MAKING ART AND THE MEMORY OF PLACE

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ABSTRACT

This practice-led thesis examines my artmaking process, which is rooted in memory, remembrance, nostalgia and grief. I return to my grandfather's neglected garden, a significant site of childhood memory and place attachment, as both subject and material source. Drawing on artist who engage with memory, materiality and loss, I contextualise the relationship between grief and place through a phenomenological lens. I paint with remnants from the garden - plants, spics and teas - as an ode to my grandfather and the time we shared. His influence shaped my love for art, and in this body of work I adopt a childlike approach, working with materials in their rawest form through imprinting, staining and carving.

Over the course of this project, I have observed the materials gradually fade and decay, shifting from vibrancy to muted tones. This slow transformation became central to the methodology. The works function as living, dying entities that embody mourning as process rather than fixed state. By allowing organic matter to age naturally, the work challenges the permanence traditionally associated with painting and positions decay as both visual language and emotional framework. In this way, the paintings operate as a living archive of presence and absence, proposing a materially led phenomenologically informed approach to grief in contemporary art, where the life and entropy of the artwork mirror the lived experience of loss.

DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own work and that all the sources I have used have been acknowledged by complete references. This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for Master of Fine Arts at Rhodes University. I declare that it has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at another university.

Jascy-Leigh Edom

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Jascy-Leigh Edom
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ETHICS DECLARATION BY THE HEAD OF DEPARTMENT

Research at Rhodes University is administered by the Rhodes University Ethical Standards Committee (RUESC) and guided by the RUESC handbook. You can access a copy here: https://ruconnected.ru.ac.za/course/view.php?id=5399

1. The proposal and thesis contain textual analysis of publicly available data, which does not involve human participants and therefore does NOT require ethics approval.

Signature:  Name [print]: JASCY-LEIGH EDOM

LIST OF FIGURES

Introduction

This mini-thesis contextualises my Exhibition titled *Family Tree: Growing Through Grief.* Using autoethnography as my research method, I examine my childhood memories that developed into a place attachment to my grandfather's garden in my childhood home. The place attachment is a result of my deep reimaging this now dilapidated garden, I explore an alternative approach to painting by using remnants from gardens in place of paint and brushes. The first chapter focuses on the core themes of childhood memory, nostalgia, grief, loss and death. This chapter features personal stories to frame the significance of my grandfather and the impact he had on my life. The book *In the First Country of Places: Nature, Poetry and Childhood Memory* by Louise Chawla (1994) is relevant not only to this chapter but to the thesis as a whole as it discusses the central theme of how childhood memories create attachments to places. The death of my grandfather was my first experience with grief and the trauma it causes. Ratcliffe (2019) details how the world is experienced when one is dealing with a profound loss. He accounts for all the subsequent losses that follow the death of a loved one from a phenomenological perspective. Out of these various losses came the need to hold on to any remnants of home and my grandfather's memory. Holmes (2021) accounts for the use of everyday objects and memorabilia in art and encourages alternative mediums of painting and art creation.

The second chapter delves deeper into spaces and place attachment, with the focus being on place attachments, the environmental impact on the individual and gardens and their connotations in art and literature. Manzo and Devine-Wright (2013) offer an interdisciplinary insight into place attachment by demonstrating how it shapes personal identity and community. Looking at the concept of place attachment from a geographical,

sociological and psychological perspective offers a comprehensive understanding of the topic and accounts for how these attachments are shaped and how they develop over time. *Processes of Place Attachment: An Interactional Framework* by Jennifer Cross (2015) develops this into a framework of seven points, namely, sensory, narrative, historical, spiritual, ideological, commodifying and material dependence. While all of these points will be addressed, the main focus will be on the factors that pertain to my study, which are the narrative, sensory and historical factors that lead to a place attachment. The element of childhood is something that underpins the entire project, as it is grounded in a childlike perspective. For this reason, I found it necessary to engage with literature that focuses on a child's point of view. Moore (1986) attempts to do this by focusing on the role of outdoor spaces and play in a child's development. By doing so, he investigates the hidden world that children construct in imaginative play, which, at times, can bleed into the physical world. Moore highlights the importance of play and safe fantasy realms for the growth of a healthy, well-rounded child.

The memories made in childhood formed an attachment to the garden, which informed my artmaking process. When I first began experimenting with alternative painting mediums, Rubin's perspective (2023) offered a source of inspiration as he emphasised the natural flow of art-making over technicality and skills. Rubin approaches creativity as a fundamental aspect of life and emphasises being present and open in artistic practice. He argues that creativity can be found in everyday, mundane acts and should not be regarded as something that needs a specific medium or space to exist. In many ways, art is the act of creating meaning, generating conversation and interrogating topics from a visual culture perspective. This is not unique to academia, since art is everybody's right. This is the conversation propounded by Rubin, as he advocates for a free approach to creating. Chapter

three is an in-depth exploration of my artistic practice where I use remnants from gardens, like plants and spices, to paint. The points brought forward by Rubin, coupled with Cas Holmes' argument on the found object and the significance of the mundane, are the basis for my painting style.

The layout of my thesis follows the timeline of the events as they took place, starting with early childhood and culminating with my art practice. Chawla (1994), Manzo and Patrick Devine-Wright (2013) and Rubin (2023) create the framework of the conversation and keep the perspective of a child as a central part of the discussion.

CHAPTER ONE

Memory

1.1 Childhood Memory and Nostalgia

The study of memory has fascinated academics of various disciplines over the years. In the late 1800s, psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus first became fascinated with a person's ability to retain information and was established as the father of memory (Ebbinghaus, 1913). From his initial study, an interest in the scientific functions of the brain began to spread among psychologists and academics alike. Over time, the ideas around the human mind, brain functions, memory and recollection began to grow increasingly abstract, encompassing concepts like nostalgia. The idea of nostalgia was not new by any means (Anspach, 1934). It was described as the feeling of pain when separated from a familiar environment. At the start of his research, Hofter believed nostalgia to be a mental illness (Sedikides, Wildschut and Baden, 2004). This belief continued into the next century when researchers coined it as a symptom of grief, loss or depression. It was not until the late 1990s that nostalgia was recognised as a positive emotion rather than a symptom of poor mental health. Not only was it believed to be positive, but it was later considered functional. Writer Saul Bellow (1970) once stated, “Everyone needs his memories. They keep the wolf of insignificance from the door.” Without nostalgia, the best parts of life might fade into obscurity. The presence of such a deep longing is evidence of a joyful experience, a happy memory. My earliest happy memory is drinking tea in the morning with my grandfather in the family garden. His passing and the loss of the garden became a nostalgic memory for me. Even twelve years after the fact, the longing is still just as prominent.

My grandfather (Ian Edom) passed away when I was ten years old, and I do not have one negative memory of him. This is not to say he was perfect, but while he was alive, I associated him with stability, comfort and peace. It is an established truth that nostalgia is a liar, in the sense that an intense longing for something that once brought joy can make one idealise a situation, perceiving it to be better than it was. Columnist Herb Caen stated, "Nostalgia is memory without pain" (Sedikides, Wildschut and Baden, 2004), which is the kind of thought process that led researchers to reevaluate the phenomenon as it could not be a sign of mental illness if it did not come with negativity and pain. But life is filled with good and bad things, and remembering one over the other creates an inaccurate recollection. It is for this reason that nostalgic memories are often embellished in one's mind. When I recall my grandfather's garden, it always appears grand, lush and beautiful. It was a place where I could spend the entire day and never be bored. When I visited it as an adult, I was surprised by the size. As a child, everything in the garden felt larger because I was smaller. This sense of the garden as huge did not come from its actual size, but from a nostalgic feeling which made the place wonderful and grand in my memory. In addition, there are barely any pictures of the garden as it existed when I lived there; my recollection is based solely on my childhood memories. Perhaps the garden was not regarded as an important space by other family members, and as a result, no one bothered to document it. Available pictures captured only people and events because they were deemed significant. In my art practice, I typically use images of family members or old photographs from albums to paint and draw inspiration. The absence of such resources (of the garden) has led me to rely mainly on my memory, which is influenced by nostalgia and a childlike perspective.

The significance of childhood memory is explored at length in poetry, literature, art and music, with references dating back as early as the seventh century (Chawla, 1994). For

several years, it was believed that children's memories are often inaccurate and therefore unreliable (Kali, 2003). Scholars like Sigmund Freud, who studied the inner workings of the human psyche, proposed that while children's memory is weak, it could be strengthened by a connection to a negative emotion. However, a study conducted by Howes, Siegel and Brown (1993) established that any emotion can have a lasting effect on one's memory and that there are multiple factors which contribute to memory recollection. That being said, it is difficult to attribute any aspect of memory recollection directly to the subject being a child. For many years, I believed that my fantasy of my grandfather's garden was a result of the fact that I was young and impressionable. And while that may very well be a factor, it is also important to consider the bigger picture.

From 2003 – 2005, I lived with my grandparents, and my parents were embroiled in a custody battle. I was between the ages of two and nine when this was taking place. My parents gave birth to me when they were teenagers and were together for the first two years of my life, but I have no recollection of this time. While they tried to create a traditional family life for me, I have no memory of them being together or of us existing as a family unit. My first memory of my parents was of them in court, and they did not show any animosity towards each other despite the situation we were in. I can, in fact, vividly recall going out to eat bunny chow[1] with them after long days in court. They would joke and laugh with one another despite the obvious issues we had. For this reason, I did not grow up with the idea that parents were necessarily meant to be a unit. My mother and her family were one unit, while my father and his were another. There was no negative emotion attached to this, as I had strong ties to both of them. The court determined that my father

[1] Chow is an Indian South African fast-food dish that originated in Durban, consisting of a hollowed-out loaf of white bread filled with curry ith a salad on the side.

would have temporary custody of me while the proceedings took place because he had a more stable home life than my mother. In addition, I threw a massive tantrum when my mother attempted to move me from my grandparents' house in Durban to the unfamiliar city of Johannesburg. This is how I began living with my grandparents.

It was established that for the duration of the court proceedings, I would stay with my grandparents and my father. It was also at this time that the relationship between my mother and father began to deteriorate. The realisation that she could lose full custody of me upset my mother greatly, and she was especially upset that I could not live with her during this time, as we did not know how long the custody battle would last. I was also required to start school in the coming years, and she did not want me to attend school in Durban, but rather in Johannesburg, where she lived. All these plans had to be put on hold while the court proceedings were underway. My grandfather worked and provided for the family while my grandmother took care of the home and helped the church community. My father was working and financially capable of raising me. My aunt, Genel, worked as a law secretary. In this context, custody was granted to my father, but my mother decided to counter-sue him for full custody. This is how it was established that I would live with my fraternal grandparents and my father while the custody battle took place. Living with my father was very different from what it seemed. Up until this point, I was mainly living with my mother, and I would visit my father's home on weekends. My father was a very active man, and we were seldom at home during this time. He would take me to the gym with him or on his fishing trips. He played professional soccer, so I would go to practices with him. His sister, my aunt, was also very active in my life, and when he was busy, I would spend most of my time with her. My grandfather was away at work for most of the day, but when he was home, I spent all my time with him. One of my earliest memories is of the smell of

Dettol[2] because he would soak his feet in a green bucket with water and Dettol every day after work. I would sit with him and watch the news or his favourite show, Noot vir Noot[3], even though I did not understand a word of Afrikaans. Once I began living there full-time, things started to change, as I would spend most of my days with my grandmother while the rest of the household was at work. She was a terrifying woman, by all accounts. She is 1.80m tall and used to be a bodybuilder and professional softball player. The image of a soft, loving grandmother was far from my reality.[4]

Once I began living with her, it became evident that she was unfit to take care of a young child. One memory of her in particular stands out for me. I was a very active child, and since my father was very health-conscious, I was not allowed to eat sweets or sugar very often. The only sugar I was allowed to have was in my tea. As a small child, I would steal sugar from the container next to the tea and kettle using a small spoon or by simply dipping my fingers into it. One day, my grandmother found me stealing sugar and decided that the best punishment would be to take all the sugar she had in the house and force me to eat it. Even when I got sick and threw up, I was made to keep eating. I got so sick that I was almost rushed to the hospital. Up until this point, the other people in the house did not realise how badly she had been treating me. My father and my aunt were subjected to very similar treatment, so they thought it was normal and it was just discipline. My grandfather was unaware of this, as my grandmother would be seemingly kind and caring when he was around. After this episode, everyone began to realise how unstable she was. She was admitted to a care facility, and my grandfather took over as my primary caretaker. It became evident at that time that her previous actions were not based on anything reasonable but

[2] Dettol is a brand line of products used for disinfecting and as an antiseptic.
[3] An Afrikaans-language musical quiz show broadcast on South African Television.
[4] This was explored at length in my previous body of work.

rather a result of her mental turmoil. Later on in life, she and I would reconcile, and her actions were forgiven as I understood that she was acting out of stress and anxiety. My grandfather felt guilty for the situation I was in, under his care and in his home. He believed that children should be allowed to have happy, blissful childhoods and regretted that I was not able to experience that. As a result, he became overly invested in making sure my time living in his house was more joyful. He also believed that children should play outside because nature was the best teacher. This was the foundation of the garden becoming a safe space and escape from all the horrors that had taken place in the house.

In this chapter, I share personal stories to emphasise the important role my grandfather played in my life. In my early childhood, I was forcibly separated from my mother. My father was not mature enough to play the role of a parent and instead assumed the role of a fun, older brother. My grandmother was abusive, and my aunt was focused on building her own life. My grandfather not only looked after me but also quietly assisted my mother in gaining custody of me and defended me against my grandmother. He created an environment that was suited to a child and attempted to redeem my lost childhood through imagination and play. He intervened at a critical point, which could have changed the trajectory of my life forever. For this reason, I chose to centre this project around our memories together and the impact his passing had on me.

1.2 Grief and Loss

My grandfather had been established as my primary caretaker and a source of comfort and safety. His passing was my first personal encounter with death, and even today, I have yet to experience a loss greater than this one. It marked a pivotal part of my growth and left a lasting impression on my life. I was ten years old when he passed, but the grief persisted

into adulthood. Umbersoon (2003) talks about how grief can affect a person well into adulthood, even if it was experienced in childhood. Most children have a rudimentary understanding of concepts like morality and the fragility of life. When confronted with the death of a parent or parental figure, the concept becomes a reality. Umbersoon (2003) discusses how an individual's grieving process can differ based on their social, economic and cultural backgrounds. The events that informed my childhood memories became the basis for how I processed the loss. The background is also important in understanding how my family as a whole processed the loss and how this affected the grieving process.

When a family member passes away, the family at large can experience some shifts in dynamics (Bowlby-West, 1983). Each family member plays a role within the family structure. Some relationships and dynamics are subject to change and adjustment when someone in the collective passes away. For example, the death of a parent might require a sibling to take on a greater parental role within the home. This is an example of one of the many losses that come with the death of a family member. In addition to mourning the death of a loved one, one must also mourn the life that existed when they were still alive. The family and community that were once so familiar begin to shift in an attempt to adjust to the loss. In addition to this, every individual in the situation grieves differently, and sometimes this can cause conflict amongst family members. Bowlby-West (1983) describes how these conflicts can lead to divorce and estrangement among siblings. The greater loss accompanies subsequent losses, making the grieving process multifaceted. There are many things to grieve about the death of a loved one. Abeles, Victor and Delano-Wood (2004) discuss the effects the death of a parent has on adult children. While grieving the loss of their parents, adult children can end up traumatising their children if the grieving process is not approached healthily.

Some of the effects discussed include the added stress of having to parent while grieving. Even though a person is under emotional stress, they are still expected to fulfil their parental responsibilities, on top of everything else. If the adult child is still dependent on the deceased parent, it also adds another layer to this dynamic (Abeles, Victor and Delano-Wood, 2004). When my grandfather passed away, my father was still living in his house and relying on him for financial and emotional support. My mother had won the custody battle, and I had begun to adjust to my new life in Johannesburg. Following my grandfather's death, my relationship with my father's family became strained, and my relationships with my aunt, grandmother and father were no longer a priority. As time passed, I realised that my grandfather was the one who made sure to include me in the family dynamic, and now that he was no longer around, I spent increasingly less time with them. In grieving the loss of my grandfather, I also had to grieve the loss of my relationship with half of my family and try to understand the reality of the new position I had within the family structure. My father had gotten married and was building a new life without me. In his death, my grandfather had taken with him my family and sense of stability.

For a ten-year-old child, this can be a lot to process. To help me cope with the loss, a teacher gifted me the book, *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett (1911). The book tells the story of a ten-year-old girl named Mary Lennox who, after the deaths of both her parents, must move from her home in India to England. The story follows her in her new life, living with her uncle on the Yorkshire Moors. She finds a garden on the moors and dedicates herself to reviving it, thus learning about death, decay, loss and grieving. I did not visit my grandfather's garden often after his passing, and the metaphor connecting the death of a loved one to the decay of a garden is ever-present in Burnett's book. Tynan

(2022) furthers this metaphor by incorporating gardens into a conversation about grief. Tynan details the richness of the garden as a site for grieving, as there are numerous parallels to the cycle of life and death in a garden space. A place where life is nourished by the dead that came before them. The way soil fertilises plants and flowers can become, simultaneously, a powerful symbol of grief, death, life and regrowth. By highlighting this dynamic, Tynan (2022) shows that beyond the metaphor, the relationship between grief and gardens is deep and layered. The idea of incorporating the dead into our lives as dynamic parts of our existence is prevalent in the garden space. A place designated to nurture life is also closely linked to the process of death. It is for this reason that Tynan deems the garden "the ideal literary site" (Tynan, 2022, p.22). The allegory of the garden will be explored at length in chapter two, but the connotations of death and decay are significant when discussing grief and loss.

Mourning the death of a loved one is a socially acceptable practice. It is understood amongst people that when one experiences a death in the family, there will be a significant impact on the family members. This is sometimes extended to pets, but very seldom encompasses the losses one experiences in daily life. Mourning a career, marriage or business venture is not regarded as significant enough for it to affect productivity. However, ecologists who work with biodiversity and plants have reported feeling a similar sense of loss when their plants die. Windle (1992) suggests that the mourning we experience for family members and pets can also be extended to the flora and fauna in our environment. Windle extends this notion by suggesting that this could also be an attachment to an environment or ecosystem. If the environment is healthy and safe, an attachment can be formed. Because of this attachment, when an environment is lost, it can register as grief and mourning.

Since Ecology is the study of the relationships between living organisms, death is a natural factor. When the environment changes or a part of the environment is lost, there will be ripple effects on the rest of the ecosystem. This natural phenomenon also applies to the social conduct of life. When a family or individual is in mourning, it can begin to affect the space they occupy. For my family, the garden was not a normal priority, and after the passing of the main provider, the garden seemed to be lost. While my family was mourning the loss of my grandfather, the garden began to decay. I lived in Johannesburg and hadn't visited it for many years. This marked a time of significant grief and mourning for me, as the loss of the garden began to symbolise, not only the loss of my grandfather but the loss of my ecosystem, my support structure and my family. At the heart of this is the idea of a human experience and a discussion about how people deal with grief. Across disciplines, people have attempted to explain human experiences, and one of these explanations is the notion of phenomenology.

Phenomenology is a philosophical study that seeks to describe phenomena as experienced by the individual, without preconceived theories or interpretations. The focus is on the structure of experience and consciousness (Cerbone, 2014). In his last days, the French philosopher Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), who did extensive work dealing with phenomenology, was working on a manuscript for a book entitled *The Visible and the Invisible*, where he began research into the phenomenology of grief. Unfortunately, he passed away suddenly before its completion. Ironically, Merleau-Ponty wrote extensively on the complexity of sudden death and the impact on the surviving parties. Often, when someone is experiencing the loss of a loved one, in a bid to comfort them, people will suggest that it gets better with time. “Time heals all,” they might say, which is one of the oldest clichés. When my grandfather passed away, I heard this sentiment echoed in so many

ways, from various people. Twelve years since this loss, I can confidently say this is not true. In my experience, at least, time heals very little, if anything at all. Healing is, in fact, not a destination so much as a continuous process. The grief simply ages, and with time, one comes to terms with the fact that there will always be something missing. For a long time, I struggled to explain why I felt like time was making it worse. I had to accept that my grandfather would not see me start or finish high school. He would not see me graduate from university. He would not be there to walk me down the aisle at my wedding. My children would never know him. Every joyous moment in life would be shrouded in an underlying sense of loss. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's research, Ratcliffe (2019) discusses the phenomenology of grief and how it functions as a transformative, multilayered experience. He describes this experience by stating, "One could maintain that death involves the extinction of a person's life possibilities and, in addition, that it is experienced as such by those who grieve for that person and fully comprehend the fact of her death" (Ratcliffe, 2019, p. 1).

Influenced by my childhood memories of my grandfather, I began to associate grief and loss with the garden space. His funeral and burial were particularly difficult to get through. I began to imagine the graveyard as a place where people are planted, something akin to a garden of souls. A garden is a place that nurtures and nourishes flora and fauna. It is synonymous with growth and life. It was comforting to associate such vibrant imagery with my grandfather's resting place. This was amplified when I visited my grandparents' home six years after their passing and found that almost all the plants and trees had died. The dilapidated space became synonymous with mourning and death. Tynan (2022) discusses the association between gardens and grieving. She liked planting seeds in anticipation of growth and a successful harvest to the cycle of life and death, in the sense that something

is placed in the ground in the hope that it will be resurrected into a new existence. In this way, the dead remain a part of the living. Dead plant matter nourishes the soil for new life to grow. The implication is that those who have passed continue to impact the lives of those who are alive.

Since grieving is a universal human experience, it is something that everybody can relate to. For this reason, it has long been a theme in literature, research and art. Arnold (2023) suggests that, like grief, creativity is also a universal experience. Based on this, she elaborates on the creative practices of artists who have engaged with their grief in their work. The artists discussed in Arnold's essay all create work around the subject of death and bereavement. Some focus on specific aspects of the grieving process, like healing. By exploring such a diverse collective, Arnold demonstrates how loss can impact an artist's practice. In the section entitled *Merging*, she discusses how an artist's medium can be influenced by grief as a subject matter and how elements of their memories influence the chosen medium. She highlights the importance of storytelling when the focus is on a personal narrative, such as the death of a loved one. Arnold's narrative of these artists resonates with my own artistic practice, as I emphasise personal stories to illustrate the deep significance of my connection with my grandfather and the impact of the loss. The experiences I had with him in the garden were what led me to paint with materials and remnants from the garden.

1.3 Remembrance and Memorabilia

Growing sentimental attachment is a natural human experience. References to these connections can be found in art, movies and music across popular culture. Sometimes it's a blanket a child cannot sleep without or a stuffed animal that must be taken everywhere.

This continues into adulthood, with some people cherishing a necklace gifted to them by a friend or keeping a trinket from home in their wallet when travelling. These objects are associated with a significant memory that creates a sentimental bond to the object. Schechman (2022) discusses how these sentimental bonds and memories can affect an individual's self-identity. She highlights the impact that treasured, personal memories can have, thus showing how they become integrated into people's lives through places and objects. Sentimental memorabilia like this is no stranger to the arts, and many creatives draw from their memories to convey personal connections with people, places and objects. For example, artist Jenna Lynn elevates memorial art by using the deceased's ashes in her artworks. At the request of a loved one, Lynn creates pieces that preserve and honour the dead. While this might be an extreme example in the sense that the actual body is used in the painting process, artists using remnants from the deceased's life are not unheard of.

Some may incorporate clothes left behind or letters shared amongst loved ones. Drawing on a personal archive in this way can be a powerful way of channelling a person's memory into a physical form. Unfortunately, in my case, I did not have many sentimental items that reminded me of my grandfather. I once again found myself in the nostalgic garden, where my grandfather's memory seemed to rest. Ginn (2013) dissects the relationship between the garden and the deceased. She follows the story of gardeners who have dealt with death and loss and interprets how they liken their experience of grieving to the gardening process. She states, "Making a garden certainly involves practical effort - digging, planting, weeding and watching - and I will stress that responding to and dealing with traces of the past similarity requires work - it is not about luxuriating in the glow of memory, nor shades of melancholy, but about making memory and losing it again." (Ginn, 2013, p2). Drawing on the statement made by Merleau-Ponty on the grieving process and the idea described by

Ginn in her paper on the garden, I incorporate remnants from the garden into my painting process as a monument to the deceased and how they continue to impact the lives of the living.

With such a personal concept as the death of a loved one, I wanted the medium to reflect the meaning as literally as possible. Artists have used found objects to convey meaning, and often the meaning can be found in the randomness or significance of the object. The garden nurtures plant life and is a place of growth and nourishment. When these plants die, they are removed so they do not contaminate the living. By collecting these plants and extracting the pigment from them, I paint with the remnants of death. The garden is the final resting place of my grandfather's memory, and the place where I get the material I paint with. Elements of nostalgia are related to the subconscious mind, and both encourage more whimsical aspects of art production. Warped, fantastical imagery is encouraged, and the precise reality of things is no longer a concern. Without any direct reference to images and relying solely on my nostalgia, the garden does not exist as a realistic depiction but rather as an ode to how it appears in my childhood memory. Plant pigments are temperamental and tend to change and age in ways that are out of the painter's control. When working with such materials, one learns to embrace the process of decay and to let nature take its course.

Found objects have become a noted sculptural element. Artists have explored the use of personal items, random objects and even historical memorabilia in their work. Removing objects from their intended purpose has become another visual language and form of communication. It is understood that these objects have a function in the work and are intended to disrupt. While I did not see it fitting to feature found objects or direct

memorabilia in my project, I was inspired by the idea of incorporating mundane paraphernalia into art. Given the personal nature of my concept, I intended to find a medium that reflected it. Experimenting with plant-based pigments and the marks that plants and spices leave on surfaces arose from trying to incorporate remnants of my memory into the physical work. Michael Sheringham (2006) discusses how the seemingly ordinary things in daily life can be overlooked in favour of those that are perceived as extraordinary. However, this tends to drive a wedge between individuals as the mundane is usually where we find nuance, relatability, and where the forgotten aspects of life tend to connect people. He further explains the negativity associated with quotidian[5] elements and the lost beauty of daily life. The fantastical, childlike nature of my work, coupled with ordinary material from the garden space, bridges both the real world and the imagined one.

Incorporating elements from the garden, like plants, spices and vegetables, brings a mundane element into this reimagined world. Because there are barely any reference images used, I rely heavily on my memories of the garden to paint. These memories are distorted by my connection to the place and the fact that I was a child when I last saw it. As a result, the work exists as a recollection, rather than an accurate depiction. Using the actual remnants of nature as painting media brings more organic shapes and structure into an otherwise abstract painting. In terms of meaning-making, the plant matter ages as time passes, from bright, vibrant colours to a more brownish/yellowish hue. Some fade out, and some begin to crack; this is a reflection of the cycle of life and fading memories. While some are clearer, others have faded and changed over time. Highlighting the passing of time through the shift in pigments demonstrates how memories change and develop. Artist Chanell Joy does a similar thing with her painting medium by grinding rocks into a type of

[5] Refers to occurring everyday, or common place events or actions..

paint. The gradient and texture that this creates give the work dimensions despite the lack of colour. Using found material in art is a concept that has been introduced previously; however, it is more common in disciplines like sculpture as opposed to painting.

Textile artist Cas Holmes incorporates aspects of painting into her work, using found objects as inspiration. Her work is centred around the concept of home and everyday life. She collects memorabilia, like cloth or old T-shirts, from the people she encounters in daily life and transforms them into art pieces. Holmes states, “There is a wealth of inspiration to be discovered in our connection to the things we can find in our everyday lives, from the domestic items in our homes to the things we light upon as we go about our daily business or out on a walk” (Holmes, 2021, p. 6). By collecting plants and flowers from my daily walk to and from campus or between the drive from Durban to Johannesburg, remnants from everyday life are used to recall memories from the past. Instead of turning them into pigments, some plants are left on the board for some time, causing them to leave a mark or become embedded in the board. In this way, the scenery from everyday life is metaphorically embedded in my memory.

Holmes similarly handles her materials. Although the focus is on textiles, she introduces items not only from her daily life but from the lives of those she encounters. By doing so, she eternalises the memories she has created with them. This is a way of commemorating the memories we create as time passes and making the ordinary, extraordinary. My grandfather's garden was not seen as something of importance, not even worth photographing or preserving. It was a mundane part of everyday life. By bringing it into the art space as an archive of memories, it is now the focus of my work and can be

appreciated for its wealth of meaning. Holmes brings items she has collected into her artworks to immortalise them.

Figure 1: Cas Holmes. *Napkins.* (Shadows' series). Each 28 x 28 cm.

(Fig.1) Above is titled *Napkins* (Holmes, 2021). Using a printing method, Holmes transfers images of her grandmother onto napkins that once belonged to her. In her series titled *Pani Kekkavva*, she presents the process work for her *Shadows* series, which shows all the found objects and imagery that go into her artmaking. Using someone's personal items in a portrait evokes feelings of acquaintanceship with the subject, since we not only get to see her in the images, but we also get a glimpse of her preferred style and taste in a personal item like this. We are also left with questions about why the artist chose these specific items to represent her grandmother. Could it be that she carried these napkins with her all the time? Do they retain a scent that is reminiscent of her? While I cannot offer answers to these questions, the fact that this imagery encourages such a train of thought is evidence of the significance a personal item can have in a work of art.

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Figure 2: Cas Holmes. *Where has all the flour gone?* 68 x 63 x 1 cm. Washcloth, flour bags, hospital sheeting, paper, dye, print and stitch.

In (Fig. 2), Holmes incorporates household items like a washcloth and flour bags into her artwork. She has described this technique as painting with cloth (Holmes, 2021). The subject matter is a mixture of imagery found in a kitchen, such as a mixing bowl, eggs and a pack of flour. Amongst the imagery are silhouettes of people and patterns that could be found in the home, like the flower print in the right-hand corner. She "paints" with the material she is depicting, for example, by drawing a pack of flour on a discarded flour pack. While she does not elaborate on the scenery and imagery she uses in each piece, it is evident that each indicates an object found in the home. Because her work focuses on tracing everyday life, memory becomes an underlying theme. The exercise of recalling the days gone by inherently involves personal memories. These items hold memories and stories of

their own that are evoked when they are placed in the artwork. Some items are collected from Holmes' personal life, while others are collected through thrifting, having no personal connection to the artist herself. However, they inspire stories and connections in the viewer's mind, such as wondering who the washcloth above belonged to and why it was discarded. Personal items like these have a life of their own and bring a new layer of meaning to Holmes' work and practice (Rinkinen, Jalas and Shove, 2015). Even the act of collecting becomes part of the artistic process. The article, *"Object Relations in Accounts of Everyday Life",* speaks about the use of objects and how meaning is attributed to them through their uses. By including these objects and remnants in her art, they no longer serve their intended purpose but instead become a part of the archive that makes up Cas Holmes' work. The washcloth is no longer a cleaning tool but rather a subject of observation.

The memory of my grandfather is linked to the garden in my childhood home, rather than physical objects like handkerchiefs and t-shirts. Using remnants from a garden references his memory. It fades and changes over time, but he still left an indelible impression on me, much like the plants and flowers leave marks and stains on the board. In this way, the themes of memory, grief and loss are directly linked to the materiality of the work. The imprints of plants are subject to change like an ever-changing memory. My childhood memories of my grandfather and the time spent in the garden represent a time of happiness and stability. His passing was my first experience with loss and grief, and in a bid to make sense of the complex emotions that accompany the death of a loved one, I equated his memory with the garden. This created an attachment to the place that would result in a further loss when I had to move from my hometown of Durban to Johannesburg. The death of my grandfather resulted in many subsequent losses, which can be a lot for a young child

to process. By remembering him and acknowledging his impact, this work honours his memory and immortalises him as the fantastic man he was.

CHAPTER TWO

SPACES AND PLACE ATTACHMENT

2.1) Environmental Impact on the Individual

In the 1970s, Urie Bronfenbrenner (1917-2005) developed Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1981). The theory illustrates how various levels of interaction can impact a child, directly and indirectly. This is usually depicted in a diagram, where the child is at the centre, and immediate family and friends who interact with the child directly form the first layer, labelled the microsystem. The next layer is the mesosystem, which consists of individuals who do not regularly interact with the child but might influence people who do, for example, friends of their parents. The exo-system is the indirect environment and the systems that govern the society where a child is growing up, such as political, educational and religious systems. The macrosystem deals with intangible, overarching beliefs and values; the last one, the chronosystem, accounts for the changes over time (Bronfenbrenner, 1981). This outline accounts for all the facets of interaction that a child experiences during their development. The study emphasises the influence that environmental factors can have on a child, consciously and subconsciously. The place where they grow up and the way the people in their immediate vicinity conduct themselves will eventually form how the child perceives the world around them (Bronfenbrenner, 1981). This basic framework has been developed and adapted to account for specific situations, but is widely accepted as the basis for child developmental psychologists investigating environmental factors in a child's growth. The study accounts for the social environment that will eventually shape the physical world in which a child grows up.

In his book *A Child's Domain: Play and Place in Child Development,* Robin Moore (1986) investigates the role the physical environment plays in the development of a child. The contents of this book became a crucial part of my research because they focus on the unique perspective of a child. The mysterious world of play and fantasy is at the forefront as Moore investigates the relationship between an imagined fantasy world and the real one. This sentiment was something my grandfather emphasised when interacting with me. His line of thinking was that one has one's whole life to be mature and responsible, but only a limited time when it is socially acceptable to be whimsical and chaotic. It is not frowned upon for a child to wear a mask from their favourite superhero movie to buy groceries, but at a certain age, one is expected to dress appropriately. We have a limited time to fully engage and embrace the chaos of childhood. Instead, I spent most of my time surrounded by adults, without many friends my age, because I was the first child in the family. There were no cousins to play with, and barely any friends in the neighbourhood were my age. Most of my developmental years were spent in court, where I was confronted with the harsh realities of life at an early age. I did not believe in Father Christmas or the tooth fairy, and instead found the idea of such things ridiculous and meaningless. Now, in my young adulthood, I am surrounded by cousins and siblings who are between the ages of three and thirteen, and I would never dream of shattering that fantasy for them. Only now do I understand the importance of imagination and what the lack thereof can do to a child.

My grandfather recognised this problem, having raised three children himself. He brought this to my mother's attention and expressed concern about how I was developing. Being new to parenthood herself, my mother was under the impression that these were good signs. She took pride in the fact that I was able to communicate and speak well and that I behaved, in her words, like "a small adult". Even today, she will tell people that she never had a baby

because, according to her, I came into the world chatting with my elders and drinking tea. But under my grandfather's guidance, she realised the other side of this. Together, they began to create a more child-friendly environment for me. I lived with him for the duration of the custody battle, but my mother still played a crucial role in my life. She was involved in every aspect of my life despite the distance between us, with me living in Durban and her being in Johannesburg. Even in instances like this, my grandfather's role in my development was fundamental. He not only played a parental role with me, but also with my mother. He was aware that she was a neglected child who did not have stable parents. He also realised that she was a capable, loving mother who was trying her best despite the lack of support from his son, my dad. For this reason, he had great compassion and respect for her, and his death was just as difficult for her as it was for me.

As she worked to build a more stable life for me in Johannesburg, I was left in the care of my grandfather, who had made it his mission to create a more child-friendly, joyous environment for me. He realised that I spent most of the day outside, which fit perfectly with his philosophy that the outdoors was the best teacher and that children should play outside. Both Moore (1986) and Lentini and Decortis (2010) emphasise the importance of outdoor play and criticise city planners for failing to provide sufficient safe spaces for children to play outside. Lentini and Decortis go as far as suggesting that this is partially the reason why young people are spending more time increasingly indoors, while Moore makes it a point to encourage urban designs that are more child-friendly. Both these studies were published after my grandfather’s death, and he is by no means an academic source, but his ideas and outlook on life form the backbone of my study. It highlights the importance and validity of looking at personal experiences and autoethnographic research. He was always interested in nature and planted mango, guava and papaya trees in the

garden. It was my job to climb the papaya tree and get one for him to eat every other day. When he noticed my interest in the garden, he began teaching me how to plant and grow different herbs and fruits. Eventually, this would form a beautiful garden in front of our house where I would spend most of my days. It became a place of learning and healing for both of us.

Environmental psychology is a discipline which explores how people develop in their surroundings. As we examine our experience, it becomes clear that our environment has an impact on our behaviour. Since I spent most of my time outdoors, I developed an aversion to shoes and would take them off at every opportunity, something that still annoys my parents to this day. Gifford, Seg and Reser (2011) discuss the profound impact that our surroundings can have on our psyche and our mental development. Furthermore, they discuss how this dynamic works when people shape their environments. Following my grandfather's passing, there was no one to take care of the garden, and it began to decay. It was simply not regarded as important in the grand scheme of things, and even I did not realise the impact the space had on me until I began to reflect on it. By this point, the garden had already decayed to almost nothing. I moved to Johannesburg, and with both my grandfather and me gone, the place was neglected. This became a personal metaphor for the trajectory of my life up until this point. Just like the garden, I had been nurtured and cared for by my grandfather and had been left with a profound sense of loss and decay following his passing. Seeing the place in that state introduced me to a new layer of grief. It was only then that I remembered all the memories we had created there and how that had ended. There would be no new memories. It was also then that I realised that the garden was much smaller than I remembered or imagined. In my childhood memory, it was grand and glorious, but when I saw it later in life, it was simply a modest garden. It was my

grandfather's presence that gave it a sense of wonder and glory, and without him, like me, it would never be the same.

When he was alive, my grandfather taught me the importance of fantasy and creativity. He recognised my love for art and painting and encouraged me to explore it. The only condition was that I had to do it outside. Even today, I am not sure if this was to encourage me to look for beauty and inspiration outdoors or simply to avoid my damaging the furniture and walls with my messy, painted hands. Either way, it led to a fascination with trees, flowers and foliage as this was typically the subject of my drawings and paintings. He would tell me to look at the way the leaves and trees changed with the seasons and to document it through my art. This is how he would teach me about weather patterns and which seasons were best for growing certain flowers and herbs. If a cup of paint water were spilt over my precious masterpiece, he would comfort me by explaining that it was part of the process and that there was no limit to creativity. He would place a pretty flower in the water, and when we came back to check on it a day or two later, there would be a beautiful imprint left over from the accident. This is how he taught me to embrace mistakes and flow with my creativity instead of trying to adhere to a perceived standard of painting. Unknown to him, it would also form the technique for my painting style for my Master's in Fine Arts. There were countless lessons I learnt from him during that time, and things that I will carry with me for as long as I live. While I might not be the same due to the grief brought on by his death, this is not necessarily a negative change. There were many lessons in the pain, and they all inform this project.

Lentini and Decortis (2010) discuss the work of Manzo, stating “...the image, the representation, the importance and significance that we assign to a place, depend on the

experiences we live in those places…". At the same time, this formed a place attachment to the garden, which was the site for my creative expression and where the groundwork was laid for me to develop my sense of self. In that sense, the intention is not to recreate the space but to honour what it represents. The decay of the pigments and the natural progression of my work are evidence of this. The environment he created for me impacted my development and informed my sense of self. The approach he took when raising me was one where he emphasised whimsy, fantasy, and free-flowing creativity. These are all things I bring into my practice as a result of his influence.

2.2 Place Attachment

People experience the world through five senses: sight and smell, touch, taste and hearing. These senses impact how we perceive a place, experience or person. This is just one aspect that influences personal experiences. Thoughts, feelings and memories can also contribute to the perception of a place. The perception of a place can lead a person to experience a sense of attachment to the place itself. Cross (2015) analyses this phenomenon with a seven-point framework that encompasses all five senses, plus emotional, cultural and social factors. Cross regards this attachment as something positive since it provides a sense of safety and comfort. Place attachments can form for several reasons, both biological and interactional. The way that people engage with spaces can alter them, not only physically but also psychologically. Cross explains this relationship by looking at it from a more psychological perspective, as opposed to a physiological or biological one. This entails understanding it in terms of one's experience and the collective perception created through things like memories. This approach incorporates multiple factors such as the self, the collective and the environment. Looking at how the notion of spaces and place attachment has been explored in literature and art shows how common and impactful things like

nostalgia, storytelling, culture, family history and personal biology can be. The Interactional Processes of Place Attachments can be broken up into sensory, narrative, historical, spiritual, ideological, commodifying and material dependence according to Cross (2015). While I will discuss each of them, the main focus will be on sensory, narrative, spiritual and historical perspectives as they pertain to my attachment to my grandfather's garden.

In Chapter One, I discussed the phenomenology of grief. In keeping with this line of thinking, I would like to discuss the phenomenology of place, a concept explored at length by Manzo (2013). His work highlights the idea that everyday actions and routines can form a sense of home and belonging; that these actions can inspire serenity and stability. The environment is familiar, and the actions are predictable. We know how our home is laid out and this creates a sense of security. In this sense, a deep part of our human consciousness is attached to the comforts of everyday life.

While we live in this environment, we do not see it as anything profound. It is only when these patterns are disrupted that we begin to feel a sense of displacement and discomfort. This circles back to the idea of the significance of seemingly mundane elements in everyday life. When I lived with my grandfather, almost twenty years ago, camera phones did not exist. Pictures were taken with a camera and then developed in a shop. It was a process which cost money, so pictures were reserved for things that were deemed important. Luckily for me, my mother was an avid photographer and made it a point to document my childhood. Because of this, I had unlimited material for my previous project that focused on the women in my family. People were seen as important, but spaces were not. There are barely any pictures of the places I have lived in since leaving my grandfather's home, and there are even fewer pictures of the gardens or outdoor spaces. These were probably

regarded as insignificant, as they are only featured in pictures as backdrops and are never the focal point. It was only upon reflection that I realised the impact the place had on me and what being separated from it meant for my emotional state. This is indicative of a place attachment and relates to spirituality in Cross's Interactional Processes of Place Attachments (2015), where an attachment is formed due to a deep feeling of home and belonging.

A child's sense of self is first developed at home. Cole (2011) discusses the importance of home life in a child's development. The way they are treated by their guardians informs their sense of self. The study also highlights the role of interactive games and activities that can aid a child's educational growth and create a foundation for their academic development. The atmosphere in the garden was very light-hearted and free, and was by no means a rigorous academic environment, but it still functioned as a place of learning. I was encouraged to ask questions, talk and interact with various things. For this reason, my approach to education is still the same. The foundation for higher learning was established by the games and interactive play I engaged in in the garden. Even though it was rooted in games and light-hearted play, it became a place of making sense of home, family, and self and their relationship with one another. These are the aspects that I can make sense of, but there is also an indescribable, profound sense of attachment that seems to transcend the physical. This is accounted for under the Spiritual attachment section in CIPPA (2015), where Cross notes that these bonds can sometimes transcend the physical.

Notable psychiatrist and psychoanalyst John Bowlby (1907-1990) has done extensive research on attachment theory. Scannell and Gifford (2013) liken these attachments to the kind that develops between people and places. The implication is that these places fulfil

emotional and psychological needs, and one can experience significant distress when separated from them, much like the loved ones in our lives. According to Bowlby's attachment theory, author Jeremy Holmes (2014) describes how a secure interpersonal relationship between people can form a dependency that meets the needs of both parties. This bond is most notable between mother and child and is often the focus when discussing child development. Scannell and Gifford argue that places can perform a similar function in helping the development of identity and behaviour, while simultaneously meeting physiological needs. While it can be argued that there is no bond stronger than that of a mother and child, the comparison is justified in the sense that the garden was a place that nurtured, taught and fed me, much like a parent. Hazan and Shaver (1992) note that attachment is a survival instinct. When such significant bonds are broken, it can lead to feelings of loss and anxiety. They also mention geographical distance, estrangement, and death as possible causes of a rift in attachments. Similarly, Scannell and Gifford discuss how people can feel a sense of distress when separated from their home grounds. The mention of the geographical location, in particular, is important as it relates to the move from Durban to Johannesburg and my being separated from the garden. Apart from my own troubles, the garden also suffered and eventually became depleted, with no one to take care of it.

Lewicka (2013) discusses memory as it pertains to place. Until now, I have only discussed personal memory, but Lewicka brings up the idea of collective memory, highlighting how accumulated experiences can strengthen an attachment to a place. Before this garden was my home, it was my grandfather's. He grew up in a house with his parents and younger brother, and as he was the eldest and the first to start a family, he inherited it from them. He took great pride in his house and spent most of his spare time fixing and reconstructing

parts of it. He was a professional bricklayer and used the skills from his work to build his own home. My grandmother also did not shy away from heavy labour and took an active role in building the house. Under their guidance, they expanded the place from a two-bedroom house to a five-bedroom house with a garden and garage. Oftentimes, they shared stories of the time spent constructing the home and how this was a bonding experience for them. Before me, my grandfather raised three children, and they all shared similar experiences with him. They, too, were made to play and explore in the garden. Following his passing, they would share stories of how he taught them to make slingshots[6] and how they used them to get fruit down from high tree tops. They, too, had felt the pain of his passing and their home was disrupted by this sudden loss.

Cross (2015) discusses narrative and historical factors that influence place attachment, which can work in tandem with one another. The narrative deals with stories about the place that are passed down either through a family or a community. Stories reinforce collective identity, which can create a sense of home and bind a family to a specific location. By sharing the experience of building the home and then retelling the stories to their children, my grandparents made an example of this. I experienced the same feeling, which was passed on to me through my grandfather and our adventures in the garden. Historical factors can either be rooted in communal or personal experiences. In the context of personal experiences, it alludes to family histories and generational ties. When history aligns with the collective identity of the family, it can create a generational attachment to a place. The more time spent in a specific location, the more significant events and traditions are formed. These are then passed down to the next generation, creating a link between the location and

[6] A forked stick, to which an elastic strap is fastened to the two prongs, typically used for shooting small stones.

the lineage. In my case, this house has been in my family for four generations. The garden was created by my grandfather as a place to bond with his children and, later in life, his grandchildren. This created a significant place attachment and sense of home for myself and my whole family.

We interact with the world through our five senses, namely sight, sound, touch, taste and smell, so it is no surprise that the sensory elements play an important role in developing place attachments. The way we interact with our surroundings becomes crucial, especially when dealing with a visual discipline like the fine arts. Cross (2015) discusses these elements in tandem with the narrative and historical factors, as our senses act as the devices used to engage with the environment. Several scholars have investigated the relationship between sensory experiences and place attachment. Memory has been established as a key factor in place attachment. In *Landscapes of the Mind,* Porteous (1990) acknowledges olfactory dimensions as a way of deepening place attachments by inspiring nostalgia through memory. While he focuses on the built environment and criticises recent architecture for not considering the sensory experience, Pallasmaa (2012) expands on our relationship to texture. The author emphasises the need for direct skin contact with our environment, which he argues enables us to connect with and truly inhabit a space. The same principles apply when discussing the natural environment.

Furthermore, Casey (2000) highlights the importance of the body and its five senses in remembering and how our senses can trigger memories. By doing so, he shows that this is not only a cognitive activity, but one that has a material reality in the physical world, as we

engage with our environment. Regarded as the father of humanistic geography[7], Yi-Fu Tuan (1930-2022) has done extensive research into the connection between people and places and developed the term "topophilia" to describe the relationship (O'Leary and Tuan, 1975). He emphasises the importance of visual elements and aesthetic beauty in making an individual feel relaxed and comfortable in a place. When asked to envision my safe space, I would always remember my grandfather's garden.

In my mind, the outdoors was a safe place, as opposed to the spaces inside the home, which were plagued with bitter memories. Even as a young child, remembering the garden brought a sense of serenity and peace. Topophilia describes the love of a place that develops due to positive stimuli.

The idea of a sentimental connection becomes central when distinguishing between space and place. Tuan (1997) describes how personal experiences give meaning to a space, ultimately transforming it into a place. He notes that the difference lies in the distinction between a broad, undefined space and a specified, significant place. The significance is established through human interaction, sensory experiences, and emotional connection, which is of the utmost importance when discussing humanistic geography and place attachment. Similarly, Relph (1976) defines place as somewhere with a meaningful experience attached to it. He goes as far as suggesting that space devoid of human emotion is in fact "placeless." While Tuan focuses on the sensory elements, Relph deals more with experiences and the stories of people. He is also not the first author mentioned in this paper to criticise urbanisation and modern architectural trends for creating spaces, instead of places, highlighting the long-standing relationship between people and their environments.

[7] The study of the human experience and how the world comes to mean something to those who live in specific places within it.

Michel de Certeau (1984) discusses this concept from the perspective of everyday life. His idea is that spaces are transformed by the people who inhabit them, and this is done through mundane activities like walking. He uses walking as an example of how people and their environment coexist and are unintentionally altered by this coexistence. His focus on everyday practices links back to the ideas discussed in Chapter One under Remembrance and Memorabilia about the significance of everyday life.

The place where we live our daily lives is generally called home, and Bachelard (1958) focuses on the importance of personal places like this. He discusses the personal nature of homes or bedrooms, which offer our minds a place for repose and rest. This gives us time to reflect and stimulates our imaginations. When one's guard is down, and we are in a state of peace, we are more likely to engage in activities like daydreaming. In this way, a home is not simply a place where one resides but also a sanctuary for our creative minds. Bachelard notes that childhood homes are often the subject of idealisation as they become synonymous with our first understanding of fantasy and imagination. People might remember hidden nooks and crannies where they played pretend games with friends in their childhood homes. He proposes the term "oneiric house" to describe these reimagined places that are a blend of the memories of places and the fantasies dreamed up in them. This can feed into a place attachment, as these places become symbols of childhood creativity, memories and home. My grandfather's garden became my "oneiric house" and a place to indulge the reverie of a child. Danielewski (2000) talks about how the house morphs and distends according to the mental state and fears of its inhabitants. Although this is a fictional horror, the idea of the house as an imaginative space that plays on the memories and psyche of people is an interesting creative exploration of place attachment and the relationship between people and spaces. I always imagined the garden as a place that would adapt to

my emotional state. If I were sad, then I imagined that it would rain in the garden that day. Not only does it exist as a place in my grandfather's house, but also in my mind, which was established in my childhood as somewhere to go to seek sanctuary and peace. As established by Cross, place attachment takes place on several levels: on the physical level through the senses and emotions, and through the mind. Through these various interactions and over time, I grew attached to my grandfather's garden, and once it was depleted in the physical world, it only became more glorious in my mind's eye.

2.3 Gardens and Their Connotations

My grandfather's garden exists as my oneiric house, a place that was both real and imagined. The reality is that it is an old house with an overgrown lawn, but in my imagination, it retains all its glory and wonder. In my early childhood, I learnt lessons about geography, biology, and life, such as patience. Later in life, it became the place that taught me about death, decay and grief. Throughout literature, mythology and even religion, gardens are heavily symbolic. They become places of deep meaning as they grow alongside the people around them. Even in the aforementioned literature, authors make it a point to note the significance of the natural world and how we interact with it. While some advocate incorporating more natural spaces into modern architecture, others expound on the psychological impact of spending time in nature. When I was a child, I found it peculiar that elderly people would often sit outside in a chair, simply just to be outside. As I grew older, I began to recognise the significance of admiring the sky or smelling the grass and how spending a few moments outside can be a relaxing activity. Hunt (1992) discusses how the sensory elements of a garden can trigger memories and create a sentimental, interactive space. He likens this to a work of art, like a painting, by suggesting that it is a place that highlights aspects of the society, family or person that built it. Similarly, Charles W. Moore

et al. (1988) speak about how memories and emotions are evoked through the senses when one is in a garden. They highlight how these memories and emotions evoke imagination and how the physical world meets fantasy in places like this. This reflective interaction can inspire creation and art, as shown in John Beardsley's *Gardens of Revelation: Environments by Visionary Artists*, where he details the work of artists in the garden space. These artists explore themes like the cycle of life and death, transcendence and the afterlife as they pertain to gardens. The connection between gardens and death has been discussed in Chapter One under Grief and Loss. I mentioned that I received the book, *The Secret Garden* (1911), as a gift to help me cope with the grieving process. As a result, it became a sentimental piece of memorabilia and is still a comfort today. The story follows the lives of children who learn to cope with individual, unique challenges in life by coming together to revive a decaying garden. In this chapter, I will elaborate on how this children's novel acts as a base for the concept of my work, as it encompasses all the main themes of my project, all told from the perspective of a grieving child. Gardens hold a wealth of meaning, and we can see that in the conceptual, artistic and literary exploration of them.

The five senses have been established as being very important in the process of developing a place attachment, as well as the recollection of memories and nostalgia. Hunt (1992) discusses the five senses as they pertain to the garden space. He explains that they are designed for a holistic experience, engaging all the senses in a natural way that does not overstimulate one. Visually, colours are known to affect a person's mood, either through the connotations of the colour or simply the visual experience. Hunt explains how the vibrant colours in a garden add to a sense of happiness and serenity, which is why spending time in a garden can have a calming effect on people. The garden acted as a place of learning for me in early childhood, where the vibrant colours reminded me of a nursery school. The

bright atmosphere can be stimulating for the growing mind of a child. Beyond the visual, Hunt goes on to discuss the impact of scent. This point stood out for me in particular, as working with these natural, outdoor elements in an enclosed studio has proven to be a very fragrant experience. Throughout the project, I have been surrounded by some of the best and worst scents, from decaying vegetables to sweet tea. All of these scents seem to trigger vivid memories. When working with spices, I am reminded of the vigorous grinding process involved in making them or the fragrant scent whenever my mother cooks an authentic Durban curry. Other scents remind me of the wet ground after a fresh rain, something that was common in Durban. The sickly-sweet scent of decaying flowers reminds me of when I first revisited the garden to find it in disarray. All these memories are a testament to the nostalgic power of scent. Hunt also suggests that experiencing a garden space can be grounding due to all the textures in the natural world, such as stones, leaves and sand. All these senses work together to provide an immersive experience in the garden space, giving one a sense of peace and belonging. The memories and emotions evoked in a garden culminate in a transcendental experience that can be grounding for the person experiencing it.

Beardsley (1995) mentions how, since gardens are such immersive spaces, they begin to reflect the ones who tend to them, almost becoming one. My grandfather's garden was a testament to what he enjoyed and what he shared with me. He loved spicy food, so spice plants and chilli trees were scattered everywhere, and even though no one else enjoyed papaya, he planted a large tree in the corner of the garden to enjoy by himself. In this way, the place became a reflection of his character and personality. This idea was further cemented by the fact that the garden began to decay after his passing. Even with some humble attempts to salvage things like the mango and guava trees, nobody else in the house

possessed his skill and understanding of gardening to keep them alive. In his book, Beardsley discusses how gardens play an autobiographical role, as they can tell the story of those who live in them. In a physical sense, this can look like children's gardening tools, alluding to small children being present, but in a more intangible sense, it can look like a decrepit garden, showing the ailment of its caretaker. This highlights the relationship between people and the natural world, and the symbiotic dynamic between the two. Cooper (1999) examines the positive effects that garden spaces can have on people's moods, aiding in stress reduction and overall health. She advocates for more spaces like this to be incorporated into places like hospitals and nursing homes, as the combined sensory experience can trigger nostalgic memories and create a place of restitution. Cooper proves this through case studies that discuss the effects that garden spaces have had on the participants, further illustrating the connection between people and their environments.

The visual artists discussed in Beardsley's book explore their connection to garden spaces in their work. Some incorporate religious memorabilia, alluding to their connection to the divine by using the garden as a symbolic link between the physical and spiritual world. This is not uncommon because, in addition to embodying the cycle of life and death, gardens are often discussed as places of spiritual significance, dating back to the Garden of Eden in the Bible. The link between gardens and spirituality is explored extensively in *Sacred Gardens and Landscapes: Ritual and Agency* by Michel Conan (2007). By investigating the sacred practices that take place in gardens globally, the author shows that they not only serve an aesthetic purpose but also function as sites for people to connect with a higher self through meditation and ritual practices. Ranging from Japan to India and Mexico, the author shares a dynamic overview of mythology and history relating to the divine connotations of gardens. Beardsley's book shows how visual artists have reimagined

garden spaces in their work, using examples like Simon Rodia's *Watts Towers* or Raymond Isidore's *Maison Picassiette*. These artists tell personal stories and use symbols and unconventional materials to give a sense of otherworldliness. Imagination and transformation are at the forefront of their work, and they show this by creating layered spaces that reflect their views on existence, the natural world and death. Harrison (2008) discusses the metaphysical ideas behind garden spaces and how they relate to people and personhood. He suggests that gardens represent a human desire to make sense of the wonder and chaos that exists in nature. Grooming and curating wild flora and fauna show our desire for order and our aspiration for a more beautiful world. He also mentions that gardens show our awareness and fear of our mortality. In this way, they act as mirrors of ourselves. We can reflect on the passing of time and the cycle of life when confronted with the ephemeral qualities of the flowers and trees in a garden. My grandfather's passing was my encounter with death and the realisation of the impermanence of life. Linking this back to the rich connotations in the garden space left a lasting impact on me and brought about a deeper understanding of mortality.

In The Secret Garden (1911), we follow a group of children who learn to cope with grief and change by tending to a garden. The main character is Mary, a ten-year-old girl, who moves to England to live with her uncle after her parents pass away during a cholera epidemic in India. Her new home is emptier than Mary is used to, and she struggles to adjust to her new life. She seeks solace in the expansive moors that surround her uncle's property and finds comfort in being outside. The absence of people and children her age is something she struggles with, but she is encouraged to play outside by the staff who take care of her. The book makes it a point to highlight the changes in Mary's character as she spends more time outdoors. She becomes a healthier, vibrant child, which suggests that

nature has a positive effect on her overall well-being. Through her exploration of the property, she meets two vastly different characters, a neighbour named Dickon and her cousin Colin. Dickon is described as a lover of animals who is always out in nature. He spends his days learning the terrain of the moors and tending to injured animals. Colin is confined to his room by a mysterious illness that prevents him from walking and causes fits of pain and screaming. Because of his poor health, his father is ashamed of him and keeps him hidden from society. Colin's mother has died from a mysterious illness, and it is suggested that this is why his father believes Colin is a sickly child, although it does appear that his illness is more psychological than physical.

Together, Mary and Dickon explore the moors and occasionally try to convince Colin to accompany them on their adventures. However, he believes that venturing outside the comfort of his room will have a severe effect on his health. It is not until Mary and Dickon discover a secret garden, hidden behind a locked door, that Colin becomes motivated to go outside. The garden was once a sacred place for his mother, and the ground staff tell the children that the moors were not always so bleak and dreary. While Colin's mother was alive, it was a vibrant place, and the garden in particular was her favourite place to seek peace, even in the face of a lingering death. Following her death, the garden was locked and abandoned as Colin's father was riddled with grief and did not want to confront the loss of his wife. The children discover all the family secrets while sneaking into the garden and tending to it. They believe that if they revive the garden and get Colin to see it, he will be cured of his ailments. The children convince Colin to venture into the garden, and he realises that his physical illness is a result of his mental turmoil due to the death of his mother and his father's resentment. Mary finds peace and joy in helping someone else and gains a sense of accomplishment from reviving the garden. Dickon's mother welcomes the

children into her home and family as though they are her own, and they all discover a new familial love.

I was ten years old when my grandfather passed away, and I, too, had to move to an unfamiliar place. My grandfather's garden was neglected just like Colin's mother's was. I was once a childlike Dickon who spent most of my day outside, but over time, I became more like Colin, confined to my room and not wanting to engage in everyday life. Johannesburg was a completely different lifestyle; the city was cold, and there were no fruit trees to climb and no garden to explore. The parallels between the story and my own life made it especially significant for me. In her essay, Almond (1990) discusses the themes of the book and how the idea of loss and mourning is structured around a child's understanding. The garden is symbolic of the pain that one often does not want to confront in the wake of such a tragedy. By confronting the garden, the children can work through their struggles and forge a connection that helps them heal from their grief. Almond mentions how stories like this can offer insight and comfort for readers dealing with similar experiences, as they mirror the child's lived experience.

Similarly, Strum (2008) highlights the importance of having children's literature that deals with heavy subject matters like death and grief. Strum describes how important it is for a child to have spaces dedicated to reflection and introspection. Strum shows how these reflective spaces can aid in developing a child's sense of self, while still encouraging fantasy, as these spaces are often imagined or representational. By encouraging introspection into the inner self (a kind of mirror), the child begins to feel more comfortable exploring the outside world (like windows opening up the world). Throughout media and literature, these spaces are seen as ways for the children to make sense of real problems in

their lives, such as the wardrobe in the *Narnia* chronicles or the garden in *The Secret Garden.* Gardens are a prominent feature in both art and literature. They often have symbolic or representational features, but they also possess a transcendent quality that allows them to function as places of healing and reflection. They are seen as transformative spaces where people and nature merge. The sensory stimulation offers a nostalgic experience that allows us the space to reflect on memories. They are often connected to spirituality and healing. Life and death are both prominent features in a garden space and add to the idea of being a transformative space. People take pride in their gardens, and as a result, they begin to reflect the character of the owner, making them the ideal space for personal narratives and stories. My grandfather's garden was a place of healing, learning and comfort. It taught me how to reflect on and confront my emotions, and I continue to learn and grow.

CHAPTER THREE

ART-MAKING PROCESS

3.3 The Archive and Memory

My research interests are rooted in family dynamics and early childhood memory. In 2022, I produced a body of work entitled *Family Tea* during my fourth year of studies. In it, I examined my family's matriarchal ancestry and the influences the women in my life had on me. Tea has always been a symbol of maternal comfort for me, and it came to represent love and care within my family. A cup of tea was ever-present, whether during difficult conversations or playful banter, and thus became a prominent medium in my artistic practice as I attempted to link the concept with the materiality of the work. I used tea as a substitute for paint, creating portraits of my family members out of it. Through the explorative process of creating artworks with tea, I became interested in alternative painting materials, such as tea, spices and plant matter. This became the foundation for my current body of work, where I reference my grandfather's garden in my childhood home in Durban, South Africa. I use plant matter as a painting medium and make pigments out of flowers, vegetables, spices and fruit to directly reference this (safe) place. Growing up in Durban meant that we had many spice plants in our garden. Plants like curry leaves and *Curcuma longa* (turmeric) all sat on a wooden beam that ran along the walls of the backyard. Mango, guava and pawpaw trees stood at each corner of the area, surrounding it with fruit and fragrance. A particular maqui berry tree became a source of stress for my mother, as I often came back to the house with large purple stains on my clothes, about which my grandfather would remark that I was a genius fashion designer working on my latest masterpiece. These memories created a sense of home around plants and everything that grows from them, like spices and fruits.

The nature of the archive is to preserve. Derrida states, “The question of the archive is not, we repeat, a question of the past…It is a question of the future, the question for the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise, and a responsibility for tomorrow” (Derrida, 1996, p.36). This frames the archive as not merely a static container of memory, but as a living, ethical obligation, a space where what is preserved, lost or allowed to fade speaks directly to our values and to the future we imagine. Dealing with the subject matter of death and grief means that letting go is inevitable. Even with the memories and the preserving nature of the archive, my paintings are made from organic matter, and the subject is a dying garden, which naturally translates to an ephemeral archive of memory and mourning. The material itself carries the trace of what once was, but also gestures toward what can not be held onto, what will inevitably change, fade and decay. This is not a body of work or an archive that resists time; it is actively temporal. In line with Derrida’s (1996) conception of the archive as a question of the future rather than the past, my practice resists the traditional archival impulse to fix, preserve, or immortalise. Instead, it embraces transience as a mode of remembering, where the fading materials become an engagement with loss. My work holds the imprint of memory but refuses to fossilise it. This research is situated within a practice-led methodology in which knowledge is generated through the act of making rather than through the application of theory in advance.

Drawing on Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) emphasis on experience as it is lived before it is theorised, the practical is central, with theoretical frameworks emerging through reflective engagement with material processes. Memory, place and grief were first encountered through embodied interaction with the garden and the studio, where sensory experiences, material engagement and time shaped the meaning of the work. The work serves as a representation of the human experience with grief, described in the phenomenological

research of Ponty (1962), who put emphasis on the lived experience as it is before its theorisation. In the same way, the work embodies the life and death cycle, allowing the materials to change at will and for time to shape them naturally. The artworks take on a life of their own, starting out vibrant and ending dull and faded. This process shows that the fading and changing is intentional and shows the stages of progress from life through to death. Ponty argues that our primary way of knowing the world is through direct, embodied experiences. Prioritising perception, sensation, movement, memory and affect, before we name, explain and systemise it. An example of an embodied experience is collecting and painting with materials from the garden, smelling them and handling them can invoke memories and feelings related to memory and grief. The personal memories explored in this dissertation do not function as illustrative content or literal references but as an active methodological framework, shaping both the process and the outcome of the work. Rather than translating specific memories into literal imagery, I intentionally worked with memory as a sensory, affective and temperamental phenomenon. This approach reflects an understanding of memory as fragmented, unstable and continually reshaped by time, rather than as a fixed or complete record. Memories of my grandfather's garden and of childhood movement between Johannesburg and Durban informed the work indirectly, guiding decisions around material, surface and process. The choice to work with natural pigments, plant matter and staining technique emerged from the sensory qualities embedded in these memories, such as smell, touch, colour and atmosphere, rather than from visual accuracy. This resulted in imagery that remains suggestive and open, mirroring the way memory is recalled as an impression rather than a detail.

Memory also shaped the working process itself. Repetitive acts of gathering, staining, carving and waiting reflect the cyclical nature of remembering, where certain images and

sensations return over time without resolution. Allowing materials to fade, warp, or decay became a way of working with memory's temporal instability, acknowledging that recollection is altered through duration rather than preserved intact. The final outcome of the work is therefore not representations of specific moments from the past, but material traces of an ongoing relationship with memory. By exhibiting the works after their transformation, and by including a photobook that documents their earlier states, the project foregrounds memory as something that lives through change. In this way, memory operates not only on subject matter, but as a structuring force that determines how the work is made and how it changes.

Rather than representing a specific landscape or a literal image of my grandfather's garden, my work leans into the ambiguity and subjectivity of memory. The references come from layered recollections of moving between Johannesburg and Durban throughout my childhood, two cities which hold the tension of my divided home life. While my materials are literal and natural, the imagery itself resists precise identification. It is intentionally vague and suggestive, reflecting the disorientating, often unreliable nature of memory. The vagueness becomes a method, a way of honouring the fragments of memory. By choosing to work from this fragmented memory, rather than a literal image, I foreground the internal experience of home, rather than its architectural or geographic details. My imagery is inspired by the endless travel between homes, by looking out of car windows, and by sleeping on planes as an unaccompanied minor from the age of three. The journey itself became a home to me, more familiar and constant than any of the shifting homes I moved between. This approach is informed by Chawla's (1994) exploration of childhood environments and their lingering emotional imprints.

The work below was created using turmeric, beetroot and mixed berry tea. In the original state (Fig. 3), the painting is vibrant and layered, its palette suggesting a landscape terrain. It is a landscape painting of a field of flowers painted with turmeric. The upper section is made from beetroot and tea, suggesting an abstract sky. Over two years, this work has undergone its material death (Fig.4). The beetroot pinks have faded to greyish rust while the bright turmeric has oxidised to softer, browner hues. The transformation is part of the methodology, as the painting is not fixed but temporary, showing the impermanence of memory and the inevitable erosion of grief into more subtle traces. My natural, ephemeral pigments resist the nature of the archive in contemporary art, which is to preserve, where permanence is pursued through synthetic or stabilised materials. Here, deterioration is a necessary part of the process. As Derrida (1996) reminds us, "the question of the archive is not a question of the past…but the future." The fading hues speak to this tension between remembering and letting go, between preservation and the natural process of forgetting.

The work in (Fig. 5) is the first painting I completed for this series and the only one that depicts the garden as a literal space, whereas later works lean more into the suggestive and abstract. The pigments for this work come from plants and spices that once grew in the garden, such as curry powder, from our curry leaf tree. The use of these organic pigments aligns with themes of ephemerality, decay and continuity. These natural substances will change over time, further emphasising the idea that memory is not fixed but shifting and vulnerable. While I started by working from a literal image of the garden, it became apparent that the imagined spaces from my childhood and what I was seeing in the image were two different things. However, the representational garden in my childhood memory is more real to me than what it has become today. (Bachelard,1994, 47) says "A house that has been experienced is not an inert box. Inhabited space transcends geometrical space."

Similarly, this garden transcends the literal; it becomes a container for fragmented memory, childhood innocence and loss. Because it is representative, the imagery is as well.

(Fig.6) is another example of an artwork that has a literal subject. It is taken from a childhood picture of my cousin and me playing in the garden. The space was never regarded as something important or worth documenting, and because of this, it is not a prominent feature in childhood pictures. For this reason, I focused mainly on the figures in this image. The experiences and memories we shared in the space are, in some way, more significant as they form the bond to the place. Using beetroot, I employed a new method of cutting up the vegetable and placing it on the board, in the shape of the image. This allowed the beetroot to stain the board in organic shapes. The idea of painting informed the process, but without using paint. I wanted to experiment with how far I could push the natural materials, using them not only as a material but also as a painting tool. Instead of a paintbrush, I used the beetroot itself as a mark-making tool. The marks vary from stippled and accidental to intentionally placed, showcasing the tension between control and surrender in the making process. The painting is rooted in an act of remembering as making, reconstructing a memory through material engagement. By refraining from using brushes, I relinquish control, allowing the organic material to become both subject and tool. This act of relinquishing control invites the stains to behave like memory itself, inconsistent, fading, sometimes sharp and vivid, sometimes muddled. Over time, the second image (Fig. 7) reveals how the beetroot has faded. The transformation becomes part of the artwork's narrative and purpose. The fading functions not as a deterioration, but as a metaphor. Memories erode, identities shift, and even our most formative impressions are gradually forgotten. In this way, the painting is alive and subject to decay, just like the moments it captures.

These works operate not as a fixed record, but as a living archive, spaces where memory, place and materiality intersect. Through their impermanence, the paintings reject the conventional archival desire to preserve and instead embrace the instability of remembering. Memory is not recalled through clear chronology or representation, but evoked through texture, trace and tone, often stained and fading. In choosing materials from the garden and working with plant matter and spices tied to familial routines and rituals, the subject matter becomes inherently personal, while also gesturing towards a shared sensory language of home and loss.

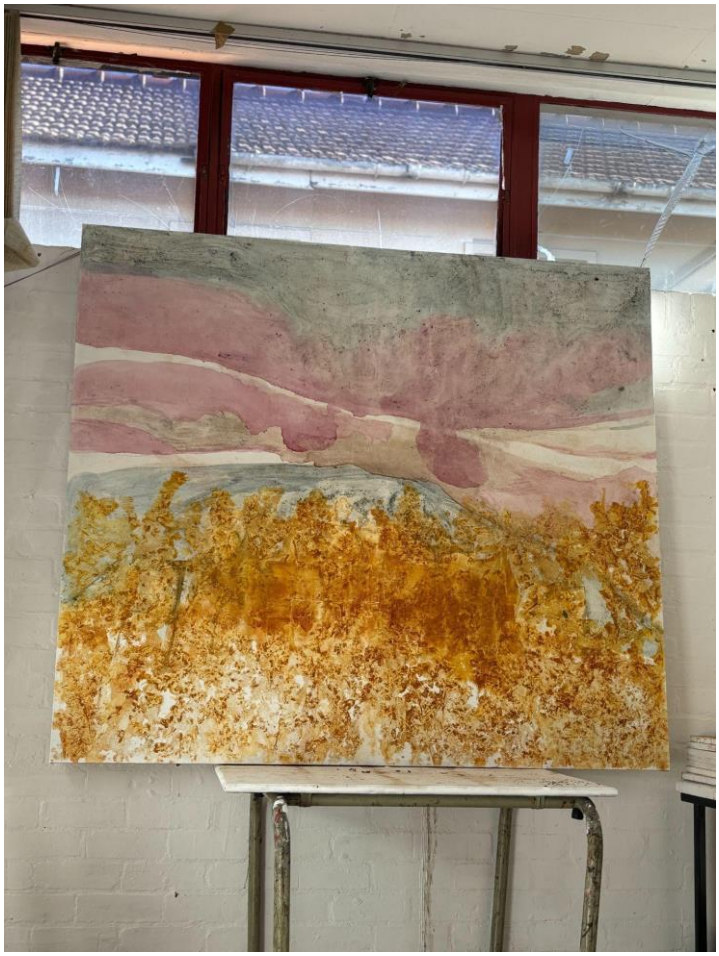

Figure 3. *Field of Flowers*, 2023. Turmeric, Tea and Beetroot on Canvas, appox. 130x170cm. Studio documentation

Figure 4. F*ield of Flowers,* Taken in 2025. Turmeric, Tea and Beetroot on Canvas, approx. 130x170cm. Studio documentation

Figure 5. *Papa's Pawpaw Tree*, 2023. Mixed Media (Plant pigments, tea and spices) On MDF board, 137x91cm. Studio documentation

Figure 6. *After school, in the Garden*. 2024. Beetroot
On MDF board, 137x91cm. Studio documentation

Figure 7. *After school, in the Garden.Taken in* 2025. Beetroot On MDF board, 137x91cm. Studio documentation

3.2 Ephemeral Art and Material Decay

Lippard (1997) notes a shift in the late 20th-century art climate toward the ephemeral, conceptual and process-oriented, a movement away from permanence towards the immaterial and performative. In my practice, I employ the idea of dematerialisation by working with organic materials that are inherently unstable, allowing time, light, and natural elements to participate in the artwork's slow transformation. Ephemerality and material decay are key elements in the work, where impermanence is a method. By allowing pigments to fade, crack, and rot, I align my work with the ecological cycles of growth and loss, resisting the nostalgic urge to preserve and hold on. These gestures are also grounded in earlier discussions of grief, memory and environmental decay, cementing the work as a living process rather than a finished object.

In the Contemporary sphere, artists are getting increasingly experimental with their materials, which has opened up a discussion on the impermanence and preservation of these works. When performance art was first welcomed into the Fine Art space, objectivity and ownership were at the forefront of the discussion. Previously, there was always an object to assign value to, such as a painting or sculpture. With art forms like performance, the experience was intangible, and the emphasis was on the idea rather than a material possession or physical object. Artists and critics alike began to put value on the idea rather than the object, which brought about a new age in the contemporary art world. Lippard (1997) notes the shift from art being a painting, sculpture or installation, to it being documentation or an experience. The process and differentiation become as important as the final product, if not, more so. The figures below show the details of the materials fading and shifting. Figure 8 is a fern painted in coffee, and while the coffee has mostly stayed intact, the residue from the materials around it has begun to fall into and stick to the coffee.

This left pieces of leaves, teabags and turmeric stuck in the crevices. At the beginning of the project, these things would be seen as bothersome or something that needed to be fixed, but with the process, I learnt to trust the natural elements and accept the way the materials interacted organically. Figure 9 shows a flower I painted in mixed berry tea, which is blue. Over time, the turmeric from above began to leak into the flower. These are the kind of natural interactions that I learnt to appreciate in the art-making process. Figure 10 shows a leaf painted in turmeric, which has deteriorated over time. Rather than fading, the turmeric started to fall away, leaving behind this blurred effect. These three images show the different ways the materials have interacted with each other and shifted in accordance with their environment. While working on these paintings, I realised that these natural processes were a true reflection of the life, death, grief and loss that I explore in my research. A garden has foliage that folds and flops over each other, and over time, memories become blurry, like the turmeric leaf. Observing these changes and lamenting on the cycle of life and death, that these plants went through and that we as people go through, is what ultimately led to the shift from trying to preserve and create pigments, to working with raw materials in their most natural forms.

Figure 8, Coffee on Board

Figure 9. Tea on Canvas

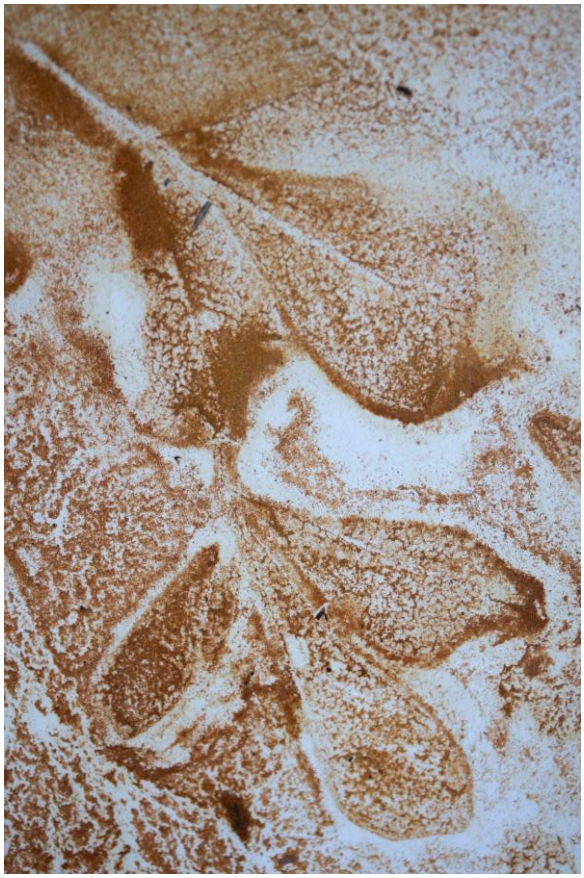

Figure 10. Turmeric on Canvas

Close-up shots of Studio Process, 2025. Mixed Media.

The decision to work on wooden boards rather than canvas stemmed from a desire to remain materially and visually aligned with the garden, an environment that is central to the theme of the project. A wooden surface offers a natural grounding, evoking the texture and rawness of earth and bark. Carving into the wood brought more opportunities to explore with depth and texture in my art. In the early stages of the project, I incorporated figures into the artworks, such as (Fig. 11), which was from a New Year's Day family picnic in the garden. Figure12 was inspired by an old family picture of me in the Mango tree in my grandfather's garden. The figures are basic line carvings, as they are meant to represent the

memories that were once alive and tangible in the garden, the many days and significant events that passed through the space. I used carving in other ways, such as (Fig.13), to play with the material of the board and the suggestion of wood. The image is of leaves on a tree, and the wood peaking through suggests branches. Though I experimented with bringing figures into the work in early stages, I did not intend for them to play a central role, and the focus was mainly on spaces and shifting environments, like my constant shifting homes and the journeys between them. Carving into the board was a helpful experiment in the beginning, but my attention shifted to the materials, as they were capable of living and dying on the board, which was a greater concern for the conceptual underpinning of the project. With more focus on the ephemeral materials, I decided to experiment with canvas to see how it reacted to the materials as opposed to the board. This led me to artworks like (Fig. 14), where I carved into the turmeric to create a tree. Figure 15 shows a close-up of this, as the turmeric builds and collects on the surface, like sand. Instead of carving into the wood, I carved into the turmeric. The first image is more recent, while the close-up shot was taken directly after the painting was completed. The shift in colour and vibrance shows the ageing process these works are actively going through.

In line with Lippard's (1973) concept of dematerialising the art object, this body of work resists permanence by embracing natural decay, change and disappearance. The organic materials, their eventual fading and the warping of boards all perform a function in a process-led practice. These choices highlight the temporality of memory and the impossibility of fully preserving lived experiences. Early figurative carvings in wood reflect an initial attempt to anchor memory in form, yet the progression towards more abstract, ephemeral marks speaks to a shift in focus, from representation to process, from object to residue. In this way, the work dissolves the boundary between art and

environment, material and memory, form and erosion, all in line with the shift in contemporary art toward impermanence and presence over monumentality. Rather than a technical challenge, the approach to materials functions as a way of using smell, stain, touch and decay as ways of accessing memory, allowing materials to behave unpredictably rather than controlling them. This leads to understanding the garden not only as a visual subject but as a remembered environment, aligning it with Ponty's (1962) idea that meaning is generated through contact, not representation.

Figure 11. *Family Picnic*. Mixed Media
On MDF board, 137x91cm. Studio documentation

Figure 12. *In the Mango Tree.* Taken in 2025. Turmeric
On MDF board, 137x91cm. Studio documentation

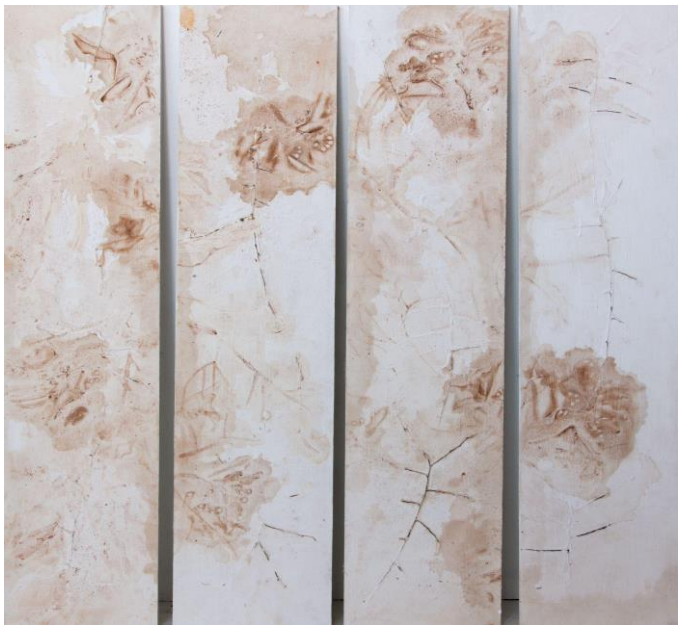

Figure 13. *Branches. 2*024. Tea
On MDF board. Studio documentation

Figure 14. *Turmeric Tree.* 2024. Turmeric On Canvas. Studio documentation

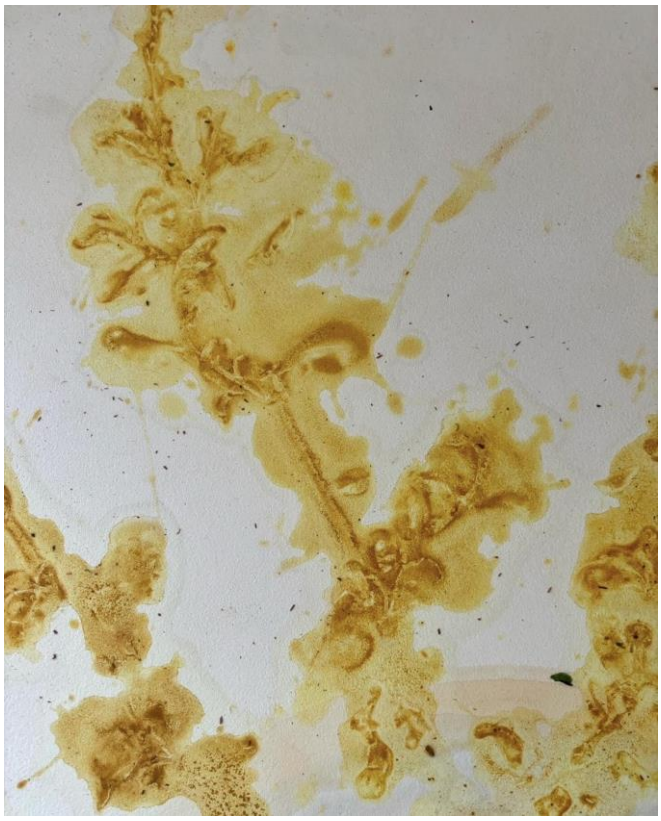

Figure 15. *Turmeric Tree, close up, taken in early 2024*. Turmeric On Canvas. Studio documentation

3.3 Ecological Grief and Artistic Mourning

The term Ecological Grief is attributed to Cunsolo and Ellis (2018), who used this term to refer to the grief that results from a loss of environment, species and ecosystems. While this is usually spoken about in the context of climate change or mass extinctions, in this context, ecological grief is not just a response to environmental deterioration, but rather a deeply personal, affective experience of mourning. My practice focuses on the garden, both real and remembered, as a site of loss. The plants have died, the earth has shifted, the fence has rusted, and the soil is dry. These small losses speak to a larger ecological shift, where a key source has been lost: my grandfather. Deborah Bird Rose's *Wild Dog Dreaming* (2013) offers a powerful reflection on loss, care and the codependent relationship between humans and the natural world. Writing from the edge of extinction, she invites us to remain in grief rather than turn away from the losses unfolding around us. She asks us to bear witness. Rose does not treat grief as an endpoint, but as a practice of care, emphasising that grief is born from love. My mourning, whether it is of my grandfather, a disappearing garden or a home, emerges from a position of love. This grief becomes a way of acknowledging what is vanishing, rather than shying away from it. Through this project, I have been lamenting in death and grief for over two years, acknowledging and witnessing its presence in everyday life. Through my artistic practice, I have watched my materials shift and change and realised that no matter how deep the sorrow and grief are, there are natural cycles that are out of our control. All we can do is bear witness to them.

Like Rose, I am interested in the textures of loss, the granular, staining, fading impact of grief that settles into everyday objects. The pigments I use are not archival or permanent. They are meant to fade, to disappear. In doing so, they echo the losses that cannot be reversed, only mourned. Figure 14 is inspired by a picture of my grandfather and me during

my first Christmas. It is one of the few pictures I have with him, and when I started it, it was a vibrant blue colour. It was painted in a berry tea, and when the pigment would fade, in a bid to keep it vibrant, I would add more tea, infused with vinegar and lemon juice to change the colours. But over time, this resulted in a buildup of brown residue on the board from faded materials. I decided to carve into the brown in the same way I carved into the turmeric, which resulted in the botanical features around the figures. I developed a habit of leaving my material on the board while I worked, so it could create organic stains. The marks on the figures come from the teabags that were used for the pigment, and some of the floral patterns come from actual plants being placed in the tea to create an embedded stamp. Rose emphasises witnessing something rather than fixing or abstracting loss. To witness is not to solve or rescue the world, but to remain ethically present with its suffering. My work becomes a site of such witnessing. The images of overgrown gardens, empty chairs and soft decay are less about preserving the past and more about honouring its continued presence through my memory and materials.

While some subject matters were very straightforward, like a picture of my grandfather and me, others are more memory-based, like (Fig.17). This painting was done with coffee and depicts the rings of a tree, once it has been cut down. One of the first things I remember my grandfather telling me was that you could find out the age of a tree by counting its rings. The impact of this memory and the fact that it has to do with the passing of time, ageing and death, in that you can only assess age once the tree is cut down, is why I found it to be a fitting subject. I end this section with (Fig.18) because even though I have learnt to let go and this artistic journey has taught me about relinquishing control, this painting remains my biggest heartbreak. It is one of the first artworks I created for this body of work, and I was proud of it. It is also the first artwork where I noticed the fading and changing of the

pigments. The subject is a hedge that used to grow in the garden near our front door. Everyone in the house smoked cigarettes except for my grandfather, and they would throw the remains of their cigarettes into this hedge. My grandfather would complain about it every day, and picking the cigarette buds out of the hedge became part of his daily routine. When I visited the house recently, the hedge was completely gone, and in its place was a collection of cigarette butts. I imagine him complaining about it from his grave, and I remember why I started this project. It was because of all the beautiful memories I have of him and the environment he created for me in the garden.

This is what the painting looks like after two years and embodies this project. It echoes the intention behind my practice, where grief becomes a form of witnessing. My paintings are not nostalgic recreations, but acknowledgements of what is lost. The pigments I use from plants, spices and tea are drawn from a garden and are subject to death and decay. They fade, change and disappear, mirroring the impermanence of the memories they hold. In this way, my art practices ecological grief, as both an embodied memory and a quiet refusal to forget (Fig. 19).

This research brings together theories of place, memory, and grief to argue that my art practice functions as a form of phenomenological repair, where meaning is re-negotiated through embodied engagement with material and environment. Rather than treating memory, place and grief as separate conceptual concerns, this project understands them as interwoven conditions of lived experience, most clearly activated through the garden as both site and process. Tuan's (1977) conception of place as space made meaningful through experience and emotional attachment provides a foundation for understanding the garden not merely as a physical location, but as a lived environment. During childhood, my

grandfather's garden functioned as a site of safety, play and continuity. Following his death, however, this place became marked by absence and neglect. As Ratcliffe (2017) suggests, grief does not simply occur within the world but fundamentally alters how the world is experienced, reshaping familiar environments and disrupting previously held meanings. In this sense, the garden becomes phenomenologically altered by loss, no longer functioning as it once did, but remaining emotionally charged.

Drawing on Chawla's (1994) understanding of childhood memory as deeply embedded in sensory and environmental experience, the return to the garden in my practice is not an act of nostalgic reconstruction, but a re-encounter with a place transformed by grief. Memory here is not fixed or archival; it emerges through material contact, sensory recall and bodily action. The act of gathering plant matter, spices, and organic remnants from the garden activates these layered memories while acknowledging the irreversible passage of time. Through the use of decaying materials, staining processes and the acceptance of fading, warping and material instability, the art practice becomes a ritualised engagement with grief. Rather than attempting to restore the garden or preserve its former state, the work allows loss and change to remain visible. This aligns with Merleau-Ponty's (1962) emphasis on experience as it is lived before it is theorised, where meaning emerges through embodied interaction rather than conceptual resolution. The practice does not speak closure, but establishes an ongoing relationship with absence. In this way, the work performs a form of phenomenological repair. This repair is not understood as healing in the sense of recovery or restoration, but as a reorientation towards a world altered by loss. By working within a damaged and neglected environment and allowing materials to undergo their own processes of decay, he re-inscribes meaning into a place shaped by grief. What

emerges is an understanding of home and attachment as processual rather than permanent, and of mourning as something lived alongside environmental change rather than resolved.

Figure 16. *Jay and Papa.* 2025. Mixed Media
On MDF board, 137x91cm. Studio documentation

Figure 17. Age of a Tree. 2024. Coffee
On MDF board, 137x91cm. Studio documentation

Figure 18. *The Cigarette Hedge.* 2023. Mixed Media (Plant pigments, tea and spices) On board. Studio documentation

Figure 19. *The Cigarette Hedge. Taken in* 2025. Mixed Media (Plant pigments, tea and spices) On board. Studio documentation

Conclusion

This research explores how grief can be materially and emotionally expressed through an ephemeral art practice rooted in childhood memory and place attachment. Drawing on interdisciplinary frameworks in environmental psychology, phenomenology, and contemporary art, the project proposes a practice-led methodology that embraces decay, transformation, and impermanence as central components of both the artistic process and meaning-making.

Chapter One establishes the foundation of the research, examining the relationship between grief, memory, and early sensory experiences in my late grandfather's garden. Informed by Chawla's (1994) and Ratcliffe's (2019) reflections on place and mourning, the chapter positions the garden not only as a literal site of childhood attachment but as a symbolic landscape of loss and one that influences both research and practice. Holmes' (2021) exploration of memory, domestic fragments, and everyday objects supports the idea that art can become a vessel of lived experience. I share personal memories that inform my artmaking practice and form part of my narrative methodology.

Chapter Two extends this inquiry into the environmental and psychological elements of place attachments. Drawing from Bronfenbrenner's (1981) ecological systems theory and Moore's (1988) research on children's play environments, the chapter positions the garden as a space of safety, imagination and development. Cross's (2015) framework provides a nuanced understanding of how place attachments are formed through personal experiences, social relationships, and cultural meaning. This framework helps articulate the emotional resonance of the garden, both as a sensory and nostalgic environment. Within this context, The Secret Garden offers a powerful literary parallel. Burnett's (1911) tale of a neglected

garden becoming a space of healing and transformation mirrors the emotional arc and personal narrative in this research. The connection between loss and place and the possibility of emotional reawakening through tactile interaction with the natural world. The garden in *The Secret Garden*, like my grandfather's, is both a literal and symbolic landscape, a place where grief is not only felt but slowly worked through. This literary framework helped to reinforce the idea of the garden, not simply as a backdrop, but as an active, transformative presence in the grieving process.

Chapter Three translates these insights into an artistic practice grounded in impermanence. By embracing natural materials that fade, rot and change, the artworks actually embody grief, rather than merely represent it. The paintings become living archives of loss, unstable, vulnerable and ultimately transient. This challenges dominant artmaking norms of permanence and preservation, proposing instead a more ephemeral, living and dying archive. By allowing the work to succumb to natural change, this alternative archive embodies both absences and presence, where what has been lost is just as significant as what has been preserved. Memories are used as a source material in the sense that they provide context rather than depicting specific imagery. Vagueness mirrors how memory behaves phenomenologically, justifying abstraction, fragmentation and suggestion. I chose materials that fade, stain unpredictably and decay over time because memory is unstable and ever-changing. The artworks reflect grief that is ongoing instead of static and fixed. What remains is a testament to the grieving process: what was, what remains and what must inevitably pass. Rose (2013) gives a touching account of bearing witness to grief and loss. My work is a story of mourning, where each material holds traces of a place, a memory and its eventual fading. It has taught me how to grieve and let go without forgetting. Through the making, this research produced a new understanding of how memory, grief and place

operate through material engagement rather than representation. The work demonstrated that home is not a fixed location that can be recovered, but a condition that is continually formed through interaction with places and materials. Grief was understood not as something to be resolved, but as an ongoing relationship maintained through repetitive, embodied actions such as gathering, marking and allowing materials to decay. The use of fragile and impermanent materials showed that decay does not only signify loss, but generates meaning through change, trace and persistence over time. As a result, the project positions art practice as a way of staying within loss and environmental change, rather than attempting to repair or restore what has been lost.

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