

## **Deborah Aschheim**

### **Involuntary Memories: Marine Corps Air Station El Toro and the Nixon Years**

In fall 2011, the Great Park invited Deborah Aschheim to be one of the first artists in residence at the new Palm Court Arts Complex. Aschheim proposed a community centered project about memory, history, and place, because the opening of the park and arts facility marked the end of an era with the closing of the Marine Corps Air Station El Toro and the beginning of a new chapter in urban renewal for the City of Irvine. Aschheim used the park's seven-month long residency program as an opportunity to build upon her previous body of work about memory. She used the park's studio to conduct her own field research by interviewing visitors about their personal remembrances of the base, city, and county. To give the project a face and a time frame, she focused her line of inquiry on Richard Nixon, Marine Corps Air Station El Toro, and University of California at Irvine. What she hoped to learn and understand from this process was how place and history resonate with individuals and from one generation to the next.

Building upon her existing methodology and oeuvre in working with memory, Aschheim spent nearly every Sunday at the Great Park working on her drawings. When a visitor entered her studio, they would see historical photographs, reference books, and her drawings of and about Nixon, UC Irvine, and the military base. The visitor(s) would inevitably engage her in conversation and she would ask if she could record a personal story connected to one of these topics. Once she explained she was only interested in memories, not politics, the visitor would sit down and start talking. About the interview experience, Aschheim said, "I found a way to trigger the involuntary memory. It was exciting to watch the memory coming and see that they wanted to share. I was intentionally very neutral and I wouldn't share personal views. It's the most sustained period in my life where I had the most bipartisan conversations with people. The dialog had nothing to do with our convictions. As soon as you realize you're on the other side of the issue, everyone stops listening. These conversations weren't about that. The visitors knew I was really listening. We were talking about political things, but it was about what it was like to be a person moving through political times and how THEN wasn't NOW."

After interviewing the visitor, Aschheim researched the specific event the person was referring to in order to find a corresponding historical image and draw it. She transcribed the visitor's story and then paired the text with the drawing. Often times, Aschheim found discrepancies between what was described and what actually had happened. She wasn't interested in accuracy she was interested in the idiosyncratic, unreliable, and creative aspects of memory. In addition to the drawings based on personal interviews and archival research, Aschheim has made sculptures inspired by two buildings found on UC Irvine's campus and has included excerpts from unique and seldom-viewed personal home movies filmed inside the Nixon White House provided by documentary filmmakers Penny Land and Brian Frye.

The stories, drawings, sculptures and video presented in this artistic and tangential exploration, are not about an accurate historical portrayal, it is a poetic gesture about

how and what we remember and what that reveals about us as individuals and a community. The work will, no doubt, trigger your own personal stories and relationships with the development of Orange County and Richard Nixon, but it is also meant to inspire questions and conversations about how our idea of the past and future is constructed. How it constantly shifts because our brain's recall processes change our memories every time we experience them. Aschheim wants us to notice when those experiences of time travel or involuntary memories take place and not just think of them as déjà vu moments, because, in the artists' own words, "I think we are haunted by the futures that did not come to pass." The past and future are always tied to the present and the present is always in flux.

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All quotes are excerpted from an interview with the artist in her studio in Los Angeles on October 27, 2012.