

Mutation Ecstasy:  
Memory and Identity  
Prof Donal Fitzpatrick

# Mutation Ecstasy: Memory and Identity

## Prof Donal Fitzpatrick

# Project Description

**Project Duration:**

February 2016 – December 2019

**Funder:**

N/A

**Research Partners, consultants, collaborators:**

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Shandong University of Arts, Jinan, China.

Macau University of Science and Technology, Macau.



'Extinction memory/Memory extinction' (installation photograph), SUAD, Art Museum, Jinan, China, 2019.

The research investigated, through a multi-media art practice, how images of our present are inflected by traces of our past. The work sought to create visual equivalents for the complexity of the processes in memory of blocking access to an image, displacing an image with another image, substituting other recollections and seemingly unrelated images and sensations for the image actively recalled, and the generation of fused fragments of recollection and new memories in the process. Based in art studio practice, the research sought visual equivalents of the combination of intentional and unconscious actions, of faithful attempts to reconstruct what 'actually happened in the world' and the hybrid presence of constructed fictions of abstract sensations and intrusive, involuntary images morphed together into new visual forms. These material investigations generated artefacts that visualised the dynamic of the recall and reconstruction mechanisms of memory, exploring the slippage between the role of technology in imaging and the process of fictionalisation. Focusing on autobiographical recollections, information pertaining to the recall and reconstruction of specific events in one life (and the way this authorship intersects with collective social memory), the artefacts attempted a material visualisation of a sequence of successive moments over time and the subsequent changes instigated by recollection through a process of alteration, adhesion and repetition in memory. The works resulting from this research were presented in four exhibitions between 2016 and 2019 at venues in Poland and China.

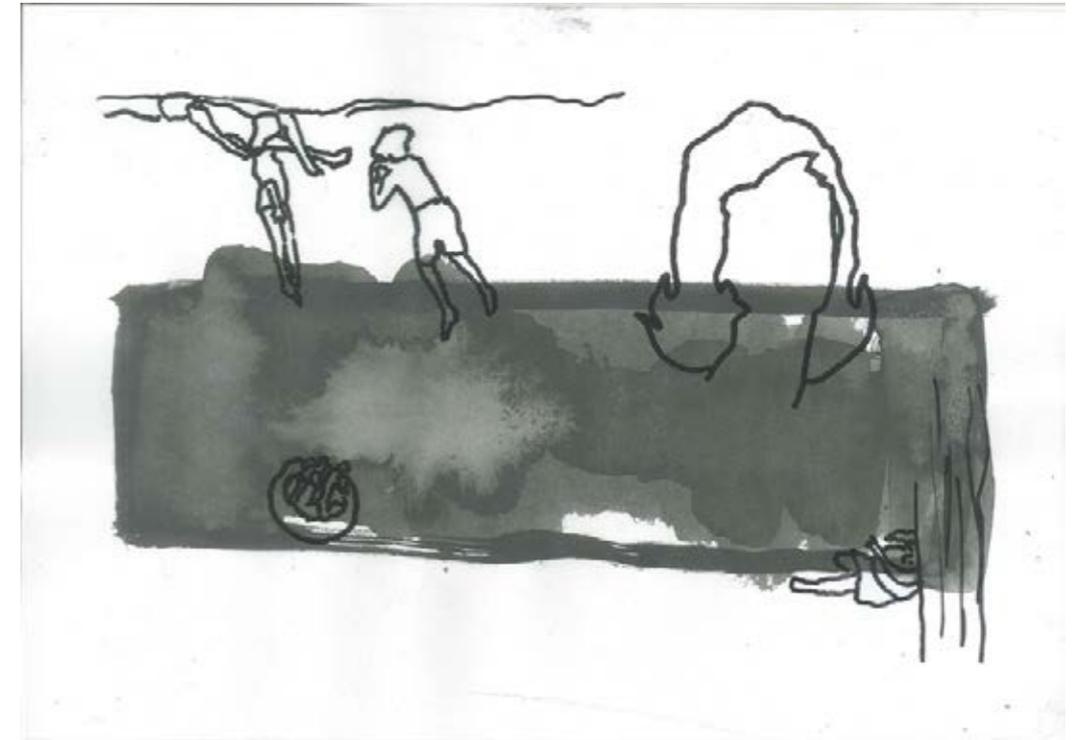
# Research Aims & Objectives

## Research Aims:

- To understand the status of memory images within the narrative of personal recollection and identity and the elastic/dynamic relation of time and memory.
- To investigate the objectivity of such memory images within the complex set of practices operative in human recollection and the role of collective memory in human interactions.
- To explore the challenges presented by images from memory as manifestations of desire.

## Research Objectives:

- Using a visual methodology, to construct a new optic of lived memory as a succession of events occurring within an expanded field of events, both physical and fictional.
- To explore through graphical processes the state of memory as a collection of unfinished and partially abandoned images, and to discover relations of meaning through active recollection.
- To gather together by graphical and painted means displaced memories and orphaned images reflecting fragments of an unfinished narrative.
- To trace, through the production of visual imagery, the operation of images as they glue together fragments of recollection and the processes of assembling relations scattered across time and place.



'Mutation Ecstasy', ink on paper. Exhibited in Kielce, Poland, 2016.

# Research Context

This project was a development and extension of ongoing research into the nature of memory and its complex relations to our construction of our experience of the world, and the proposition that a part of the function of visual art in human beings is as a physical manifestation of memory. In activating the retrieval of a primary memory other memories are activated and combined with sensations, colours and fragments of apparently unrelated memories. These 'other' memories can be morphed onto or into the primary memory creating a new hybrid memory, a tapestry of familiar recalled associations as well as rogue recollections. This soft organic process of active recollection mirrors the complex processes of visual creation in generating some images intentionally and others by chance or through the process itself.

Drawing on the philosophical ideas of Alain Badiou, the artefacts generated through this project are viewed as the inscriptions of something which is impossible but real. In the images the inside/outside binary is erased and they exist as deeply experienced biological dynamics in the mind. The passage of the traces of the external world, as accessed through memory, altered and metamorphosed in the neural web of fragmented associations and unrecognised sensations, produces a new interiority that is directly composed of our sense of our exteriority, our sensorial experience of the external world.

The series Mutation Ecstasy uncovers the development of a single narrative event and records in images visual material that surfaced in the recollection process. This gave rise to complex interplays between repetition, representation, abstraction and scale. The resulting exhibition was held in the University Gallery at Kielce, a town infamous as a site of Jewish massacre in the Nazi period. In exploring the displacement of a personal memory narrative and researching the process of image substitution and different visual resistances in memory images, it was impossible not to take account of the charged spatial environment and circumstance of the exhibition.

Building on the context of extensive earlier research on the relation to imaging and memory, this project was conducted also in the context of thirty years of exposure to Chinese thought and visual culture, investigating its challenges to the western construction of time and exploring new models of non-time narrative and simultaneity. The format of the scroll was used in some of the resulting artefacts (the Infernal Fragments exhibition), evoking a strongly Chinese visual methodology and linking the random disruption of the visual narrative of western cinema, also referenced in the work, with the ancient pre-filmic narrative of the unfolding scroll ink paintings of Chinese history. The technical context of the methodology also included utilising an adapted form of the method known as 'cliché verres', popularised by the 19th century French artist, Corot, painting directly onto glass plates which are then photographically printed.



'Mutation Ecstasy', ink and photo on plastic.  
Exhibited in Kielce, Poland, 2016



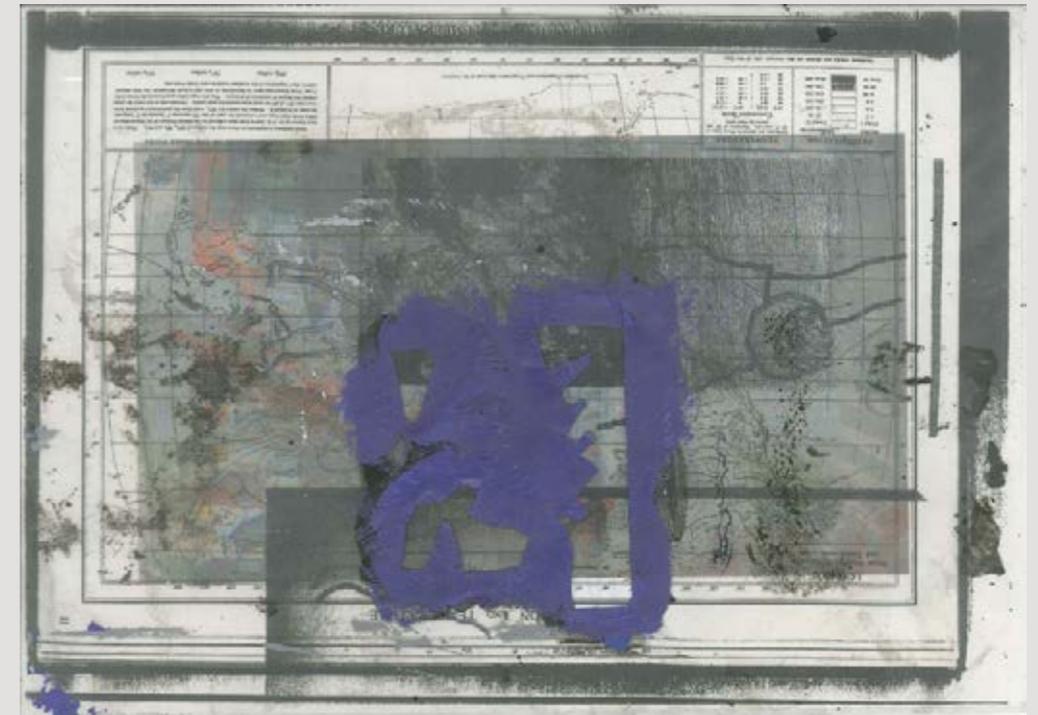
'Haunting', ink, acrylic, photo on paper.  
Exhibited in Jinan, China, 2018



'Mutation Ecstasy', ink, acrylic, resin on paper.  
Exhibited in Kielce, Poland, 2016.



'Infernal Fragments', acrylic, resin, photo on paper.  
Exhibited in Macau 2018



'Mutation Ecstasy', ink, acrylic, resin and photo on paper.  
Exhibited in Kielce, Poland, 2016

# Research Methods & Process

The primary source material for the works exhibited as 'Mutation Ecstasy' was a visual diary of attempts over many years to access a specific autobiographical memory of swimming at Stadbroke Island, Queensland, Australia in childhood. The diary catalogued the fragmented narrative of seemingly unconnected and partially recalled images. Particular attention was paid to the areas of resistance in the mind blocking access to certain memories or erasing different forms of content and displacing time and space and fusing other memories and images to this fractured narrative. In seeking to characterise the personal relationship to these images in memory, a metaphor of the self as an occupied country was considered. This meant considering how to image phenomena such as persistence, displacement, loss, detail and sensation.

The ongoing development and exploration of a graphical means to image these questions is the primary aim and ambition of the research of which this project is a part. The slow procedural nature of print and drawn processes accord with the layered perception of time embodied in the work of forced and unforced recollection. The liquid evanescence of ink on plastic and the synergistic relationship of agency between studio practice and memory was investigated in the 'Mutation Ecstasy' exhibition by arranging the works to be double hung on the walls facilitating the viewers experience of the images as sequential art evoking a powerful narrative of material events and evoking the dual processes of displacement and recollection. The concept and nature of exile as a visual phenomenon was more clearly understood as a primary motivation for exhibiting the research internationally. This exhibition prompted an alertness to the particular nature of time and space and the culture of reception of the various places where the work is exhibited.

For the exhibition 'Infernal Fragments' other technological forms of imaging enabled a fictionalisation of memory through the use of photographs, digital cinema screen shots and 3- dimensional prosthetic scans. Autobiographical imagery was used involving a direct exploration of self and identity in a tidal sway between specific personal visual information and abstract marks signifying unrepresentable sensations associated with specific places and

times, in an attempt to evoke new non-linear forms of narrative. The interweaving of personal historical photographs and objective scanned data appear to convey an objective truth recalling specific events.

Adapting the '*cliché verres*' process, images were produced using plastic sheets painted in ink and other graphic media which were then scanned and digitally printed onto rag photographic paper and subjected to further graphic enhancement. The process of positioning the works so that they were not photographs, nor drawings, nor ink paintings but a hybrid of all of these methods was intentional and selected because it had resonance with the ambiguous status of memory images.

The process allowed for a series of overlaid images to emerge redolent of certain repeated forms drawn from memories and other related images from previous research. A recurring image appropriated from a Casper David Friedrich painting of 'Ploughed Fields near Dresden' figures here both as a memory image and an inverted sense of an imagined land/scape albeit one that is no longer a vista or scape but rather a sensorial expression of land as mass, gravity and time.

In the 'Haunting' exhibition the trope of water was investigated through multiple images of respiration, breath and weightlessness. The fusion of these ghostly immaterial images and their repetition were explored as graphic equivalences of the imagery generated by unrestrained recollection in the retrieval process of memory. The trope of water occurs independent of the exact memory to which it is tied and the visually inscribed experience of immersion in water is developed graphically and metaphorically as a mode of imagining images in memory as a dance inside a theatre of fiction and forgetting. These images function as inscriptions of an existence, as something which is but does not appear. They are subject to the fictional processes let loose by the agency of recollection. They represent the 'real' fiction in the actuality of our remembered lives.



'Infernal Fragments', ink, photo, resin on paper. Exhibited in Macau, 2018



'Infernal Fragments', ink, photo, resin on paper. Exhibited in Macau, 2018

# Project Outcomes & Dissemination

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## Mutation Ecstasy:

Solo exhibition of 21 original works on paper at the gallery of the Institute of Fine Arts, University of Kielce, Poland. February 2016.

The exhibition was curated by Professor Wieslaw Lucza, Director of the Institute of Fine Arts, University of Kielce, and the exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue essay in both Polish and English by the noted Polish art scholar J. Rybinski. The exhibition was the subject of an address contextualised the works within the wider frame of research into memory, and an interviewed on Polish national radio.

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## Haunting:

Solo exhibition of 30 works on paper at the Shandong University of the Arts, Jinan, China. 23 October–20 November 2018.

The exhibition was selected and curated by Professor Yannan Dong, Head of Graphic Design at the University, and was a major event in the University's 60th anniversary celebrations. A public lecture and a series of postgraduate lectures on the research of memory and the works in the exhibition were presented, and the University acquired three works from the exhibition for its permanent collection.

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## Infernal Fragments:

Solo exhibition of 10 large scroll works on paper exhibited as an installation of painted graphic elements in the gallery space of Macau University of Science and Technology, Macau. November 2018.

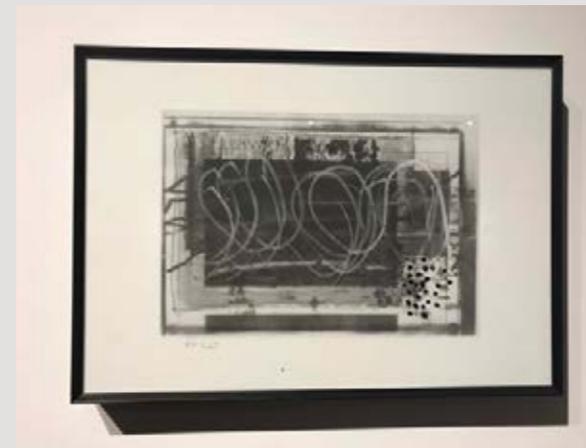
The exhibition was curated by Professor Liu Peng, who also authored the accompanying catalogue essay in both Mandarin and English.

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## Extinction Memory/ Memory Extinction:

Solo exhibition of 28 prints and drawings on paper at the Shandong University of Art & Design, Art Museum. 5 November–10 December 2019.

The exhibition was curated by Professor Li Wenhua, Director of the Shandong University Art & Design, Art Museum.



'Extinction memory/Memory extinction' (installation photograph),  
SUAD, Art Museum, Jinan, China, 2019.

# Appendix

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**Output Type:**

Creative body of enquiry, original artistic works,  
solo exhibitions