

Hybrid Memories: Victoria Lobregat and Susan Ryman

The sight of the little madeleine had recalled nothing to my mind before I tasted it [but] as soon as I had recognized the taste of the piece of madeleine... immediately the old grey house upon the street, where [Aunt Léonie's] room was, rose up like a stage set to attach itself to the little pavilion opening on to the garden which had been built out behind it for my parents.¹

Whenever art theorists get together to discuss memory, someone inevitably cites this passage from Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, in which a chance encounter with a 'madeleine', a small tea cake, brings back a flood of childhood memories for the protagonist. The pretentiousness of this French literary source notwithstanding, the madeleine quote functions to illustrate how memory can be triggered by our sensory encounters with our world.

According to literary theorist Paul John Eakin, however, Proust's has memory all wrong. Eakin argues that Proust sees memory as *invariable*, as events simply stored away then recalled in more or less the same form as they occurred. Rather, Eakin argues, remembering is a dynamic process.² In other words, memories are not narratives simply written into mental books and shelved away; the act of remembering is living and active, and the process of recalling itself reconfigures memory.

In thinking about memory, perhaps a more useful example comes from Clive James, ex-pat Australian author and broadcaster. In the second volume of his 'unreliable memoirs', *Falling Towards England*, James says "When I hold my hands as if in prayer and roll a pencil between them, I can smell the plasticine snakes I made in Class 1B at Kogarah Infants' School."³ (Got a pencil or pen handy? Try it right now.) Memories are only ever *fragments* from the past, such as these, patchworked by our present perception which fills in all the gaps. Each time we recall, we rewrite. Memories are always hybrids, more or less; they fuse what we've *done* with who we *are* and who we've *been* in between. Perhaps the only 'pure' memories are those never recalled.

The works in this exhibition by Victoria Lobregat and Susan Ryman offer us fragments of memories recalled by these artists. The pictures are never complete and the meanings are never prescribed, so they in turn offer us triggers for our *own* memories. Although working independently, Lobregat and Ryman have both struck upon visual fragments that resonate with the lived past they share with us, their audience. These fragments rise from a familiar suburban life now distanced by time, of worn home crafted objects, of faces only sketched now in memory, from sounds, textures and smells that live now as echoes.

As we encounter these works, we might feel the uncanny sensation of the present pricked momentarily by a shard of the past. For me, Victoria Lobregat's splintered scene of a trouser and suit repair shop felt strangely unsettling, rasping at my mind like a name on the tip of my tongue. Later I realised that I had lived a three-minute walk from this shop and my favourite restaurant was next door.

¹ Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past (A la recherche du temps perdu)*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff, (London: Chatto & Windus): 1957

² Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999: 106. Emphasis added.

³ Clive James, 'Preface', *Falling Towards England*, (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd) 1985: 12