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RUNNING FROM THE TOUCH ON MY BACK: AFFECT AND TECHNOLOGY IN A  
STUDIO PRACTICE

ANTHONY NOEL HAMILTON

23 Pages

I rediscovered a family photo box two years ago. An image of my grandfather sat on the top of the piles in the Tupperware box. The photo created an immediate intensity and infected the entire family photobox. My grandfather committed suicide twenty years before I was born. From the point of this discovery I have needed to explore why vernacular photographs can create haunting resonances. There seem to be limits to the information we can glean from photographs like this one. Photographs like this one activate our desires to fill in unknown details. They also encourage personal hauntings and lingering myths. This gap between knowledge and experience is the starting point of my thesis. I use narratives and mythology in a photomedia practice to explore limits of knowledge and mysterious entanglements provoked by our experiences with vernacular photography.

One way mythology emerges is from epistemic unclarity. Photos and their framing are starting points for constructions of identity. Framing is literal: albums, shoe boxes, scrapbooks, wallet-keepsakes, digitization, among other forms. A desire to know what's outside the frame and the unknown elements of a photograph activates the viewer's narrative impulse. The uncanniness ignites this activation in images that are both near and far to the viewer. Thus I choose to investigate family photographs and the photos I've owned the longest.

The investigation in my work is oriented toward what I see as the warm, loving, and tender features of technology. Cell phone photos and videos, homemade scans, and prints on bond paper can all have warmth. I collect and concentrate photographic actions and objects. I rub, cut, sweat on, wash, sleep with, scan, sand, and tape together these photos. The actions can be destructive, but my process embodies an urgency. The process is a way for me to live with the pictures rather than letting them sit in the attic. I touch and sometimes destroy the photos to collect more information. I erase the ghosts, create new ones, or find a way to live with them. These empirically-fruitless activities are a research practice. This auto-ethnographic research practice holds contradictory approaches to photography together like fact and fiction, documentation and feeling, and seen and invisible. Holding these ideas together at once suggests photos are slippery objects. They exist in in-between states. This flux creates a messy cold scientific, warm tender presence to photographs.

**KEYWORDS:** affect, photography, video, vernacular photography, auto-ethnography, studio art

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ANTHONY NOEL HAMILTON

A Thesis Supportive Statement Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Wonsook Kim School of Art

ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

2020

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RUNNING FROM THE TOUCH ON MY BACK: AFFECT AND TECHNOLOGY IN A  
STUDIO PRACTICE

ANTHONY NOEL HAMILTON

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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A.N.H.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION, THE PHOTOGRAPH

I rediscovered a family photo box two years ago. An image of my grandfather sat on the top of the piles in the tupperware box. The photo created an immediate intensity and infected the entire family photobox. My grandfather committed suicide twenty years before I was born. From the point of this discovery, I have needed to explore why vernacular photographs can create haunting resonances.

There seem to be limits to the information we can glean from photographs.<sup>1</sup> Photographs like this one activate our desires to fill in unknown details. They also encourage personal hauntings and lingering myths. This gap between knowledge and experience is the starting point of my thesis. In my photomedia practice I use narratives and mythology to explore limits of knowledge and mysterious entanglements provoked by our experiences with family photography. It affirms my existence from his.

The investigation into family photography is oriented toward what I see as the warm, loving, and tender features of technology. Cell phone photos and videos, homemade scans, and prints on bond paper can all have warmth when applied in this arena. These technological media are all elements in vernacular photography. From its abundance and the keepsake nature of old kodak prints, I used vernacular photography as an example of technology's warmth. I collect photographic actions and objects. I rub, cut, sweat on, wash, sleep with, scan, sand, and tape together these photos. The actions can be destructive, but my process embodies an urgency. The process is a way for me to live with the pictures rather than letting them sit in the attic. It gives the photos a new meaning and significance, as a way of living with the gaps in documentary

<sup>1</sup> It's worth noting here for the history of this idea, that in *On Photography* Susan Sontag writes "Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy". (Sontag)

knowledge. I touch and sometimes destroy the photos to collect more information. I erase the ghosts, create new ones, or find a way to live with them. These empirically fruitless activities are a research practice. This auto-ethnographic research holds contradictory approaches to photography together like fact and fiction, documentation and feeling, and seen and invisible. Blurring these boundaries suggests photos are slippery objects. They exist in in-between states. This flux creates a messy entanglement in our feelings towards photographs: cold, scientific, warm, tender, loving characteristics are true simultaneously.

I discovered there are epistemic gaps in our interpretation of photographs from this research practice. My first research question is what do these gaps mean? This perceptual question, of how viewers fill the gaps, I join with a material question. The material question comes from the limited empirical knowledge gained from touching and living with photographs. What are the narratives and myths created from actions like touching, rubbing, sweating on, cutting, writing on, and sanding photos? How could spending an intense amount of time looking and touching a photograph reveal more about a photograph?

## CHAPTER II: METHODS

My practice is a studio practice. However, it requires more than being in the studio and making. I do a significant amount of research prior to commencing each piece. This research involves talking and reflecting with other practitioners and researchers. Other research involves family history, national records, conversations with artists and other practitioners, taking photographs, reading across a variety of genres, seeing art shows in Chicago, and writing for different art publications. This studio-ish practice, that includes writing, curating and social activities. I collect and concentrate photographic actions and objects. This involves the aforementioned social aspect, and reading and writing in order to generate new possibilities within this restriction of working with the family photobox. These other activities inform the overall research and study of the subjects in my work. This informal social method of study also informs and contributes to my actions with the photographs.

### CHAPTER III: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

*Catherine Russell, Autoethnography: Journeys of the Self*

Autoethnography is the experience of the self in relationship to things and people. Catherine Russell defines autoethnographic writing and video as having many characteristics. Russell's autoethnographic characteristics include studying a researcher's changing relationship to the subject they study; the research providing both an experience and an essence; and the framing of a personal history within a social history.

My project is autoethnographic in that it is a study of me and my family members. The most relevant characteristics in my work include recognizing the self as always in flux. The work provides an experience and not just an essence. The work frames a personal history within a larger social history.

The work *Running (2020)* is a video work with text incorporated are two examples that directly illustrate the autoethnographic characteristics of my videos. *Running* shows small-peephole videos on a black background that are cellphone videos being sharpened to the point of complete distortion. The sound is pitched down in order to create a low-meditative sound. In both of these videos the slow-drawn out text narrative causes the narrator's position to the video and the photo that is the subject of the video to change throughout.

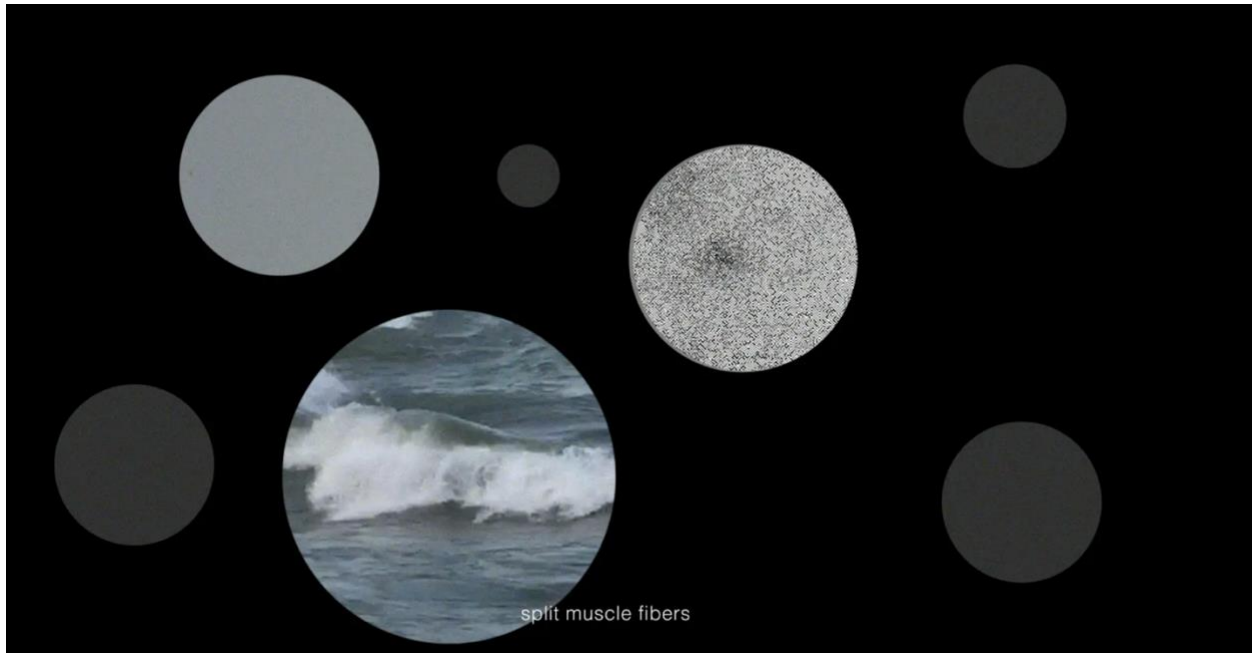


Fig. 1 *Running*, HD Video, 2:07, 2020

Video works well in these cases because of the time it requires viewers to spend with it. They are generally 2-4 minutes in length. Videos demands watching through and often re-watching in order to let narrative effects and structural effects unfold. These videos loop and make slow changes throughout, the text unravels calmly. The strategy of creating videos that are unclear, and require multiple viewings also lends to providing both an experience and essence. I use videos in my practice as a mimetic experience of active and passive time with vernacular photographs. Video is both a visual artistic strategy and similar as an object to the vernacular photographs I live with. There is the experience of watching the video and the narrative and visuals unfolding.

The last characteristic of an autoethnographic study defined by Russell is the framing of a personal history within a social history. In *Lareen, 1970* the text includes details of my Irish and Irish diasporic family. I have come to think of the subject of the autoethnographic study as a culture of vernacular photographs. When I discuss the *Lareen, 1970* project with friends and

colleagues, they quickly interject with their own stories of similar haunting photographs, usually of someone deceased. These discussions even went as far as artists having uncannily similar projects. These simple discussions culminate to an informal ethnographic study that shows there is a shared experience to these vernacular photographs. I draw that this culture is an imagined community from the speed and ease that friends were able to discuss these similar events.

An imagined community is defined as a community that is built on an intangible thing, and that is connected by the thing and not direct contact or networks. In my work, this is the connection to people who have a similar photograph as this grandfather photograph. While this item is tangible, it's a connection between people who have the idea of the grandfather photograph, so it could be a photograph, or another item that conveys a similar sentiment. (Anderson)

Vernacular family photographs are a small part of visual culture and visual history but command a massive importance in private visual culture. They are the center of households, families, and help to form the identity of the family through the photographs own visual culture and meaning. In my work, I study my current relationship to the family photographs, which speaks to a larger group of people who own these types of photographs and can relate. People who don't own these photographs might also understand something further about their own vernacular photographs or the nature of these vernacular photographs. Autoethnographic study allows my work to not just include named feelings, but to give me space to allow unknown reactions. (Russell 276)

*Shawn Michelle Smith, Photography between Desire and Grief*

In *Photography between Desire and Grief*, Shawn Michelle Smith makes a continuation of Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*. She analyzes the term that Barthes' applies to a photograph's intent which Barthes calls "affective intentionality". Smith describes *Camera Lucida* as an "unconventional, personal attempt to grasp the essence of photography." Smith continues by explaining that *Camera Lucida* is a "provocative, inchoate attempt to describe photography's affective power". This book is inseparable from the personal, no matter how scholarly or academic it gets, because the subject of the image is his recently deceased mother. My studies are also a continuation of writing and art that has grown out of *Camera Lucida*. He wrote about a single photograph which is never revealed in the book that was the essence of his mother. This singular photograph of my grandfather became an essence of him. Holding this photograph, that I imagine he held at some point, activated the feeling of being closer to my grandfather in some way. It was like feeling his breath on my ear, or on the back of my neck. Despite it being a cold, glossy surfaced photograph, it warmed me. The puncture of this photograph, Smith says is the *that-has-been* factor, the fact that my grandfather has existed. This indexicality is haunting. There is a relationship between this indexical haunting and the fact these are vernacular photos—it re-emphasizes the imagined community and the warmth that these photographs have.

Barthes provokes his viewership and observations of his mother's photograph: "being irreducible, it was thereby what I wanted, what I ought to reduce the Photograph to; but could I retain an affective intentionality, a view of the object which was immediately steeped in desire, repulsion, nostalgia, euphoria?" Here, he is laying out that even though he can reduce and deconstruct the photograph, there is still an emotional pull to the photograph. Shawn Michelle



Smith views this *Camera Lucida* section as: "... not simply an affective response that Barthes proposes to retain, but an affective mode of approaching the photograph. In other words, he hopes to do more than passively record the emotional effects images have on him." Affective experience involves more than a passive recognition of viewing photos. A passive experience of a photograph is entirely forgettable, the billboard you pass, a hipster ad on Instagram, the stock photos sold in frames could be examples of these (but also have potential to not be). The affective experience lingers. While the subject and details may be forgotten by the viewer, there is something about knowing that this photograph exists that sticks with you. It haunts you. This is the haunting sensation of the grandfather photograph that my process investigated.

My process diverges from Barthes's *Camera Lucida* in the ways that Smith outlines. She claims *Camera Lucida* is not just a book analyzing the essence of photography, but in itself is pleading us to feel photography, adoring the viewer with their own images, and performing this devotion. My work explores the unknown photographs to which I am connected. Nonetheless my work is aesthetically related to *Camera Lucida*. *The Wasp (2019)* is a one-minute meandering narrative text and video with a bouncing photo in a foam-core house set. This video shows and describes things around the photo that is the subject, but never reveals the photo. (Smith "Photography between Desire and Grief", Barthes)



Fig. 2, *The Wasp*, 2019, 1 minute 9 seconds, HD Video <https://vimeo.com/362443861>

*WG Sebald*

I see the way that this essay weaves through images and its narrative similar to W.G. Sebald's use of image and text. In Sebald's novels, which contain images that do not directly depict the text, the image and text sit next to each other to reverberate off of each other. He weaves together individual photo vignettes in the novels from these experiences. Sebald's process is one that I continue with my box of photos. It is useful to relate Sebald's process to mine because of how he activates history with images. His writing taints arbitrary images with history. The image of the boy in the cape pairs with Austerlitz speaking about the kindertransport, the mission that brought thousands of children from Nazi Germany to England. Sebald's attention to this history because of these children's lack of knowledge of their history and their internalization of their unknown trauma.

The method that Sebald uses these photos emphasizes their having-been-ness. These photos are true, we have some idea of what the photos depict, even if they are obscured. These photos are affected by the text that Sebald places in them, even though they don't always directly depict the text. This reading of the photos within texts of various levels of relatedness is mimics the experience of finding photographs in a family photobox. These family photobox's are affected by all the contexts of our imagined communities, histories, and autoethographies, and the photographs around them. Sebald articulates this reverberating effect in a way that is very similar to the effect that I see in vernacular photos. (Sebald)

*Jason Lazarus*

A work that uses a photographic archive and installation to activate affective intentionality is Jason Lazarus's *Too Hard to Keep (T.H.T.K.)* project. The project primarily uses the relationship of singular photographs to this phrase and then a larger group relationship to each of the other photos. The project is described as "an archive of photographs and photo ephemera deemed by public participants as 'too hard to keep' and too painful to destroy," on the digital archive. The photos are both displayed online, and as wall installations. If a submission is asked to be private, Lazarus displays the photo's reverse.



Fig. 3 *THTK (Kansas City)*, Part of solo exhibition *Don't close these doors unless you know what you're doing*, Nerman Museum, 2014 (Lazarus, website)

The installation activates an affective intentionality on part of the person who submitted the photo, and Lazarus's groupings and ordering. Shawn Michelle Smith describes interactions with the installation as "...viewers of Lazarus's installations cannot know what specific feelings any of the images previously evoked, they are encouraged to contemplate shared practices of photography and the diffuse affective charge of ordinary photographs." The viewers interpret a greater intensity and create different myths when a viewer is denied information to photographs or the context the photograph is taken. There is something intense about these vernacular photographs that often get relegated to the attic. They contain a potential for an affective lingering because they manage to be banal and excruciatingly emotional at the same time. It's difficult for the owners and viewers to know what to do with these photographs, both in terms of

psychological compartmentalization and logistically. Logistically they are physical material objects. (Smith, “Archive of the Ordinary”)

Similarly, *Lareen, 1970* describes parts of the photograph of my grandfather but never reveals the photograph. *Lareen, 1970* is a video of waves on a lake moving at twenty percent of real speed, coupled with the attached poem, either spoken or displayed.

*Lareen, 1970 (2018-2019)*

A simple graphic shot of a lake in Ireland.

There is a tombstone. “Until the daybreak and the shadows flee away” is engraved shallowly into the rock.

It was written when Hazlett Hamilton, my grandfather’s grandfathers father, drowned.

The bottom left having a small notch and the creases create tributaries that rain carried pieces of the tombstone into the lake. The phrase written means that you’re mine forever and all of eternity. This family history was discovered from the crumbling photograph found at the back of a humid attic. On the back reads:

Noel Hamilton  
Full Name  
George Ralph Noel  
Born  
4th April 1936  
Taken at “Lareen”

I think about my grandmother sitting in that saltbox lake house in 1970. My dad the same age as his dad is in the photograph. He was playing in the yard when my grandmother received a phone call with a hardly audible staticky connection. She puts the phone down, calls her boy inside from the lake. She sits him down and says “Dad’s drowned”.

This poem I see similar to Lazarus’s work. It doesn’t directly describe the photo, but it doesn’t leave everything out either. There are pieces of the photographs that viewers and listeners can gather, but they are left without some information.

In *33 Meditations on Photography*, Jason Lazarus poses the question “can photographers think of their practice as an accumulation of gestures?” This question asks if photography can be

considered from the process, not the product. The shift from product to process underscores a potential for photographic practice to have an ineffable quality. my practice hopes to emphasize this unspeakable, unnamable, or undefinable part of photography. The unnamable quality is why I argue that touching family photos is a photographic practice. I rub, cut, sweat on, wash, sleep with, scan, sand, sharpen (which I see as digital touching), and tape these photos together. The process is a way for me to live with the pictures rather than letting them sit in the attic.

### *Jonah King*

The artist Jonah King has influenced my work. In his essay “Broken Image”, he uses vernacular photos from Instagram, a Spanish flea market, and his grandfather’s funeral to talk about the grief that is contained in all photographs. This essay, and his work, explicitly uses technology to show its capacity for warmth. His website describes his work as “exploring technology, intimacy, and collectivity.”

These themes are seen in his work *Harvest Gyre*, which was displayed at Illinois State University Galleries in Fall 2019. In this work, participants are asked to enter a portal-looking sculpture. The participants then hug for 30 seconds to a minute. During this time, a robotic arm spins a 3-d scanner around the participants embracing. Then the 3-d scans are displayed on an elongated monitor. As the 3-d scans enter from the bottom, they slowly disintegrate as they near the top. This piece explores and negotiates technology’s ability to capture intimacy, while exploring what is left behind. I see these themes as important in my work. I continue these ideas from conversations with King, though the output of mine tends to be more introspective, rather than a social participation.

Jonah King's work points to technology's ability to have warm, intimacy embedded in it that is more than the connections it provides. It's about the cell phone photo saved that you look back at. Or the text that's copied into a note.



Fig. 4, Jonah King, *Harvest Gyre*, Part of solo exhibition *All My Friends are in the Cloud*, University Galleries at Illinois State University, 2019 (King)



## CHAPTER IV: WORKS

The piece, *Lareen, 1970* started with the process of rubbing and touching the photograph. The creases in the photograph felt like the palm of a hand. Maybe the palm of my grandfather, or another person who owned this photo before me. This visual adds to the warmth of the photograph. I needed a way to document the creases. The folds, creases, and tears multiplied through each move, and every time I held the photograph. I decided to put a piece of paper on top of the photograph and rub it with graphite. Rubbing is a simple activity a lot of people learn in kindergarten, but it also has profound implications. The graphite rubbing is reminiscent of grave rubbings. Grave rubbings can become singular markers of someone's existence, much like the single photo of my grandfather. There is also a relationship to death and dying that photography has that is echoed in a rubbing. After I discovered this process and practice I urgently made an erase-and-redraw rubbing. Animation was a matter of deeply investing and caring about a subject with my piece *Nothing Matter, Gus* (2018) from the previous year. In *Gus* I painstakingly drew a frame by frame animation of the act of watering an asparagus fern. It grew, and then a world developed from it.



Fig 6. *Nothing Happens, Gus*, Frame by Frame animation, 26 seconds, 2018-2019

I applied this process from caring about this houseplant, then used animation as a medium of caring to study the grandfather photograph. I wondered how spending an immense amount of time looking and touching a photograph could reveal more? Through these processes I researched my grandfather and animated his photograph. This led to two more pieces. All three pieces, the rubbing-animation, the slowed down lake, and the poem, combined into a three-part installation *Lareen, 1970*. The pieces came together as different resonances of the one photo.



Fig. 7 *Lareen, 1970*, installation, 2018

### *Running*

I returned to the family photo box to make this video. I ran with a photo of my dad running. I dropped the photo early on in the project. When I dropped the photo, I didn't realize because the sticky feeling was still on my back and butt for the entire run. A story whispers in white text while collaged circles present different sharpened videos to affect each other as the viewer watches. The circles are similar to the different layers of perception from a photograph. Both obscuring and revealing information. The video disintegrates like how the photographs are slippery and contain these different emotional responses that owners have to live with.

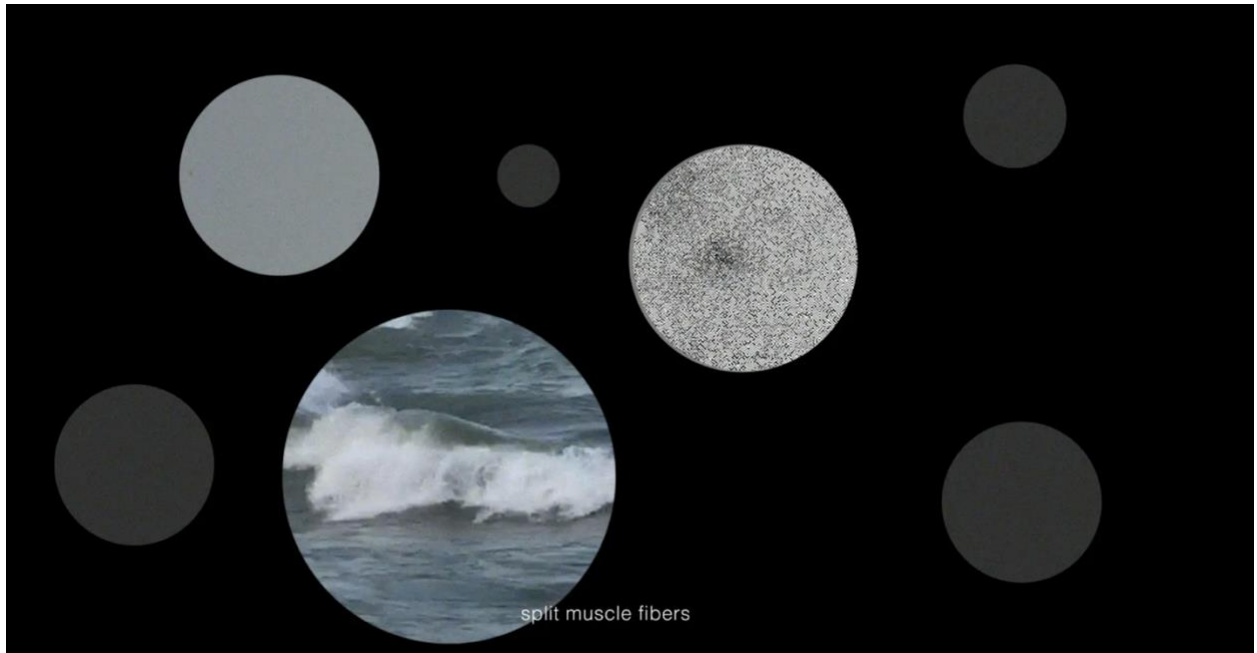


Fig. 8 *Running*, HD Video, 2:07, 2020

## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The studio-research attention to a collection of family photographs is a demonstration of technology's ability to have warmth. The attention is to living with the haunting and the gaps in knowledge that arise from vernacular technological media. When owners and viewers of vernacular photographs let go of the need to understand them, there is a potential for more than the empiric knowledge that is present in the photographs. A limitation in my process points back to the Smith quote on Lazarus. If information is withheld it can be obscuring to the viewers. Similar to the way that photographs appear to hold information, and the work processes how to live with this gap.

This warmth of vernacular photographs and technology makes me wonder about photographs not being printed now and images exist as digital files. Perhaps your work also speaks to an era that no longer exist. If we find a photograph of one's grandfather on a hard drive, would the connection be just as intense? Or different?

The buy-in from viewers is a hurdle. Art is not about checking boxes. This work is about the unknowingness of photos and can create a hurdle to enter. I'm interested in how the expansion of time, as an important formal element of my work, will change outside the context of an academic studio environment. Vernacular photos are a way to construct identity. They also exist in a state of in-betweenness, where they mean new things constantly as they age. This project activates a long-term studio-research practice through this change and flux. One change is the transition of these photographs from analog to digital. This engages the materiality of the photos and the technology in general. The material becomes linked to a sense of the gaps in knowledge. The material also mixes between the literal and metaphorical interpretations of warmth.

It's a process that folds in on itself. These narratives catalyze from a desire to know. The absence of knowledge brings desire. But my work does not give into this desire to simply explain, it is a process of living with the not being able to fill in these details, and the affects produced. The obscuring of the information in the photographs is the subject more than the personal narratives and imagery.

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## APPENDIX A: VIDEOS LIST

<i>Lareen, 1970</i> , 2 minutes, 47 seconds, HD Video, 2018-2019	<a href="https://vimeo.com/302623796">https://vimeo.com/302623796</a>
<i>The Wasp</i> , 1 minute 9 seconds, HD Video, 2019	<a href="https://vimeo.com/362443861">https://vimeo.com/362443861</a>
<i>The Whale, HD Video, 3' 33"</i> , 2019	<a href="https://vimeo.com/363409790">https://vimeo.com/363409790</a>
<i>Running</i> , HD Video, 2:07, 2020	<a href="https://vimeo.com/398572817">https://vimeo.com/398572817</a>
<i>Nothing Happens, Gus, 26 s</i> , HD Video, 2018-2019	<a href="https://vimeo.com/358328794">https://vimeo.com/358328794</a>
<i>Install Video 1</i>	<a href="https://vimeo.com/403733183">https://vimeo.com/403733183</a>
<i>Install Video 2</i>	<a href="https://vimeo.com/403741246">https://vimeo.com/403741246</a>
<i>Install photos</i>	Anthonyhamilton.art