images are specific enough to be landscapes but general enough to invite the viewer to create his or her own narrative.

This disconnect from the original subjects of the photographs through time and the printing quality also suggests a form of death in the image. Milan Kundera suggests the mortal fear of death is not related to a loss of the future but to a loss of the past, and that forgetting is a form of death (64). By losing one's memories, an individual loses his or her past, which begs the question, "are we ourselves without our memories?" This question resonates with me as I see my mother losing her memories. As I grow older, I, too, am beginning to forget, and question the accuracy of my own memories. I also wonder if an individual loses his or her memories of loved ones, what impact will that person's death have? This further relates to a sentiment Boltanski has reflected upon in interviews where he has stated, "If you don't have a personal life, or if you can destroy it, death becomes unimportant," (64). If memories of something are lost, then it seems as if that thing did not exist and the impact of its true loss would be nonexistent.

## Considering Home

Continuing with the theme of "home" developed during my work with *(re)building*, is an piece in my thesis exhibition titled *Salt House* (2014) **Figure 15**. While contemplating the phrase in *(re)building*, I wanted to actually create a house made of salt. My experiments in casting objects purely out of salt had failed so far, so I attempted to utilize a substrate that would support the salt and provide minimal interference in allowing the salt to grow. I began experimenting with handmade paper as this support.



Figure 15 Kara Petraglia, *Salt House* (2014) Handmade paper, salt  
Photo credit: John Bernardo Photography

The paper used to form *Salt House* was created using a traditional sheet-forming technique of beating pulp and then adding it to a vat of water to be dispersed. For this process, I used salt water for the vat so that my sheets would form with traces of salt already present, in an attempt to promote salt crystal growth. For *Salt House* I created an armature out of aluminum mesh that was roughly 6" H x 6" W x 5" D, and sewed the joints together with linen cord. I then layered sheets of dyed black paper over the form until it was entirely covered. Once the paper was dry, I submerged the structure in salt water for one week, at which point a high concentration of salt crystals had formed in a 1 1/2" band around the bottom and I removed the structure from the salt water. Over the course of the next few weeks, the salt crystal band increased in width, as did the size of the crystals. The paper held a great deal of residual moisture and it took approximately two months for the full form to stop changing. In its final state, the band of salt crystals along the bottom of the structure are completely opaque, and protrude off of the surface about 1/2".

The experience of viewing the *Salt House* resonates with me in a similar way to viewing Robert Gober's *Burnt House* (1980) **Figure 16**. Robert Gober considers his work to function as a "natural history diorama about contemporary human beings." (Foster 130) With this in mind, viewing his early dollhouse pieces, it is possible to read more into the objects than simple reproduction of houses. The majority of the houses he constructed are described as "domestic

nondescript,” with the exception of two. The first, *Untitled* from 1978-79, was based on a southern plantation house, which was based on a temple; and the second, which I will discuss here, *Burnt House*, 1980. This house is two stories, with what appears to be white wood siding and a red shingle roof. The front of the house is displayed open to reveal fire damage to the interior, as well as visible damage to the roof and the gable in the front. This object is loosely based on Gober’s paternal grandmother’s house with the exception of the fire, (Sussman 39-40). Gober states:

The fire, I believe, was inspired by two terrible events. When I was young, maybe eleven or twelve, and walking home from school, a house across the street from us was engulfed in flames. A mother and her son were outside of the burning house and the mother was hysterical because her youngest child was inside...And on May 25, 1979, Etan Patz disappeared from the face of the earth as he walked to meet his school bus...His disappearance sparked a worldwide manhunt and his smiling trustful face was seen on posters and fliers that blanketed our neighborhood for months. (40)



Figure 16 Robert Gober, *Burnt House* (1980) (material list not available)

Burnt House presents a confused perspective on memory, as it conflates two remembered events within a third site, his grandmother's home. The symbolism of this space highlights the crime and trauma of the fire by asking the viewer to act as a detective to first understand what happened and then to identify what was lost. Completing either scenario is impossible, as the conflation of three memories does not exist in any version of the past. The fabrication of a singular space where these three memories exist alludes to how memories can sometimes be jumbled and recombined in one's mind. The combination of multiple memories into a singular idea or object resonates specifically with me because of my intent in using the salt as a metaphor for sorrow and impending loss. In Salt House and the other works in my thesis exhibition, the use of salt does not represent a single occurrence of these emotions, but rather an accumulation of sorrow and loss over time. My salt is like Gobar's fire in that it creates a generalized visual moment to express multiple experiences and emotions. However, where Gobar recreates representational objects, I attempt to create metaphoric objects that emphasize material and process, which is perhaps more akin to how Rachel Whiteread utilizes cast concrete in her work.

Rachel Whiteread's cast cement sculptures of domestic interiors explore spaces which are usually unseen in the buildings we live in and questions the boundaries of these spaces relative to the viewer (Dennison 31, 36). In this way, Whiteread's sculptures present the viewer with the volume of space that is typically inhabited by people, but is turned inside out. Her sculptures are casts of the interior of a space, which brings us outside of our typical experiences by forcing us to confront the spatial volume of a house or apartment as a solid form rather than as space that is experienced through movement and time (33). Whiteread emphasizes the symbolism connected to the idea of "home," and provides this as a backdrop for the viewer to analyze his or her own experiences within similar spaces. Relying on a larger cultural and shared understanding of what these domestic spaces represent and what occurs in them, Whiteread taps into this generalized symbol and invites the viewer to project individual experiences onto it.

Whiteread's *House* (1993-94) **Figure 17** was created using a semi-derelict house in East London whose inhabitants had custom-fit cupboards and cocktails bars, and decorated it with a variety of wallpapers and floor finishes (Mullins 51). Before removing all of the interior curiosities, it was fully documented by Whiteread, which she compared to "exploring the inside of a body and removing its vital organs," (52). Once everything was removed and prepared, each area of the house was filled with concrete. The building was stripped by hand, both interior and exterior. Mullins describes the result as, "The interior volumes of the family house had been

solidified, and as bricks were pulled away, sheer concrete walls imprinted with the idiosyncrasies of 100 years of domestic use were revealed.” (52)

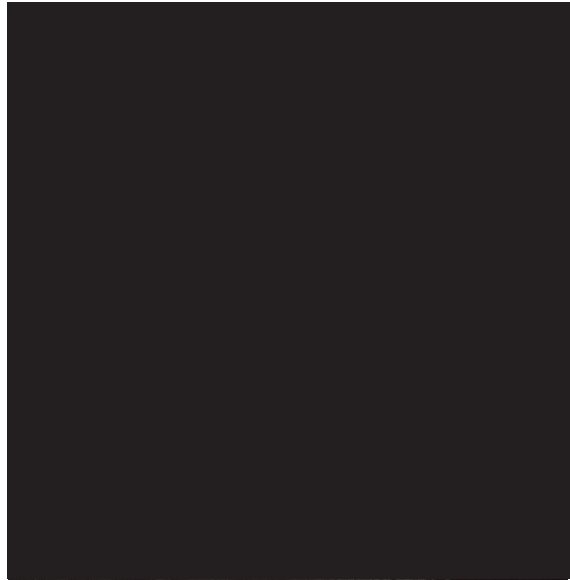


Figure 17 Rachel Whiteread, *House* (1993-4) cast cement

In *House*, a shift occurs where the original house transforms from an artifact of those who lived there, into a symbol of “home” and domestic space. In the casting process a mold must be used which, traditionally, allows for multiples to be made out of the original matrix, thereby reproducing copies of the original object. In this instance, however, the process required to produce the cast utilizes the original home as the mold and in the process of separating mold and cast, the original house is destroyed.

In this one-off casting of the house it literally has to be lost in order to show the concrete cast, which exists as the residue of experiences in that house. In producing the sculptures in this way, Whiteread is always preserving the human trace. Her work is “akin to one of the earliest sculpture practices, the death mask, for her work is both a portrait of the original building as well as an object in its own right that will...accumulate its own history.” (Dennison 38) The parallel between Whiteread’s work and my own resides in understanding our materials as physical metaphors for the accumulation of personal history. Whiteread’s concrete captures details such as soot that clung to bulges where fireplaces were, or lemon-yellow paint from a bedroom wall, giving shape and form to the history of the space. My salt captures the essence of emotional experiences and reflects how feelings can swell and build up on top of one another, or wash away with a sense of relief. Although the process of working with the materials is different,



both my use of salt and Whiteread's use of concrete allude to the same end: an emphasis on the weight and physicality of emotions and experience.

*Salt House*, along with two other thesis works, *Salt stains* and *Only salt remains* emphasize the materiality of the salt and the processes used to integrate it within the works. *Salt stains* **Figure 18** is a series of four handmade paper panels that range in size from 33 ½" H x 18" W to 36" H x 23" W and exist as four different examples of patterns and textures that can be created when the paper absorbs salt water.

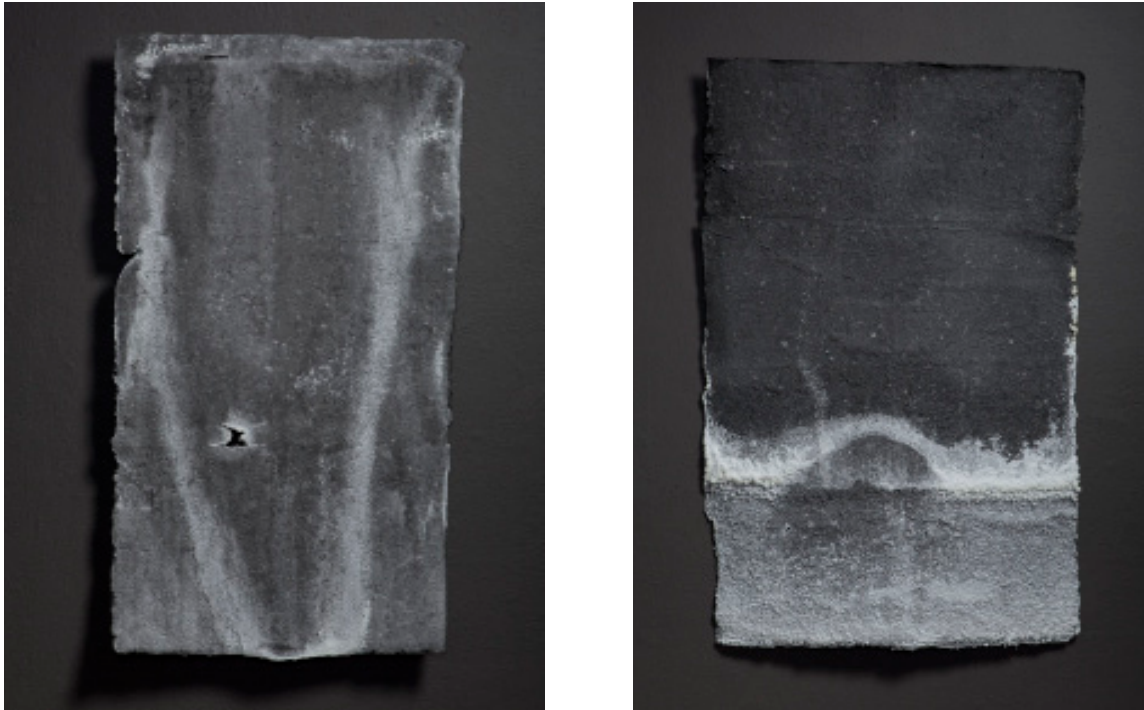


Figure 18 Kara Petraglia, *Salt stains* (2014), handmade paper, salt. Photo credit: John Bernardo Photography

The objects themselves are made with dark grey handmade paper. They are installed on supports that allow the panels to hang away from the walls, which emphasizes the objectness and materiality of the paper. In the exhibition space the panels function in a way that recalls stained glass windows in a church or chapel. Stained glass windows in this context provide a narrative where the images in the glass are meant to be looked at and read rather than looked through. In the exhibition space, the narrative of the panels alludes to the physical accumulation of growth and experience over time, with the different qualities of the salt in each panel evoking a different feeling. One of the panels suggests an airiness, and distance as it appears like a celestial field **Figure 19**, with the salt crystals bubbled up along the surface of the paper reminiscent of depictions of the cosmos; another appears as if it were a piece of wall, or excavated piece of concrete, with washes and stains on the surface; the last two panels provide a more pictorial perspective, recalling landscapes of a body of water or rain **Figure 20**. Each panel provides space for contemplation, and invites the viewer to consider the different forms and shapes of the accumulations. In the gallery space, these panels face the intaglio prints, *Filling the absence*, lining the walkway for viewers to approach *Only salt remains*, a large portfolio of loose handmade



paper sheets and salt.



Figures 19, 20 Kara Petraglia, *Salt stains* (2014) individual panels. Photo credit: John

The exhibition space is painted with a dark, warm grey, which assists in transforming the feeling of the room into a more intimate and quiet space. **Figures 21 and 22** All of the work is lit with warm spot lights, which emphasize the textures and sparkle of the salt, and causes the room to be darker. The darkness of the space, as well as it being a smaller room within the gallery creates an environment that welcomes quiet contemplation. The stark lighting, darkness of the space and arrangement of the works provides a series of visual cues that reference those of religious sculpture and objects, and invite contemplation and a feeling of reverence experienced in such spaces. Both *Filling the absence* and *Salt Stains* provide for these moments in a similar way to vitrines, and *Salt House* acts as monument for memory. Considering Gobar's *Burnt House* and Whiteread's *House*, the objects themselves represent larger ideas of memory and experience within domestic spaces, and as such, become larger symbols or monuments to stand in for the memories and narratives of those experiences. In this way, *Salt House* also acts as a narrative symbol, inviting each viewer reflect upon his or her own experiences.



Figure 21 Kara Petraglia, *only salt remains* (2014) view of exhibition at the Rosenwald-Wolf Gallery, Philadelphia, PA. In view: *Salt House*, *Salt stains* and *Salt remains*. Photo credit: John Bernardo Photography

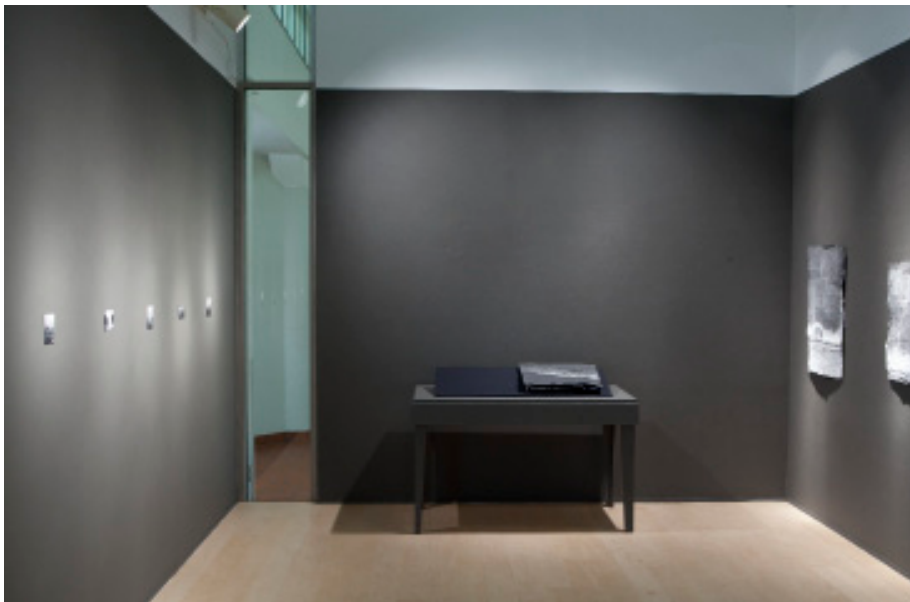


Figure 22 Kara Petraglia, *only salt remains* (2014) view of exhibition at the Rosenwald-Wolf Gallery, Philadelphia, PA. In view: *Salt stains*, *Salt remains* and *Filling the absence*. Photo credit: John Bernardo Photography

## Considering Absence

*Only salt remains* **Figure 21** is a book in the form of loose sheets in a portfolio. There are six sheets of 16"x20" black handmade paper. The text consists of one continuous line written

in black oil paint across the center of the pages that reads: When the time comes, I will feel her absence and only salt will remain. This line of text specifically relates to my relationship with my mother's illness and the cycle of accumulated emotions I experience each time she is hospitalized. This text suggests the feeling of impending loss, with washes of salt crystals coming up around the text to evoke tears and sorrow, with the wave-like patterns referencing waves of emotion **Figures 22, 23 and 24**. The pages were formed by tiling the black handmade paper sheets, but these were treated differently than the paper for *Salt stains* and *Salt House* as no salt was added to the vat during sheet formation. Excess water was also removed using a hydraulic press. The sheets were then dried under weight, and the resulting sheets of paper are thinner and smoother, allowing me to paint on the text using oil paint and oil medium. Once the text dried, I submerged the sheets fully in salt water for two days. I pulled the sheets out and hung them to dry so that a light residue of salt would form on the front and back. Once the sheets dried, I then submerged them partially in salt water so that salt crystals would only accumulate on a portion of the sheet. Each page has a different tideline rising from the bottom where it is possible to see how far the page was submerged in salt water. The crystals that formed vary in texture and size, from even surfaces, to larger, clear sparkling forms. These variations suggest different levels and intensity of sorrow felt.

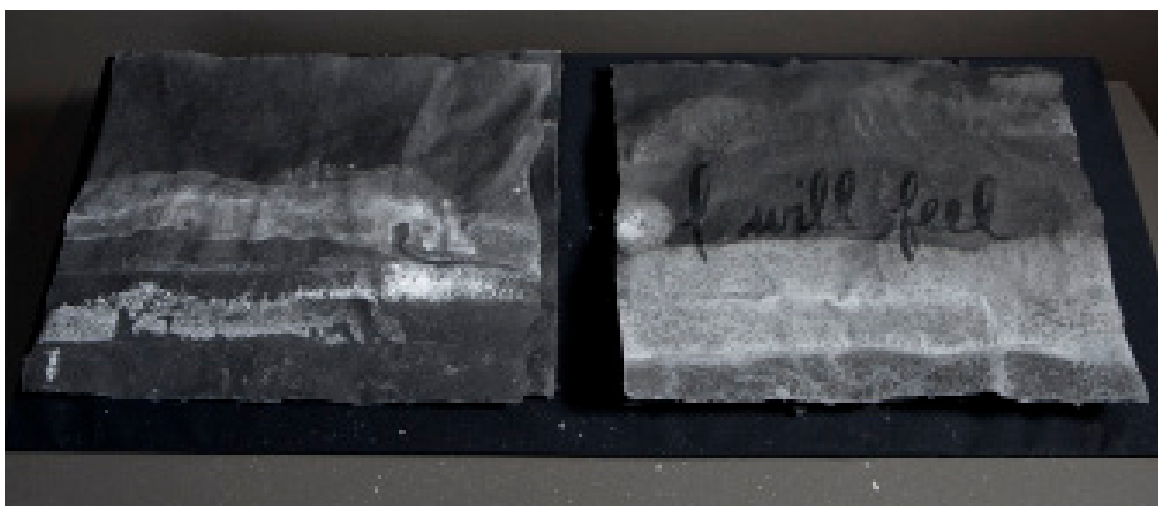


Figure 22 Kara Petraglia, *Salt remains* (2014) handmade paper, salt. Photo credit: John Bernardo Photography

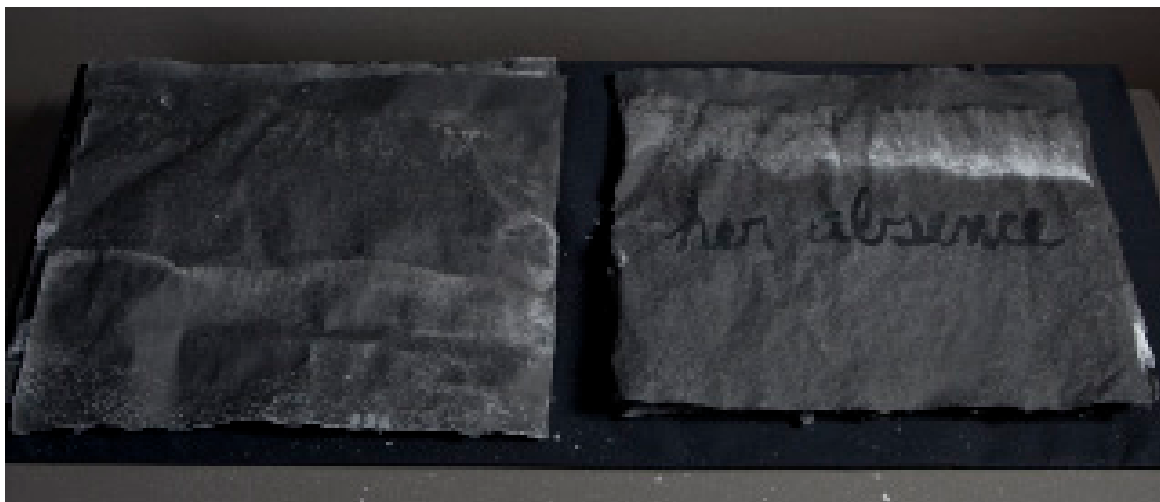


Figure 23 Kara Petraglia, *Salt remains* (2014) handmade paper, salt. Photo credit: John Bernardo Photography

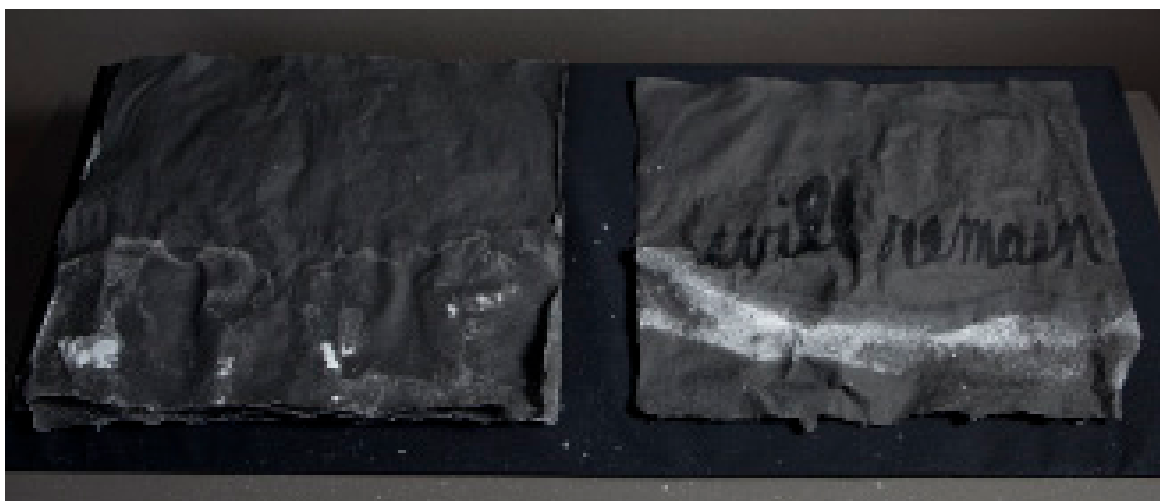


Figure 2 Kara Petraglia, *Salt remains* (2014) handmade paper, salt. Photo credit: John Bernardo Photography

## CONCLUSION

My explorations during my time in the MFA Book Arts/Printmaking program have centered on exploring my fascination with salt as a material and conceptual substance. Through my investigations and attempts to uncover the expressive qualities of salt, I have come to see it act as a metaphor for emotional experiences. My thesis work is an extension of this aim and uses salt as a metaphor for sorrow and impending loss, which relates to my relationship to my mother's chronic illness. Throughout my life I have grappled with complex accumulations of emotions and release of these emotions as the severity of her illness fluctuates. I have found

salt to be a poetic and physical metaphor for this experience because its physical properties (accumulation, crumbling, washing away, etc.) along with its use as literary metaphor and its place within human experience provide a rich narrative to draw from. My thesis work is the culmination of these investigations over the last two years.

In addition to creating visual works that connects these ideas, I developed my work largely through writing in personal journals and text that was included in finished work. Focusing on writing, and my increased confidence in this part of my studio practice is the greatest change I experienced during graduate school. By adding this element of writing to my practice of research and material experimentation, I have found that I am able to create work that speaks personally to me as well as broadly to a larger audience.

As my awareness of and confidence in my own art practice continues to evolve, I see potential for continuing my work with salt in various capacities. I hope to continue utilizing printmaking processes, but I also plan to focus more on writing, drawing and collage work in the immediate future.

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