

# Making Memories

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## Abstract

Objects can be classed as a 'prompt' to "our conscious lives of inexplicable mysteries which exist...as reminders of people who are absent" (Ash, 1996, p. 220). Objects embody memories for individuals reminding them of special times, people and places. To others this object may have no worth, but in conjunction with a memory adds attachment and value. As a maker my previous work includes a collection of fashion artefacts entitled "Absence" in which each object played with the idea of absence and presence and questions functionality. The process of casting objects in platinum cure silicone then using the mould, as the basis of the finished piece is a technique I have developed, leaving a negative space, but a positive ghost like representation of what once was present, creating a lasting material memory. I am currently creating a series of ten artefacts that capture individual's lost relationships by fusing memories and existing objects that have become imprinted and embellished with the characteristics of the original owner. The finished artefacts will represent individuals lost love in a material form. My practice develops the use of both traditional leatherwork and silicone moulding techniques in conjunction with modern processes from laser cutting to 3D printing. The N-Exlace was produced as my own personal response to the emotional transfer of memory to artefact and became the first in the series for 'Making Memories'. Before working with other people's stories I wanted to use my own experience of a lost romantic relationship to develop process and techniques. Love letters and photographs were rediscovered. Old diary entries were used to provide a contrast between what I've deemed the 'public' and 'hidden' side of the relationship. A locket kept as a memento was used in silicone casting experiments, which produced a ghostly imprinted sphere, signifying the memory of the object. The making process used traditional handcrafts that were labour intensive and physical allowing each stage and memory of the relationship to be considered and processed in turn whilst making. Techniques such as experimental acetone printing left letters and photographs distressed and faded, adding to the feeling of memories being forgotten. Working from instinct the piece took the form of a necklace. Very literal to the cast locket embedded within it but the leather began to symbolise my own skin that had been imprinted with memories, but now had been 'processed' so was detached from my own body. Concluding this phase of making allowed me to become fully absorbed in the emotions and feelings of the relationship again, establishing the idea that emotion is transferred from making to artefact. Working with 10 items my process of making comes from my background as a fashion practitioner, where having collected and analysed the 10 selected stories from original interviews, I have developed a series that can be worked on holistically. The story is a constant guide to the making processes leading to developing new techniques and skills within my own practice and inventive outcomes within the series of finished artefacts.

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As an artist, my work has always been focused on the stories people tell of their memories of others, combined with the interaction of significant objects. Storytelling is an important part of my practice, forming narratives or scripts that are analysed and used to inform the making process of new artefacts. My previous work includes a collection of fashion artefacts entitled *Absence*, in which each object plays with the idea of absence and presence, and questions functionality. The process of casting objects in platinum cure silicone then using the mould as the basis of the finished piece is a technique I have developed, leaving a negative space but a positive ghost-like representation of what once was present, and creating a lasting material memory. My current work looks specifically at memories of lost love, be it familial, romantic or platonic.

Objects embody memories for individuals, reminding them of special times, people and places. To others a particular object may have no worth, but, in conjunction with an individual's own memories, forms a special bond for to that person, making it priceless through its links to the past. Objects can be classed as a prompt to 'our conscious lives of inexplicable mysteries which exist...as reminders of people who are absent' states Ash<sup>i</sup>. The more objects become imprinted and embellished with age and meaning, the deeper the connection between owner and possession. Turkle<sup>ii</sup>, like Ash believes objects can be used as reflections on life transition, markers of relationships and even companions. This is where my research and practice begins.

I am currently working on a project that aims to capture and portray memories of a series of participants' lost loves in material form, creating artefacts that act as vessels in which memories can be stored. This then acts as a reminder of a lost love, and a prompt for the memory that may have been forgotten otherwise. Throughout the making process, a number of decisions take place that involve both the emotion of the participant as storyteller, and the maker. These decisions guide the making process, determining techniques used and materials chosen. My practice develops the use of both traditional leatherwork and silicone moulding techniques in conjunction with modern processes, from laser cutting to 3D printing. This paper will discuss how the making process takes place and look at how choices are made for the techniques and materials that are used.

## **Collection of Memory**

The initial collection process for the lost love memories started with an open call through the use of physical drop boxes at a number of venues in the UK, and then online through my website. This allowed the participants to write down their stories and indicate whether they would like to be involved further. A selection was made from the collected stories, and participants were contacted in regards to being involved further. Ten participants were selected, covering a diverse range of relationships, ages and objects. From this selection, individual interviews were conducted in which participants had the opportunity to tell their stories of lost love. This enabled two key points; it allowed participants to talk freely about their experience and discuss different elements of the relationship. Many of the participants spoke about their relationships in a linear 'start to finish' way. It also allowed me to become part of the process by hearing the emotion in the participants' voices, thus allowing me to visualise how memory may be materialised as an artefact. Benjamin emphasised the relationship between story teller (participant) and craftsperson (myself), by using a craft metaphor. He described how 'traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way hand prints of the potter cling to the clay vessel'<sup>iii</sup>. This idea that the participant's presence is embedded in the story makes it almost tangible, and through the making this presence is utilised when processing the story into an artefact. The participant is also recognised in the co-production methods I utilise as making progresses, further discussions take place with modifications to the artefact through constant interaction, conversation and feedback throughout. From the initial collection process, as well as taking memories of the lost love to utilise within making, I also create a

new relationship with the participant. Atkinson discusses the 'deep and personal' connection he created with his first life story interview, and how he was 'moved by his willingness to share his life with someone he hadn't known before'<sup>iv</sup>. Like Atkinson, this openness created a powerful bond between myself and the participants, which in turn is used within the making process to create a meaningful artefact to store the memory of lost love.

### **Initial Analysis and Emotional Embedding Through Making**

Further to creating bonds with participants, and in some cases working with intimate stories and relationship recollections, part of the challenge through the making is to transmit the emotion or 'emotional residue' as Atkinson describes it<sup>v</sup>. Within the collection process, the interview is recorded so it can be transcribed and analysed in further depth. I undertake the transcription procedure as this allows me to revisit elements of the story that stand out and further embed the story within my mind, becoming a temporary vessel ready to transmit the story into a new artefact. With such in-depth analysis of these stories, I begin to carry the memories around with me. In some instances, they become quite emotionally heavy and the only way of dealing with this is to process the emotion through making.

I also replay the recording in the studio, as if the person is once again telling the story. As Benjamin suggests 'When the rhythm of work has seized him (the craftsman), he listens to the tales in such a way that the gift of retelling them comes to him all by itself'<sup>vi</sup>. This continuous repetition of the story allows it to lead the making. Once in my head, elements of each story replay subconsciously in my mind whilst I'm working on specific processes of creating. The story becomes embedded deeper within my own memory but is also transmitted into this new artefact. Leslie discusses the idea that whilst working, stories that have forgone an 'existence on paper, imprint themselves into the listeners fantasy awaiting transmissions, afterlives'<sup>vii</sup>. The stories are waiting within me to be transmitted, and within my own practice this is done through each stage of the making process, from material choice to technique used.

### **The Making Process**

Throughout the designing and making process, the story, including events that happened within it, people, places and other objects all inform how the artefact is produced and how it will look. Coming from a fashion product background, I design and create an artefact as if I were putting together a collection. The collection therefore consists of individual participants, each with its own character, much like a fashion collection. Each artefact is thoroughly researched and explored through the interview, transcription and analysis process, allowing design decisions to be made as to how the piece may initially look. However, after designing an initial idea, the making process is led by the transmission of emotion into the artefact and what techniques appear most appropriate for it.

For each artefact, the type of relationship is considered along with other factors gained from the interview to inform their creation. As the maker, I become the transmitter of emotion by learning new crafts, material processes and techniques that are required in order to be embedded into the new artefact. Stories could prompt traditional making techniques such as crochet and embroidery or traditional leather work, but also silicone moulding, wood turning or plaster casting in order to create a fitting artefact. All making techniques have to be learned, if necessary in accordance with the participant's story.

Techniques that had to be learnt, including crochet for one particular artefact, meant learning a new process.

In one instance, I worked alongside a maker who taught me basic crochet techniques, which allowed me to learn and develop the craft to suit the needs of the artefact. All the while the memory of the story, including crochet, playing in my mind and almost willing me forward. Without having this specific story to make I would not have imagined learning crochet as a craft. If I had tried to learn crochet for myself, I would have not have progressed as quickly or with as much skill. Having the story as a basis provided me with a purpose and objective to learning, so as not to let the participant or the memory of her grandmother down.

As Peter Korn suggests, being a 'novice' every step requires 'conscious deliberation'<sup>viii</sup>. He describes how making and working with specific materials or techniques becomes second nature. He goes on to discuss how 'mind, hand and body' read from the same page,<sup>ix</sup> how 'craft becomes a fully integrated application of one's capacities'<sup>x</sup>. This full immersion into the making of an artefact, becoming one with it as it becomes part of the extended self, is how each of the stories I have gathered gets transmitted into the object through the making process. The stories are the driving force behind the craft. As the skills utilised for making are now my own tacit knowledge, decisions happen with little deliberation but as more of an organic process, like the piece is an extension of my own body.

In terms of the relationship between the participant and their lost love, the struggle with the making of the artefact becomes synonymous with how relationships are formed and function, therefore as relationships are not always perfect, in some respects neither will be the artefact. This is hard to accept as a maker. To do justice to the story and memory of a lost love, artefacts feel like they need to be completed – to look polished and presentable. Richard Sennett describes how 'obsession with perfection seems a prescription for failure'<sup>xi</sup>. I have tried to channel this obsession with perfection into the production of an artefact that fully justifies the story, although with my background in leatherwork, some of the artefacts appear finished to a professional standard because of my own knowledge of this technique.

I have work predominantly in leather and silicone. As a trained leather worker, my skills have been founded in shoes, luggage and accessories, working with vegetable tanned leather hide. This leather is dyed with natural materials rather than chemicals, giving a subtle mellow tanned colour that continues to develop and darken with age. The use of natural vegetable tanned leather (veg tan) also allows for it to be 'wet moulded' and retain its shape, as can be seen in the N-Exlace, an artefact created through experimentation, based around my own memory of lost love. The characteristics, such as darkening with age, fit within the context of my work. The aging process adds to the character of the leather and the artefact created, allowing it to grow old, gaining history and memories of its own. It is an organic material that keeps changing throughout its life. Veg tan also has a distinct smell that is rich and comforting. It smells familiar and homely, fitting in with the idea of a lost love. Cutting into it with a sharpened knife can be compared to cutting through butter. It responds well to dyes and other printing processes, and I have developed techniques such as acetone printing as discussed further in examination of the N-Exlace.

The silicone used is platinum cure, which has an opaque look to it when cast. Each mould, which acts as the finished piece, is rich in detail, replicating minute imperfections or character marks. The casting process is methodical, relaxing and solitary. The consistency of the base silicone is that of thick syrup. Pouring from the tub into a bowl is time consuming. This part of my making process is important as it cannot be rushed, meaning that elements of the process, be it the making or the memory, can be contemplated and thought through whilst working. It is relaxing, therapeutic and a silent technique. The satisfaction of demoulding the cast piece and the result being held up to the light bring the void object to life, giving it instant depth and meaning. Using these two primary materials as the basis for my work creates clean and simple looking artefacts, but with imprints of both personal objects and human emotion.

## Technique Choices

Involving personal emotion within a making process means decisions of technique or making process do not always complement or justify the story. This became evident when designing a strap for a camera artefact which I wanted to decorate with the pattern of a participant's personal item. Having initially chosen to use laser cutting for this process, I set about completing this, however the process did not feel like it suited how the emotion should be transmitted. It felt like burning the leather was not a fitting embellishment technique. The process was too hands off and void of interaction, allowing a machine to complete the work took control away from the maker. Going back to acetone printing, where the hands rub the print onto the leather using different pressures, felt much more involved and allowed the story again to be processed within the making. Discovering that technique – in this project – is controlled through the transmission of emotion, demonstrates the powerful impact storytelling and memory has within the making process.

## Documentation

The process of making is documented by film and studio journal, creating a timeline of production. Documentation comes in the form of drawings, videos and diary entries which accompany each of the finished artefacts. The making process informs theoretical reading which becomes a symbiotic relationship, feeding back into the making process again. These elements are all captured through the documentation.

Film is used primarily to capture the making process, and when learning a new technique to demonstrate the time taken to master a skill. This relates back to the stories of lost love and how, in documenting the process, the viewer of the artefacts can witness the effort and labour within the techniques used. All making processes are documented for each artefact, forming a making journey that can be replayed in its entirety. A reflective studio journal is kept alongside the process of making, to allow discussion in the artist's voice format, to express areas of development and emotions felt, and make references between practice and theory. Sketches, photographs and relevant materials are published within the blog to link back to specific stories, artefacts or techniques.

The completed artefacts are then to be viewed by the participant, who, in a co-production role, can discuss what has been made and if it serves the purpose of their story and memories in terms of materialising them. They then can also view the documentation and see the making process as a film to further understand how their story has been used to inform procedures and choices. This is an ongoing process and to a certain extent acts as a bridge, where a new relationship has been formed between participant and maker.

## The N-Exlace



*Image: The N-Exlace*

As part of learning how to process individuals' memories from the stories, I designed an object from a personal experience of a lost romantic love. This was to develop how decisions as part of the making would be made, and how it felt to work with memory leading the practice. The artefact was developed from memories of the lost love, relived through old diary entries, love letters and photographs combined with a physical object, a locket that had been given as a gift during the relationship. During the making of the artefact, I developed the acetone onto leather printing technique. Having worked with acetone before on paper, I had noticing that the print technique left parts of the image lighter and darker or even absent. Developing its use on veg tan leather seemed like a natural progression to capture the haziness of memories from the past. The distressed finish shows only parts of the documented relationship, and how other memories dissolve and fade away over time. Whilst imprinting the leather, thoughts and memories, happy or sad, were replayed, almost transmitting from my mind through the making into the material. The leather was tightly moulded using a mannequin to replicate the curves of the neckline, allowing a seamless fit across the upper chest. The leather was then left to dry and the edges and surface were finished with traditional leather work techniques to give a high-quality result. Again, the relationship was considered through the waxing and polishing process, embedding the emotion deeper into the leather, almost sealing it in.

The locket was cast into a spherical mould and then removed from the cured piece. As pouring silicone is a technique I have regularly used, the process has become tacit knowledge, allowing the thought process whilst making to be about the memory of the object and relationship rather than the process. The locket was destroyed in the making process, however the silicone captured every detail, dent and scratch clearly within the process. Like the love, the locket no longer remains, but the imprint is still visible, leaving the locket absent, but present. The silicone was mounted into the leather collar where it would have sat when worn. This felt like the right location and again the practice was led by the emotion of the memory. The design and making process allowed me to rethink the ending of the relationship and acted as a therapeutic and cathartic exercise in remembering why choices were made, but also how they have shaped who I have become. The artefact is not a fashion accessory as it could be perceived, but represents my own skin that had been imprinted with memories, but now has been 'processed' and detached from my own body. It is a representation of a period of time and relationship that have now passed. The hollow space of both the locket and the body show the space

of the physical that has moved on, where the memory has become materialised throughout the making process.

Concluding this phase of making allowed me to become fully absorbed in the emotions and feelings of the relationship again, establishing the idea that emotion is transferred from making to artefact.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, my practice has evolved from working with traditional craft techniques to utilising memories that guide the making process and the outcome. The artefacts themselves capture elements of each participant's story, making the memories tangible. My practice has developed so that I can recount memories from stories told and transfer these into artefacts through tacit knowledge and making processes. The production documentation of each artefact stands as testament to the process, and allows the viewer to also become embedded within the journey of making memories.

I hope to complete the collection of artefacts during 2018, and the making journey can be followed through my studio journal at [www.charliegoldthorpe.com](http://www.charliegoldthorpe.com).

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## Images

Goldthorpe, Charlotte (2016) 'The N-Exlace' [photograph] (personal collection).

## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> Ash, 1996: 220

<sup>ii</sup> Turkle, 2007: 5

<sup>iii</sup> Benjamin, 1999: 91

<sup>iv</sup> Atkinson, 1998: 22

<sup>v</sup> Atkinson, 1998: 23

<sup>vi</sup> Benjamin, 1999: 91

<sup>vii</sup> Leslie, 2010: 387

<sup>viii</sup> Korn, 2015: 51

<sup>ix</sup> Korn, 2015: 51

<sup>x</sup> Korn, 2015: 52

<sup>xi</sup> Sennett, 2008: 46