Past-Present

A Mythology of Time

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I abstract photographs of healing to rekindle bonds with my ancestors from a period that spans a century or more marked at the beginning by a Great War. In common, we are from lands in southern Scotland, the place through which I reconnect with the past.

Figure 1: Past-Present 1930-1960 Family Archive

I open with an abstraction of the 1930-1960 family archive. The photographs of family shown in their environmental setting are combined into a single overlaid image. Time is reduced to surface marks, people have all but disappeared.
We left this place, as some were taken away in war and others migrated in waves. Those left behind have since passed away.

Past-Present recreates human bonds in a motherline. Mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) creates energy, giving us warmth that the camera detects. The warmth is more concentrated where we heal.

Past-Present is an exhibition and an artist’s book.

Collaboration was present from earlier phases of my practice. This added character interest as archive newspaper articles were found for my ancestors. A letter from the trenches to Mum. Another ominously began “Dear Mrs Cosh ... “.

I would have lost this key interest if I had worked entirely on my own.

Photographs of Scotland were made during this course and no doubt primed the abstract elements of place. Local migration from farm to farm I followed from west to east. Burns wrote many poems and songs in this region. I stopped at the Isle of Whithorn, a family home and place where Christianity arrived in Scotland.

At first I photographed minor trauma of close family to act as a mirror of the wounds suffered by ancestors in war. From these photographs I create images as abstract forms based on the glow captured and each time I aim for a pre-visualised theme. Success in matching theme was never guaranteed. It started with ghost landscapes and expanded to other forms. The outcomes became more predictable through observation of the original image and with practice in the digital darkroom. These are the forms I sought to find: ghost place as faded memory Figure 5, of ghost Figure 2 and the division of cell Figure 10. Other themes supporting the work became more incidental.

The digital camera’s sensor detected and enhanced warmth at the site of healing. I sculpted and layered and re-layered the photograph, by intuition and imagination.
When presented at an earlier exhibition and in critique, viewers confirmed also seeing the figurative forms. The images are therefore more universal and interpretation carries beyond immediate family.

Place for the author signifies the presence of ancestors.

It is uncanny how images emerge and this phenomenology is described well by Trigg (2013). Migration in my early years away from the southern coastal rural lands of Galloway meant that I got to observed from close-up yet in my memory place was never dulled by familiarity (ibid).

People I do not recognise yet strangely seem to know, intrude on the work as uninvited ghosts. When sought the ghosts do not appear for weeks at a time, but when seen they are fixed. I locate them in my mind as markers of events in historical time.

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Figure 2: Past-Present Ghost uninvited intrudes
Past-Present evolved as a series of projects:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project</th>
<th>Type and Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3. Poppies are Red</td>
<td>Pictorial Commemoration.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In choosing abstract photography, I am reminded that:

“People do not React
To Abstractions
They only React
To Direct Experience”

Stanley Kubrick

Then from National Geographic, Genographic, “No article we have ever published has been more difficult” than our first feature about the molecule of life, which appeared 42 years ago. (Greshko 2018)

On this molecule my work was founded and so the existence of a challenge is very clear.

Roland Barthes wrote of family likeness and genetics, “more penetrating than likeness: the photograph sometimes makes appear what we never see in a real face (or in a face reflected in a mirror): a genetic feature, the fragment of oneself or of a relative which comes from some ancestor.” (Barthes 1982, 103)

In genetics, Barthes’ words in my view are of epigenesis, that mystery of how DNA transforms to give life and likeness. My work however is based on a presence of mtDNA. Detected by the camera sensor enhanced but is felt as warmth to the touch. Physical likeness expressed by Barthes is not important to Past-Present in which identity is obscured in favour of glow as a form.
My practice as ArtSci was perhaps inevitable given developments during my earlier career. I worked in computing at the time of cutting-edge advances in biological science. Our computer systems at work were deployed firstly to decode the human genome in one of the worldwide groups and subsequently to lend support to the National Geographic human migration project, Out of Africa. Since 2004 my computer has continued to perform tasks in computational biology, ranging from human proteome folding in 2004 to human cancer markers in 2020. At the time of writing the computer is queued to accept work units relating to SARS-CoV-2, 2019 novel coronavirus.

However, it was on discovering motherline gene inheritance, that my photographic practice was sealed.

The author’s DNA (LivingDNA 2019) has been sequenced and began to enter the work.

Figure 3: Grandmother archive overlaid with author DNA code and son’s healing glow
The immutability of the motherline gene means a change once only in a thousand years and so in Past-Present easily spans the century passed.

I stop at the farthest point that living memory can reach as touch that aligns with that world event known as the Great War.

Chromosomes are grouped as: motherline mtDNA; Autosomal Family DNA and Fatherline Y-DNA.

mtDNA has been used to reconnect other families. The remains of notorious western cowboy Jesse James were identified from the maternal line (Stone 2001). Exhumed remains of the Romanov royal family murdered in the Russian revolution in 1918, were identified from the British Duke of Edinburgh, again using mtDNA (Pruitt 2019).

Koerner in darkroom work, “myDNA” (2019), by contrast refers to his inherited gene damaged by his parents exposure to nuclear radiation, which affected the survival of his siblings and himself.

Figure 4: Project myDNA Michael Koerner UNSEEN Issue 7
I had felt sad that my family elders were unable to speak of the loss of their close ones. From my experience of researching and making, I now understand why they remained silent.

The course gave me cause to dwell on events, leading to deep sadness and shock. In learning of Family Constellations (Preiss 2012), it was possible to continue on.

The themes of Past-Present have triggered emotion in others to whom I have spoken regarding their loss. But Freud and Jung are the concern of others, expert in their fields.

Past-Present is unheimlich and may take from the weird and the eerie (Fischer 2016), or Phantasmagoria as spirit visions (Warner 2006), or Spectres of Marx (Derrida 2006). Observations from these writings translate well between literature and visual art.

It was during my Final Major Project (FMP) studies that I visited the Wellcome Museum during which my interest turned to genetics. Block 1 saw me spend a concentrated 8 weeks learning all of the detail I could take in.

Experts were consulted at a Symposium in Imaging Science at Westminster University, December 2019. A practitioner of skin imaging and a forensic scientist from the medical arts challenged and advised on my theoretical approach to photographing trauma.

My original theory was that the camera’s digital sensor detected residual infra-red. This is not possible at body temperature.

The camera detects:

- the red of the healing blood supply
- bacterial fluorescence

So Past-Present proceeds on mitochondrial trace.
Elements from my work overlap with representations of atmospheric form from the work of Alfred Stieglitz from the early days of abstract photography.

Rorschach inkblot tests come to mind where analysis related as much to the viewer’s approach to the task than to any visual description given as a response.

In exhibition and critique, viewers have seen as I do, or closely so. Where I see a ghost they mostly do too. Where I see a ghost landscape, they describe the same or some near variation. In that respect the work communicates.

Figure 5: Past-Present - Imagined Landscape
Figures 6-14 Past-Present Imagined Landscapes and Cells
I see parallels in my work with Natalia Goncharova’s mystical lithographic prints as claustrophobic representations of angels in scenes of war (albeit that my work contains representations of ghosts).

I also see parallels with the work of Susan Hiller who worked with aura - inspired by the portrait of Doctor Dumouchel Figure 16, which highlights the doctor’s healing hand...
My investigation found that Ultra-weak photon emanation has been proven to exist (Kobayashi 2009). Scientists used a dark room and a gas cooled sensor to detect photons. However, aura for Hiller is not linked to light emission, but is imagined.

Likenesses are apparent with the paintings of Howard (2018) who spot painted for Damien Hirst. Howard alludes to the “hidden brush of gravity” in interview at the Jerwood Gallery with Will Self (2017). Our methods have an equivalence that led to overall visual resemblance through vertical lines.

When my work was in colour I had taken inspiration from Rothko and the Chapel paintings described by Christiensen as “Art as an Experience” (2017).

In relation to technique, as did Flusser, I view the camera as a detector and modifier of light. It is a processor of signals, altered by code (2012).

One approach used to engage the viewer with narrative line, has been to create figurative outcomes from the process of abstraction. Earlier images had become pure colour abstract but for Past-Present I adopt the aesthetic of the family archive images.

In the book Cutting Edge Science Redefining Contemporary Art Miller (2014) describes a category of modern work using the term ArtSci.

ArtSci practice was initially rejected by the art world and galleries, in the same manner as Impressionism and Surrealism were, but now has gained acceptance. Specialist outlets for such work are many and include Ars Technica and, nearer to home, the Wellcome Foundation.

My practice is postmodern and is clearly abstract surreal. It takes influence from various sources in the evolution of abstract conceptual experimental photography.

Digital practice is necessary for this work. During the MA, I consolidated my digital skills as I gained an ACA Photoshop qualification.
I major on using digital software and am practised in processing data (big data) and working with Generative Art as described by Bohnacker (2012) updated by Fross (2018).

In my practice, I experimented to obtain consistent lighting and white balance using daylight, room LED lighting, flash and ring flash. Macro photography and near microscopy were used at one point with images layer stacked. A very flexible tripod setup was needed to gain reach to subject areas of healing, with triggering by remote release.

However, when the intent is to enhance bodily glow, detail is removed from a photograph in order to concentrate on underlying structures. There is no need for higher resolution images which in any case frustrate the application of filters which interpolate best at medium to low resolution.

My research sought to enhance image quality. Measures were taken to:

- Avoid image banding
- Overcome changed technical outcome as editing software was upgraded
- Increase image print size

I am routinely challenged to print at scale. Painters Rothko and Howard make paintings at around 2 to 3 metres tall. My intent is the memento print in line with the commemorative style mimicking the small-scale work of the Victorians as illustrated in (Batchen 2004). It is more closely suited my outcomes or intent.

However, I developed the potential through my research to print at just under 2m tall. This is a requirement for immersive art as an experience.

It would also be possible to print from a 15m roll at 48cm width. An image of 20GB was made that combines (cross-correlates) a horizontal transformation and vertical transformation of healing to make a panned coastal view. The end result would be very wasteful unless made as a video. Photography should not be seen to be increasing its carbon footprint in these modern times.
I avoid nostalgia, which for me has negative connotation in relation to my chosen themes of science and place and re-kindling of human bonds.

There were successful works of authors whose visual approaches I felt did not suit my work. I refer to a Handful of Dust (Campany no date). Also, War Primer 2 (Broomberg and Chanarin 2018).

The use of collage in the latter works well, but I prefer to use layering as my method. However, I realise I missed an opportunity to incorporate family archive photography of artefacts e.g. a national identity card, medals and old photographic wallets which exhibit patina, but am resolved to my own style and content.

A trap narrowly avoided in my work was assert to that the soldier fought as the biological agent of the mother. She gave her energy making cells, mitochondria, that allowed him to act.

In this, my assertion challenges Berger’s quotation “Men act” (1972:47).

Something I have learned from the course is to contain a resolved body of work. I should not be tempted to weaken it by a natural inclination to expand and ultimately bloat the work.

My ancestors would be surprised at the developments in our modern world that allow us to look back over time and reconnect with forgotten spaces. Biological discoveries were still to be made. The existence of DNA came about through Miescher in 1869. Even Plato in c 360 BC wrote of the creation of man in words that describe DNA.

However, the double helix of Franklin, Crick and Watson was discovered in 1951 after the early period covered in my work. The human genome was decoded around the turn of the millennium.
In presentation I was acutely aware that abstract work can lead to one-of-a-type images that may not sit together well. The same was managed by another MA Photography Student ahead of me, Rita Rodner, but also Pierre Chemaly.

Presentation strategy can manage this through physical separation within the exhibition space. It would spoil a presentation if strong abstract images fought visually against each other.

I decided to work with an antique monochrome aesthetic inspired by my family archive photographs in order to get a consistent image set. This created unity in presentation although better individual prints are obtained without filtering - so I have resolved the argument of single print versus print collection in favour of collection.

A standard filter worked well in my work but in anticipating criticism I wrote an editor action to turn colour to monochrome, add a random grain and add a lightened vignette. In the end I used what was most convenient. By mid-January my research had completed and there followed a burst of creative activity in which 50 to 80 original images were made. The count depends on end use. I needed to work quickly to keep pace with my plan.

My mounted prints were to be shown at an Easter Exhibition following a learning exhibition last August.

An artist’s book has been made with sections:

- artist interview
- related prose
- archive images
- main images

Additional images that guide the narrative include my DNA sequence and highlighted word map in overlay as inspired by Recombinant Rhymes and DNA Art (McNamee 2019) and made using text to image from Generative Art (Bohnacker 2012) updated (Fross 2018).
I continued with my artist’s book although some aspects will have to wait: the embossing of the cover and curating of a professionally made edition. I was advised to switch from exhibition to book but too late as the virus pandemic led to lockdown. I could not in 6 weeks publish a book that would normally take three months.

I curated colour work before and would again in exhibition alongside my project. This strategy generates contrast and interest as noted by (George 2015).

The range of work I make for Past-Present parallels the August 2019 exhibition:

- Mounted print exhibition ✓ Viewer print handling by author engagement
- Video contextualisation x Dropped this time round
- Music x Produced but dropped
- Secondary exhibition ✓
- Portable exhibition ✓ Viewer print handling by author engagement
- Print & mount on-demand ✓
- Exhibition guide x Dropped this time round
- Artist’s book ✓
- 35mm and 4x5 negatives ✓ Demonstration of general skill set
- Portfolio website ✓ michaelmtturnerphotography.com

New for the FMP exhibition:
- Online ticketing ✓ Redo for new date
- Business cards ✓ Add cards with exhibition images
- Augmented reality view ✓ Practitioners need it to be PDF for review
- Commercial website ✓ WIP turnerphoto.art

The planned exhibition was to take place in Amersham Studios, the same space as the August 2019 exhibition of the same project in its previous iteration, and was booked for the Easter weekend over four days (compared to 8 days for the earlier exhibition).

I created an augmented reality model with a visit pre-isolation to obtain space dimensions.
Feedback was obtained from workshop attendees at an informal showing, and from practitioners and other viewers who attended the 8-day event. Attendees were accomplished photographers and it worked well that there were two photographic exhibitions running in Amersham that week. Two Falmouth MA graduates, Megan Ringrose and Andres Barrow, and a current Falmouth student, Sarah Douglas visited. The overall feedback was incorporated into the making of the Easter exhibition, currently postponed.

Prior to the commencement of the ongoing Covid-19 lockdown, I received review comment on my FMP from John Humphrey and Simon Ellingworth, on the 4x5 inch test prints and emergent portfolio website. Encouraging comment and cursory comment was received from two others Brian Steptoe book editor and Paul Ashley contemporary journal editor, with more feedback anticipated.

The postponed exhibition should again allow managed physical interaction with the mounted prints. A portable form as small prints in a DNA test kit box, will again allow the work to be taken outside of the white cube gallery space. There will again be opportunity for visitors to acquire 2x3 inch mounted copies as I print on demand.
Some ideas for the future would involve working with a specialist audience of abstract practitioners in order to further develop my practice and expand my audience.

I have allowed additional research that carries my practice beyond my FMP:

- Amending stills in the video editor Adobe After Effects
- Trialling Red Giant’s, “Particular” module in Adobe After Effects.

I hoped to make moving stills to draw the viewer in, in what is described as our current condition of a sea of images. I will take up effects processing after the hand in date.

I am inclined to dramatise work. An early advice from critique alerted me to a problem in using “The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and there shall no torment touch them.” from the Scottish National Memorial at Edinburgh Castle, a place of great national outpouring of the Scottish people. I would need to alter the whole work to make it consistent throughout without jarring. The decision was sealed. There was no time.

Figure 18 Past-Present Ghost
Photographs

Cover Past-Present DNA Art Michael Turner, 2020
Figure 1, 2, 3 Past-Present Michael Turner, 2020
Figure 4 Project myDNA Michael Koerner UNSEEN Issue 7
Figure 5 & 6-14 Past-Present Michael Turner, 2020
Figure 15 Angels and Airplanes - Natalia Goncharova nationalgalleries.org
Figure 16 Portrait of Doctor Dumouchel - Marcel Duchamp
Figure 17 Exhibition space in 3D SketchUp
Figure 18 Past-Present Ghost

Video


Bibliography


Campany, D. (no date) a Handful of Dust from the Cosmic to the Domestic. Le Bal / Mac.


