

# Remains Of A Memory

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“Memory is the medium through which we filter present experience and create a sense of time, place and person.”

-Veronica O’Keane ‘A sense of self; memory, the brain, and who we are’ 2021

This year I have been exploring the complexities of memory and the act of remembering itself as they are vast and elusive as are the emotions that we associate with specific memories. Throughout this essay I will elaborate on how my artistic practice and work has explored this idea of memory and remembering in a way that includes the ever-changing nature of emotions and the sensation that are undeniable even if some of the factual aspects of a memory are ‘misremembered’ or remembered ‘incorrectly’. This being that each of us will remember the same event in time differently as we are naturally inclined to focus on different elements and place value on different sensations and specifics as Henri Bergson states in his book *Matter and Memory* (1986) “In truth, all sensation is already memory.” (Bergson, 1986)

This year, with the help of the writings of Veronica O’Keane and the work of Terry Kurgan I have experimented with the ideas and practices of remembering and misremembering and the very real emotions attached to memories, and how this can accumulate to develop one’s sense of self and how it evolves as we grow into different spheres of our lives. As we age and grow into ourselves, we start shifting our perspectives and developing our understanding of the world around us.

My own development and growth has been greatly influenced by my family history and my loved ones actions in the early years of my life. It has been interesting to explore the relationship and dynamic between my own past and present and the appreciation I have for my childhood memories and these early archives. Learning to find growth in loss, conflict and change and the gratitude for those opportunities to navigate the world with a compassionate perspective. My family has changed a great deal over the years, but I have learnt more from all of my family members than I ever could have imagined and learnt the value of support and love in all its many forms.

‘A sense of self; memory, the brain, and who we are’ written by Veronica O’Keane in 2021 has been an immense source of knowledge and insight throughout my process. As a psychiatrist, in her book, O’Keane notes her observations over many years of how experiences and memories are intertwined. She explores the many questions that I myself have been asking throughout my own making process.

Questions about the way memories make us feel and how they can have such physical effects on us? The question of whether any memory is 'true' or 'false', and the idea that just because you know rationally that something is or wasn't 'real' it doesn't change the emotions experienced and how 'real' they felt or may still feel (O'Keane, 2021).

O'Keane gives us a framework for understanding the way in which we view the human brain and its development as we age and/or go through various developmental stages, and most importantly how this process uncovers the fundamental connection between the formation of memories and the establishment of our sense of self.

O'Keane writes about several patients and their experiences of a variety of psychoses and emotional traumas. These accounts are woven into the book while she explains how they engage with the ideas of memories, remembering, the emotions associated with them and how they influence the sense of self (O'Keane, 2021).

The first and most important example within the book is the story of a patient that O'Keane names Edith. Edith suffered from post-partum psychosis and believed that the baby she had taken home from the hospital was not hers. After treatment through medication and therapy, Edith was released from the Bethlem Royal Hospital but continued to meet with O'Keane as an outpatient.

"She told me that as she was passing the graveyard on her way to an outpatient consultation following discharge from the unit, her eye caught the small gravestone in her local graveyard that she had seen on her way to involuntary detention in the Bethlem. This was the same gravestone that she had immediately understood then, prior to admission, as being where her baby was buried. As she looked at the small tilted gravestone months later, for a few moments she was 'back' on her way to the hospital being involuntarily detained by the imposters who had replaced the real people in her life. She had a rush of the full range of these beliefs, accompanied by a feeling of terror. I asked her if she knew that the psychotic ideas were not real on this, the second, occasion. What she said next set me on a long-term pathway of inquiry about the nature of the matter of memory. She looked straight at me and said, 'Yes... but the memories are real.' " (O'Keane, 2021, p. 8)



This extract from O’Keane’s book is perhaps the most powerful explanation to the questions that I have been asking myself throughout the making process of this year. The ideas of what role does memory, and specifically childhood memories with regards to my work, play in the present? The most vital point to me is that simple line, “...but the memories are real.” (O’Keane, 2021, p. 8) This body of work focuses on this idea of memory, re-remembering and ‘misremembering’ and how these childhood memories in particular have such a vital role in the development of our sense of self. What I am experimenting with in this body of work is this conception of how memories are manipulated and changed because of our own experience at the time of remembering. So not only do they impact us but in the process of remembering or even re-remembering, they change into something different than what they were. Something misremembered but no less ‘real’.

There is something that happens over time, there is this shift and fade of ‘fact’ in memory. You start to remember things differently than you did before. Looking back on something that usually made you laugh and finding yourself feeling an element of sadness and melancholy. The idea that today that memory doesn’t evoke joy or happiness but instead makes you question other elements of that memory that you perhaps hadn’t considered before.

The point being that we engage with memories differently depending on our current emotional state and eventually as time goes on, we create new versions of memories that end up far from the originals.

The work stems from a want to understand this idea of your sense of self being created through memories and those people present within them. It is also brought on by this search for comfort, nostalgia and familiarity in an unfamiliar circumstance. Over the last year or so I have spent a great deal of time thinking about the past and my early childhood memories in particular. The memories that are held within big old photo albums, that have been stored away and taken out every now and then to reminisce and tell stories. These photo albums that are supposed to be a record of your life or a part of your life at least but seem to present with a rose-coloured tint. Trying to remember and relive old memories and wondering about the ‘truth’ of the images and my own feelings surrounding them.

Much like all photography there is always an element of curatorship within an image. If we look at any kind of photography; war, political, familial and even social media photography, there is an undeniable process of editing the 'truth' (The New York Times , 2015). In family photos, we select the background, we position our bodies in a specific way, we smile even when we may not feel happy. We curate ourselves in a way that doesn't always depict authenticity.

What becomes clearer is this notion that memories, no matter their perceived 'authenticity' feels real. The emotions that are inextricably linked to a memory remain embedded long after the details of a memory fade.

The written entries transferred on are the base layer of the work. Not only are they a physical documentation of my emotions surrounding a specific memory stimulated by an image, but also a way of grappling with those emotions and coming to terms with the new 'interpretation' or version of those memories. The pieces of text are handwritten and found texts from books, journals, articles etc. The found texts are pieces that have influenced my thinking or perspective or have strong connections to a memory. Books I associate with early childhood or ones that I relate to in retrospect. The handwritten pieces are a stream of consciousness surrounding the memories or thoughts on a relative day. The legibility varies as the content is less or more clear or personal. Some are transferred in different orientations and are therefore less legible than others.

This concept of legible versus illegible becomes an important part of the installation and its purpose of questioning the accessibility of 'truth' or 'fact' within memory as you are unable to read all the components present within this setting.

The process of the work is strongly rooted, both physically and symbolically, in this act of transferring. The act of moving something from one place to another, and in this case, moving memories out of their original context and out of the photo album and into a new space of negotiation and navigation.

The sheets used in my installation are a combination of a pongee lining and voile linen. Both materials are used in the construction of undergarments and interior lining respectively. The importance of using these materials symbolically relate to the internal layers of protection and complexity that I imagine within myself along with the external layers of memories collected as they fade in and out of focus. Where the details fade, and you're left with only the outline, the raw components and the lasting emotion of a memory.

The process starts with the transferring of images onto the fabric and is followed by the written and found entries both directly and transferred onto the fabric. The process of writing is intuitive and differs every day. Some days I have a lot of questions, a real need to understand and reflect, while on other days I have less uncertainty and more emotional processing to unravel.

This installation is made for the viewer to move through the space and experience the multitude of shifts within not only the materiality of the work but also the physicality of the space itself and the accessibility or lack thereof that is present.

The journey through the space has no start or finish in the sense of that those terms are interchangeable in this case. You as the viewer can access the installation at many different intervals between the pieces. As you do there is a possibility that the visual elements transferred onto the material will become clearer or fade into indistinction, depending on the direction you take within the space and who you are physically in relation the space itself.

The most important element of the work is the journey that one takes within the experience of the space. The movement of a body through the space, observing, reading, touching and feeling. Allowing a sense of embodiment to each viewer.

The nature of the work is that it is very subjective. It is based on my own experience and my own interest in the concept of the family archive and my own memories, but this does not lessen the overall connection with nostalgia that family photos have.

I believe that one of the most crucial things that a book like O'Keane's does, is it gives the reader a sense of understanding and validity to the experiences described and felt by a large quantity of people. Not only does the book elaborate on the science of the human brain and why these connections between memory and sense of self are so intrinsic but it also provides a strong sense of emotional depth and understanding.

O'Keane's book focuses on the overall exploration of memory and the development of the sense of self, while my work seeks to understand how that has unfolded within my own life and own experiences. The work stems from a want of understanding and a search for 'truth' in the subjective and malleable field of memory and the act of remembering itself.

What I take most from the writing of O'Keane is this idea that we influence and change our memories as we grow, and that most importantly, there is no 'truth' or fact within remembering and memory itself, but there is meaning and 'truth' in the emotions that are attached. The point being that just because something didn't really happen, doesn't mean that it didn't feel real.

This body of work includes influences from multiple fields of interest. It deals with the field of neuroscience and its role in the formation of our sense of self, it deals with the psychological and emotional side of navigating and negotiating memory and its effect on our engagement with the world around us. The family archive is as mentioned before, the most important element and the documentation of memory as it were. Where O'Keane uses her scientific knowledge to explain the subtleties of memory and emotion, an artist such as Terry Kurgan writes about the emotional connection and experience of sharing her own personal memories in her work such as her lost and found exhibition. Kurgan speaks more specifically about the presence of the personal within the public sphere and how that can create a more 'human' environment. However, Kurgan also identifies the value in family photographs as "I think they could be anybody's and are emblematic of some of the grand themes, like love, loss, longing, life, death, anger, joy, hurt, desire and more" (Williamson, 2000). I find Kurgan's work to be extremely nostalgic and provides this feeling of the uncanny. In simple terms; finding a sense of familiarity in the unfamiliar. This feeling of the uncanny is one of the springboards that provoked my installation.

My practice has been heavily influenced by my own personal connections and interests, and so over this time of Covid-19 and emotionally strenuous and intense times, I have found the process of making that inspires me most is that of reflection. Through this reflection of my own memories and childhood experiences, there became a process of reflexivity. This reflexivity regarding the making of the work did indeed become a new way of reflecting and even understanding my own emotions surrounding difficult and complex memories and even parts of myself. This entire process of looking back in order to understand the present and exploring these two different worlds that exist between the past and the present and how they both, in different ways, have felt foreign or disconnected at some point or another.

I believe it starts with this feeling of familiarity in an unfamiliar way. Feeling the eerie or the uncanny sensation flow through your mind. Seeing something that should be familiar but is now something different, something unrecognisable.

The work interrogates this idea of pieces disappearing, of what is left behind. What remains when you can no longer remember the story or picture their faces or the place? What remains when you can no longer recognise your own memory?

This body of work is a new form of remembering. You could almost say that these are even entirely new memories. For when I look and walk through these pieces of memory, I remember the moments of making. The time and work that went in, the satisfaction and relief or the sadness and melancholy contained within these sheets of memory. They are pieces of memories, worked together and explored in a way that they haven't been before now. The development of my artistic practice has been deeply connected to my emotions and my sense of self. This body of work has allowed me to explore and try to understand the complexities of identity within memory and express my own experience within that process of experimental discovery.

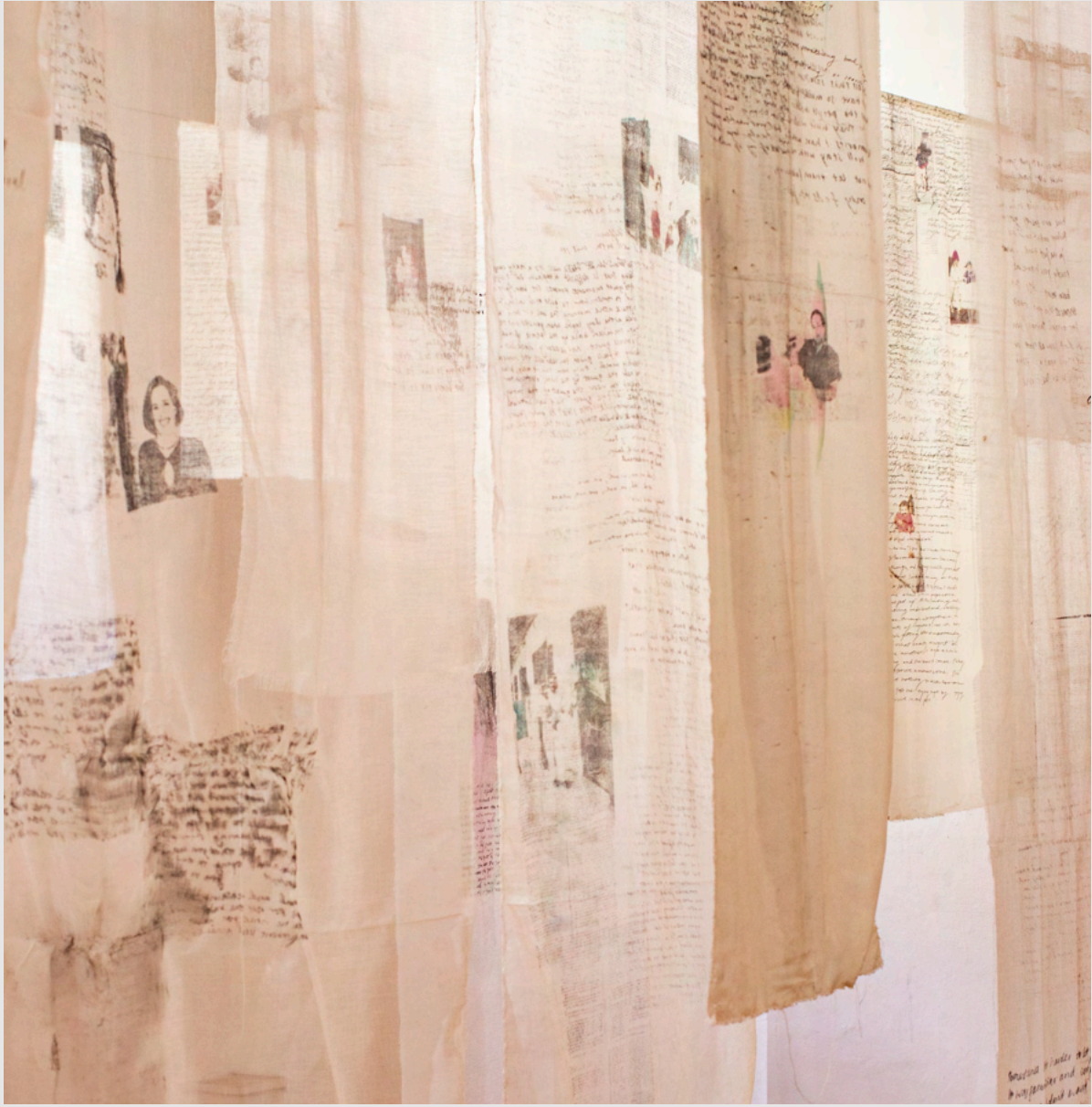
‘This heart within me I can feel, and I can judge that it exists. This world I can touch and I likewise judge that it exists. There ends all my knowledge and the rest is construction.’

Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*(1995)

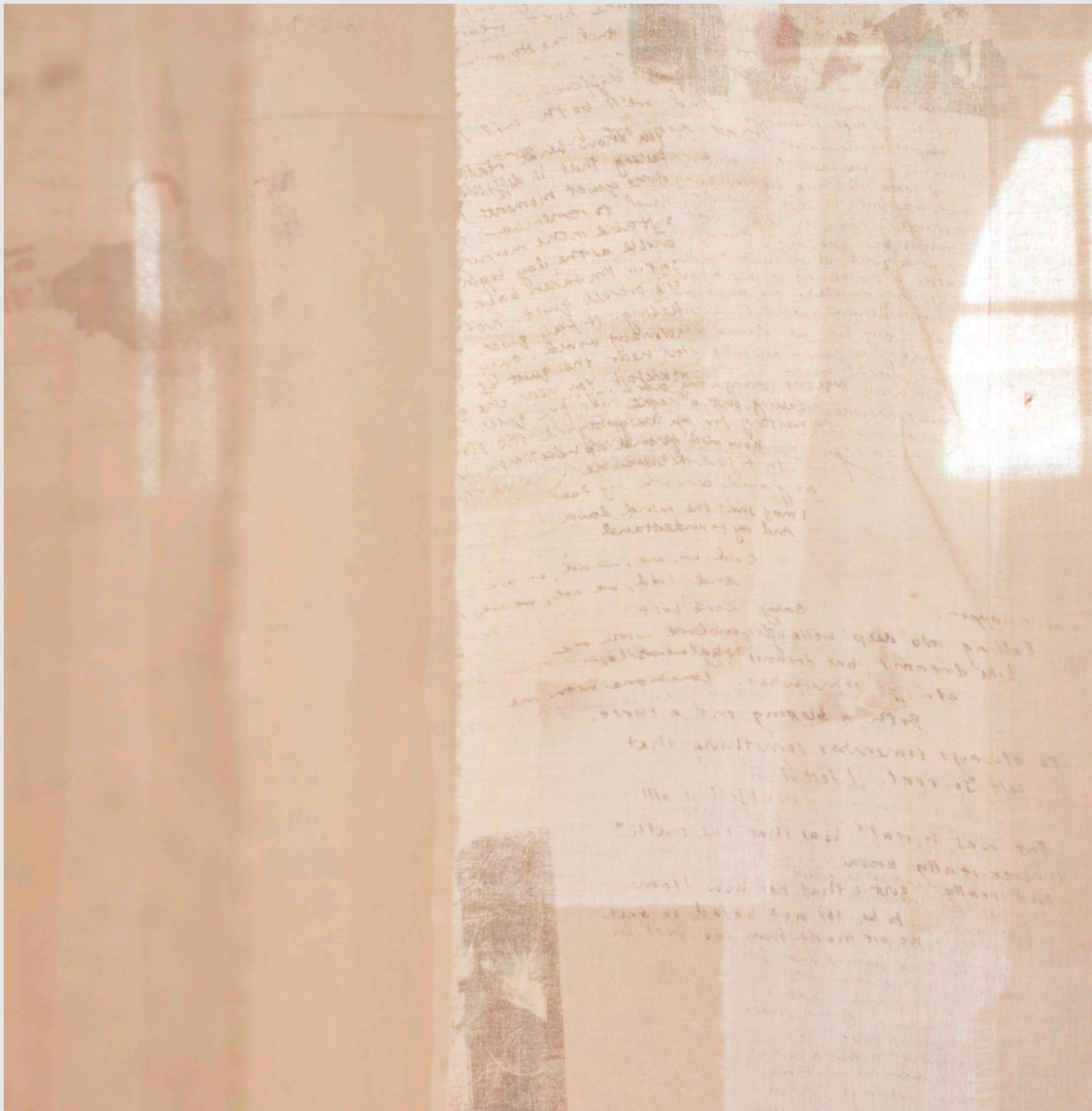
































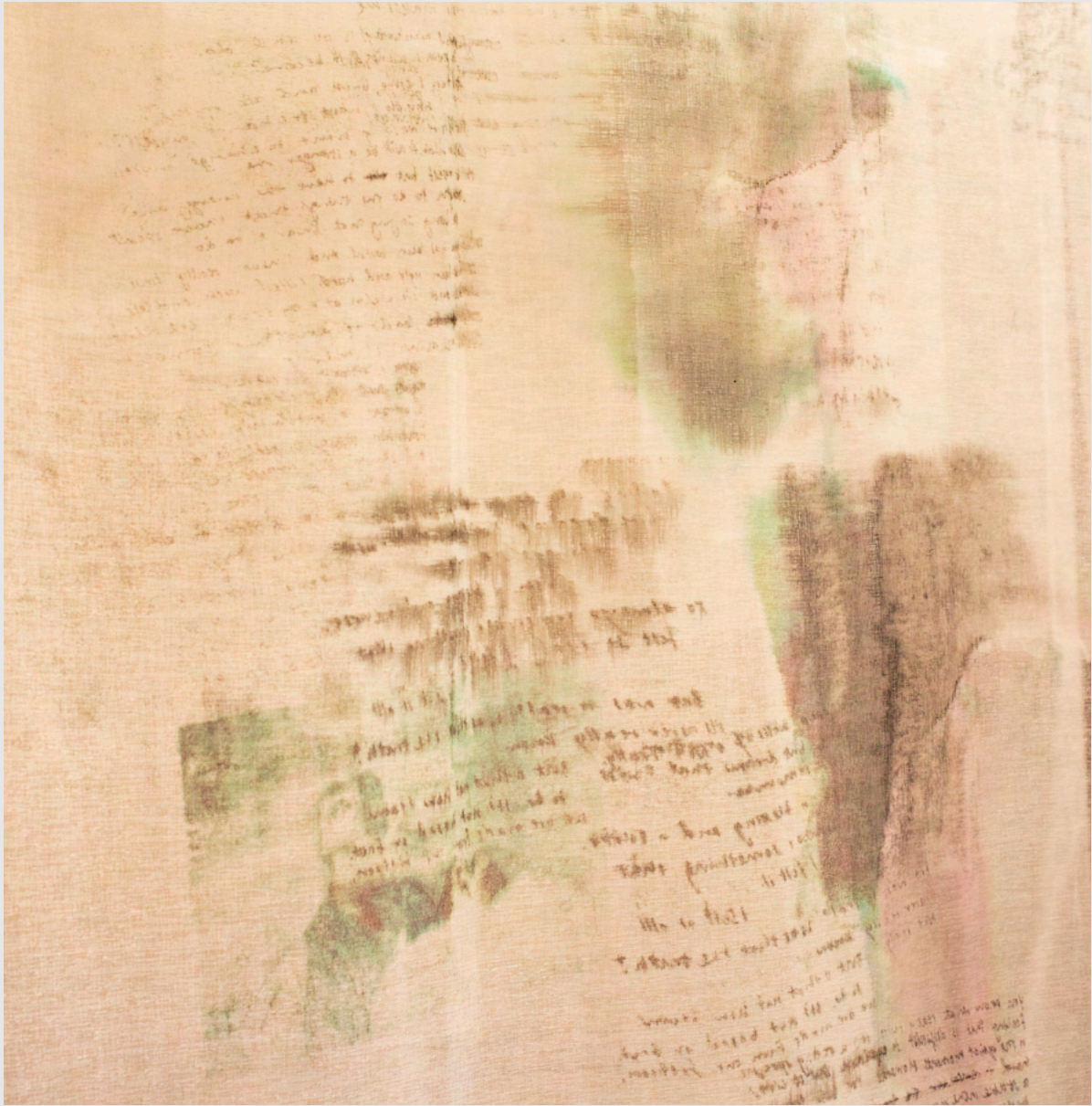




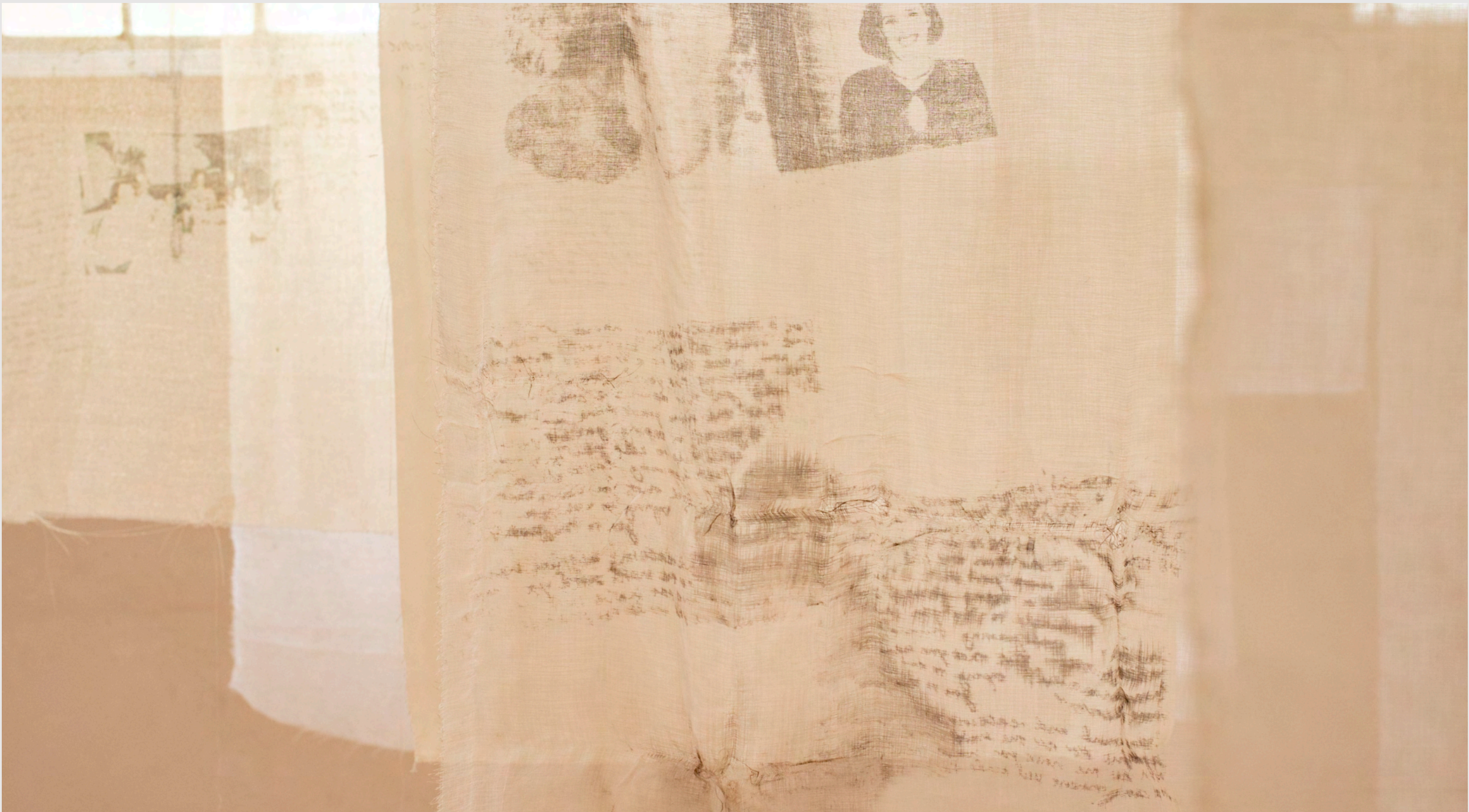




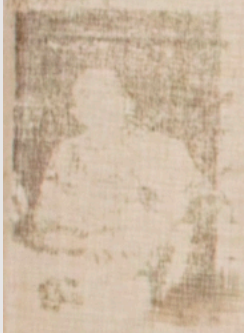




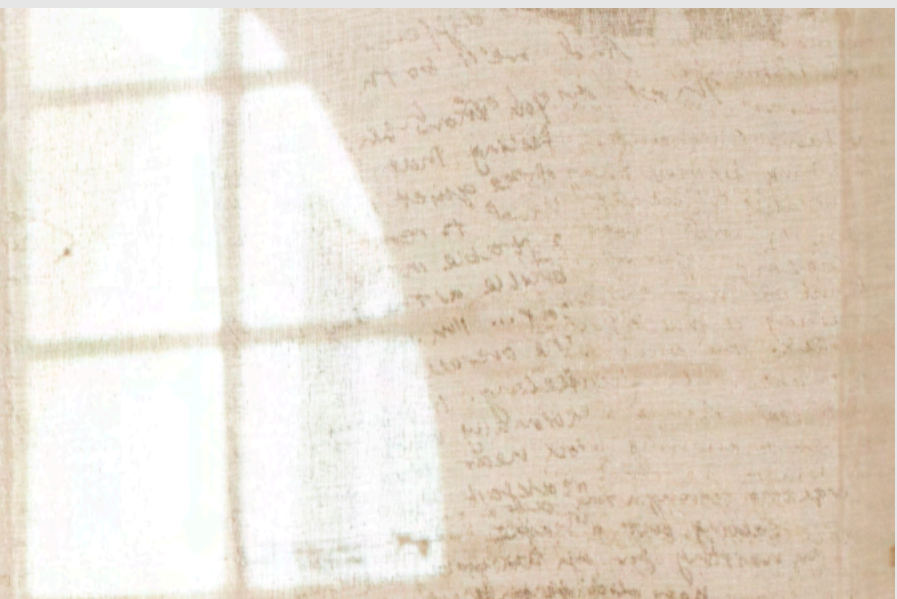








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Special thanks to my my family for their constant support and to  
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