MEMORY TRACES
ARTISTS TRANSFORM THE ARCHIVE

AN EXHIBITION AT THE
LA JOLLA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

FEBRUARY 5 – MAY 15, 2022
FOREWORD

Memory Traces: Artists Transform the Archive features the work of seven artists who have drawn inspiration from more than 80 years of historic material housed in the La Jolla Historical Society’s archive. Their creative responses and interpretations of their findings within the photographs, newspapers, artwork, business and personal files in the collection are wildly diverse and prompt new lines of inquiry about the individuals, places, and stories that have come to define La Jolla. The exhibition acknowledges the complexity and ever-changing nature of an archive, as well as the powerful influence archival practices have on personal and civic memory.

The La Jolla Historical Society Board of Directors and I extend our congratulations and sincere appreciation to exhibition curator Elizabeth Rooklidge, who brought curatorial expertise and rigorous original scholarship to this project. We congratulate and express our deep appreciation to the participating artists.

We express our profound gratitude to the financial underwriters of this project, whose support made this exhibition and publication possible. We thank photographer Philipp Scholz Rittermann, and Amanda Lanthorne, Assistant Head of Special Collections and University Archivist, San Diego State University, for her support as research advisor. Thanks also to the La Jolla Historical Society staff, Deputy Director and Collections Manager Dana Hicks, PhD, Historian Carol Olten, Visitor Services Associate Ricardo Lopez, and Business Assistant William Carey. I am immensely grateful to the La Jolla Historical Society Board of Directors and to the many members of LJHS for their support of our programs. It is with great pleasure that the La Jolla Historical Society presents Memory Traces: Artists Transform the Archive.

Lauren Lockhart, Executive Director, La Jolla Historical Society

EXHIBITION

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Curated by Elizabeth Rooklidge

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The exhibition *Memory Traces: Artists Transform the Archive* and the accompanying catalogue essay present a look at archives that is simultaneously critical and affirming, considering both the archival field’s troublesome history and generative possibilities for its future. The La Jolla Historical Society has, particularly over the last ten years, begun substantive work to break with traditional archival presentation. Former Executive Director Heath Fox developed a new programming model when he joined the Society in 2012. Fox describes the organization’s development: “LJHS progressed from the traditional paradigm of a historical society trapped in the fog of nostalgia and undisturbed by contact with living culture. Its exhibitions and programs reflect a view of itself as an active laboratory, crossing boundaries of art, humanities, science, and cultural disciplines. It seeks to be an organization of social conscience: thought-provoking, forward-thinking, innovative, and engaged with the societal and civic issues of the day. The archive is viewed as a toolbox, used to examine these through the lens of time, and to consider and interpret their meaning to contemporary life.”

The La Jolla Historical Society’s current curatorial statement emphasizes “reading history forward into the present and future,” an aim that manifests in its interdisciplinary, collaborative projects. The Society brings in guest curators, artists, architects, and other cultural and scholarly producers to stage exhibitions that focus on La Jolla’s past and its contemporary context. These changes have done much to open up the Society to thinkers who can engage with La Jolla’s history in wide-ranging ways. Indeed, recent exhibitions have included subjects such as women’s role in the town’s development; technology and cinema; urban ecology; and contributions of Chicano people to civic life in the region. Such projects go far in positioning the Society as a site for contemporary people to act upon the past and reveal its relevance to today.

*Memory Traces* continues this work, opening the Society’s collection to creative practitioners more widely than ever before. “Inviting artists into LJHS’s archive to reinterpret familiar histories, and illuminate those absent from our collection, offers us a pivotal opportunity,” says the Society’s Executive Director, Lauren Lockhart. “It is a chance to constructively reexamine the collection – its contents, our collection practices, and the voices and specific narratives reflected in its materials. The exhibition implores us to consider the archive as a living, breathing entity that we, as its stewards, are responsible for helping to grow and evolve over time. The discoveries made by the artists featured in *Memory Traces* challenge us to engage the community in new ways to support this growth and to bring new voices into our collection.”
MEMORY TRACES:
ARTISTS TRANSFORM THE ARCHIVE

Elizabeth Rooklidge

Memory Traces: Artists Transform the Archive uses the La Jolla Historical Society’s holdings to consider the archive in its traditional function and reimagine it for contemporary times. The exhibition features seven San Diego artists working across mediums, whose practices investigate memory, history, and how meaning is created from fragments of the past. At the outset of the exhibition process, the artists were given a prompt: visit the La Jolla Historical Society’s archive, dig around, and find something that interests you to use as a point of departure for making new work. Begun in the late 1930s, the Society’s collection contains material relevant to La Jolla, CA, including “books, maps, scrapbooks, ephemera, fine art, newspapers, street and land use files, business and personal documents, and historic and prehistoric artifacts. [It] boasts over 20,000 photographs, over 700 postcards, 400-plus architectural drawings, and approximately 200 oral history recordings.” The artists were asked to respond to whatever compelled them— it did not matter if the material was a newspaper article about a specific historical figure or the particular arcing line of a tree branch in a snapshot. The work they made is remarkable in its diversity of form and content, and all together incisively probes the core ideas inherent within the archive itself. Looking back at the history of the Western archive, as this essay will, provides a foundation for understanding why archives are so important— the stakes involved— and what it means for artists to transform them.2

The exhibition draws its title from one of Sigmund Freud’s lesser-known essays, which contemplates the workings of memory and how we record it. The 1925 text, A Note Upon The Mystic Writing-Pad, provides a touchstone for thinking about the problems with trying to record the present and reconstitute memory. The Mystic Pad—a popular children’s toy at the time— was an erasable writing tablet, comprised of a brown resin or wax slab with an overlay of translucent wax paper and celluloid. When written on with a stylus, the brown background would become visible on the surface where the stylus had been dragged across it— thus, letters would appear. When the paper was lifted, separating from the brown resin, the writing vanished. Yet upon close inspection, Freud noticed that a trace of what had been written remained upon the underlying slab and was visible in the right light.

To Freud, that slab, with its faint inscriptions, functioned as a kind of memory— the text, a record of thoughts, had not fully disappeared.

In A Note Upon The Mystic-Writing Pad, he wrote:

If I distrust my memory— neurotics, as we know, do so to a remarkable extent, but normal people have every reason for doing so as well— I am able to supplement and guarantee its working by making a note in writing [...]

Devices to aid our memory seem particularly imperfect, since our mental apparatus accomplished precisely what they cannot: it has an unlimited receptive capacity for new perceptions and nevertheless lays down permanent— even though not unalterable— memory-traces of them.3

Each of us experiences memory’s imperfection.4 Even recent memory is famously unreliable, not to mention that of an entire lifetime. And what of multiple lives over the long arc of time? Throughout human history? It is understandable that, like Freud, we would want to make some sort of concrete record less subject to memory’s inherent vicissitudes. Written documentation seems a particularly apt tool for this task, and it is through this observation that we come to civilization’s primary attempt to record memory: the archive. A look back at the Western archive’s history illuminates the profoundly complicated nature of this effort and raises urgent questions about its role in contemporary society.

THE ARCHIVE NOW AND THEN

What exactly is an archive? The Society of American Archivists, North America’s oldest and largest archivist association, currently defines it as such:

The word archives (usually written with a lower case a and sometimes referred to in the singular, as archive) refers to the permanently valuable records—such as letters, reports, accounts, minute books, draft and final manuscripts, and photographs—of people, businesses, and government. These records are kept because they have continuing value to the creating agency and to other potential users. They are the documentary evidence of past events. They are the facts we use to interpret and understand history [...]. Archival records serve to strengthen collective memory and protect people’s rights, property, and identity.5

Embedded in this description is the ideological core that makes up the archive’s problematic history and thorny present, which can be traced from its earliest formation. This origin suggests the concept of the archive that has developed throughout history: a neutral, merely practical record of the past. Archival historian Elizabeth Yale has proposed that the birth of the archive corresponded with the advent of writing—in particular, writing’s use in agriculture, for which it was employed to produce records that tracked the land and its harvest. “With agriculture,” Yale says, “there was a need for storehouses for grain; with writing came a need for storehouses for records.”6 Put simply, as state bureaucracies grew over the next five thousand years, written records proliferated exponentially in number and kind. They encompassed a vast array of subject matter beyond land and food: historical events, music, math, art, political events, medical research, business transactions, legal claims, genealogies, and more. The places these records— “documentary evidence”— were kept became the archive.
Turning to writing by some of the most influential figures in Western archival development, we see statements that illuminate this ideal. In the late nineteenth century, Douglas Brymner, the first to oversee the Canadian government’s national archive, called archivists “men of letters who are not authors,” and described their job as needing just “a little more brain power” than that required for organizing records in a storehouse. British archivist Hilary Jenkinson, who has been hailed as the most important figure in spreading continental European concepts of the archive across the English-speaking world, stated in 1947 that archives should “accumulate naturally.” Jenkinson laid bare the construct of the archive’s neutrality when he wrote, “They are not there because someone brought them together with the idea that they would be useful to students of the future, or prove a point or illustrate a theory. They came together and reached their final arrangement by a natural process: are a growth you might say, as much an organism as a tree or an animal.”

Yet for all these self-effacing proclamations of simplicity, neutrality, and authorial distance, other statements from these figures expose both the archive’s venerated status and the archivist’s intense influence as the storehouse’s creator. Brymner explicitly stated his goal to build the new Canadian archive into “the Mecca” for historical research in all of North America. “My ambition,” he said in 1888, “aims at the establishment of a great storehouse of the history of the colonies [...] in every aspect of their lives as communities... It may be a dream, but it is a noble dream.”

The archive’s conceptual core was placed on an intellectual and cultural pedestal, positioned at the lynchpin of civilization itself. Indeed, while Brymner’s hyperbolic reference to Mecca—Islam’s holiest site—may have been a figure of speech, it speaks volumes about this dogged construction.

Contemporary historians have noted that at the root of this positioning lays one primary thing: power. When we consider power’s presence, we see the truth of archives, extending back to their birth. Elizabeth Yale points out that the skill of writing was long harbored only by elites. “Rulers accruing power through their control over resources,” she says, “invented the archive as a mechanism for consolidating and reinforcing that power.”

Power, in other words, was built into the archive’s foundation from its very beginning. Leading voices in archival history themselves, perhaps unwittingly, dismantle the veracity of their own claims to the simplicity of “arranging” records in these storehouses and bring to light the archivist’s outsized impact on shaping the archive. “Being entirely alone,” Douglas Brymner said, “I had full scope to adopt any system I chose, without let, hindrance, or remonstrance.” Brymner and his fellow archivists wielded the ability to organize impactful records—products of lived experience of the individuals and communities from which they came—in a system free from accountability, which inevitably shaped the archive in their own subjective ideological framework.

**CHANGING ARCHIVAL THOUGHT**

In the mid-20th century, a seismic shift disrupted the prevailing perception of the archive. This change was prompted, in large part, by the advent of Postmodernism, a movement across philosophy and the arts that debunked the modernist notion of universal truths assessed by objective knowledge. No text or document, postmodernists argued, functions in a vacuum—context always exists. Narrative meaning is shaped by the author, the speaker, the historian, the archivist, the artist. Claims of objectivity and neutrality fall apart as we come to understand that every variation of a record and its presentation is contingent upon the interpretation through which it is filtered. This dynamic has, in fact, persisted since the invention of writing itself.

French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) was one of the primary figures to apply Postmodernist theory to the archive. In 1995 Derrida composed the foundational text, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. He moved beyond unveiling the power structures behind the physical archive to demonstrate an understanding of the “archive” in a figurative sense, as one of the primary organizational modes for all of Western thought. In Derrida’s formulation, violence is present in archiving (whether physically or conceptually); for every act of inclusion, the archivist commits one or more of exclusion. Through selection, stories, lives, perspectives, and memories are suppressed. Derrida coined the term *trouble de l’archive*: “the trouble of secrets, of plots, of clandestineness, of half-private, half-public conjurations, always at the unstable limit between public and private, between the family, the society, and the State.” Historically, the archive’s framework has attempted to control this instability, offering a specific but distorted lens through which to see the world. While published in English as *Archive Fever*, the title of Derrida’s book in the original French is *Mal d’archive*. Art historian Tom McDonough has proposed that a more appropriate translation than *archive fever* would be *archive sickness*. “For Derrida,” McDonough writes, that sickness constitutes “both a malady within the archive, affecting its ability to construct social memory, and an affliction suffered by those who are denied access to its store of information.” This work by Derrida, as well as other Postmodernist thinkers such as Michel Foucault, marked a fundamental change in how we understand the archive. No longer viewed as an innocent system for recording historical truth, the archive provides a powerful tool for shaping memory and concretizing bias.

Another line of thought that transformed the archival field—and shares many concerns with Postmodernism—is postcolonial studies, which emerged in the 1960s with thinkers such as Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, and Gayatri Spivak. This critical movement analyzes the legacy of colonialism and imperialism, namely the social, cultural, political, and environmental consequences for colonized people and their land. It takes as implicit that record-keepers (historically implicated in the colonialist project) are biased, and thus unreliable narrators. This bias must be confronted.
and dismantled in order to disrupt the power dynamics that sustain colonialist ideals in the present day. Scholar and curator Okwui Enwezor (1963-2019) distilled colonialism’s mechanisms in his own writing on art and archives. On the archive in British colonial rule, for example, he says, “Throughout the nineteenth century, the ‘great game’ of imperial expansion was an acquisitive game of spatial dominance but one invested with the superior capacity to control the flow of information through the archive.” A fundamental strategy in controlling this flow was hiding from the public material considered to be “too sensitive,” in effect erasing certain realities that might skew historical perspective away from Imperial Britain’s favor. Key to Europe’s imperialist project was the suppression of records representing the reality of subjugated people’s lives. The United States itself is, of course, a product of the colonialist project; the Americas were “discovered” by European explorers looking for new land and resources to exploit. These colonizers then attempted to erase—through genocide—the indigenous populations who had lived here for thousands of years. The narrative around the U.S.—its foundational myth and public understanding of the nation’s essential character—has been shaped by colonialist ideals, with the archive serving as a primary tool for their dissemination. Thus imperialist and colonialist ideologies are embedded in the archive through the concealment or total excision of material. While this control has frequently been exerted explicitly, as by governments such as Imperial Britain, the dynamic is at other times less obvious to archivists themselves, accustomed to such power and unaware of their own biases. This often manifests in the act of leaving gaps in the archive—what theorists call “archival silences.” These silences manifest not necessarily through intentional excision, but by not collecting: deciding what to include or leave out, and where to focus collecting resources. This has long been the modus operandi across cultural archives, in particular. The silences represent—or do not represent—Indigenous people, immigrants, Black people, people of color, Queer people, women, disabled people, unhoused people—all those subjugated by our larger society. It is erasure by omission. Postcolonial archival theorists, or decolonial archivists, such as Michelle Caswell, Jarrett Drake, Bethany Nowviskie, and Megan Ward represent some of the most creative voices in the recent years. Decolonial archivists have called for “pushing the boundaries of archival imaginations” to create a “speculative collection,” an archive that criticizes its own rootedness in colonialism and continually acknowledges its materials’ context. A speculative archive does not flatten, does not erase, does not solely represent the powers that formed it. Rather, it is generative, eschewing traditional notions of neutrality and objectivity for contingency and flexibility. As Megan Ward and Adrian S. Wisnicki have written, “[The speculative archive] would work against the idea that the present state of human affairs is the inevitable and singularly logical result of the accumulated data of the past by looking forward to imaginative, generative, alternate futures or slantwise through branching, looping time.” The decolonial strategy uses archival materials to imagine a different future, one that is both more robust and just.

ART AS ARCHIVAL TOOL

While various new archival models have been put forth, there is no broad consensus among theorists as to how a more just kind of archive would materially manifest, nor should there be. To pin down the archive into a prescribed structure replicates the very dynamics of power that shaped the field to begin with. So the question becomes, what do we do with this new, amorphous concept of the archive? Here it is productive to reflect on the decolonial proposition that archives are “stages to be leapt upon by performers, by co-creators [...]. Repair can happen through inspired acts of making that engage with the archive’s multiple temporalities.” Art is a uniquely positioned tool for such temporal play, its multivalent nature efficacious for interacting with the nuances of the archive’s reality.

The artists in *Memory Traces* all employ their existing practices to approach the La Jolla Historical Society’s archive to make visible erased histories and craft poetic visions of something new. Each artist has long explored memory and history—in mediums as different as painting, installation, video, and performance—and now turn their attention to the archive’s specific archive. While they were selected for the exhibition because of their work’s existing themes, they were given complete freedom in making an original project from the archive, with no requirements from the curator or the organization regarding how to choose material or incorporate it into their artwork. This strategy creates a structure for those “inspired acts of making,” as evidenced by their finished projects, which address a wide array of subject matter and temporalities. Janelle Iglesias and Robert Andrade dive into postcolonial critique by examining the ideological and sociopolitical implications of a particular natural environment. Joshua Moreno seeks to fill the archival silence around La Jolla’s Queer history, while Chantal Wnuk explores the idea of a personal archive and how it can bear a deeply individual poignancy. Shirin Towfigh pursues a more abstract meditation on how memory travels through time, often in enigmatic form. Crafting humorous homage and melancholy monuments, Allison Wiese and Joe Yorty use historical material to evoke past lives.

To “transform” means to change in nature or character. Artistic intervention into an archive’s material does just that, revealing that it does not have to be a static entity, subject only to the power systems that have shaped its history. Ultimately, *Memory Traces: Artists Transform the Archive* suggests that the archive’s contemporary value may, in fact, lie in its malleability. It can serve as potent raw material to be used as a tool for critique, for expanding understandings of experience and history through new narratives. The works in this exhibition activate the traces in La Jolla Historical Society’s archive with imaginative and diverse interpretations that affirm the value of keeping memory alive.
The La Jolla Historical Society officially uses the term “collection,” but by definition it is an archive and I will address it as such for the purposes of this exhibition and catalogue. “La Jolla Historical Society Collections Background” statement as of 2021.

This essay focuses on archives and archival theory in the Western world, as that is the context in which the La Jolla Historical Society has developed.


Ibid., 31.


One model decolonial thinkers such as Michelle Caswell have proposed is the “community archive,” which first emerged alongside Western social and political change in the 1960s. Caswell describes the model as “independent grassroots efforts emerging from within communities to collect, preserve, and make accessible records documenting their own histories outside of mainstream archival institutions.” Much of the driving force behind the development was to empower people who had traditionally been erased from archives to control their own historical narratives. By sourcing material from within their own community and remaining autonomous from traditional systems of power, they could shape and sustain their own collective memory. See Michelle Caswell, “SAADA and the Community-Based Archives Model: What Is a Community-Based Archives Anyway?”, South Asian American Digital Archive, April 18, 2012, https://www.saada.org/tides/article/20120418-704.

Ward paraphrasing Bethany Nowviskie in “The Archive After Theory.”

Indeed, artists have used the archive as both subject and medium since the invention of photography, and the interest swelled to a cresendo in contemporary art around the turn of the 21st century. See Hal Foster, “An Archival Impulse,” October, vol. 110 (2004), 3-22, as well as Owku Enwezor’s “Archive Fever: Photography Between History and the Monument.” While the archive’s presence in art is not new, Memory Traces distinguishes itself by its expansive approach to engagement with a specific archive.
Memory Traces: Art and the Archive

The exhibition "Memory Traces: Art and the Archive" explores the ways in which artists engage with archival materials to create new narratives and meaning. The exhibition features works by various artists, including paintings, sculptures, and installations, each of which addresses the themes of memory, history, and the archive.

The works of art are presented in a series of installations that transform the gallery space into a site of reflection and discovery. Each installation is designed to provoke thought and encourage visitors to engage with the materials on display.

The exhibition explores the role of the archive in contemporary art, highlighting how artists use archival materials to create new meanings and perspectives. The works on display challenge traditional notions of memory and the archive, offering a fresh perspective on the relationship between art and history.

Exhibition: Memory Traces: Art and the Archive

La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art (San Diego, CA)
THE ARTISTS

JANELLE IGLESIAS
JOE YORTY
JOSHUA MORENO
ALLISON WIESE
ROBERT ANDRADE
SHIRIN TOWFIQ
CHANTAL WNUK
In installations that range from minimal presentations to intricate structures, Janelle Iglesias probes the relationship among humans, the natural environment, and our contemporary consumer world. She uses found natural and human-made materials local to each project’s site to uncover the particular ways in which objects carry memory. Breaking down the systems—such as archives and collections—that constitute public history, Iglesias’s work uncovers the often unrecognized assumptions we hold: ones shaped, at the most fundamental level, by settler colonialism and capitalism. By sensitively re-cataloguing materials, Iglesias seeks to, “in some small way,” she says, “build our world anew.”

Born and raised in Queens, New York, Iglesias moved to San Diego in 2016. Upon arriving, she became fascinated by the palm tree, one of Southern California’s most potent symbols. With PALM READING, Iglesias unpacks the tangled meaning the plant has accrued since it first came to the area. Contrary to popular assumption, only one palm species is native to California: the Washingtonia filifera, which originally grew only in the Colorado Desert, one hundred and fifty miles away from La Jolla. All other palm species around Southern California were imported, first by Spanish missionaries who arrived in the eighteenth century. Lore says that one early species of imported palm was planted by Father Junípero Serra himself. The Franciscan priest founded the first mission in California, and so the Serra Palm serves as a symbol for Spanish colonization of the Alta California region and, ultimately, the genocide of many of the Indigenous people who lived there. Yet since palms were planted widely around the turn of the twentieth century, the tree has come to signal Southern California as a site of utopian fantasy.

Iglesias’s research in the La Jolla Historical Society’s archive surfaced a wide array of palm tree images. The palm appears with its classic, sunny aura in materials such as postcards, photographs, and newspaper articles. Iglesias also found more unexpected images that expose the palm tree’s reality: laid out like logs in a shopping center parking lot, mature palms being airlifted by helicopter into downtown La Jolla, laborers digging precise square holes in the ground to prepare for planting. These scenes suggest the cost and extreme labor behind the perfect rows of trees reflected in the former images, the trees that residents and visitors alike assume have always grown there.

For PALM READING, Iglesias gathered pieces of palm that had dropped to the ground. Divorced from the context of the whole tree, the individual parts become like Modernist sculpture, pared down to their essential, elegant form. Taking this transformation as a point of departure, Iglesias built a gridded wood frame for the tree parts. The strict structure nods to the architectural Modernism that maintains a strong presence in La Jolla, most prominently in Louis Kahn’s famed design for the Salk Institute but ranging across public buildings and private homes. Developed during the first half of the twentieth century in Europe and the United States, Modernism eschewed ornamentation in favor of minimalism, focusing on a rational use of materials to reveal a structure’s “truth.” With natural elements placed in a literal Modernist framework, Iglesias’s installation exposes the affectation inherent in the highly constructed, utopian vision that shaped La Jolla, and continues to bolster the town’s image today.
JANELLE IGLESIAS

LJHS Archive Files: Palm Trees, Postcards
Memory has been one of the foundational themes in Joe Yorty’s art practice throughout his career. He frequently works with domestic objects he gathers from estate sales, thrift stores, and swap meets: collectible figurines, novelty lamps, carpet remnants, wallpaper, bath mats, VCR exercise tapes, holiday string lights, and much more. While the kitschy objects remain recognizable as such, his work is undergirded by references to abstraction, the strict forms (and macho aura) of Minimalist artists such as Carl Andre and Donald Judd. Yorty combines these found materials and art historical references into installations that speak to nostalgia—both in the home and for home—and how the nostalgic impulse often carries undertones that are darker than we might like to admit. Mixing high and low, Yorty employs re-contextualization to examine what he calls the “anxieties and absurdities of American domestic culture.”

With his work for Memory Traces, Yorty presents a one-to-one scale replica of twentieth-century Spanish artist Eduardo Chillida’s steel sculpture, Gure Aitaren Etxea/Our Father’s House. The 1986 work was installed at the corner of Prospect Street and Draper Avenue in La Jolla Village as part of a 1989 outdoor exhibition organized by Tasende Gallery and the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego. Chillida created the original five-foot sculpture as a study for a work of the same title, which would later be installed in Guernica, Spain. That thirty-foot cast-concrete sculpture provided a compelling monument to honor the memory of lives taken by the 1937 bombing of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War.

Yorty assembled his replica—based on drawings and photographs from the La Jolla Historical Society’s archive—out of wood and collaged its surface with facsimiles of photographs and newspaper articles. During his research, Yorty was drawn not only to Chillida’s work, but also to the archive’s files marked “Housing” and “Cottage.” There he found photographs of a house being moved on a flat-bed truck, another home’s disastrous cave-in, as well as documentation of the interior of Wisteria Cottage, the former private home which the La Jolla Historical Society now occupies. The latter photographs—taken after the bookstore that formerly occupied the space had been vacated—are of particular note for their aesthetic. The images’ offhand compositions are captured with flash photography, a technology that lends them the distinctive feel of crime scene photos. The style evokes Yorty’s signature flair for capturing both a pop culture spirit and the unsettling undercurrents running through the domestic environment. Adding an additional, and profoundly personal, layer to the work, Yorty included his own father’s cremains in the construction. Altogether, their father’s house manifests the complicated nature of home: a place where lives are lived and lost, a site of safety, change, and precariousness. Yorty crafts an homage to the records—be they photographs or monuments—we make in an attempt to keep those lives in our memory.
JOE YORTY

LJHS Archive Files: Art and Sculpture, Cottages, Houses/Moving, Housing, Wisteria Cottage
Joshua Moreno’s larger practice centers on the found. In complex sculptural installations, he combines objects culled from the vicinity in which he is working, arranging them in compositions to tell a new story that simultaneously invokes the memories the objects carry. In his drawings—often on paper but sometimes directly on the gallery wall—Moreno traces the light and shadows in a given environment over an extended duration. Drawn over days or even weeks, the intricate masses of lines track time’s movement as manifested in physical space, marking a memory of each moment. Moreno brings these same approaches to his work for the La Jolla Historical Society.

While living in San Diego from 2006 to 2018, Moreno often spent time at Black’s Beach, so was naturally drawn to the beach as a subject while researching for Memory Traces. Black’s is a distinctly multi-layered site. A wildly beautiful landscape, it draws both locals and tourists from all over the world. It is a hotspot for adventurous paragliders, who sometimes endure disastrous accidents, while the treacherous trails down the cliff to the beach pose a threat to even the least adventurous visitors. Black’s has also long served as San Diego’s de facto nude beach, despite protracted legal battles between nudists and the city. Meanwhile, the Salk Institute of Biological Studies perches on a cliff overlooking Black’s. The renowned biomedical research institution’s buildings were completed in 1965 and are considered to be modernist architect Louis Khan’s masterwork. Their monumental, austere facades bring a different, yet equally stunning, aesthetic presence to the location. While looking through the Society’s archive, Moreno was particularly interested in finding information about gay cruising at Black’s Beach. Even a cursory Google search confirms that Black’s has a long history as a popular cruising site and is, in fact, so famous that it frequently serves as a setting for gay pornography. Despite this fame, the Society’s archive holds no materials on the subject, which seemed to Moreno a glaring archival silence in the record of La Jolla’s Queer history.

In his drawing series, Black’s Beach, Moreno sought to remedy this silence, weaving Queer life into existing archival material. He traced historical images of the Salk Institute, the natural landscape, beachgoers, and signage, as well as photos he took at the beach himself. He also included stills from gay porn, which he made by playing the films on his laptop and tracing on paper laid directly atop the screen. Moreno employed a grid to help him align the work as he combined tracings from various sources. Sometimes, however, he shifted the paper, which resulted in partial, double, or blurred imagery. This aesthetic speaks powerfully to the way events become historical memory; it is made up of fragments, which shift and blur over time, depending on how they are arranged in our minds and in the archive. With his traces, Moreno presents Black’s Beach as a physical site that holds memories of life, danger, intellect, secrecy, and desire.
Who goes to Black's Beach?

In a survey of 1,827 people at the beach, made in August 1972, it was found that:
12 per cent came from the city of San Diego.
58 per cent came from San Diego County (outside of the city).
14 per cent came from Los Angeles.
9 per cent from other California counties.
6 per cent from outside the state.
75 per cent were between 20 and 65 years of age.
69 per cent were males; 31 per cent females.
69 per cent had made at least seven visits.
76 per cent were there with a "friend"; 14 per cent with their family.
90 per cent of beachgoers participate in nude bathing.
No one admitted to being a voyeur.
Allison Wiese works in sculpture, installation, and performative interventions in public space to consider the interplay between the literal and the metaphoric in vernacular culture. One of Wiese’s primary tools is text, which she draws from popular music, novels, historical documents, and—of particular relevance to this project—film. These texts frequently appear in the form of the advertising signage we see every day, which she activates through another of her most prized strategies: relocation. Wiese relocates texts to lend the final product an unexpected sense of ambiguity, compelling the viewer to consider the multiple valences inherent in all text and objects.

Aligned with these interests, Wiese’s project for Memory Traces centers on a cloth banner, emblazoned with the words “Matinee Today,” which was used to advertise afternoon showings at La Jolla’s historic Granada Theatre and, possibly, the Cove Theatre later on. Built in 1925 in an elaborate Spanish-Moorish architectural style, the Granada’s interior was lavishly decorated with leather seats, a glass crystal bead curtain, a lush ceiling mural, and gilded mirrors. The theater featured a pipe organ to accompany the silent films it screened in its early days and played its first “talkie” in 1929. The Granada went on to feature Hollywood’s most popular movies up until it shuttered in 1952. Meanwhile, the nearby Cove Theatre had opened a in 1948. With its more modern facade and updated film technology, the Cove quickly became a local favorite and remained so until it closed in 2003. Together, the Granada and the Cove formed a cornerstone of La Jolla’s cultural scene for more than 75 years. Wiese received the “Matinee Today” banner from her partner, artist Wendell Kling, who managed The Cove from 1989 to 1995.

For her Memory Traces project, Wiese took the banner on outings throughout San Diego, the anthropomorphized object engaging in activities she describes as “some mundane and some preposterously adventurous.” Photographs document the banner picnicking, swimming, dancing, drinking, and taking a nap. The banner’s original makers likely had a limited intent for their product, but the very characteristics that made it effective as a theater advertisement—its material durability, ease of movement, and high visibility—allowed the artist to give it an unorthodox public life. Following the outings’ completion, Wiese donated the banner to the La Jolla Historical Society’s archive. Over the arc of the project, the banner accumulated more experiences, more memories, before retiring to a (perhaps more staid) existence in the archive, where it becomes a piece of precious historical material to be handled with care. With her documentation, Wiese alludes to the idea that all archival material has lived previous lives, some as surprising and adventurous as those whose hands they moved through.
ALLISON WIESE

LJHS Archive Files: Cove Theatre, Granada Theatre, La Jolla Cinema League, Movies
In his multimedia practice, Robert Andrade examines the intersection of the natural and the built environment. Andrade uses a combination of industrial and organic materials to investigate the artifice that arises when humans intervene in what he calls “raw, wild life,” and the inherent politics of power embedded in its attendant historical context. Having earned an MFA from Cornell University, Andrade recently completed a degree in landscape architecture at the University of Southern California, and his current work seamlessly fuses landscape design and fine art.

Andrade’s project for Memory Traces, titled Partially Protected, focuses on Torrey Pines State Natural Reserve, a nearly two thousand-acre state park located in La Jolla. Formally established in 1899, the reserve is home to North America’s rarest species of pine tree— the Pinus torreyana— native only to San Diego county and one of the Channel Islands off Southern California. Now critically endangered, the Torrey Pine has become an icon of La Jolla, and the reserve hosts over two million visitors per year.

Andrade considers how the site has changed over time, both in its geology and inhabitants. For the central sculpture, he created a CNC-routed model of the reserve. It is both a contour and a terrain model, manipulated to reveal gradual shifts in the site’s topography. The opals nestled on the model’s plateau suggest both time— the stones take millions of years to form— and value, the monetary and cultural worth assigned to their rarity and beauty. Absent from the landscape are both current visitors and the many Indigenous Kumeyaay people who lived on and cared for the land long before European settlers arrived. For hundreds of years, the Kumeyaay had eaten the pine’s seeds, used its resin for medicinal treatments, made baskets from its needles, and successfully cared for the tree and its habitat.1 Their displacement and genocide marked the coming changes to the land that would leave the Torrey Pine endangered. Ultimately, Andrade’s work asks, What does it mean for land to be protected?

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Partially Protected, 2022, plastic, foam, and Mexican opals
Partially Protected (Process Collage), 2021, digital collage

Partially Protected, 2022, graphite sketch on trace paper
ROBERT ANDRADE
LJHS Archive Files: Aerials, Plants, Torrey Pines
Shirin Towfiq’s parents and grandparents immigrated to the United States as refugees in the years leading up to the 1979 Iranian Revolution—a move that would shape her artistic practice for almost ten years. Escaping persecution for their Baha’i faith, Towfiq’s family packed quickly, thus forced to take only a few prized possessions. Of particular loss were the family photo albums that had to be left behind. Growing up, Towfiq often asked her mother what life had been like in Iran, and wished for a photographic record as a window into her family’s past. Towfiq—born in the United States—has never visited Iran, so her mental image of her family’s home country has been built from the memories passed down to her orally. This dynamic has formed the core of Towfiq’s artistic work, in which she employs textile, collage, photography, sculpture, installation, and performance to mine the ways in which familial history, memory, and the personal archive define identity.

While spending time in the La Jolla Historical Society’s own archive to make new work for this exhibition, Towfiq began by looking through the organization’s historical photographs. The Society maintains twenty thousand in its collection, many of which come from personal or institutional photo albums. As Towfiq shuffled through the photographs—which are stored in individual, transparent sleeves—her attention wandered to their backs. The surfaces bear stains, water marks, and adhesive residue. On some, stark shards of black paper indicate where the photographs were torn from the albums’ pages. Many also bear hand-written notations, indicating the place and date they were taken, what the image depicts, the original owner’s name, or cryptic sets of numbers. The notations were made in multiple, unidentified hands, some perhaps by the original photographer and others likely by the Society’s archivists over the years.

Towfiq recognized the photographs’ backs themselves as works of art, layering formal and textual abstraction. She digitally scanned the photographs’ backs only—it was not the image on the front that spoke most to memory, she felt, but the reverse. The scanned images were then printed on acrylic and hung on the gallery wall. Together, these works poetically invoke the way memory is passed down over time. The objects themselves bear literal traces of previous lives, retaining intimations of an arcing story, but their original context has been abstracted as they have moved from location (a photo album) to location (the Society’s archive), with who knows how many stops in-between. Just as Towfiq’s family has passed down their past in the form of memory, so too does the artist propel history through time.

SHIRIN TOWFIQ

The Distance Between Me and Them, 2021, digital prints on acrylic
SHIRIN TOWFIQ
LJHS Archive Files: Various photo boxes
Chantal Wnuk’s figurative paintings deftly evoke the textures of human connection, solitude, and loneliness as anchored in place. Her images feature people, most often women, rendered in surreal colors and somewhat cartoonish shapes that project a potent melancholy. The works suggest how bodies, and the relationships among them, exist in the mind’s eye—not in a realist mode, per se, but distorted by emotion, by our feelings for the people who inhabit those bodies and the places surrounding them. References to technology make their way into Wnuk’s images in the form of the smart phone, signifying how digital screens function to both separate us from and connect us to each other. In recent years, small-scale sculpture has begun to appear in Wnuk’s practice, proliferating after she started to use sand from the San Diego beaches that feature in many of her paintings.

La Jolla’s Shell Beach was one of the first Wnuk visited while living in San Diego from 2013 to 2020, and it became a favorite. She spent time swimming in its clear water; kneeling on its thick, granular sand; searching for shells and sea glass. It was, for her, a site of romance, both with a partner and with San Diego itself. Wnuk has since moved, first to Texas and then Ohio. Her memories of Shell Beach offered rich material for new work drawing from the La Jolla Historical Society’s archive.

Small Wound on Shell Beach includes painting, sculpture, and replicated archival objects, all incorporated into an installation. To begin, Wnuk repurposed a shelving unit she had built while living in San Diego. The slender structure, encrusted in sand, holds a multitude of miniature sculptures—part fine art, part souvenir—also using sand, as well as rock, wood, and paint. Hand-drawn postcards hang from the shelves. The back side of shelves and sculptures are painted a matte black, creating a flattening effect; the elements lose their intricate detail and morph into a silhouette. Moving through space, the viewer is left with an impression—a memory—of their initial visual experience.

The installation also incorporates two paintings, both of which convey time’s passing. One features a closeup of a figure grasping a fistful of sand in her hand, the grains slipping through her fingers. The other depicts a figure turned away from a lush sunset, holding a smartphone, paused in the act of swiping back through photos. Wnuk toys with the cliche signifiers of San Diego—sunset and sand—which represent less the truth of the place and more a symbol of it. As employed in Wnuk’s work, cliches add humor to heartbeat. With its many components, Small Wound on Shell Beach acts as a kind of personal archive, an ode to a place of emotional connection, heavy with sentimental memory.
Touch Starvation and Golden Hours, 2021, oil and sand on panel
CHANTAL WNUK

LJHS Archive File: Shell Beach