Review: Zuckerman Museum's "Forget Me Not" another thoughtful, visually distinctive exhibit

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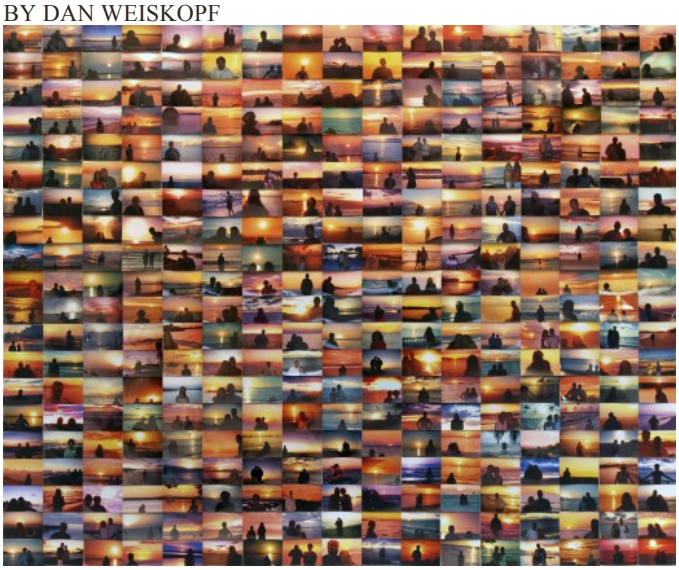

Penelope Umbrico: Sunset Portraits from Flickr Sunsets, 2011. *Photographs, 4 x 6 in. each. Courtesy of the artist.*

Forgetting has its own shades and textures. Some memories wilt like sun-starved plants, others burst like artillery shells; some we shred viciously, others are absentmindedly discarded.

Zuckerman Museum's Forget Me Not, curated by Teresa Bramlette Reeves and Kirstie Tepper, surveys the snarled, gappy fabric of memory. It's a well-worn theme, but thanks to their insightful handling, it seems surprising and fresh as a first kiss.

The exhibition, on view through December 6, includes 10 women artists working in a wide range of mediums: textiles, ceramics, photography and painting, along with mixed media sculpture and archival assemblage. In an interesting curatorial innovation, each artist contributed two works, a main piece and a companion. These secondary pieces expand on, gloss, annotate, qualify and often significantly deepen the ones they're paired with.

Ruined or empty places are sites of cultural forgetting, and these conditions of amnesiac placelessness are explored by photographers Emily Gomez and Kelly Kristin Jones. For her Unearthed series (2003-ongoing), Gomez shot former sites of Indian mounds, mostly

across the Southeast. Some images show structures that are overgrown and neglected, while others depict the casual ravages of capital and empire: the former site of Fort Detroit is an intersection surrounded by mid-rise buildings, and a mound outside of Nashville was partially bulldozed to clear land for a Walmart parking lot. The present is littered with shabby, marginal places, by contrast with the meaningful but invisible past.

Jones, on the other hand, traveled to undeveloped lots in Atlanta's Old Fourth Ward neighborhood and photographed the blue patches of sky directly above them, then excised from the image an outline shape corresponding to the lot's boundaries. Seeing the land as an abstract gap surrounded by bright sky conveys an openness to the new possibilities of place that contrasts with Gomez's mournful, drained views of erased histories.

The struggle between recalling and concealing the past also surfaces in fiber works by Sally Jackson and Judith Scott. Jackson, a Yakama woman who lived 1870-1920, is represented by a photograph of her ititamat, a memory ball made of string ridged with knots. Such "counting the days" balls are part of a traditional autobiographical practice. The knots stand for both ordinary days and significant life events, mostly tragic ones such as the deaths of her sister and grandchildren.

By contrast, Judith Scott's tightly wound armatures are private, idiosyncratic constructions. Her Untitled (2003) is roughly conical with bulbous protrusions, and bits of the objects embedded inside surface like fragments of shipwrecked vessels from beneath the blue, gray and green yarn. The ititamat is a code that can be read transparently, but Scott's works fascinate for what they conceal.

Many things go unrecorded and unremembered, and hence can't be forgotten. Jess Jones' Wind Quilt (2015) captures one of these evanescent moments. The piece is a large rectangle of tulle stitched with a sweeping pattern of colorful ribbons. While these at first resemble a festive cascade of confetti, they are actually a data visualization, specifically a stitched representation of a dynamic map of the winds in Atlanta, each line standing for an invisible atmospheric current that existed at a single otherwise ignored, unremarkable moment. It's a net that traps the wind, but moreover, because the choice of day is arbitrary, the work intimates that all moments are equal in their potential to unfold into beauty. And like the past currents it memorializes, the fabric curls and sways ever so slightly, animated by the minor drafts in the gallery. The companion flip book is a childhood delight, producing both an animation of the map itself and a breeze as the pages flick rapidly by.

Archives and archival artworks are a natural medium for dealing with memory and loss. Lauren Peterson's Preservation of a Somewhat Recent Present (2015) is a wunderkammer of abject, minor, discarded, dysfunctional objects. These include bits of lint, wire and ribbon pinned to the wall as well as compressed blocks of cardboard, typewritten papers and candy wrappers coated in plaster and laid on wooden shelves. While it's standard (and a little tired) for postmodern takes on memory to emphasize decentered fragmentation, I suspect that Peterson hopes to produce a more constructive

shift in our attention. Her painstaking separation and recombination of these scraps of trash makes them visible again as individual objects.

Peterson's archive adheres to no obvious pattern, but Zipporah Thompson's Requiem (2013) is geometrically ordered, a host of artifacts symmetrically hung on the wall against a reddish oval background — a mock natural history display. Fur pelts, rope and knitted fabric bound into balls and other shapes hint at obscure functions. The work conjures the feeling of a ritual preparation, but its serene veneer of masterful classification is sharply undercut by the companion piece Lost in Translation (2013), a serpentine trail of knotted and folded ceramic fragments that lies like a fractured spine — suggesting that reconstructing cultural memory in museum contexts is at best an imperfect art.

The only conceptual organization in Penelope Umbrico's Sunset Portraits (2010-ongoing) is one imposed by online search algorithms. She has filled a massive grid with photos found by searching Flickr for keywords involving sunsets. Viewed from a distance it is impressive, a pointillistic mirage dotted with the shadowy outlines of anonymous heads. Up close, there is an initial impulse to find something distinctive in each, but as one image after another goes by this is replaced by tedium and a mild distaste for our obsession with the specialness of our own experiences. Past this feeling, though, lies the truth that Umbrico's images don't exist for us voyeurs, but for their makers. For all its light, the piece is a reminder that peeking into others' memories is a chilly enterprise.

Beyond these artistic explorations of memory, Forget Me Not also contributes to preserving the history of the Atlanta art world. ATLas, on view as part of the exhibition, is an oral history and visualization project that maps the major artistic institutions existing in the city during the 1970s, including Nexus Press, the Atlanta Art Workers Coalition and the Women's Art Collective. The multimedia maps and interviews the project has already generated will be invaluable for artists, scholars, critics and community organizers alike. Whether or not art history is truly global, there's a pressing need for this kind of deeply researched local art history.

In its short existence the Zuckerman has put on a series of high-quality exhibitions, and Forget Me Not continues this run. Its works are conceptually ambitious, visually distinctive and deftly crafted, and all of them benefit from exceptionally smart installation. They testify to the struggle to live tangled in the past's strings. As Leonard Cohen wearily crooned, "I can't forget, but I don't remember what." Numb from hanging on, we still can't let go.

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