

Meditation as Method in Lynda Gammon's *Latent*

by Haema Sivanesan

The vault of a museum or public collection is a beguiling space: at once storage and archive, a place where objects designated as having a cultural value are packed away safely, oftentimes so safely that they are almost forgotten, in a state of “suspended insignificance.” The storage vaults of museums and public galleries are places of both memory and forgetting, where the potential of art works and artifacts remains latent, in a “temporal remission”, a kind of oblivion.

In this compelling body of work, Lynda Gammon considers the vault as both a conceptual space of art, in this case, photography, and as an environment for meditation. In English, from the Latin, to meditate is to think deeply or carefully about something, to contemplate or ponder, suggesting an active state of mind. However, in Asian cultures, and particularly in Buddhism, meditation refers to a practice of Empty Mind, a practice of letting go of clinging thoughts and ruminations to prioritize stillness, a state of repose. That stillness allows the potential of another kind of awareness or knowing to emerge.

Drawing on a Buddhist approach to meditation, Gammon coordinates photographic time with the duration of her meditation. Like photography, meditation is bound to time — they are both durational practices. In this body of work, *Latent*, 2024, Gammon performs the latency of the vault, describing it as a place in which to “be with” the past, to be “actively resting with” a purposefully researched and chosen list of art works that point to a specific engagement with the past, documented through photography. The purpose of this body of work is to be with history and the inheritances of the past, and to acknowledge it as existing simultaneously in the present, even if its legacies remain unacknowledged. This approach to art practice, drawing on meditation as a method for the exploration of the simultaneity of past and present, is not new for Gammon. Previous work, including *Studio Pictures (Fisgard)*, 1983-89 and, more recently, *Meditation on a Studio Wall*, 2016 contributed to developing the approach for this body of work.

The history of photography has been closely tied to practices of documentation through the creation of a range of representational materials (for example, catalogues, atlases, surveys, archives, collections) that appear to represent the scope of human knowledge and by extension, power. As an artist who is critically engaged with this history of photography, Gammon's practice is concerned with, as she states,

challenging archival and museological methodologies that were inherently political and never neutral. These archives/collections have formed the way ‘our’ memory and history are shaped. But this ‘our’ is not actually mine nor is it yours of course.

Collections are a product of the specific people and institutions that produce them, according to the versions of history that they wish to promote. Therefore, archives are inherently subjective, producing biases, absences, false truths and fictions. Accordingly, artists concerned with the history of photography and the nature of the archive have brought a criticality to these uses of photography, questioning the truth of the photograph by working against the grain of the archive to draw out histories and content that may not be readily apparent.

A public art collection is also a type of archive representing the cultural history of a place. In this body of work, Gammon enters into the collection storage of the university art collection to consider artworks that have been sitting forgotten for years, if not decades. Gammon's objective is not to study these paintings or to undertake an art historical reading but to simply be with these artworks and to document that experience as an artistic intervention and performance. Through this process, she develops an inquiry that transforms an absence into a presence.

Gammon writes,

The fact that my great aunt Sylvia Sutton's work was not included in the collection points to an absence in my own very

personal way. Then looking at, looking for...the work of her friends only some of whom are in the collections, exposed the incomplete and fragmentary nature of the collection/archive in general. I was interested not only in this particular version of history but also in 'where' it is manifested... in the dark depths of the vault spaces where we are generally excluded. So, this project creates a counter narrative in a small way that points to a larger issue of absence. Obtaining access to the archive/vault is a slow process. It is not public...one goes alone and not without an endless series of emails making appointments etc. By spending time with the work of these women artists, I was interested in exploring what slowing down means for 'knowing' ... slowing down and focussing differently. Listening [and] experiencing carefully and in a more fulsome way...

A conceptual starting point for Gammon's work, as she explains above, was a painting by her great aunt Sylvia Sutton in the artist's personal collection. Through her initial inquiries, Gammon came to realise that her great aunt's work was not represented in the university's art collection and thus absent from history. She writes,

I asked them who might have been a woman friend of my great aunt's... whose work did they have that would have been made around that time here in the area of the south Vancouver Island.

In this way, Gammon raises a broader set of questions as to the nature of the collection, undertaking a personal, intuitive, relational, and ultimately feminist exploration. She continues,

So this list grew in its own organic way through the memory bank of these individuals who are in the vault working with it....and in so doing my list of 'sittings' has its own gaps and its own concentrations and particularities (i.e., I would get absorbed in one person's work and end up doing a few sittings). But these gaps and particularities and concentrations always existed in the collections without being acknowledged.

Considering meditation as an artistic method, Gammon explores what it means to "sit with" and (re)visit an almost forgotten legacy of women artists in Victoria; to be present with, and in the presence of, the art works of women who forged an artistic life for themselves some two generations prior. Each meditation that Gammon undertakes in the vault is documented by a carefully titled photograph, which records details of the duration of the meditation, the location of the artwork, its title, and the artist's name, as well as the date and time of the visit. This meticulous approach to titling is a kind of cataloguing in itself. It produces its own taxonomy: the taxonomy of a set of meditative experiences that offers a counter-archive with its own flaws, conceits, and biases. As the theorist and curator Okwui Enwezor notes, the critical interrogation of the archive "may result in the creation of another archival structure as a means of establishing an archaeological relationship to history, evidence, information, and data that will give rise to its own interpretive categories." In this way, Gammon uses the methodology of the archive against itself, to bring a forgotten history and its legacy to presence, indeed occasioning its reincarnation.

Through her meditations and through the production of her own counter-archive, Gammon reveals how certain histories and experiences of the world, as recorded through these artworks, can easily be overlooked or elided until they are brought into relation with oneself, and thereby into a relation with present-day society, and in turn, back into public memory. Thus, this project is also about memory and remembrance — not history as such, because history refers to mechanical time whereas memory relates to human time. In Buddhism, time is an illusory dimension or frontier that conditions the material world. One seeks to push through and transcend this frontier through the practice of meditation. Accordingly, there is a sense in which this body of work seeks to destabilize concepts of history and the present and show their simultaneity, both as image and as experience. Gammon's body of work thereby shows us a diachronicity, whereby the historical object or artwork is brought into presence by being placed in relation to the present.

Photographs inherently suspend time, requiring us to consider each photograph in this body of work as a conflation of various points in time—the historical time of the artwork, the durational time of meditation, the present-time of the photographs. Each photograph is created by the layering of time and duration: the duration of the camera's exposure,

the duration of the meditation according to a precise measure of time. The accumulation of a series of such photographs over time creates both a chronotope, coordinating periods of time past and present in a specific place, and a chronology, documenting the repetition of a meditative performance, a serialized gesture taking place over a period of time, underpinning the artist's inquiry. This layering of time through performance and photography activates the historical artworks, drawing the works held in storage out of their temporal remission. Ironically, this body of work will, no doubt, over time, also enter into its own space of temporal remission — whether in a collection vault or personal archive, waiting for the time of its own reincarnation. This truth of the work bears out the reality that no material object or artwork can transcend the flow of time to become immortal. But our lived experience, the events and questions that shape our lives, comprises a non-linear constellation of past and present moments.

Ultimately, this project relates to a process of the artist putting herself in the liminal space of the collection storage vault to find her relations. Through this series of meditations or awareness practices, the artist seeks the evidence of a particular and personal history. And, by sitting with the latent energy or aura of her great aunt's artistic milieu, Gammon locates a lineage in which she can be comfortably Empty, that is to say, in a state of active rest or peace, in the company of these women, where the meaning of this body of work resides.