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Geographies of Story

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GEOGRAPHIES OF STORY

by

Emma Nishimura

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GEOGRAPHIES OF STORY

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Family stories are told and retold, evolving over time with new details and other layers. One story merges with the next, while photographic images, oral and written accounts dissolve into the fabric of memory, building the family narrative. Both individual and collective, these histories continue to grow and transform as a new language is created, one that is visual, written, spoken and unspoken. As the complexities develop, the impact of these stories on our lives and the need to make sense of them in relation to our own identities increases. Yet, as I wade through my own family's tales, the stories and images seem to slip through my fingers, given the instability of the artifacts, photographs and memories I have been left with.

Forever haunted by the stories that surround my paternal grandparents' experiences in Canada during the Second World War, I continually find myself being drawn back to that time. To the events, historical climate and landscape that became the setting for the internment of my grandparents and 22,000 other Japanese Canadians in 1942. I grew up hearing very few conversations about these years. Although they rarely happened, I knew when they did, that it was important to pay attention. My grandmother, prompted by questions from my mother, would share small moments and experiences. I was pulled into these tales, captivated by her words and conscious of empty spaces. For many stories were left untold and questions unasked, due to the silence, pain and bitterness that seemed to cloak these years. Now, seventy years later, the impact of the

internment continues to mark what it is to be a Japanese Canadian, with the reverberations being felt by each subsequent generation, who struggle in their own way to locate this narrative within both individual and collective identities.

Drawing inspiration from the discovery of family albums and artifacts, historical and fictional literature, as well as my own travels, this body of work looks at the different forms and incarnations that memory can take. Within the framework of this complex narrative I have sought to explore the relationships and interactions between the sites where these experiences occurred and the stories and memories themselves. Fascinated by the beauty of the landscape and its contrasting history, I have used a variety of mediums and processes that allow me to spend time reflecting and working with my hands. I have accessed this familial history through the use of the repetitive motions of making, cutting, writing, and printing. Investigating the photographic records I have inherited and the conflated memories they have come to represent, moments have been recreated and a landscape revisited. Yet nothing is exactly as it was; the boundaries between truth and fiction have become blurred. Instead, a cycle, a loop of memory work has been set in motion, in which the layers of meaning and the alternate readings of events, can be seen in the fractured and obviously constructed elements of the works. Traces of memory can be found, links to forgotten places established, while voids and absences investigate the fragments and silences of what has been left unsaid or forgotten.

At times tenuous and in other moments concrete, a seemingly continuous line runs throughout the work. Roads, rivers and an ever-changing horizon line connect one piece to the next, laying the foundation for a landscape that has witnessed much, but changed very little. Layered and veiled, these paths whisper of a story, almost

unreachable and unknowable, but there nonetheless. While stark and contrasting silhouettes emerge from within, these lines offer a shifting sense of grounding, separating and dividing, highlighting the desire to locate memory, as well as the importance of letting it slip away. For at times the need to forget can be just as important as the need to remember.

These constructed images, while rooted in the actual site of past memories, acknowledge the shifting nature of memory itself. Traveling to these locations and witnessing what remains, my documentation of these places, full of colour and concreteness, have also become part of a new memory, an extension and continuation of the original story. Thus, images appear to slowly break down and build back up again, merging and inverting as my sky becomes a sky that once was and photographs become drawings and etchings become stories. Fluctuating and changing when viewed from different distances, angles and points of view, the work considers the past, present and future and the conversation that exists between them all.

In creating and perpetuating this space of memory within my work, I am constantly aware of the futility of my actions. The works can and will only ever be an echo of what once was. However, despite the elusive and fragile nature of memory and art, I seek to create, through my work, an environment that opens the space to share these stories - in which different ways of seeing, of researching, of telling and of hearing a story can be experienced. By drawing attention to the fragments and layers left behind, the weight of what cannot be recovered or remembered is revealed. And by investigating how stories are used in the construction of a geography that can be grasped, I am able to explore where that narrative fits within my own sense of self, family and community.

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