

Considering Photography, Materiality, and Memory in the work of Su Legatt

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“Photographs are a way of imprisoning reality...One can't possess reality, one can possess images--one can't possess the present but one can possess the past.”

— Susan Sontag, On Photography

Memory is a capricious notion; one that vacillates between real and imagined. In this body of work, Su Legatt creates artworks that attempt a reconciliation of memory and inherited ideas. She creates deeply affecting images that meditate on memory, identity, and human fragility. Through an experimental process that embraces deterioration and instability, artworks emerge with a lightness of touch that is both intentional and poetic. Imagery, imagination, light, and materiality converge to form objects that are symbolic, fragile, and visually compelling—works that resist permanence even as they invite sustained reflection.

The history of photography is heavy and structured. It is a monolith that weighs on artists who work in the medium. Legatt's work is deeply grounded in this history while simultaneously challenging its foundational promises of truth, permanence, and documentation. Since its invention in the nineteenth century, photography has been positioned as an index of reality—a medium capable of fixing memory, preserving history, and legitimizing ownership. Legatt unsettles this assumption. Through processes that invite instability, deterioration, and material failure, her images foreground photography's inherent fragility and its role in shaping—and distorting—personal and collective narratives. Additionally, the chosen materials—beautiful yet unreliable—visually enact this philosophy, offering multiple readings within a single object. This exhibition unfolds both literally and poetically, asking viewers to reconsider how meaning is constructed through image, material, and memory.

Working with alternative photographic processes, digital manipulation, and installation, Legatt creates images of rural Minnesota in states of continual transformation. Printed onto unconventional materials such as glue and sheet metal, the photographs resist photographic fixity. The glue prints harden and disintegrate, collapsing the image into material ruin, while transfers onto metal reference early photographic experimentation alongside printmaking traditions. These choices recall photography's early chemical volatility—daguerreotypes, tintypes, and other fragile supports—while pushing the medium into a contemporary material language.

Legatt's subject matter is inseparable from these processes. The images depict her family's homestead across six generations, confronting the layered histories of settlement, land use, and inherited narrative. Photography has long played a role in reinforcing colonial and agrarian myths, presenting land as empty, productive, and owned. In response, Legatt asks critical questions: Whose land is this? Whose land was it before? How do photographs participate in the normalization of these claims? Memory, like the photographic image, becomes an unreliable archive—one shaped by repetition, omission, and erosion.

Several works incorporate corroded and gilded metal surfaces, invoking historical photographic objects revered within white settler culture—images of homesteads, farms, and family lineage. Yet these works refuse nostalgia. Instead, they reveal conflicting emotions of pride, discomfort,

and reckoning as Legatt examines her own position within a legacy of colonization. The degradation of the image mirrors the unraveling of inherited stories and the instability of historical certainty.

Through material instability, Legatt reimagines both familiar and unknown places. By foregrounding material vulnerability, Legatt challenges photography's authority and repositions it as a site of inquiry rather than evidence. As she states, "The truth is not about benchmark moments. The truth is reflected in the lives and the moments of our lives." Her work invites viewers to reconsider how photographs function as cultural artifacts—how they shape archetypes of "the rural," reinforce stereotypes, and obscure contested histories.

Ultimately, Legatt's practice situates photography not as a static record, but as a living, deteriorating archive. The exhibition asks audiences to reflect on time, land, and memory, and to re-educate themselves about the images and stories they have inherited—recognizing both what has been preserved and what has been allowed to fade.