Memory is a funny thing. We all have memories of shared events and experiences, but not all shared memories are the same. Memories are slippery, fickle, and selective. They can haunt us, define us, or even hurt us with their absence. But most of all, memories are fragile. They fade with time, suffer from distortion and wishful thinking, and become buried under an avalanche of daily minutiae.

C. Maxx Stevens has used the fragile entity of memory as the foundation of her life’s work. It should come as no surprise, then, that her favorite materials are ephemeral and laden with the symbolism of forgotten past lives: used and discarded dollhouses, old and faded photographs, paper, horsehair, used clothing, and detritus collected at junk shops and garage sales. *House of Memory* is a demonstration of her continuing process of re-building and, in some cases, reinventing her personal memories.

Each installation in this exhibition focuses on memories that embody particular aspects of Stevens’s past. *Three Graces* is a musing on her relationships with two of her sisters, Molly and Lou. Three feminine forms, with their graceful, yet gritty, hoop skirts, represent each sister. The oldest girls in a family that included nine children in all, they are a trio that weathered the storms of growing up to raise their own families and create their own narratives. Molly is the cataloguer of family history and the symbol of family lineage—her dress is topped with a photograph of their mother and maternal grandparents. As the eldest sister, she steps regally forward, the belle of the ball and the leader. Lou is the family storyteller, her dress festooned with photographs and topped with a house form representing the family she has raised.

While the forms of Molly and Lou read as elegant ball gowns, gliding effortlessly across a stage, the form representing the artist is a stark contrast. Stevens has described this work as a dress turned inside out, the exposed awkward architecture suggesting her shyness and introversion. And yet she is bold in this depiction, a statement about her own non-traditional ideas about worth and beauty. Aggressively unconventional, Stevens often represents herself using the familiar girlhood iconography of short skirts and pigtails. This self-portrait is topped with a ring of cedar twigs,
which surround and protect two images of herself both as a child and an adult, her own temporal
twin, simultaneously in the present and the past.

After Stevens’s childhood bout with polio, which also resulted in several leg surgeries over the
years, her older sisters no doubt became her protectors, as the artist’s self-portrait—a smaller,
humble form—suggests. She’s no Cinderella, however, cowering behind her superior stepsisters,
but part of a tightly knit family unit that faces the challenges and heartaches of life together.

Likewise, the seven structures that comprise House of Memory include separate “houses” for the
artist’s father, mother, grandparents, and sisters, each house containing icons representing those
relationships and personalities (a basket, for example, for the caretaker/homemaker). Arranged
within the gallery, the placement of these structures alludes to a suburban cul-de-sac. Built with
simple garden stakes, each form is essentially a three-dimensional line drawing. Fragmented, symbolic
imagery is arranged haphazardly and illogically, as in a dream. The floor of House of Disregard, for
example, is covered with delicate glass containers arranged beneath a series of suspended metal weights
which seem to float ominously above them.

While these constructions parse the personalities and particularities that shaped Stevens’s
childhood, Cultural Landscape maps the places that ground her: her ancestral home in Oklahoma
and her childhood home in Kansas. Her recollections of growing up in a multi-tribal community
outside of Wichita are sepia-toned and idealistic. Everyone knew each other and, from a child’s
perspective at least, it was a quaint suburban bliss that maybe only exists in selective memories,
episodes of contemporaneous sit-coms, or as the too-perfect backdrop in episodes of the Twilight Zone.

Stevens represents this time and place with a row of nearly identical 1950s-era metal dollhouses,
wrapped and preserved as if in amber. But these symbols of childhood innocence and domestic play
have a dark edge to them; their corners are bent, the paint is worn, the rooms are void of dolls or
toy furniture, and the girls who played with them long gone. Behind the dollhouses, unsettling the
scene further, distorted, silent video images glance across a softly moving curtained wall. Against
the opposite wall, Cultural Landscape embodies Stevens’s memories and associations with Oklahoma,
past and present, through family photos and cultural references such as horsehair braids; the book
constructions and blackboards refer to her current role as an educator.

Stevens considers her work in printmaking—such as ID or Iron Lung—to be only a small part of
her oeuvre, but she still makes the process her own. Each work is multi-layered and sculptural,
containing found objects, scraps of organic matter, and layers upon layers of crinkled paper
held together with glue, like matted masses of old plastic shopping bags blown into the corner of
a parking lot. Fragments of personal symbols abound: the crow, the bird cage, the girl’s dress,
and the pair of lungs. Some of these symbols can be taken quite literally; as a child, Stevens spent
time in an iron lung, for example. Other images are more nebulous. Is the empty cage about
confinement or freedom?

Throughout this exhibition, fragments of the artist’s memories, icons of girlhood, and personal
symbols present themselves like the results of an excavation. They are some of the many messy
fragments that make a life; they are not perfectly constructed or finished, but their rough edges
are a testament to survival. Stevens has constructed a visually dense and intriguing glimpse into
her world, revealing specific people in her past as well as the building blocks of her identity. While
these stories are very much alive in presentation and movement, they are riddled with reminders of
decay and vulnerability. The dollhouses rust beneath thin, yellowing membranes, and the paper in
her sculptural and print work already seems aged. Hers is highly personal work, but, if anything, it
reminds us of the fragility and preciousness of the memories that make each of us who we are.

—Kathleen Ash-Milby (Navajo) is an associate curator of contemporary art at the
home is where the heart is
Janet Dees

C. Maxx Stevens mines the landscape of cultural and personal memories to create works of art that bridge the past and present. In her installations, sculptures, and prints, she culls together symbols and artifacts representing her immediate family, the extended family of her tribe, and the pan-Indian community. While her works are imbued with a sense of longing, they are not stuck in the past. They underscore the importance of maintaining family and cultural traditions, and of affirming self-identity.

Stevens’s art is animated by a personal iconography of recurring materials and symbols, including horsehair, baskets, family photos, the crow, the form of the book, and the structure of the house. She considers herself a teller of “visual stories”—stories that are evocative and poetic rather than directly narrative. It is possible to understand the reverence and remembrance embodied in Stevens’s works without knowing the details that each element in a piece may conjure for her.

A constellation of works that take the shape of houses forms the core of the exhibition House of Memory. For Stevens, the house refers to both physical and metaphorical places, with this series serving as loci for memories and ideas pertaining to individuals in her life. Dad’s House is constructed of materials that invoke the artist’s father. A man’s jacket hangs in the center of a wire-frame structure that resembles a house. Covered in crow feathers, the jacket is placed in front of a curtain embroidered with images of crows. The crow represents both a messenger and an observer, a reminder to reconnect to the knowledge of her ancestors and her own past. Stevens’s father, who died several years ago, was a family storyteller whose words connected the past to the present. Scattered about the floor of Dad’s House are balls of horsehair. Found in several of the artist’s works, horsehair alludes to connections with the animal and spirit worlds. Its presence here may suggest the permeability between the human, animal, and spirit realms.

A single woven basket forms the focal point of Mum’s House. An open umbrella attached to the ceiling of the house mirrors the shape of the basket, which is directly beneath it. The ground is covered with blood-red felt. Stevens is a member of a matrilineal society, and this work emphasizes
the importance of the artist’s mother specifically and women in Seminole and Muscogee societies more generally. The basket, womb–like, symbolizes the source of life, the root from which all generations spring. The ground covering evokes multiple meanings related to blood, including the idea of bloodlines and lineage.

*House of Transitions* concerns the artist herself. Within this house, a plastic crow is anchored to the center of a record player that is enclosed in a birdcage. A miniature double-sided portrait of the artist is attached to the top of the birdcage, and dangles in front of the crow’s face. On one side of the portrait, the artist is depicted in traditional Seminole attire, while on the other, she wears what she calls her “normal clothing,” or the type of outfit common to her work as a college professor and professional artist. The rotation of the turntable causes the crow’s beak constantly to flip the double-sided portrait, favoring one side and then the other, creating something like a dance that the artist performs, balancing between her roles in her family and community and as an educator and artist. The birdcage functions as a house within a house, keeping things in and keeping things out, creating limitations as it serves as a source of protection. For the artist, this is a metaphor for an aspect of her personality. A shy and reserved person, Stevens carefully negotiates the boundary between the private and public; she has stated that the birdcage is symbolic of her “feelings of containment both physically and emotionally.”

Stevens comes from a family of nine children, seven of whom are girls. Her relationship with her sisters is a central aspect of her life and the subject of *Sister’s House* and *Three Graces*, both in this exhibition, as well as other works. The number seven also appears frequently, an allusion to the artist and her six sisters. In *Sister’s House*, paper dresses stand in for each of the seven sisters. The dress representing Stevens is front and center, the others gathered behind it. As in the self–portrait photographs featured in *House of Transitions*, the sartorial choices made here are not arbitrary but symbolic, with each dress modeled after one worn by each sister during a particular stage of her life, and associated with the artist’s specific memories. In *Three Graces*, the focus falls on the three oldest sisters in the family—Molly, Lou, and Maxx. As the oldest sisters within a matrilineal family structure, they are the ones who gather to discuss issues related to the family and serve as the keepers of tradition. In this work, the forms of houses, baskets, and dresses, with their attendant symbolism, converge to represent the personalities and character traits of each of the sisters.
In the works discussed above, the artist constructed house–like armatures to contain and invoke the lives of specific people. In her new two-part installation *Cultural Landscape*, Stevens uses real dollhouses to bring to life the memory of two places she spent formative years of her life: Kansas and Oklahoma. This work relates to the physical as well as the psychological geographies associated with these places. It represents the intersection of the past and present, and the specific culture of the artist’s homeland in Oklahoma with the pan-Native milieu of Kansas, the home of her upbringing. Stevens was born in Wewoka, Oklahoma, but grew up in the 1950s and 1960s in Wichita, Kansas. Her family lived in an area of Wichita called Planeview, a community originally built to house workers at airplane manufacturing plants during World War II. The Kansas side of *Cultural Landscape* evokes the architectural uniformity of that environment through the repetitive use of similar doll houses, procured by the artist on online auction sites and at thrift stores. Each house is perched on an individual stand, giving them a sentinel–like quality that is counteracted by the gauzy and shellacked fabric in which they are draped. The light emanating from within each house lends a haunting quality that suggests the nature of memory itself.

The Oklahoma side of *Cultural Landscape* consists of four wooden stands that serve as cradles for four open books. Draped across the books is a long, blank scroll of paper. The material is meant to speak for itself. Like the house, the book is an important recurring form in Stevens’s oeuvre, and also serves as a container for memories.

Whether contained within a book or a house, stories are the primary concern of Stevens’s work. She transforms memories into substantive materials, making her stories new and affirming connections to her community, her family, and herself. The themes she explores, however, resonate far beyond the specificity of her experiences.

—Janet Dees is assistant curator at SITE Santa Fe, a contemporary art museum in New Mexico.

**select references**


Sculptor and installation artist C.Maxx Stevens (Seminole/Muscogee Nation of Oklahoma) was born in 1951 in Wewoka, Oklahoma, and raised in Wichita, Kansas. She holds an associate's degree from Haskell Indian Junior College, a BA from Wichita State University, and an MFA from Indiana University. Currently an assistant professor of art at the University of Colorado in Boulder, Stevens has taught at the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA), the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and other institutions, and has served as the academic dean in the Center for Arts and Cultural Studies at the IAIA. Stevens received the Visual Artist Award from the Andrea Frank Foundation in 2000, and in 2005 was honored with an Eiteljorg Fellowship for Native American Fine Art.
EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Artwork</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Material &amp; Dimensions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dad’s House, 2012</td>
<td></td>
<td>Horsehair, feathers, cotton cloth, garden stakes 9' × 3' × 6'</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mum’s House, 2012</td>
<td></td>
<td>Cloth, wicker, horsehair, garden stakes 9' × 4' × 6'</td>
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<tr>
<td>House of Transitions, 2012</td>
<td></td>
<td>Found objects, garden stakes 7 ½' × 3' × 3'</td>
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<td>House of Disregard, 2012</td>
<td></td>
<td>Found objects, garden stakes 8' × 3' × 3'</td>
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<tr>
<td>House of Grand, 2012</td>
<td></td>
<td>Found objects, garden stakes 9' × 6' × 3 ½'</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sister’s House, 2012</td>
<td></td>
<td>Found objects, garden stakes, mixed media 8 ½' × 6' × 3'</td>
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<tr>
<td>Four Directions House, 2012</td>
<td></td>
<td>Garden stakes, mixed media 8 ½' × 6' × 3'</td>
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<td>Three Graces, 2004</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mixed-media installation  Dimensions variable</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cultural Landscape, 2012</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mixed-media installation with found objects and video projection Dimensions variable</td>
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<td>Ruffle Memories, 2007</td>
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<td>Edition 14/20  Digital prints, tracing paper 20” × 15”</td>
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<td>Crow Warning I, 2009</td>
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<td>Crow Warning II, 2009</td>
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<td>Transfer relief, tracing paper, ink, Sobo glue 30” × 22”</td>
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<td>Boeing Park Day, 2010</td>
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<td>In the Flower Bed, 2011</td>
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<td>Relief print on paper, layered parchment, flex glue 27” × 18”</td>
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<td>Two Things with Mum, 2012</td>
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<td>Monoprint, digital prints, mixed media 22” × 30”</td>
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<td>ID, 2012</td>
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<td>Parchment paper, digital prints, leaves, flex glue 26” × 22”</td>
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<td>Caw and Lung, 2012</td>
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<td>Monotype on paper, dress patterns, flex glue 30 ½” × 22 ¼”</td>
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<td>Safe House, 2012</td>
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<td>Monotype on paper, dress patterns, flex glue 27” × 18”</td>
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<td>Iron Lung, 2012</td>
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<td>Collagraghic and digital print, tracing paper, flex glue, metal frame 27 ½” × 19”</td>
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The artist extends special thanks to Lou Anna Stevens.