

South Eastern Center for Contemporary Art  
(blog)

Thoughts on Frank Selby: *Misunderstanding*

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Salisbury, NC-based artist Frank Selby's exhibition, *Misunderstanding*, is showing at SECCA until February 17.<sup>th</sup> His painstaking attention to detail and highly naturalistic drawings copied from old press photographs are a testament to the decay of memory. This theme runs through all of his drawings and branches into other concepts on the failings of language, image, and how the two can distort the truth. On my first night in Winston-Salem I watched a documentary called *Between the Folds* (about the art and science of origami) and found that paper folding and Selby's work have analogous principles. In the film, origami is compared to making memories and impressions in paper through folding. Once folded, the paper can never go back to its original state. Similarly, Selby demonstrates that the old photographs he copies are manipulated memories that not only physically decay with time but also lose their context through language and his own manipulation (cropping and resizing) of the photograph. This process continues until the moment originally "captured" has been skewed—making a statement unintended for the original work that cannot revert to its original state.



Selby replicates old photographs with precision, including all the flaws that accumulated during the shooting and developing processes as well as the inescapable disintegration caused by time and wear. To do so is to show that a photograph is not an absolute rendering of a moment. A photograph can be posed, cropped, resized, and damaged. He further distances his drawings from their intended meanings by giving them a title that removes the photo from its original context. Selby also resizes the photographs to re-scale the origin and meditate upon the intention of the photograph.

Selby states, “Every message is perverted from its inception in language and gains more distortion through each iteration and reproduction,” which gives us a sense of what his work is truly about. A prime example of his theories about language and communication is prevalent in the drawing *stare into the lake astonished*. The photograph he draws from is an appropriated, cropped image of Civil War soldiers overlooking a battlefield. Selby re-scaled this particular image to show two soldiers, but in the original, there is a group of soldiers posed on the right side of the photo who are supposed to be the focal point. His interventions are slight, but their affect is large. Selby is shepherding change, but not through his drawing technique as he attempts to make exact replicas of these photographs. Instead, he highlights the inverse relationship of trying to know and remember a moment or image by copying it—whether by hand or eye. His work is re-documenting the moment captured in the photograph as a semblance of a memory, and it is physically deteriorating in the same way that memory fades with time. Also, the title that Selby gives the piece—*stare into the lake astonished*—gives the subjects (and the indiscernible background) a new context since in the photograph, it appears as though the figures are looking onto a battlefield. This piece exemplifies Selby’s desire to demonstrate the misleading nature of language as well as image, furthering the idea that image generates miscommunication.

Selby’s exhibition, *Misunderstanding*, was given its nomenclature because all of Selby’s works, in one way or another, are intentionally meant to be misunderstood. We are meant to misunderstand the image because he re-presents the image in such a way that ultimately subverts the concept that photography shows truth and that one can use language to create an imagined context for any image.