

ABSTRACT

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WAKE UP, WE'RE NOT ASLEEP

Matthew Hunt Robertson, Master of Fine Arts in
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of Art

Wake Up, We're Not Asleep is an exhibition of painted images and installations that explore the nature of memory. The following is an explanation of the inspiration and creative process that produced the work, as well as a description of the pieces themselves.

WAKE UP, WE'RE NOT ASLEEP

by

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Dedication

To those who inspired the work, but who aren't here to see it.

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Hello, There's No Escape

‘There is no escape from yesterday because yesterday has deformed us or been deformed by us.’ - Samuel Beckett

What is the nature of memory? Beyond its function of storing, retaining and recalling information, what role does it play in our lives? Since antiquity, artists and philosophers have sought to understand this essential yet beguiling mental faculty of ours. In recent years, neurobiologists and cognitive scientists have developed more refined research, data and technological instruments, but memory's contours and mechanics remain a mystery. What is known, with certainty, is that while memory plays an important role in the structuring and maintenance of an individual's identity, it is also illusory, unreliable and susceptible to corruption.

I am fascinated with memory's imperfections; the frequent and involuntary envisioning of past traumas, the fractured and incomplete quality of our recollections and the misapprehension of one's past. Developing a visual language to depict these qualities of remembrance is the focus of my recent work. *Wake Up, We're Not Asleep* is an exhibition of paintings and installations that explore, through autobiographical investigation, three principal faults of memory: rumination, transience and malleability. *Labyrinth*, an installation of hanging paintings that form a mazelike space through which the viewer must navigate, uses repetition and the distortion of imagery to mirror the confusing and cyclical characteristics of involuntary autobiographical memory. *Lighthouse* employs backlit paintings and a looping dimmer to examine the phenomena of memory loss. *I Think It's Somewhere in Here* is an installation of three-dimensional

objects and painted images that touches upon the fallibility of memory, and the idea that every time we recall a past experience, the process of recollection might permanently alter our memories. Through these three works I explore some of memory's most common and perplexing deficiencies.

A Mirror, a Lens or a Projection?

‘Everything is autobiographical, and everything is a portrait, even if it’s a chair.’, once quipped the painter Lucian Freud. The mining of autobiographical material as source for one’s work is a common and longtime practice amongst artists, especially those involved in the investigation of memory. Because I’m interested in exploring the phenomena of episodic memory, which is the storage and recollection of past personal experiences, it makes sense that I exploit my own history as a means of examining memory’s characteristics.

There’s a multidimensionality that occurs when a past event is superimposed on the present, an experience the author Virginia Woolf explores with great sensitivity in her writing. Woolf’s own experiences growing up in a large family with seven siblings, and the loss of her mother to illness when she was 13, had a deep impact on the young artist’s psyche; the echoes of her past would subsequently reverberate throughout much of her work. She described her experience of reality as ‘the present...backed by the past.’ According to Suzanne Nalbatian in her book *Memory in Literature*, Woolf’s ‘memory process integrates the past and present in the search for the definition of selfhood.’ For Woolf, the past was always implicit, like a river’s depths moving below the surface of the present moment.

The death of Woolf’s mother deeply marked the artist. Woolf performed a resurrection of sorts by repeatedly modeling a number of her fictional characters after her mother. *The Voyage Out*, *Jacob’s Room* and *To the Lighthouse* are three novels containing characters constructed from components of who Woolf thought her mother to

be. ‘There is the memory, but there is nothing to check that memory by; nothing to bring it to ground with... the elements of her character.... are formed in twilight.’.

Here, Woolf touches upon the ephemeral quality of memory, specifically those from childhood. Even though the memories of her mother were nebulous, she was compelled to reach back into the haze of her past to retrieve qualities from the recollection of her mother for the purposes of her artistic practice. I’ve employed a similar strategy of inspecting and harvesting information from my autobiography to help create the work exhibited in *Wake Up, We’re Not Asleep*.

Many of Woolf’s works of fiction are meditations on family, domesticity, memory and time, and it’s clear that her writing benefited from her utilization of her history. Whether she was compelled to weave her autobiography into the fabric of her stories because she was fixated on her past, or she chose to for the sake of authenticity, Woolf’s contributions to the canon of 20th century literature is undisputed.

The Friendliest Ghost I Know

‘There is no present or future, only the past, happening over and over again.’

Eugene O’Neill

In Daniel Schacter’s *The Seven Sins of Memory*, the author identifies the sin of persistence as one of memory’s seven primary flaws. “Experiences that we remember intrusively, despite desperately wanting to banish them from our minds, are closely linked to, and sometimes threaten, our perceptions of who we are and who we would like to be.” It seems that emotion and memory are inextricably conjoined. Emotional events are recalled with more regularity and lucidity than more neutral, or banal experiences. Traumatic events tend to be charged with strong negative emotions, causing these memories to be indelibly scored onto the surface of the psyche, its contours thrown into sharp relief. Such memories are likely to be revisited with more regularity, and those recollections will be experienced with greater intensity than memories originating from less emotionally charged events. Similar to how one might obsessively inspect a loose tooth with their tongue, the mind is involuntarily drawn to replay these events of heightened emotion. A reinforcing loop can grow from such conditions, leading the individual into a habit of obsessive thought, or toxic rumination.

When I was 10 years old my brother Cap was killed in a car accident. The death of my brother has been one of the most impactful events in my life, and, comparable to Woolf’s repeated investigation of her mother through characters in her novels, the focus of much of my creative work has been informed by, or deals directly with the loss of my brother and the impact his death has had on my family.

Throughout the course of my studies in graduate school, I've made a number of works that dealt with memory in general, and more specifically my experience with rumination and the relationship between trauma and memory. A painting made exploring my memory of my brother is *The Friendliest Ghost I Know*. Referencing an old family photo, the three paneled painting depicts a headless, handless and footless body wearing red swim trunks floating in a turquoise blue space, beside two smaller panels, one of which is composed entirely of river rocks, and the other a chalk-like gestural mark on a green-black background similar to a chalk board. This was one of my first images where I worked with a fractured, abbreviated human form; a representation of the effects of trauma on the individual, as well as the fragmented quality of memory.

In the painting *This Raft of Ours (Devours)*, I continued to explore the use of the dismembered human form as a symbol to represent trauma and memory. The patchwork of disjointed body parts, all sourced from the same reference, tumble about the picture plane chaotically. The repeated use of the same figure throughout the painting relates to the phenomena of rumination, or toxic brooding; a coping mechanism that sometimes develops in response to traumatic experiences in childhood, where the individual compulsively, and repeatedly replays negative emotional events in their mind.



Figure 1 Robertson, Matthew. *The Friendliest Ghost I Know*. 2017. 48" x 60". Oil and chalk on panel



Figure 2 Robertson, Matthew. *This Raft of Ours (Devours)*. 2018. 71.5" x 96". Oil and chalk on panel.

The use of a repeated motif as a means to describe the development of obsessive thought processes born from traumatic events continued in my animation, *A Not So Distant Episode*. The multi-channel video instillation was composed of four looping animations displayed next to one another in a grid. One of the channels displays a sequence of fifteen 9"x11" oil paintings depicting the frontal view of a yellow house, each painting slightly different from the next, looping in an endless staccato of abrupt and jarring cuts as the animation progresses from frame to frame.

My personal experience with rumination as well as trauma's impact on memory has been the inspiration for and the focus of much of my recent work. Similar to Woolf's relationship with memory and her incorporation of her past into her artistic practice, I place my own experience of reminiscence under the scope of creative inquiry to illuminate facets of memory that are personal as well as universal.



Figure 3 Robertson, Matthew. From *A Distant Episode*. 2019. 9" x 12". Oil on paper.

The House

In his seminal work *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard describes the childhood home as being ‘our first universe’. He develops a form of examination that intertwines psychoanalysis, phenomenology and poetics which he names ‘Topoanalysis’, and defines as being ‘the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives.’. To Bachelard, ‘a house that has been experienced is not an inert box. Inhabited space transcends geometrical space.’ There is an inherent poetic charge to the childhood home, according to Bachelard. The memories of our homes from early childhood have been engraved into our psyches and made permanent. The analysis of the phenomena of memory is an integral component in Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space*, and he speaks of memory as possessing an inherent geographical characteristic. The space in which the memory was created is more impactful than its temporal placement in the individual’s timeline. The clarity of a memory and our ability to retrieve it relies more on our ability to conjure in our mind the space in which the incident occurred than our ability to place a date on the experience. I employ references residential architecture and commonplace domestic objects not only as a way to describe the particular space and props of my memories, but also as a means of connecting with the viewer. I agree with Bachelard that there is a dreamlike quality to the memories of our childhood home, and the painted imagery displayed in *Labyrinth*’s curtains embody a chimerical quality. A lamp, chairs, scissors, lifejackets and window frames; objects of domestic banality obfuscated, blurred, superimposed and

disappearing behind layers of oiled paper, mirroring the degenerative and illusory aspects of memory.

The period of time to which I refer in this particular body of work is of my early childhood, roughly between the ages of 5 and 11. According to Bachelard, the phenomenological characteristics of the child's experience is closer to that of a dream than of the conscious awareness of a wakeful adult. If the lens through which the child perceives the world distorts reality in such a way that their experiences tend toward the dreamlike, then the memories themselves would display such a quality. The childhood home is poetically charged because the author of its memories, the one who bore witness to that space, perceived the world in such a way. When Bachelard writes 'We bring our lairs with us.', he's not only identifying the reality that we carry the memories of our past experiences with us wherever we go, he's touching upon the idea that these memories have the potential to continuously influence how we perceive the world.

Labyrinth

‘What haunts is the inaccessible which one cannot rid oneself of, what one does not find and what, because of that, does not allow one to avoid... The ungraspable is what one does not escape.’. Maurice Blanchot

The myth of Theseus has resonated with me since early childhood. Perhaps it has something to do with that image of the minotaur in my brother’s illustrated book of Greek myths that I remember fixating on as a child. Burned into my mind’s eye, the artist’s watercolor painting depicted the moment just before Theseus drove a curved bull’s horn through the heart of that towering minotaur as it charged at him. While it was that fantastic image that originally captured my curiosity, it’s the metaphorical richness of the story which has kept me interested over the years. The myth of Theseus and the minotaur is a sprawling, tangled mess of a Greek melodrama, chock full of greed, hubris, lust, delusion and the malicious intervention of a wrathful god. It’s the symbolism of the labyrinth and the minotaur that I would like to isolate and examine in juxtaposition to my investigation of memory. According to the legend, Daedalus built the labyrinth beneath the palace of the tyrannical King Minos to house the king’s monstrous, flesh eating stepchild, the minotaur. The Labyrinth is commonly accepted as symbolizing the subconscious mind while the minotaur represents our inner struggles that reside there. For the sake



Figure 11 Robertson, Matthew. Labyrinth. 2020. Dimensions varied. Oil, paper, wood, wire.

of this piece, I've reinterpreted the myth and used it as a vehicle to examine the subject of memory. Daedalus' maze becomes the illusory and disorienting nature of memory, and the minotaur assumes the role of the untrained mind, cast into memory's labyrinth to constantly patrol its corridors.

While Daedalus' mythical labyrinth was most likely carved from stone, the hanging curtains of *Labyrinth* shift and turn as viewers navigate the space between the oiled paper, mimicking the ephemeral and amorphous quality of memory. The decision to work on oiled paper was born from an accidental discovery that I stumbled upon in the studio. I often use paper as a support for studies and warm-ups, and it was in the process of painting on a sheet of drawing paper that I realized that a thin coat of linseed oil will transform opaque paper into a translucent surface. By layering paintings made on this support, I discovered that I could create an image that exhibited qualities of both movement and the passage of time. The image on the uppermost layer closest to the viewer is clear and unobstructed, the images beneath are obscured, incrementally becoming more and more faint the further they recede from the surface. I began to experiment with layering paintings of still images harvested from a digitized reel of super-8mm footage that I have of my older siblings playing in the sun. The resulting pieces exhibited characteristics of stop-motion photographs superimposed on top of one another. These original works were made on 9"x11" sheets of paper and became a series for a piece titled *Unknown Knowns* which was exhibited in the group show *Residuum* at the STAMP Gallery at UMD College Park in the spring of 2019. I continued to experiment working with oiled paper and began to explore what happens when light is passed through the material.



Figure 4 Robertson, Matthew. From Unknown Knowns. 2019. 9" x 12". Oil on paper.

After 4-6 weeks of curing, the linseed oiled paper begins to develop a yellow hue and wax like texture to its surface. I gradually increased the scale of the sheets of oiled paper that I was working with and began hanging the paper from the ceiling to allow the overhead lights in my studio to illuminate the paintings. Once I began to hang the paper from the ceiling of my studio it wasn't long before I realized the potential for creating an interactive space through which the viewers would be able to navigate. A corridor of translucent walls and shifting images, a maze of memory.

The crown molding along the top of each of the curtains, functions both as a practical means of hanging and sandwiching the individual sheets of paper together, as well as an opportunity to reference the motif of domesticity and the home. To create the molding for this piece, I worked with 4'x8' sheets of ½" MDF which I cut into 5' lengths of various widths. I then used a router to carve different profiles into the lengths of MDF which I then glued together to form the layered molding. Finally, I painted the molding a color to match the general value and hue of the oiled paper.

As the viewer makes their way through *Labyrinth's* hanging curtains, they're confronted with images that are distorted and blurred, a reflection of the inherent inaccuracy of memory's representation of the past. Images are repeated in a number of the curtains, a reference to the mind's tendency to fixate on past experiences, especially those born from trauma. The imagery depicted within each individual curtain is repeated and overlapped in such a way to depict a sense of movement and the passage of time; a portrayal of the transitory nature of memory. The network of hanging curtains form a maze of warped and shifting images through which the viewer must navigate. Similar to the imprisoned minotaur, confined within the



Figure 5 Robertson, Matthew. In-progress photo of *Labyrinth*. 2019.



Figure 9 Robertson, Matthew. In-progress photo of *Labyrinth*. 2019



Figure 10 Robertson, Matthew. *Labyrinth*. 2020. Dimensions varied. Oil, paper, wood, wire.

passageways of Daedalus' subterranean complex; *Labyrinth* places the viewer in the role of a mind lost in reminiscence, forced to meander through memory's corridors in an endless maze of a reimagined past.



Figure 7 Robertson, Matthew. Labyrinth. 2020. Dimensions varied. Oil, paper, wood, wire



Figure 6 Robertson, Matthew. Labyrinth. 2020. Dimensions varied. Oil, paper, wood, wire.



Figure 8 Robertson, Matthew. Labyrinth. 2020. Dimensions varied. Oil, paper, wood, wire

Don't Forget to Leave the Light On

The river Lethe, in Greek mythology, was one of the five rivers that flowed through the underworld of Hades. Known also as the Ameles potamos, or, river of un-mindfulness, it was necessary for the shades of the dead to drink of the river in order to forget their past earthly lives before being allowed to reincarnate into their next. Named after Lethe, the goddess of forgetfulness, this ancient myth is evidence of our awareness of and attempt to explain or grapple with the transience and impermanence of memory.

My continued exploration of working with oiled paper and the optical phenomena that occurs when light passes through layers of the paper with images painted on them led me to experiment with backlighting. I originally built a small lightbox made from a pine board frame, two sheets of plexiglass (one frosted), a birch panel and a strip of LEDs. I found that I was able to arrange the layers of paintings in such a way that, when the LEDs weren't illuminated, only the uppermost image was visible while the subsequent images weren't able to be seen. It was only when the LEDs were turned on that the succeeding images became noticeable. The symbolism of the layered paintings alternating between visibility and concealment seemed to correspond with my other works. I decided to explore developing a lighting system that would allow me to employ a prolonged dimming cycle with the frequency of minutes, so that the shifting of the LEDs luminosity would be barely discernable. In order to accomplish the slow fade that I wanted for this piece, I used an Arduino board to control the LEDs in the lightbox.



Figure 11 Robertson, Matthew. *On the Beach*. 2019. 9" x 12". Oil, paper, lightbox.



Figure 12 Robertson, Matthew. In-progress photo of *Lighthouse*. 2020.

For the piece *Lighthouse*, I employed the same design that I had for my initial lightbox but increased the scale. I worked with 1"x4" lengths of pine and ¼" sheets of birch plywood to create the frame. I covered the interior portion of the birch panel with reflective, aluminum tape to maximize the luminosity of the LEDs. I cut 10 lengths of LED strips and affixed them to the aluminum taped panel and soldered them together. The painted images are sandwiched between two sheets of plexiglass, and I sanded and applied layers of matte medium to the plexiglass that faces the LEDs to help diffuse the light emitting from the pixels. The images that I used for this piece are painted on either oiled paper, or sheets of tracing paper. The amount of light allowed through the images was determined by how transparent or opaque my application of the paint was, and I was able to control clarity of the subsequent images by managing how many layers of oiled paper or tracing paper were placed in front of them. Once activated, the time it takes for the LEDs to complete a single cycle, moving from zero light emission to full brightness and back to zero again is three minutes. When the LEDs aren't illuminated, the viewer is only able to see the uppermost painted image, and as the LEDs gradually illuminate, the hidden images slowly become noticeable. At the apex of the cycle, when the LEDs are at their maximum illumination, all of the layered images are clearly discernable.

Lighthouse explores the transient nature of memory and the progressive diminishing of our personal histories over time. The barely distinguishable fade of *Lighthouse's* LEDs mimics the slow deterioration of memory over the course of one's life. This piece also touches upon the subterranean quality of memory, the veritable



Figure 13 Robertson, Matthew. *Lighthouse*. 2020. Oil, paper, lightbox.



Figure 14 Robertson, Matthew. From *Lighthouse*. 2020. Oil, paper, lightbox.

buried cities of forgotten, yet still present memories that exist within us. Traces of these forgotten experiences coalesce unexpectedly from time to time and come into focus, reminding us of the ungovernable nature of memory.

I Think It's Somewhere in Here

‘...remembering is a form of phantasying in which relations to internal objects are continually worked over and revised.’ – Sigmund Freud

Each time we revisit a past experience, there's a chance that the act of remembrance will alter our memory. When we first create a memory, it takes the brain some time to successfully store the information, this process is called consolidation. During the period of time between when the experience occurs and when the memory is successfully stored, the information is malleable and susceptible to distortion. Every time we subsequently recall that memory, it has to go through a new process of consolidation; and it is during this period when new information can be introduced to interfere with old information and the memory can be altered. Similar to a game of ‘Telephone’, where a message is whispered amongst a group of people, from one person to the next, and inevitably, by the time the last person in the group has received the message it has been altered in the process.

During the excavation process of an archaeological dig, there are four distinct stages of assessment that are to be followed; background study, field survey, site specific assessment and mitigation. The mitigation stage refers to the steps taken by the archaeologists to reduce any physical impacts that the excavation may have on the archaeological data. It would be impossible as well as impractical to exercise such care when recalling a past experience, the mind moves just too swiftly. In a way, childhood memories are similar to the ruins of ancient civilizations; each individual assumes the role of an inquisitive archaeologist, sifting through the remnants of their



Figure 15 Robertson, Matthew. *I Think It's Somewhere in Here*. 2020. Oil, acrylic, latex, ink, chalk, wood, cardboard, paper, book.

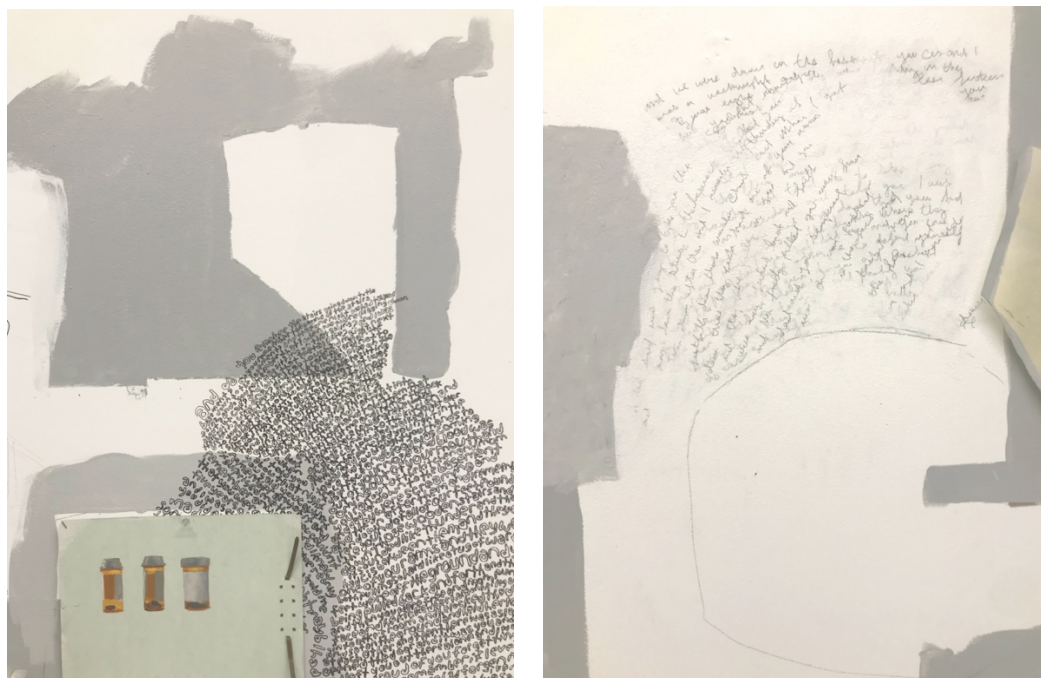


Figure 16 Robertson, Matthew. *I Think It's Somewhere in Here* (Detail). 2020. Oil. Acrylic, latex, ink, chalk, wood, cardboard, paper, book.

own past. However, unlike the wreckage of archaic cultures which can be retrieved and observed without being fundamentally changed, each act of recollection has the potential to alter and distort the memories themselves.

The installation, *I Think It's Somewhere in Here*, is an investigation into the ephemeral and volatile aspects of memory. This piece evolved from an exploration of layering, adjusting and removing an assortment of smaller works on the wall of my studio. I began by affixing a number of paintings and drawings to the wall, and then painted the area surrounding those hanging works. After the paint had dried, I would remove the paintings and drawings, leaving a silhouette of those objects on the wall. I continued to work with this process, adding, painting and removing, until I had developed a history of marks layered on top of one another; a palimpsest of sorts. In relationship to *Labyrinth* and *Lighthouse*, this installation uses text as a way to share specific autobiographical information with the viewer. Text and images are layered on top of one another. The process of layering, marking and removing continues; traces of past actions remain. Some of the text and imagery is coherent, some of it is obfuscated or altered. What's left is a shifting landscape of images and text; frozen in time, layered and disordered. A three-dimensional representation of my efforts to revisit and investigate my past, a process itself which may be forever altering my memories themselves.

Conclusion

“It’s so hard to say goodbye to yesterday.” – Boyz II Men

Wake Up, We’re Not Asleep, is an exploration into the nature of memory; the product of my efforts to develop a visual language that captures and depicts specific problematic aspects of this complex and integral component of the human experience. Though I may adhere to a Woolfian understanding of memory, where, through the act of remembrance, past and present are made to exist concurrently with one another, enriching and adding depth to the banality of one’s day-to-day experience, I also recognize the inherent perils of allowing the mind to wander unconstrained through memory’s corridors, risking the ability to appreciate the present moment by dwelling amongst the illusions of a recreated past. A particularly hazardous situation develops when trauma and memory converge, and like a scratched record, the mind incessantly replays a harmful event, possibly evolving into a prison of thought from which the individual may never fully escape. An unsettling and paradoxical characteristic of remembrance comes into focus when it’s realized that the process of recall itself has the potential to fundamentally alter our stored memories.

By scrutinizing my own experiences with memory’s most predominant imperfections, I’ve been able to create work that is both personal and universal. My endeavors in the studio to formulate a visual vocabulary of memory has been focused on experimenting with materials as well as processes; whether it’s through the manipulation of material to imitate the impermanent nature of remembrance, employed in the translucent curtains of *Labyrinth*, or the development of a process of layering images and

objects to emulate the stratified characteristic of memory, used to create the installation *I Think It's Somewhere in Here*. The exhibition *Wake Up, We're Not Asleep* presents the viewer with a poetic interpretation of the phenomena of memory, exploring the oft unacknowledged deficiencies of this enigmatic mental faculty.

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