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*Digital Memories: An Exploration of Learning to Create Art in the Digital Age*

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B.A. Art

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## **Artist Statement**

My work explores the relationship between physical and digital mediums. I aim to create digital images that look as if they could be a traditional media. I am interested in how the two forms relate to one another and how digital manipulation affects physical artwork. I shoot and develop the black and white photographs used in this work: I am interested in the way that black and white is not just black and white, but many in-between shades as well.

To a digital element, I create glitch gifs from my images and use augmented reality to display these gifs over the artwork, so it looks as if they are glitching right in front of you: marrying physical, the piece displayed in front of you, and the digital, the A.R. gif.

I play with the idea of memory, and how the past is simply just a story we tell ourselves. The past is captured with my photographs, and I use digital manipulation to transform them into something new while still holding the essence of the old.

My work takes a lot of influence from contemporary digital artists, such as Petra Cortright and Jesse Draxler. Cortright's digital manipulation of images and her gifs were some of my earlier inspirations for this project. I enjoy the way she lightheartedly plays with digital mediums. Draxler was my main inspiration in terms of aesthetics because of his dark and contrasty images. I feel that my work has a blend of not being too precious with my photographs while keeping the sensuality that comes with black and white film, blending Cortright's playfulness and Draxler's aesthetics.

## Digital Memories

For a while, I thought this project had to be something earth-shattering and groundbreaking. I thought it had to encompass everything I've done throughout my four years of college. It felt like nothing really lined up and there wasn't a project that I was passionate enough about to feel like I could work on it for so long. I always put a lot of pressure on myself when it comes to anything academic or artistic or anything that is going to be on view, so I knew it was going to be a hard thing to figure out what I wanted to commit to. I realized college has been a constant state of learning for me, and not just in the traditional sense. I've learned more about myself than I ever have before. I wanted this project to be a reflection of that learning, of the continuation of learning. I chose to do something that started as an assignment from a class that I enjoyed and pushed it further. My project, *Digital Memories*, encompasses the art world learning to be digital, the process of memory, and me learning how to do new things within my creative ability. First, I would like to discuss how I came to the conclusion of what my thesis project was going to encompass, then I will go into length about how I created each piece. That will lead into the discussion of the deeper significance of my work and my inspirations.

How does one decide what to create? For me, it started a year ago when I began to seriously think about my thesis project. I had no idea what I wanted to do for the longest time. I tend to put a lot of pressure on myself when it comes to creating, and I knew for this project it would have to be a big one. Like I stated previously, I thought this project had to encompass every little thing I've learned through my four years at college, but I have not had a typical college career. With the COVID-19 pandemic beginning in the middle of my college career, it became a huge learning curve for the whole world, but especially students and teachers. How do you learn when you are confined to the four walls of your home? The whole world looked to the

internet and digital means to solve our problems, and with it came a learning curve and a whole new world of opportunities.

All that to say, I didn't really start working on my thesis project until I got into my project studio class. Before I got into this class I had some ideas of what I wanted to do but I wasn't really committed to any of them, and none of them made me very excited. At the beginning of the semester, I presented my project as a documentary photography piece. I was going to do mixed media and have a journalistic aspect and present it in a way that was almost collage like. This is not what I ended up doing at all. I started down that path, taking pictures and journaling about every frame I shot, but I could not see everything coming together in my head. No matter how hard I tried, there was not an end image in my mind.

I really started to figure out what I like doing when I looked back at previous classes I've taken. I looked back at previous assignments that I have been given and things that I wanted to explore more. I remembered a digital collage that I had made that I was oddly proud of. It wasn't anything crazy or special, but I had fun making it, and I learned a lot making it and I enjoy learning. I think learning all around is an artistic process. Even when you're just learning something simple like how to do a new job or how to bake a new cookie, I think there is something artistic within that process. For me, this project was a lot of learning. It was a lot of learning about how I could take my physical work and make it into something completely new and do even more with it.

When you take a photograph, you don't really think about what that photograph is going to be. At least for me, when I take a photo, I take it because something catches my eye or because I want to capture a moment. I don't think about what the photograph is going to turn into or the long-term effects of taking that photograph. But photographs are memories. There's

something you can look back on and remember exactly where you were, exactly what you were thinking when you took it. That's something that's really special to me. Memory. Even when I started my initial project of doing a journalistic documentary collage series, I was journaling about the photographs I was taking. I would write where I was, what I was thinking, why I took the photo, how my day was going, or anything else that I felt was relevant. When actually creating my work, I was taking those memories and manipulating them into something new while still keeping the essence of the original thought.

So, when I realized I wanted to continue on with digital collage I started with photographs that meant something to me. I just started manipulating them and playing around and seeing what I could create. I created some collages, but they didn't go together and there was nothing quite grasping about them. There was something missing. It's almost like they weren't ambiguous enough; they were too precious to me still. That's when my advisor tried to guide me by giving me some guidelines to play around with. I tried creating images within 10 minutes. I did that for a while and actually got really good at it to the point that all of the final pieces that I've exhibited were created in under 10 minutes. I started to learn what I liked, what caught my eye, what elements were crucial to me, what parts of Photoshop that I used in every image, and what tools in Photoshop I didn't use at all.

Finally, I settled into one roll of film. A random roll that had been taken in November for my initial journalistic project. The roll consisted of a couple of random occasions, but it was mostly just walking around and photographing whatever caught my eye. Learning. Learning what I like to capture. I remember while photographing this film someone asked me what it is that I take photos of. And I told them that I didn't know and that I was still learning. I didn't know that these photos were going to be used in my collages but I'm glad I didn't know.

This roll of film is from about a span of two or three weeks in November of 2021. I used only photographs from this one roll to create a plethora of digital collages, from which I chose four to exhibit. I take the images and pick them apart using the Photoshop tools color select and magic wand select tool. I then pieced together different aspects from different images, or sometimes aspects from one or the same image, and make it look unrecognizable. I'm not as concerned with depth and a sense of space as I am texture and color and hue and line. What really matters to me is a sense of sensuality that you automatically receive from black and white film mixed with a feeling of being lost but also somehow still fitting together. By piecing together these aspects, I created a completely new image, that I tried to make look like a physical form of art, such as an abstract painting. I have to finish the image and under 10 minutes, and once 10 minutes hits I'm done with the image, or else I could go on manipulating it forever.

Just this one aspect of my project, because there are multiple, begins the blend of physical and digital art. The physical being the black and white film that I have taken and developed myself and the digital being the manipulation on Photoshop. I think this offers an interesting blend of art. Film photography has always been something so physical and tangible for me, while Photoshop has felt out of reach and too technological. Bringing the two together using my own photography offered a starting platform that felt safer while still opening up the room to explore new things.

The second aspect of my project is after I create an image, I create a GIF out of it. I do this using a website that creates glitch images of whatever image you decide to put into it. There are various options and ways to glitch your image, but I would always use streak and hue. I then take the glitch images and create a GIF that takes the image to another digital format. And for my exhibition, I learned how to use augmented reality in order to display the GIFS on top of the

images. The viewer is able to scan the image, and the GIF pops up on top, making the image look like it's glitching in front of their eyes. This once again blends the physical and digital. You have the physical piece in front of you well the viewer is looking on their phone or device to see a digital glitched image.

Going back a bit, I want to explain more in-depth on how I create the final collage images. When starting a new piece, I first choose an image. Something that I think could be visually stimulating with tones and contrast, but at the end of it, this image will be the most distorted, so I mostly choose randomly. I then set a timer for 10 minutes. As stated, this started as an exercise to help decide when to be finished with a piece but then became a part of my practice. There was something about having to be done in under 10 minutes that kept my work feeling exciting and more committed to the tone of memory. I would then start distorting my base image. This image, to me, is the background, so I want it to have some kind of difference in tones and contrast, but the goal was to make it flat so that I could build on top of it. I used the Filter Gallery in Photoshop and would almost always do 'Ocean Ripple' twice, then 'Grain' to add a bit of texture. I think doing this the same for all my pieces makes them look more cohesive and gives a familiar starting point for myself. I also like how it looked aesthetically.

The rest of the process is where things would differ. I would choose another photo and either use 'Color Select' or 'Magic Wand Tool' to randomly select portions of the photograph that I thought would add visual interest. I tried to stay with shapes and forms that would go with the way that tones were dispersed in the distorted background image. I would then take these portions of information and put them into my new image. I would take that portion and size it correctly, and move it to where I thought it looked best or to where it felt right. I would then blend those portions in by using different ways of blending in my layers. I never really distorted

my layers in the way of blurring or smudging them, but I always blended them using things such as 'Difference' or 'Hard Mix'. Using these tools helped me create more tones and made my pieces more visually interesting. By that point, I would be close to 10 minutes and decide I am done.

After I have my final image, I create a glitch gif out of it. To do this I use a website that has a multitude of glitching options. It gives you multiple frames per second and you can save individual frames to create a gif with. I always use the 'streak' glitch and the 'hue' glitch. Within these glitch options, there are ways to adjust the glitch, but I always use the randomizer because I want a multitude of results to play with. When I find an image, I like I capture it and add it to the gif cue. After I feel that I have enough images to create an interesting loop, I save the gif. I always watch it to make sure that the gif looks right and loops well. I then take my gif into Overly, which is an augmented reality tool, and add it onto my image. I will then publish the gif so that I can test that the gif is showing up properly on top of the image.

To print my original images, I used the same exposure and same exposure time for every photograph. This is not typically how you are supposed to print images. I would usually cater to each image and use a filter to make sure each image was printed so that it looked the best it could. For this project, I wanted to print each one the same so that there was a constant. This way it also shows the true nature of each image. This also relates to the way I treat my digital images in the sense that I use the same tools and processes for each image.

While there tends to be some difference in the way I treat certain details of my final collage images, across all aspects of my project I play with the idea of memory. I never once wrote down which specific tools or processes I used for each image yet using my memory I

tended to use the same things. It takes memory to form a habit, and creating these images was almost like forming a habit.

Going deeper into my own personal significance with my work brings us back to the initial images. All the photographs I use are from one roll of black and white film that I shot in November of 2021. At this point in my life, I felt happy. I was carrying my camera around as much as I could. Stopping when I saw something that caught my eye. I did not know what I was doing for my thesis yet, but I figured these photos would be used in some way shape or form, but they were mostly for me, for the memory of my fading adolescence. I'm exhibiting these images next to the final pieces because the final pieces are a representation of how our memory can shift and change the way we see things. I look back at the memory of those photographs and I remember being happy, but there's a different connotation around that happiness.

Another reason I am choosing to exhibit my starting photographs with my final pieces is to further my discussion of physical versus digital art. I am taking a physical film photograph and making it into a digital piece of art. With the way our world is turning, computers and the online world continue to grow and grow. With the introduction of things like NFTs, it's not surprising that the art world is starting to become shaken up by digital art forms. Gifs, NFTs, augmented reality, virtual reality, and so many other digital components are being used to create and display art. I wanted to use my project to explore that more.

Especially when thinking about the recent COVID-19 pandemic and how everyone was stuck indoors, unable to explore the physical art in museums or go to the craft store or use their neighborhood darkroom, artists had to find ways to create and stay safe, but still get their art into the world. The digital landscape has become a playground for artists to exhibit and showcase their work. After the pandemic, it has become easier and more accessible than ever. Museums

started to use V.R. to bring classic pieces of art into your home or to be able to walk through the halls without ever leaving your couch. Technology has advanced the whole world, but especially the art world, in so many prospering ways.

We must also be aware of the downsides as well. Is technology making art too accessible? Too easy? How do we keep up with defining art when the digital world is constantly evolving and creating new things? It's hard to keep up. It's too accessible; now anyone could create anything, which is making it too easy.

I believe that art should not be a gate-kept community where only a few are allowed the secret password to gain access, but sometimes that's what it feels like. It feels like there is a big secret about how to 'become an artist' that no one is telling me. Everyone has decided that mouths will be shut, and the secret password will not be uttered in even a whisper, but technology is changing that. Online, the secret password is screamed out loud for all to hear. Online, people want to share how they made something so fantastic, and others want to commend their work. The accessibility and ease of online artforms and platforms only opens the realm of art bigger and wider, and why wouldn't we want to let more people in?

Going into my influences, one of my first main influences was Petra Cortright. She creates digital images and videos that explore the digital world. Most of her video work focuses on how the digital world has opened up a whole new way to be watched and be on display, but it was her simple techniques of distortion that grabbed me. She also created GIFs of her work, but they were GIF's of the creation process to see how she started and where she ended up. I like how she used simple tools in Photoshop to distort her images, but somehow still ended up with something new and brilliant and engaging. I took a lot of inspiration from her GIFs and the way her work is fully immersed in the digital world. There is also a sense of playfulness to her work

that I really admire and tried to take into my work. Even though my work is more aesthetically dark and serious, I don't treat my initial images as precious and a lot of that comes from Cortright.

One of my inspirations aesthetically is Jesse Draxler. I originally found them on Instagram, and their aesthetic immediately captured my attention. I tend to be drawn toward darker photography and digital art. At first glance, their art appears abstract and heavily digitally altered, but when you look closer, you can tell there are very small manipulations that make the image distorted. The dark black and white contrast of their work only add to this distorted effect. The lack of color makes the viewer pay more attention. There is a sensuality to his work mixed with the mystery of trying to figure out what his subject may be that really grabs my attention. It's hard to tell exactly how Draxler's work is made which is another element I hoped to bring into my work. The mystery behind the madness adds to his allure and is something I hope to continue to capture in my work.

Overall, this project was a blend of my found passions in art. In these last four years, I discovered my passion for film photography, for digital design, and for learning. The line between 'fine' and 'digital' art is thinning more and more every day. The expansive growth of the digital art community continues to open up new doors and opportunities for artists everywhere. While life and art have its ups and downs, it is always grounding to come back to something that makes you feel excited and passionate, and that's what this project has done for me.