

THESIS
FLASHBACK

Submitted by
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Department of Art

In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, Colorado
Spring 2001

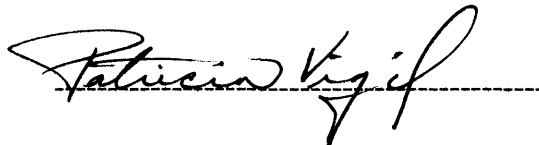
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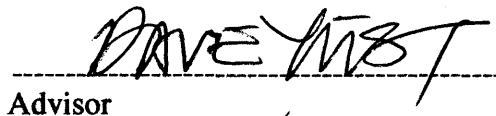
April 4, 2001

WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED
UNDER OUR SUPERVISION BY STEVEN L. RAY ENTITLED
FLASHBACK BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS.

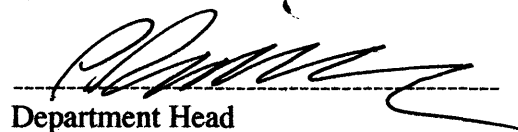
Committee on Graduate Work







Advisor



Department Head

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

FLASHBACK

My thesis Flashback began on May First, 1972; That day I was hit by a car and that changed my life. It was not until I started into thesis that I realized I needed to come to terms with this event. With the aid of the resources available at Colorado State University, I began a journey of discovery. I underwent a long series of tests to determine the actual extent of the closed head injury I had received. Once I knew the physical and psychological effects from that trauma, I began to work on a series of paintings. These works deal with event itself and its aftermath and the techniques I used in making these paintings. Through these works I experienced a catharsis that led me out of the shadows of doubt into the light of knowledge.

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FIGURE 2. REMEMBRANCE Acrylic, paper, medical x-rays and computer printout on plexiglass with fluorescent lights, 54”X33”X8”.

FIGURE 3. THE WHITE ROOM Acrylic, paper, medical x-rays and computer printout on plexiglass with fluorescent lights, 33”X54”X8”.

FIGURE 4. RESIDUAL Acrylic, paper, medical x-rays and computer printout on plexiglass with fluorescent lights, 54”X33”X8”.

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While studying at Colorado State University I had an injury and my doctor ordered x-rays of my neck. He showed them to me and asked if I ever had a broken neck. At that moment I experienced a very vivid flashback. It would be one of many I had for some months afterwards. It was from these memories of a terrible day that my “Flashback” series developed.

On May 1, 1972 my friend parked his new Chevy Nova in front of my house. I walked over and opened the passenger door and stuck my head inside to talk to him. As we were talking, his car was hit from behind by another vehicle. I sustained a closed head injury, broken and dislocated vertebrae of my cervical spine, a broken lumbar vertebra, a dislocated collar bone, severe sprains to my left knee and ankle and lacerations to my face, head and other parts of my body.

Almost from the start of my education at C.S.U. I began having difficulty. What started as insomnia began a journey of self-discovery that took me through the deepest recesses of my inner self to emerge a new person. Through the resources available at C.S.U., I was able to answer many nagging feelings I had about my life. I was tested for just about everything. All the testing took over a year. The tests revealed several learning disabilities. The first is Central Auditory Processing Dysfluency, a

hearing disorder. This involves the central auditory system being unable to tune out background noise. Two auditory impulses being received at the same time compete with each other resulting in one or the other being canceled out. Scotopic Sensitivity, another disability for which I was diagnosed, is a vision disorder related to dyslexia. When reading black text on white paper, especially coated stock, the words appear to move toward you or look as though they are moving like water in a stream. This is an effect called rivering. The tests for any neurological damage turned up a memory deficiency. I also went through individual therapy and had to go through all the events of my life that were very difficult to relive.

After that first flashback I kept thinking why, “ is this event coming back to haunt me now? ” I was having enough trouble keeping up with my classes and I had enough to deal with. In retrospect I believe that because I had so much to contend with I could not focus on the underlying significance of the flashbacks.

I had to confront that part of my life that had taken so much away from me. I had to reclaim that part of my life to be able to move ahead. It was when I was starting into my thesis that it hit me. I felt the need to develop a series of paintings relating to the accident.

When I approached my advisor, David Yust, about changing my direction from the rock face paintings I was doing, he was very open-

minded about encouraging me to develop them. He was very enthusiastic about the new paintings and that made me feel I was on the right track.

I had to do much research to find my old medical records, get x-rays and figure out how to put it all together. Because x-rays were involved I needed to have a light source to illuminate them and I had to have a transparent surface on which to mount them. I selected plexiglass as the surface due to its rigidity and strength. The imagery is attached to the plexiglass with acrylic gloss medium. Fluorescent light would be the light source because it is what x-ray viewers use and it has low heat output. I designed the light boxes myself. I wanted them to be lightweight so I used a frame construction with canvas sides to emit light but conceal the inside of the light boxes. The open tops and bottom allowing the light to escape is an emotional metaphor for the drama of the near death experience which I address later.

Flashback (Fig. 1) is the first painting I constructed for the series. It represents the flashback I had in the doctors office at C.S.U and the experience of when it hit me that I knew I had to make these works. The imagery includes the car, a newspaper account of the incident and my x-rays, medical records and selections from medical reports of the effects of closed head injuries.

Remembrance (Fig. 2) is the sense of all the technical information,

paperwork, doctors' reports and more x-rays. I had tons of x-rays taken of me. Every time I had to go in for a follow up appointment, new pictures were taken to compare with the old ones. I kept it black and white to express of the mundane and tedious procedure of going to the doctor - the endless waiting to get in, the waiting to get x-rays, the waiting to see if the x-rays came out all right, the retaking of some x-rays, more waiting and the pain from having to move my neck around so much.

The White Room (Fig. 3) is the simplest (image wise) of the series. Its content, though, is not. The near death experience is something that I still have trouble relating to others. At the time of the accident most people scoffed when I tried to talk about it. They thought I was "crazy." This is at a time when not much was written or even known about the near death experience. Every time I talked about being in the white light people would scatter. "I remember coming to and all I could see was white, this white light, it was like I was part of the light. This is written on the back side of the picture plane and is seen as reversed. I purposely intended it that way to express being on the other side, the other side of life. The three images of me (at that time) represent me before the event, the near death experience, and my return (the torn image).

Residual (Fig. 4) is about the lingering after effects I have from the accident. While I have over come many of the physical and psychological

obstacles, there are things I will never be able to change for they are permanent. I used a computer print out of one of my rock face paintings. This painting was done before the flashbacks started calling from my past to resolve the tragedy lingering in my subconscious. This was necessary to proceed with my life without the inner turbulence of unresolved issues affecting my future. The merging of these two approaches to my art has opened a new method of expression for me as well as a new approach to painting.

These paintings have been very cathartic for me. They led the way to knowledge, acceptance and resolution. Whoever said that “knowledge is power” was right. Just knowing what had happened to me helped end all the doubts I had. The individual therapy was probably the most helpful of all. It let me see myself in a different light and helped to show me it was all right to be who I am. It was like being lost in a strange town and finally someone showed me the way home. I want to claim it has given me closure though I know it will never be completely over for me due to the residual effects of the closed head injury. I can never forget what happened. The brain and body never forget such trauma. I can only accept and include it as who I am and try to live the rest of my life the best I can.

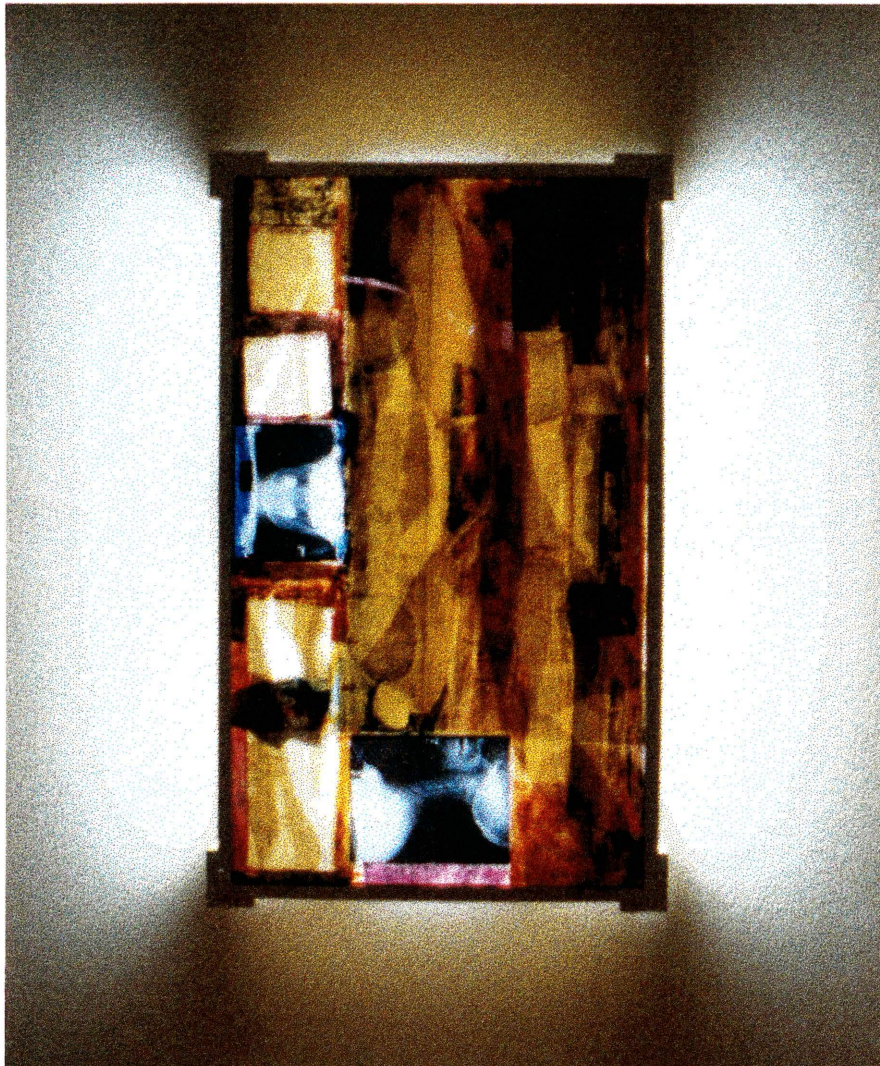


Figure 1. Flashback.

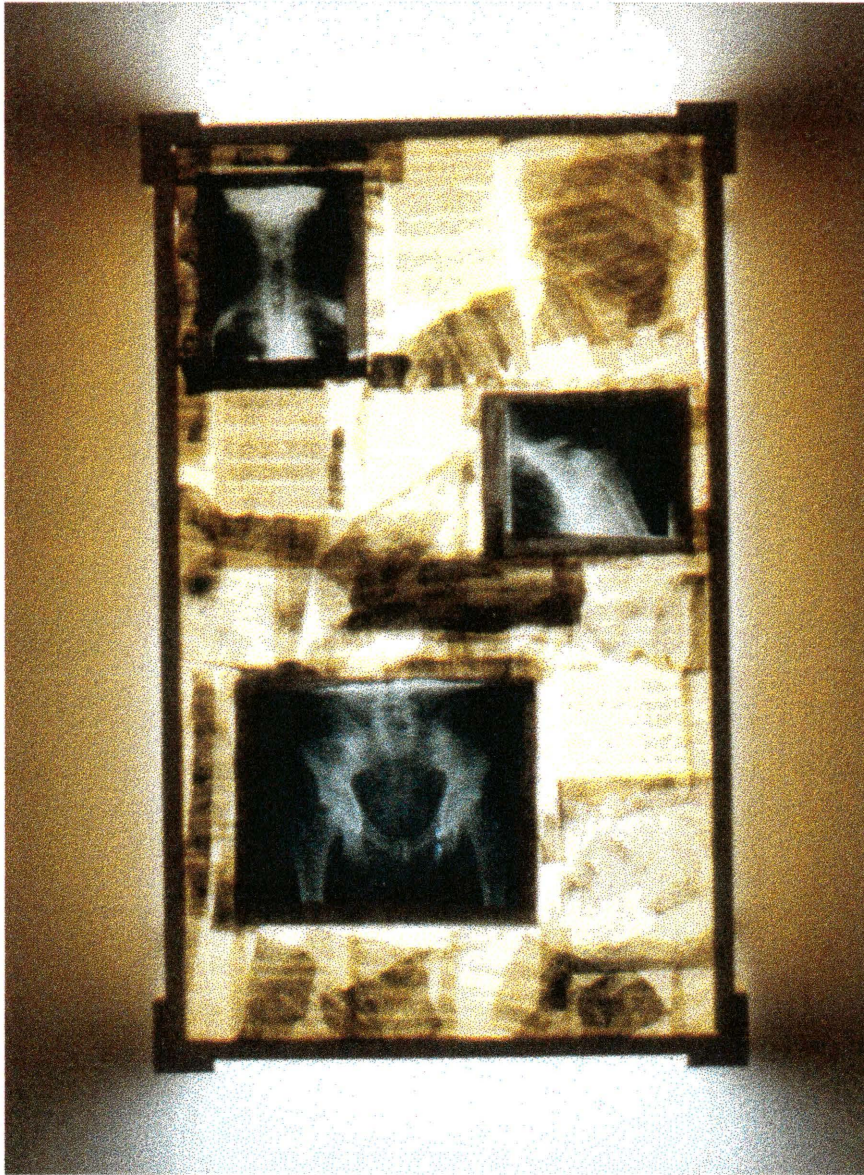


Figure 2. Remembrance.

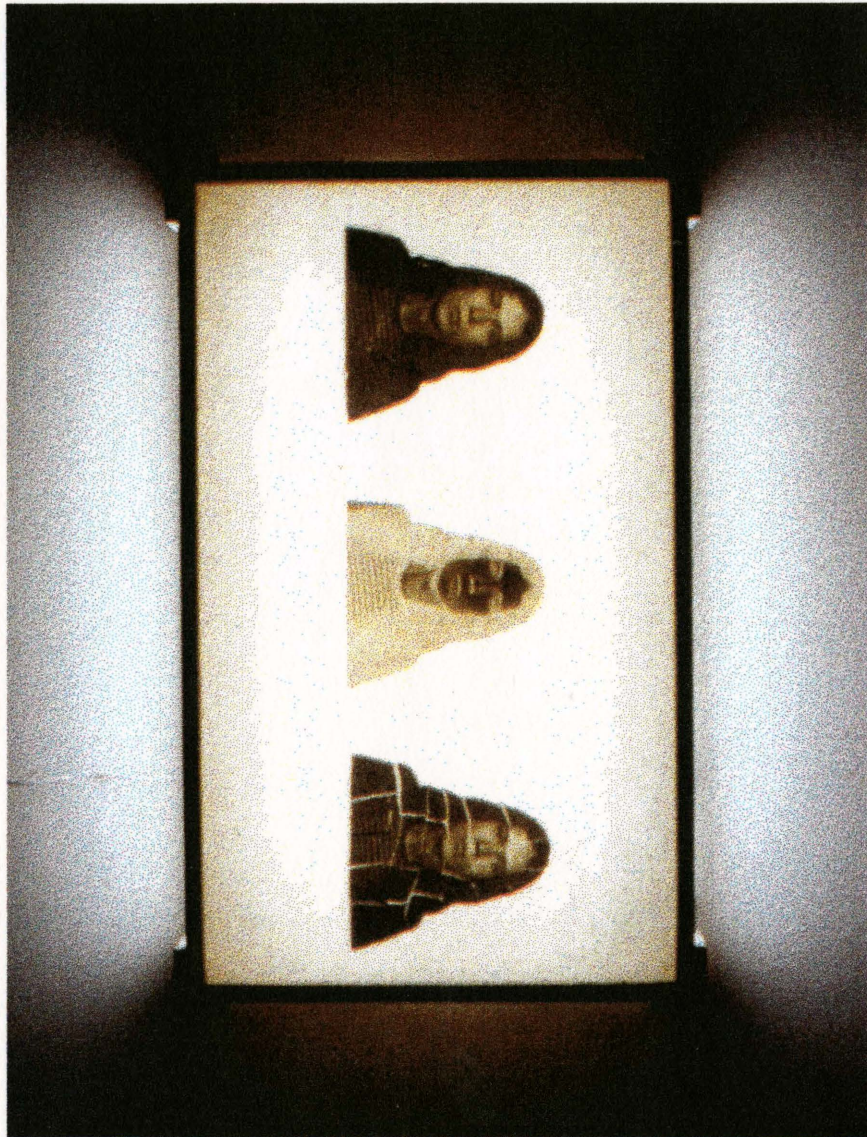


Figure 3. White Room.

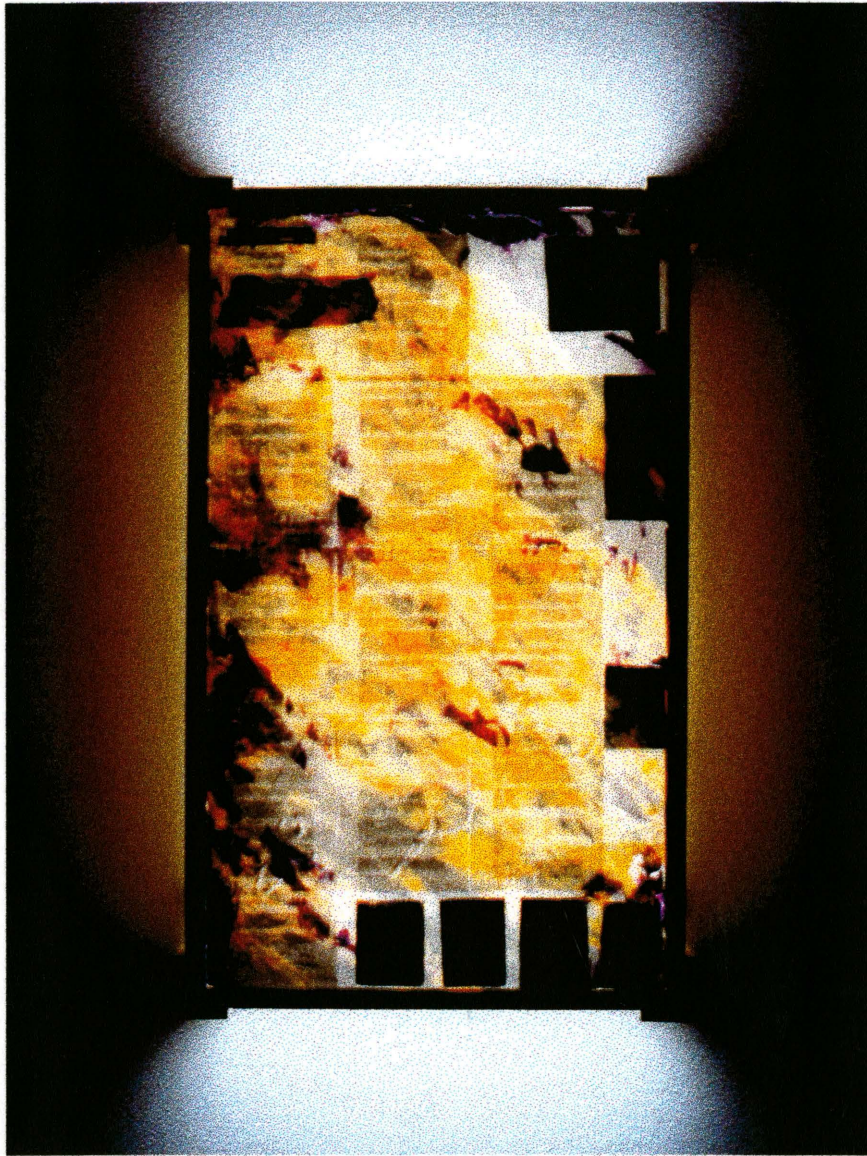


Figure 4. Residual.