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Clutching at her memories in 'Reconsider'

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The present races from us as it occurs, becoming past. Yet, we are obsessed with the past, retrieving it, nailing it down, remembering it, owning it, often at the expense of the present.

My friend Bob calls from Boston. I remember a cafeteria, dark wood, a corner building, he says. You were there. Where was it? Milan, I offer, the lunch spot near the Ambrosiana where we ate risotto alla Milanese and creamy lasagna laced with greens. No, not there. After he hangs up, I think of Morrison's, the cafeteria in Savannah, Ga., where we had fried oysters. Or could it have been the worker's cafeteria in Yugoslavia where we ate goulash and were stared at, two Americans during the Cold War, by everyone there.

Why does it matter where we ate long ago in a cafeteria? Will it make Bob, me, happy to remember? Does memory of the past make the inconsequence of the present more bearable? Does it make it easier to tolerate the terror of existence? If we pay so little attention to the fleeting present, how will we be able to remember it later when we feel a need to recall it?

In her dreamy, elusive installation at Laumeier, Deborah Aschheim seeks to recover and hold on to the past with the passion of someone convinced that she will soon lose it.

An artist long interested in thought, perception, the function of the brain and the connections between sensations that make intelligent life possible, Aschheim has lately been focusing on memory and its loss. Realizing that there is a history of Alzheimer's disease in her family, she says, "Now I'm worried about losing my words."

The majority of the sculptures in the show — from the "Earworm" series — are elaborate constructions made to help her hold on to her words.

Aschheim, who is based in Los Angeles, makes gangly hanging sculptures that ape the look of neurons. Plastic nodes are connected by plastic tubes to suggest elaborate neural networks that often end in trumpet-like forms made from plastic funnels. The plastic is colored — blue, aquamarine or white — and lighted by LEDs. In the otherwise unlighted galleries, they seem to twinkle like a nighttime sky full of stars.

Some pieces include small video screens that play faded home movies from a distant past — a European Grand Tour to Venice, Paris, London in one case, an ordinary suburban street in another, four little girls in long black wigs dancing in yet another.

Any of the senses can trigger memory. For Proust's Marcel, it was, famously, the taste of the madeleine cookie that brought back his childhood in Combray and eventually everything that filled his massive "In Search of Lost Time," the greatest attempt to recall the past in Western literature.

Music plays that role in Aschheim's work. Aschheim gave 25 words she wanted to remember to the composer Lisa Mezzacappa who created airy cantatas based on them. Each work is accompanied by its own individual piece of music, which plays at programmed times. The songs go off apparently randomly, adding to the project's unpredictable nature.

Like any art exhibition, it is possible to walk fairly quickly through Aschheim's, but the works cast a spell that unfolds only over time. The galleries become a dreamscape of memory and forgetting. They might not be your memories, but they are someone's so they have a compelling quality. It is doubtful that these works will allow the artist to remember lost worlds of experience if she should succumb to the family disease, but the installation speaks of her bravery to confront the horrifying prospect of erasure of everything she holds dear and, for the moment, near.

The exhibition includes a number of earlier works from the "Neural Architecture" series that explore the nature of surveillance.

And it also features drawings that attempt to map associative patterns of the mind and memory. Some diagram the connections that exist in a person's life, interconnected nodes spouting shoots. One is just a simple mnemonic practice of writing down everything purchased during the previous week.

Although Aschheim is very much an artist — none of her work would function as neuroscience — her practice is informed by a serious study of biology. The seriousness of her research helps to endow her art with an equal seriousness.

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"Neural Architecture" by Deborah Aschheim is made of plastic, light, motion sensors, baby monitors, spy cameras and video.
(Miko Venzo/Laumier Sculpture Park)