

On Major and Minor Events

Franklin Ratliff

2020

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Abstract

On Major and Minor Events is made up of five large-scale charcoal drawings that examine how family, memory, and ritual shape ideology. These five drawings reference an archive of family photographs. By transforming family photographs into drawings, I reflect on the nature of memory. In three of the drawings the fenced-in backyard serves as a stage where past and present collide. I use places and experiences from my past and my family's past to create personal myths. While working on the drawings that make up *On Major and Minor Events*, I focused on recording moment-to-moment sensations. This intuitive process is a ritual through which I conjure personal myths that often challenge the cultural myths that informed my childhood.

On Major and Minor Events

On Major and Minor Events is a series of five largescale charcoal drawings. In this series I try to understand how family, memory, and ritual shape our lives. The serial nature of these five drawings is important because it allows me to collect and present a complex range of feelings simultaneously. In these drawings I use an intuitive approach to mark making to combine memories from my archive of family photographs with the complex range of feelings those memories bring about. Through this synthesis I create personal myths.

The five drawings that make up *On Major and Minor Events* are similar in terms of material and subject. They were all made using charcoal pencil, compressed charcoal, and vine charcoal on Fabriano paper. The drawings range in size from 56 inches by 40 inches to 56 inches by 110 inches. The use of mark to embody memory serves as a visual thread to connect the five drawings in the series. The language of drawing lends itself to the subject of memory. Words like trace, smudge, and erase poetically connect the action of drawing to the action of remembering.

Major Event with Horn consists of three figures and a fenced in backyard at night (Figure 1). There are two children and one adult. The two children are in the backyard dressed in costumes with triangular caps. Light emanates from the stark outline of a fire. One of the children floats in a state of panic, just above the fire. In the foreground the other child blows a horn sounding an alarm. The adult approaches from behind the fence holding a large stick. He is the reason for dismay. He wears a small wireframe house that comes out from his shoulders and connects over his head.

In *Major Event with Bonfire* there are two figures in a fenced in backyard at night (Figure 2). They are the same children in costumes with triangular caps. The fire has become an inferno, the flames reducing the wireframe house from the previous image down to a trembling skeleton of marks. One child sits cross legged holding a hand up to his forehead as a gesture of contemplation. The other child stands slightly further back in the image stretching out his arms. There is a feral grin on his face as he clutches the adult's large stick in one hand. A cat cautiously approaches the fire from the right.

The dark slats of a fence cover the bottom half of *Major Event with Fence* (Figure 3). Behind the slats a fire lights up the night. The ghostly marks of the firepit show through the fence. A flat object resembling the front plane of a house hugs the rim of light cast by the fire. In the absence of figures the object comes to life and narrates the scene's emptiness. Behind all this the suggestion of another fence fades into night.

Major Event with Air Burst consists of two figures sitting in a round crater (Figure 4). A child cradles a baby in his lap, holding the baby's face close to his own. A large wireframe house sways over their heads. The scene is lit by a strong flash of light from the left. The cataclysm is so abrupt that the marks denoting light and shadow cannot keep up. A dark bottomless haze swipes back and forth hovering in the top half of the image.

In *Major Event with Salamander* there is an elevated waterfall that empties into a natural pool (Figure 5). The waterfall divides a rock face that wraps around the image horizontally. A flurry of marks shades and softens the scene. In the pool of water there is a large salamander poking its head above the clear water. Near the creature's tail the shore appears to have been pulled up like the edge of a blanket revealing the mouth of a cave.

The five drawings in *On Major and Minor Events* reference my archive of family photographs. The oldest photographs in my archive date to the early 1900s. Through the process of transforming family photographs into drawings and paintings I reflect on the nature of memory. My series *Blood*, from 2018, serves as a foundation for my understanding of this process and the meaning it generates (Figure 6). *Blood* consists of small family portraits painted from my archive. The portraits are painted in oil on thin sheets of unprimed paper. Each portrait has two parts. There is the original portrait painted with brushes, and then there is the resulting bleed through portrait. The bleed through was made by placing a second sheet of paper underneath the top sheet while I painted. As I applied paint to the top sheet, the paint bled through onto the paper underneath.

For me, these two parts of the portrait embody the nature of memory. Borrowing from French essayist Marcel Proust, these two parts offer a “stereologic” view of past and present. Ian Farr, in the book *Memory*, provides a summary of Proust’s view of memory. He writes, “Memory in Proust’s sense designates a stereoscopic or ‘stereologic’ consciousness which sees the world simultaneously (and thus out of time) in relief” (Farr, page 19). Memory collapses time and allows us to see past and present simultaneously. This stereoscopic view of past and present is how we understand our experiences. The two parts of the portrait, seen simultaneously side by side, collapse past and present. These parts mimic the function of the photographic archive as a physical record of the past.

Because family photographs are a tangible view of the past, when we hold and look at one, we are made explicitly aware of the stereologic nature of memory. Family photographs are physical manifestations of the past that situate us in the world. French philosopher Maurice Halbwachs writes, “Each object appropriately placed in the whole recalls a way of life’ shared

by the wider realm, the objects that surround us appearing like ‘a mute and motionless society, reminders of the social group’s continuity and stability’” (Farr, page 19). Halbwachs explains the power of the objects that we place around us. As representations of continuity and stability, these objects situate us in the world. Family photographs more specifically are a manifestation of the continuity and stability of family. They are myths that make us feel like we are an extension of a familial organism.

When I use family photographs as references in my work, I have no interest in recreating a specific memory. The two drawings *Major Event with Horn* and *Major Event with Bonfire* both began as digital collages (Figure 7). These collages were made in photoshop, combining moments from several family photographs. When I made the collages, I was not recreating a specific memory, I was instead more interested in the subjective nature of memory and the process of remembering. By subjective nature of memory, I mean the feelings that shape what we remember and how we remember. Oral historian Alistair Thomson writes “that the subjectivity of memory provided clues not only about the meanings of historical experience but also about the relationships between past and present, between memory and personal identity, and between individual and collective memory” (Srigley, page 285). My collages are about these relationships.

In the collages, and in the subsequent drawings they spawned, the collision of past and present is a site of conflict. The fenced in backyard has consistently served as a container for this conflict in my work. In *Major Event with Fence* figures are stripped back to focus solely on the fenced in backyard as container. The fence itself has been boiled down to its symbolic slats. My use of the backyard as a metaphoric container is inspired by the German artist Anselm Kiefer (Figure 8). Kiefer made paintings of rafter filled attics that allude to German cultural figures of

the past. These paintings play on the idea of hiding things in the attic. Metaphorically Kiefer's attic house post World War II Germany's unresolved conflict with national pride (Kiefer). I chose the fenced in backyard because of its personal significance to me. I remember having fires in the backyard growing up. My father and I were always the only two left around the firepit at the end of the night. He would tell me stories about his childhood and about my grandparents. The fenced in backyard is where I heard the stories that make up my family's mythology. Like family photographs, my father's stories connected me to the past making me feel like the continuation of a familial organism.

The group of drawings that take place in a suburban backyard were initially inspired by Francisco Goya's painting *Witches' Flight* (Figure 9). For me Goya's witches represent a rebellion against societal homogeneity, their flight a metaphor for transcending old ideology. In my drawings the children wear costumes featuring the pointed capirote hats worn by Goya's witches, an expression of rebellion against certain elements of the ideology I inherited from my family. A key element of this ideology is what philosopher Byung-Chul Han calls achievement society. In Han's book *The Burnout Society* achievement society is characterized by "overproduction, overachievement, and overcommunication" (Han, page 5). Han insists that these motivations lead to "a crisis of gratification," whereby endless growth becomes our main goal (Han, page 38). In an achievement society there is a perpetual gap, between what you are and what you can be.

In my two drawings, *Major Event with Horn* and *Major Event with Bonfire*, I tap into this sense of dissatisfaction. The children in costumes are dissatisfied with the myth of endless growth. The wireframe house that the adult wears in *Major Event with Horn*, which is the same one seen burning in *Major Event with Bonfire*, embodies this myth. The burning of the

wireframe house is a ritual of rebellion and destruction. The old myth is destroyed to make room for a new one.

Major Event with Airburst began as an urge to express a complex sensation. I wanted an image that linked the first time that my sister and I met to the last time that we will meet. I wanted to collapse hello and goodbye into a single image. I explored the same subject previously in a small charcoal drawing, *Minor Event Over the Bend* (Figure 10). I first got the idea for this subject while reading my grandfather's written account of his time in the United States Navy during World War II. Right after the end of the war he visited his brother in the United States Air Force at Tinian Island. I tried to imagine what it would feel to finally see your brother after being separated by war. The two figures in *Major Event with Airburst* represent a connection between siblings. My grandfather's written account was also the primary inspiration for the atomic light that bombards the figures from the left of the drawing. The title of the large drawing *Major Event with Airburst* references the detonation of a nuclear weapon. Tinian Island where my grandfather visited his brother is also where the planes that delivered the atomic bombs to Hiroshima and Nagasaki took off from. The use of atomic light in my drawing connects the story of my grandfather visiting his brother to the larger story that was taking place around them.

At first the fifth drawing in my thesis project may seem like an outlier, and in some ways it is. However *Major Event with Salamander* was made in direct response to the problem of endless growth. Like the fenced in backyard, the waterfall in this drawing has personal significance to me. During my childhood, my family visited the Great Smoky Mountains at least once a year. Almost every time we visited, my father and I would hike the same trail. The

waterfall in my drawing is based on the waterfall at the end of that trail where we would rest before hiking back.

Major Event with Salamander expresses my personal vision of otium. From Latin otium roughly translates to leisure. In her text *Petrarch's Rereading of "Otium" in De "vita solitaria,"* the American scholar Julia Bondanella provides insight into Petrarch's treatise on otium. Petrarch's survey challenges "the notion that leisure must give rise to idleness, passion, or vice" (Bondanella, pages 14-15). The treatise instead promotes leisure as a necessary part of intellectual labor. Petrarch presents a virtuous leisure that relegates rest and recuperation to serve as mental preparation for intellectual labor. This perpetual cycle of mental preparation and intellectual labor reeks of the endless growth laid out by Han. There is no real sense of rest in this virtuous leisure.

Major Event with Salamander rejects the notion that leisure needs to be virtuous. It is an image of otium unburdened of any expectation of intellectual or physical labor. The waterfall is where my father and I would rest before hiking back, our preparation for the labor to come. The mythical salamander stays at the waterfall and embodies a true sense of rest. I first explored this idea in my painting *Minor Event with Otium* (Figure 11). In that painting an armless creature rests in a pool of water.

I will end by discussing in more depth the intuitive nature of my studio practice. Most of my ideas for drawings and paintings begin simply as an urge to express a feeling in relation to a memory. I already gave one example of this in the case of *Major Event with Air Burst* where in response to my grandfather's written account my initial urge was to collapse hello and goodbye into a single image. I think the British artist Francis Bacon described this urge best in an interview, "But when you're outside a tradition, as every artist is today, one can only want to

record one's own feelings about certain situations as closely to one's own nervous system as one possibly can” (Sylvester, page 3). Instead of trying to arrive at a specific image I record the moment to moment sensations that a subject inspires. This intuitive process has become a ritual through which I conjure personal myths. As I have done already, I can describe the memories and feelings that inspire these myths. However, parts of their nature are still mysterious to me. That is what excites me and draws me to them.



Figure 1 Franklin Ratliff, *Major Event with Horn*, 2019, charcoal on paper, 56"x40"



Figure 2 Franklin Ratliff, *Major Event with Bonfire*, 2019, charcoal on paper, 56"x62"



Figure 3 Franklin Ratliff, *Major Event with Fence*, 2020, charcoal on paper, 90"x56"



Figure 4 Franklin Ratliff, *Major Event with Air Burst*, 2019, charcoal on paper, 56"x48"

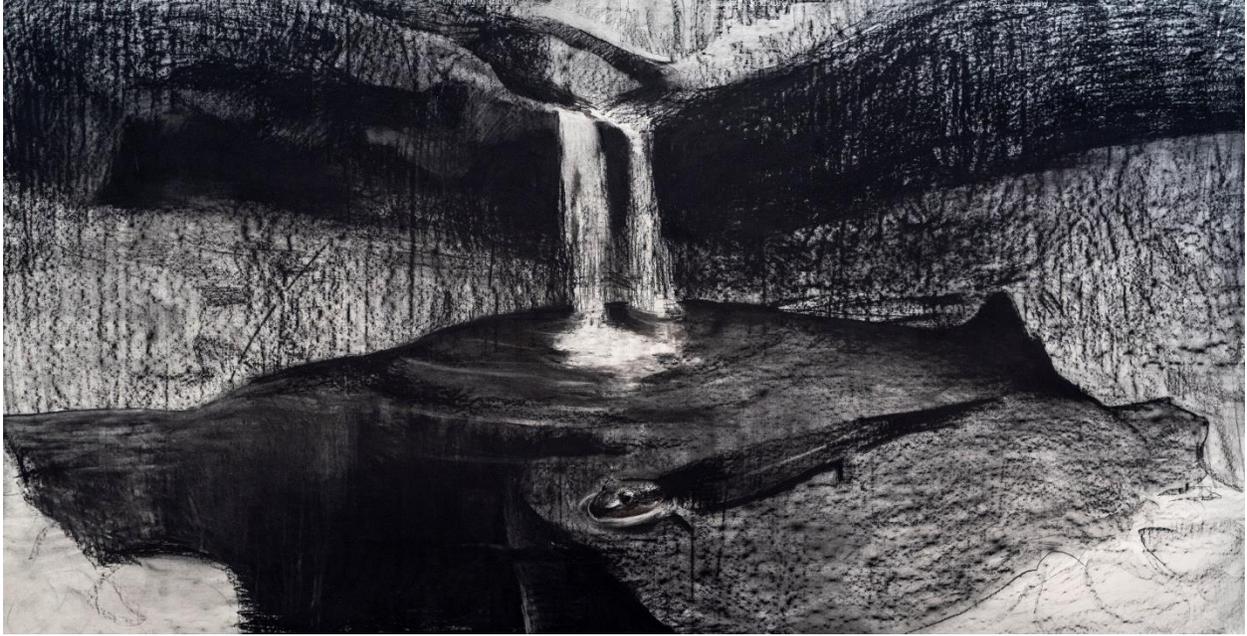


Figure 5 Franklin Ratliff, *Major Event with Salamander*, 2020, charcoal on paper, 56"x110"



Figure 6 Franklin Ratliff, *Minor Event with Smile in Uniform* from *Blood* series, 2018, oil on paper, 8"x16"



Figure 7 Franklin Ratliff, digital collage for *Major Event with Horn*, 2019, digital collage



Figure 8 Anselm Kiefer, *Parsifal I*, 1973, oil on canvas, 128''x87''

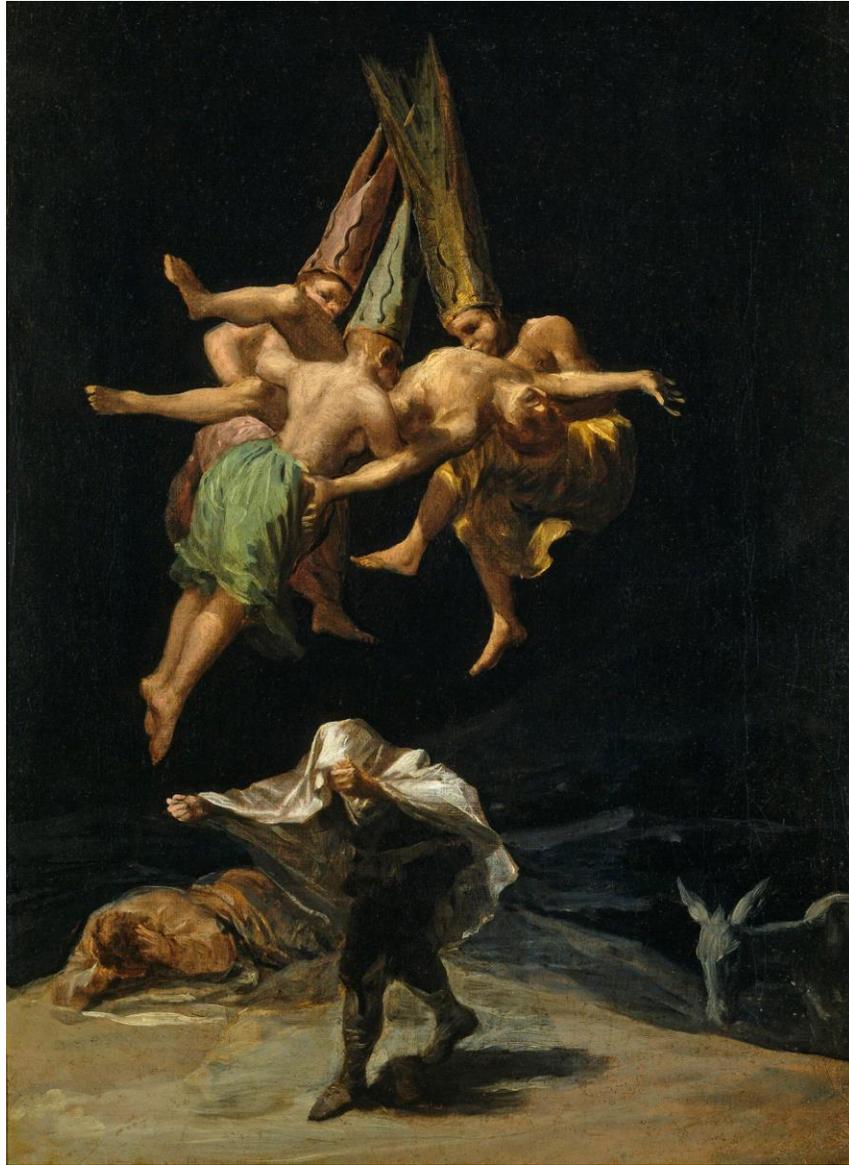


Figure 9 Francisco Goya, *Witches' Flight*, 1798, oil on canvas, 17"x12"



Figure 10 Franklin Ratliff, *Minor Event Over the Bend*, 2019, charcoal on paper, 15"x11"



Figure 11 Franklin Ratliff, *Minor Event with Otium*, 2019, oil on paper, 16x16 inches

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Biography

Franklin Ratliff was born in 1990 in Ashland, Kentucky. He grew up in Jacksonville, Florida. Ratliff received a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Painting, Drawing, and Printmaking from the University of North Florida in 2014. He received a Master of Fine Arts in Painting and Drawing from the University of Florida in 2020.