

Acid in paper is the veil of memory

1. An orange train at a platform with snow covered mountains in the background.

A cardboard Kodachrome slide, processed in July 1977. I ask David Turley what he thinks old is and there isn't a clear answer. He says something about his own age and maybe something is old if it is older than himself. I wonder if oldness can be hastened, through a hard lived life or even maybe an oft-read letter, shaggy and limp from the sweat (and tears?) that it has absorbed in a shorter time frame. A powerful letter ages quickly as emotions inscribe it deeply – even scar it as an object. In contrast, a rent receipt issued in 1919 may be youthful as an object, having remained untouched by eyes and hands and heart. It remains in a 'pure' form, in an envelope at the bottom of a drawer or box.

David Turley releases these objects, artefacts and documents from their dormancy. They are like dried seeds that remain imbedded in the earth and stay fertile for a long time before eventually tasting rain.

2. It is now October 1966 and I am a fireman

Another paper slide shows the image of a building on fire. It is night and the terraced façade is engulfed in flames. This is another memory reduced to ash or to dust. This image preserves the final moment of something. A building is similar to the large boxes that Turley sifts through at the auction houses which handle deceased estates. It is a container for life as much as it is a crypt for the dead.

Like this incendiary image, auction houses host many such 'final moments', placing before potential buyers the last goods and chattels that represent a life. Like firemen, buyers sift through what is left after the flame of life has been extinguished. Unlike other buyers however, Turley is not after objects that miraculously escaped the effects of such an event. He doesn't want a toaster that still works or a collectible china piece with no chips or cracks, he is there to see what fire can do to the objects that represent a life. He sees that smoke damage can be an aesthetic shroud, that water stains suggest rescue and that acid in paper is the veil of memory.

3. Everyone has now left the pews and only Jesus remains.

Like the train on the platform, this image is about departure. Bibles and hymnals remain on the rows of empty pews in an unknown church. This self-mounted slide is an inversion however. The image is a black and white negative and it immediately conjures up ideas of death and dying. Jesus is dead on the cross at

the far end of the church, his head hangs low. These images and artefacts that Turley identifies, collects and re-assembles seem to be very much about a Christian and Anglo Saxon view of life and death, memory and modes of preservation. It is not the colour and noise and action one finds so prevalent in eastern rituals of death, dying and rebirth in a new and glorious afterlife. So much of this is about the end. It is Victorian and death is black. Colour discolours, then fades away and eventually life blackens. Turley is interested in objects and images modulated by a time rendered sfumato. The final hymn of this congregation has ceased to reverberate. The image is burnt out, colourless.

4. Am I looking at my feet or up at the clouds?

This short strip of colour negatives shows four images of the same indistinct surface. It is a surface texture that has attracted the eye of an unknown photographer. David Turley works with empathy. What he sees in these objects and images is how people sharpen their eye or express their love with deliberate intent. This photographer has declared that at this moment, this is all that matters. A whole life is summed up in this texture. Four views for the chambers of the heart. This is the centre of everything. By isolating this small negative strip, Turley is saying to this photographer "Yes, I understand, this could be my life too, I am stopping everything to acknowledge this moment in time, in your life".

5. 18,925.51

This is a long vertical row of numbers in black, with sub totals printed in red from a calculator. The paper has yellowed, but the mathematics remain pure. This is a perfect system for the artist. This is not an image or text, but a simple assemblage of numbers. These numbers tell us that something grew. Maybe it was income from a shop or business, but for Turley, it may as well have been the number of snapshots in a life or letters written or books read. It may also provide a numeric system for the ordering of memories. Like many of the artefacts that the artist presents us with however, there is no beginning and no end. It is about infinite accumulation.

6. "I love seeing your ring around my finger" 3am 27/7/02

This is not an old document, but a pink income tax end of year certificate from 2001 – 2002 that has been folded in quarters and then had this statement inscribed on the back of one quarter. The age apparent in this document comes from the emotive focus applied to it. Someone kept awake by love and the idea of commitment wrote this statement. I am sure David Turley is also kept awake by such declarations. It is as if

he is permanently operating at 3am, like the weight of a hundred clock radios stacked onto the keyboard of an electric organ in a previous work. These time machines squeezed a single note from the organ, yet flooded us with a myriad of voices and sounds from the airwaves. Unlike the departing choristers, this congregation remains inert.

This document, is crinkled, dirty and creased, dog eared and torn. It looks like it has probably been carried in a pocket, probably a breast pocket, close to the heart. Who doesn't want the night to end when in love? Who conjures an extension of time when smitten? The scribe of this note, overwriting the world of business and commerce found on the verso is certainly one of those people and the piece of paper wears the patina of age through a spontaneous expression of love.

7. Lunch at Miss Maud's, Booragoon

A very committed diarist – I was told a former policeman, who wrote a diary every day in uppercase blue or black biro and who had lunch every Friday in Miss Maud's in Booragoon. The time he rose, the time he retired for bed, when he watched 'the box', when he looked at his stamps (usually before bed) and what temperature it was for the day, all these 'facts' were recorded without personal reflection. This is a diary where things are simply described and it is only when the author goes on his annual holidays that the allocated diary space seems insufficient and he is forced to decrease the scale of his writing and the space between words to fit in the unfamiliar stimulus which surrounds him each day.

Despite the dispassionate tone of this diarist, Turley compels us to acknowledge the poetry of the mundane. This is an articulated life and it makes us aware of the cadence or rhythm of a life.

8. I must stay on task without disturbing or distracting others.

I will not use 'put downs' or harass others. It is important that I respect other people's differences and opinions. I must stay on task without disturbing or distracting others. I will not use 'put downs' or harass others. It is important that I respect other people's differences and opinions..... And so it is written another nine times in a juvenile, inchoate script by 'John I. ', with a blank left for the 'parent signature' at the top of a page. This is a textual exercise in punishment and the cadence is considerably different. The hand writing suggests a wild spirit – in fact, an 'anti – diarist'. A cheeky drawing at the bottom of the page confirms this – a wild eyed face with a frizzy hairdo and big cheesy grin seems to be saying "You will never control me!"

9. Brenda – Bust 38 ¼ waist 31 hips 42 ½

This is a lovingly kept exercise book of dress patterns someone has made for friends. The drawing of Brenda's dress floats by itself like a ghost. The body has disappeared, but the dress remains. These drawings and notes inside commonplace exercise books and on scraps of paper are what interests the artist. Maybe the dress still exists and the wearer is no longer called Brenda. These objects and images outlive those that make them. Like a different type of auction house, where prices for deceased artists' work often skyrockets, Turley sees a preciousness or increased value in the forgotten ephemera bought for very little from a deceased estate.

It is also possible that Turley could recreate this dress, or have lunch at Miss Maud's in Booragoon on a Friday, or photograph the same sites that appear in his voluminous collection of slides, but by simply re-presenting these things he is participating in an exercise of respect which borders on reverence at times.

10. In loving memory of life drawing

On yellowed butchers paper, a naked model sits with her back to us. She is rendered in charcoal; again, a by-product of fire. Is this possibly Brenda, disembodied from her dress? What implications does the post mortem dispersal of worldly possessions have for the soul? Is a box of possessions in an auction house worthless junk or an opportunity for someone to weave sensitive stories with, to make us humble in the face of what constitutes a life?

As a recent graduate of art school, Turley would have been exposed to that fading convention of the academy – the life drawing class. Most art schools now have little space for such a rigorous discipline and seemingly in recognition of this lost art of observing who and what we are, Turley has taken this drawing by an unknown artist and made a frottage with its still unstable charcoal, rubbing it over a tombstone in his local cemetery, to reveal the words, "In Memory of.."

Gregory Pryor, 2007