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# Perception: Exploring Cognition and Consciousness Through Visual Art

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PERCEPTION:  
EXPLORING COGNITION AND CONSCIOUSNESS THROUGH VISUAL ART

A written companion to the *Metamorphosis* art exhibition

A Capstone Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree Bachelor of Fine Arts  
with Honors College Graduate Distinction at  
Western Kentucky University

By  
Summer “Sunny” Shepherd  
May 2019

\*\*\*\*\*

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2019



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## ABSTRACT

The concept of consciousness has perplexed humankind for thousands of years. Countless scientists, philosophers, and artists have devoted their lifetimes to solving humanity's questions about our relationship with the world we live within. The creative arts, such as music, theater, and visual art, can facilitate critical thinking and meaningful interpersonal communication. This paper explores the visual artwork of the author, Sunny Shepherd, through examination of historical and contemporary artistic influences on the work, as well as the psychological and philosophical concepts that fuel it. Months of research, planning, and creating went into the manifestation of the final exhibition, *Metamorphosis*, which was open in Western Kentucky University's Fine Arts Center Cube Gallery April 29-May 3, 2019.

Keywords: visual art, psychology, philosophy, art history, dreaming, consciousness

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*ART EXHIBITIONS (\*SOLO EXHIBITION)*

- \*Metamorphosis*, Fine Arts Center Cube Gallery, Western Kentucky University.  
Bowling Green, KY. April 29-May 3, 2019
- Spring 2019 Seniors Exhibition*, Fine Arts Center Main Gallery, Western Kentucky University.  
Bowling Green, KY. April 22- May 11, 2019
- Women in the Arts*, open art exhibition, The Medical Center. Bowling Green, KY.  
April 11-14, 2019
- A Celebration of Women*, invitational group exhibition, Art Matters Community Studio  
and Gallery. Bowling Green, KY. March 15-March 29, 2019
- US Bank Celebration of the Arts*, open art exhibition, the Kentucky Museum.  
Bowling Green, KY. March 2-April 5, 2019
- High Strung*, group exhibition, Love Art Gallery. Bowling Green, KY. February 17-22, 2019
- Impressions*, juried group printmaking exhibition, Spencer's Coffee. Bowling Green, KY.  
December 7, 2018-February 28, 2019
- State of Fine Art*, juried group exhibition, Georgetown College. Georgetown, KY.  
November 15- December 29, 2018
- \*because*, Fine Arts Center Cube Gallery, Western Kentucky University. Bowling Green, KY.  
November 5-9, 2018
- 2018 Student Juried Show*, Fine Arts Center Main Gallery, Western Kentucky University.  
Bowling Green, KY. October 15-November 7, 2018
- \*In Somnis*, Fine Arts Center Corridor Gallery, Western Kentucky University.  
Bowling Green, KY. October 1-5, 2018
- US Bank Celebration of the Arts*, open art exhibition, the Kentucky Museum.  
Bowling Green, KY. March 3-April 6, 2018
- Untitled student group exhibition, Baker Arboretum and Downing Museum.  
Bowling Green, KY. April 2018
- 2017 Juried Student Show*, Fine Arts Center Main Gallery, Western Kentucky University.  
Bowling Green, KY. October 2017
- Processing Place/Processing Memory*, group exhibition, Fine Arts Center Cube Gallery,  
Western Kentucky University. Bowling Green, KY. November 2017
- US Bank Celebration of the Arts*, open art exhibition, the Kentucky Museum.  
Bowling Green, KY. March 4-April 7, 2017



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## ARTIST STATEMENT

Through a multi-disciplinary approach, I use my studio practice to question reality, memory, and the passing of time. Although I work from a painting framework, I use a wide variety of materials that often branch into installation and sculpture to search for connections between what we experience and how we perceive those experiences.

I navigate my work through *liminal consciousness*: the space at the threshold of sleep and waking life. A quiet atmosphere with layered planes and ambiguous forms calls to mind altered states of consciousness such as dissociation, trance, and dreaming. Abandoned and repurposed materials give the artworks a personal history and ground them as objects in the real world.

The work relies on suspension both metaphorically and physically– through imagery that seems suspended as if in a dream, or material choices that employ tension and gravity. Ambiguous landscapes meld with traces of man-made structures to give life to a new, invented atmosphere. My compositions feature wide, open spaces punctuated by sparse detail, juxtaposing a desire for “peace and quiet” with self-imposed isolation. The work speaks to feelings of loneliness, questioning relationships with people and place, searching for the true meanings of words such as “home” and “belonging.”

## INTRODUCTION

This document is not an explanation of what my art is about, but an offering of one way that the work could be interpreted. Though I reflect on the concepts that have driven me intellectually through the work, I do not believe that my understanding of my work is necessarily the *correct* way that it should be understood. Everyone must be able to see something relatable to themselves in the work in order for it to be meaningful to them. The viewers must be able to make connections to and within the artwork, and this enriches their experience of it. My ambiguous forms and spaces lend themselves to a multitude of places and situations, but do not wholly belong to any one event in particular. Existing autonomously, they provide a neutral space in which the viewer's notions and thoughts can be followed, guided by the imagined space.

I work under the umbrella theme of psychology. I am particularly interested in cognition and perception, states of consciousness, mental health, and intra- and interpersonal communication. Though this is a very broad theme that includes complex interrelated topics, approaching the subject from a broad scope and working toward the specifics allows me to form significant associations between concepts. I believe that by getting in touch with our minds on the deepest level, we can attain empathy and understanding that allows us to forge stronger relationships with ourselves and with others.

The creation of the artworks serves three purposes:

- 1) To express something internal and emotional which is difficult to explain verbally;
- 2) To investigate the psychology behind unpleasant experiences and perceptions;
- 3) To communicate and relate to an external audience.

Although there is plenty of research in the fields of psychology, neuroscience, and philosophy regarding altered states of consciousness, it is a challenge to recreate the feeling of such transient states of being in a visual manner. Relying on only one of the senses, that of sight, limits the viewer from becoming truly absorbed in a piece of artwork. In movie theaters, the lights are dimmed, the screen fills the viewers' vision, and sound is amplified on all sides, drawing the moviegoers in by creating a total experience. The art that seems, to me, to be the most successful in fully immersing the audience into the world of the art is work that is interactive or incorporates multiple senses, not just sight. My creative practice utilizes interdisciplinary methods to fully engage the audience in an investigation of connections between consciousness, experiences, and relationships.

## SURREALISM AND THE AUTHORITY OF THE SUBCONSCIOUS

Surrealism is an artistic and political movement that began in the earlier part of the twentieth century, advocating for the endless depths of the imagination as a source of inspiration. Surrealism is characterized by rejection of rational thought in order to reveal the knowledge of the subconscious mind. Many creatives and thinkers across human history have embraced internal life as superior in all ways to the world of rationalism and so-called “reality,” and the Surrealist movement wholly embodies this concept. Most famously, Surreal art is known for its dreamlike quality, with forms and spaces composed and manipulated in illogical ways. Surrealists point to the subconscious mind as a spring, bubbling with valuable information about ourselves and life unavailable to the conscious self.

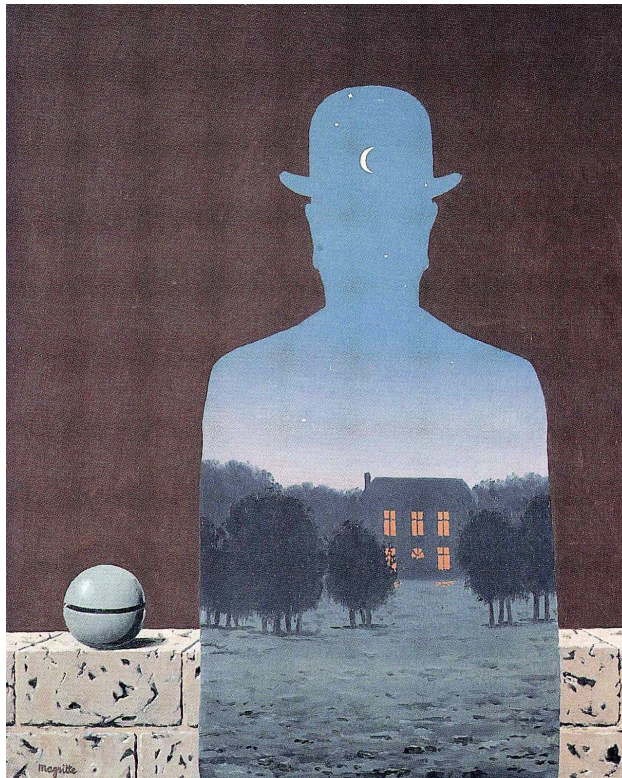


Figure 1. Rene Magritte, *The Happy Donor*, 1966.

I was first exposed to the works of famous Surrealists such as Salvador Dali and M.C. Escher in elementary school art classes. In high school, I had my first experience seeing a collection of works by the painter Rene Magritte, and I fell in love with the dreamy scenes he created. As my love for Surrealist art, films, and literature grew, I became intrigued by the psychological atmosphere felt in each of these works. Images are often painted with crisp edges in sharp detail, the way a dream can seem hyper-realistic. Eventually, I began to do my own research about the ideas that fueled the original Surrealist movement. The movement never really died out, but became part of the language found in contemporary art.

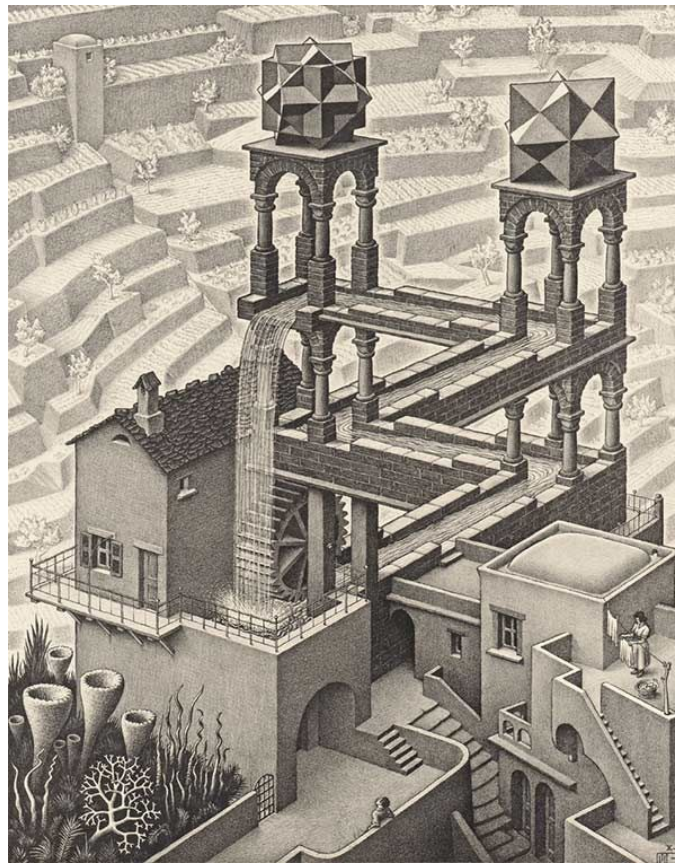


Figure 2. M.C. Escher, *The Waterfall*, 1961.



Expressionism is a similar art movement that also emphasizes the importance of emotion and the subconscious. Expressionist works are often composed of bright, saturated colors meant to evoke a particular emotion, and the marks made are often full of energy and movement. Although I focus mainly on the ideas driving the Surrealist movement, there are many ways in which the two (and many other creative ideas) overlap. The distinction between the two is not as important as the core belief they share: The rich world of interior life is an endless source of creative inspiration.

Other concepts of Surrealism continue to question what we know as reality, but the more information I gather, the more I see that these ideas do not begin and end within an isolated intellectual movement. While I acknowledge that the basis of my research focuses on Surrealism, the ideas I employ have existed in various forms since the first philosophers existed. I will frequently refer back to the key concepts of Surrealism, but keep in mind that a singular creative movement cannot encompass the full scope of the ever-developing question of where our consciousness comes from.

Surrealism is defined in the *Manifesto of Surrealism* by the French writer Andre Breton, one of the first to identify with the movement when it got its start in literature. Breton places emphasis on “psychic automatism,” an act of expression of thought in its purest sense and without the influence of reason (visual, moral, or otherwise).<sup>1</sup> Breton insists that the subconscious, unrestrained while dreaming, contains the answers to all of life’s most difficult problems. Throughout the *Manifesto*, Breton argues the case for Surrealism, even going so far as to say that the most basic function of language itself is Surrealist: to carry on a conversation with someone for the pleasure of it, to express oneself through a combination of symbols and metaphors, without forethought to what the next part of the sequence may be.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Andre Breton, *Manifesto of Surrealism*, University of Alabama, Department of Journalism & Creative Media, TCF.ua.edu, 1999, <https://tcf.ua.edu/Classes/Jbutler/T340/SurManifesto/ManifestoOfSurrealism.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Often, however, we *do* put thought into what we are saying or writing. We write scripts to be followed exactly, editing our language after its initial conception in order to be more concise. Stories are written to follow a logical narrative and usually do not provide details irrelevant to the plot. Our words are constantly pruned, but it is worth wondering what ideas may result without this careful curation of which ideas are being presented to the world.

Breton criticizes a strictly-narrative method of writing, even comparing characters in narrative literature to readymade objects.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to this, he offers instructions for an automatic writing exercise, which Breton calls “written Surrealist composition or first and last draft.”<sup>4</sup> The purpose of the activity is to continue writing as words and phrases come to mind without fixing mistakes or making any real attempt to direct a story. This reflects his belief in the true Surrealist purpose of language, to document spontaneous formulation of thought.

Originally, the Surrealists wondered if visual artworks could really be spontaneous enough to truly reject the limitations of rational thought in favor of intuition. Many thought that processes like painting and drawing were too time-consuming for this method of working, but artists had been using their visual language to quest perception and reality in other ways for a long time, long before the Surrealist writers were a group. A hyperrealistic technique known as *trompe l’oeil*-- French for “to fool the eye”-- has been used for centuries, producing images painted in incredibly sharp detail to trick the viewer into perceiving the painted surface as three-dimensional. John Frederick Peto’s work is a beautiful example of this technique.

Painting styles such as Impressionism and Pointillism developed as an experiment with the process of visual perception itself. Impressionism gives the *effect* of a thing by describing forms loosely with visible brush marks in order to reveal emotions that can’t be captured in realistic styles. Claude Monet’s series of light studies of the Rouen Cathedral are a beautiful

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.



Figure 3, John Frederick Peto, *The Poor Man's Store*, 1885.

Impressionistic documentation of the wonderful atmospheres that can be created by different light settings. Pointillism, like Impressionism, employs the basic mechanisms of vision by placing small brush marks in different colors side-by-side, instead of blending exact hues. When viewed from a distance, the marks merge together to reveal the image.

To use visual art as a process of recording the nature of thought itself *as it happens*, though, is a separate challenge. Artists must develop other ways of tackling this issue, such as using automatic writing or automatic drawing as the basis for works. Another solution is process-based artwork, which develops over time as the artist produces the work rather than following a premeditated composition.



Figure 4, Claude Monet, from the *Rouen Cathedral* series, 1892-93.

## PERCEPTION AND CONSCIOUSNESS

Do we have a direct perceptual relationship with the outside world, or is the world reconstructed in our minds? Do we see things as they truly exist, or do our minds piece the world together as we *think* it exists? Scientific research may support or discount these theories.

From the perspective of the Surrealists, the subconscious mind holds more authority than the conscious mind. Dreaming is the common experience most often connected to the Surrealist movement by art historians, likely because it is so universal. However, as Breton demonstrates, one does not need to be dreaming to produce Surrealist works. There are, in fact, other states of consciousness that allow the mind to operate without the external application of logic. These are known as altered states of consciousness. Trance, hallucinations, and substance-induced states are just a few of many experiences that could qualify as altered states.

In “States of Consciousness and State-Specific Sciences” Charles Tart defines an altered state of consciousness as “a qualitative alteration in the overall pattern of mental functioning, such that the experiencer feels his consciousness is radically different from the way it functions ordinarily.”<sup>5</sup> As Tart explains, a so-called “normal” state of consciousness is what we experience while awake and unintoxicated, but there is no way of definitively describing what every person experiences. The most common altered state of consciousness is that of dreaming, which is often seen as the direct opposite of the waking state. Realistically, the shift between wakefulness and sleep is much more gradual. Between these two ends of the spectrum are the hypnagogic and hypnopompic states, which are experienced while falling asleep and awakening, respectively. They could be characterized as the time when you are half-asleep and half-awake.

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Tart, “States of Consciousness and State-Specific Sciences,” *Science* 176, no. 4040 (1972): 1.

Tart explains that when a person undergoes a shift from a “normal” state of consciousness into an altered state of consciousness (he uses the example of someone under the influence of LSD or who has experienced a meditative state), that person is experiencing a paradigm shift. Their perceptions of the world, as well as the rules and norms that govern it, are temporarily changed. To someone who has not experienced this altered state of consciousness and is operating with a different set of paradigms, the person in an altered state may appear to have no real grasp on reality, that their comprehension and judgement abilities are impaired.<sup>6</sup>Tart uses this to explain the disparity between the scientists trying to understand altered states of consciousness and those who experience them. The same thing happens in everyday life when people who perhaps have very different backgrounds clash due to their beliefs, whether they be moral, religious, or other. They are simply unable to view the world from another paradigm, often causing socio-political conflict.

Many who have studied the science of consciousness and perception, including Tart, have proposed that there are two levels that our perceptions and knowledge fall into. The first level encompasses the information that we gather about the outside world and ourselves through our senses, the external part of perception. The second level is “internal noise,” our thoughts, feelings, and memories that affect the way we process the information being fed to our brains. Our past experiences shape the predictions that our brains make, therefore shaping our perceptions. That is, we use our previous experiences in combination with the sensory information being processed to predict what is most likely to happen next. It is a product of evolution that has helped our ancestors survive and learn across time.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 2.

Anil Seth, a neuroscientist, argues in his lecture “Your brain hallucinates your conscious reality,” that our unique conscious experience is a result of our biology.<sup>7</sup> Seth compares human consciousness to artificial intelligence (AI). Are AI sentient? No, because the vital experiences that make up being alive are rooted within our biology. We experience suffering, hunger, emotion, and the sensation of being *inside of* a body. These feelings are due to our physiological makeup, it allows us to have the experience of being alive within a body and having free will. However, AI are programmed to work in a way that mimics the human brain.



Figure 5, A section of Vincent van Gogh’s *Starry Night*, processed through Google’s DeepDream program.

AI store knowledge gathered from past experiences in order to predict the outcome of the data being put into the system. This is how the Google DeepDream technology works, by changing the program (the digital equivalent of a paradigm) to make the computer more likely to

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<sup>7</sup> Anil Seth, “Your Brain Hallucinates Your Conscious Reality | Anil Seth.” *YouTube*. Video File. July 18, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lyu7v7nWzfo&t=8s>.

detect patterns in images, and then those patterns are replicated throughout the image. Seth explains that this is the same way a hallucination works. Our brain receives a set of sensory information, and instead of interpreting it in a “normal” way, it perceives the sensory data in a different way, outside of the culturally accepted paradigm called “reality.”

There is evidence to suggest that déjà vu, the distinct, faulty perception of having experienced something before, is also a result of the brain’s attempts to deal with patterns. In “A Review of the Déjà Vu Experience,” clinical psychiatrist Alan S. Brown summarizes several different explanations of déjà vu, the most convincing of which are related to memory. According to Brown, memory explanations are based on the idea that the way we react to new experiences is influenced by our previous experiences. The brain’s attempts to form connections between patterns in memories creates a sense of familiarity, though the source of familiarity cannot be recalled or may be misplaced.<sup>8</sup>

All of this is evidence that suggests that there is no way of truly categorizing any one person’s beliefs or perceptions as true or false. If reality is just a hallucination that society has agreed upon, what does this mean in terms of things that are deemed controversial? If something is not considered true or right until the masses have accepted it as such, then how can the truth be determined about complex matters in which everyone seems to have a differing opinion? What is reality then?

For example, religious institutions rely on the agreement of their members that a belief is true. New religions are started when someone challenges the ideas that everyone accepts. The same goes in scientific circles, as well. A well-known example is the flat-Earth theory believed by the smartest thinkers alive for a long time. Then, once more evidence was collected, it was agreed upon that the Earth was actually round. Most people today believe this. But for those of us who

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<sup>8</sup> Alan S. Brown, “A Review of the Déjà Vu Experience,” *Psychological Bulletin* 129, no. 3 (2003): 404-406.



have never viewed the Earth from space ourselves, how can we be sure that the Earth really is round? We rely upon information that we did not obtain for ourselves. We accept the truth as the truth because someone else says it is so.

This thinking can be applied to our entire existence. It is not uncommon to question whether anyone actually exists outside the self-- after all, I have no way of knowing whether anyone else is actually experiencing a life inside of their heads just as I am, and I never can know that. Is the world that I operate within what I actually see it as? Or have I accepted it as reality only because the masses have seemed to agree on it?

This can not account for the discrepancies between experiences. People rarely agree on everything. For example, when eyewitnesses are asked to recall the details of certain events, they often conflict with the accounts of other witnesses. Details can be remembered inaccurately, and they can even be led to answer in particular ways by the questions they are being asked. Yet these people seem fully convinced that what they say is true.

We see how perception can so easily be manipulated in cases where suspects have been manipulated into giving false confessions, even if they do not remember committing the crime. How is it that people are manipulated into believing they did something like kill another person, even when they did not? As it turns out, it is not that difficult to trick the brain into believing things that are not true, even when we are actively aware that what we seem to be experiencing is distorted. Anil Seth explains the popular psychology experiment in which participants are tricked in assimilating a false arm as a part of their body, becoming startled and retracting their own arm when the false limb is struck by a hammer.<sup>9</sup>

Though the different theories of human perception can be wildly different from one another, one thing is clear: Each person has a different relationship with the outside world and

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<sup>9</sup> Seth, "Your Brain Hallucinates."

understands this relationship in a different way. No two people could agree on every single thing. Everyone has a different perspective, unique because of the countless experiences that have occurred in a person's life to shape who they are and how they think.

In order to build community with one another, we need to open conversations about these differing perspectives and be open to hearing the opinions of others. In my work, I paint from multiple perspectives at once in a literal sense, much like the facets projected onto imagery by Cubist artists. The "perspectives" I paint from are metaphorical. Rather than the direction from which a person is viewing a scene, I mean perspective as their *understanding* of that scene, to "put yourself in someone else's shoes."

Even just viewing art can help people look at things in a different way. Bill Taylor of the Harvard Business Review describes programs that bring together professionals whose careers are dependent on their observational skills, using artwork to reveal the ways they might be stuck in unhelpful thought patterns.<sup>10</sup> These police officers, investigators, doctors, and lawyers were taken to art museums and galleries and were encouraged to make observations about what they saw and discuss those interpretations with other participants. The assumptions they made about the artworks were related to their jobs and interests. For example, one police officer who participated in the annual Cops, Docs, and Outreach Ops program hosted by the Rhode Island School of Design Museum saw a painting that depicted a dead body at a crime scene, while a doctor saw the same painting and thought the person was sleeping.<sup>11</sup> Talking about the art in detail encourages them to change the way they interpret it. The participants were also made aware of details in the

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<sup>10</sup> Bill Taylor, "The Best Leaders See Things That Others Can't. Art Can Help," *Harvard Business Review Digital Articles*, last modified April 18, 2018, <https://hbr.org/2018/04/the-best-leaders-see-things-that-others-dont-art-can-help>.

<sup>11</sup> Donita Naylor, "Cops, Docs & Outreach Ops: Seeing Art Through Others' Eyes," *Providence Journal*, last modified March 29, 2018 <https://www.providencejournal.com/news/20180329/cops-docs-amp-outreach-ops-seeing-art-through-others-eyes>.



Figure 6, Sunny Shepherd, *Imposter*, 2018.

artworks that would have been overlooked if not for the conversations they shared. People working in any field can benefit from these kinds of creative thinking exercises, taking what they learn to look at problems they are faced with every day in new ways. Maybe we can use art to help build empathy for the plights of others by expressing personal turmoil in a way that words can not always express things.

For instance, my artwork “Imposter” was created as a self-portrait, but it does not seem to look much like me. The goal was not to create an accurate physical representation, but to express a very emotional struggle with confidence and self-worth. Exaggerated body proportions, active marks with paint and charcoal, and symbolic color work together to emote vulnerability that is usually hindered by fear and shame.

## SURREAL ENCOUNTERS

There are some moments in time that seem to be, in the truest sense, magical. Dalibor Vesely connects these moments to the world of artwork in “Surrealism and the Latent World of Creativity.” The surreal experience, which Vesely also refers to as “objective chance,” is characterized by very crisp, specific details that the mind may make limitless associations with. Vesely states:

“Objective chance is initiated by the projection of desire into a phantom-like image. The result depends on the circumstances. In the surreal encounter, ordinary objects, as well as, on a larger scale, whole streets, squares and houses become a ‘forest of indices’, capable of producing an unlimited number of metaphors. However, only those chance encounters which set off a spark with the phantom-like image, in other words those that come to resonate with our desire, turn into true surreal encounters.”<sup>12</sup>

This projection of desire onto an ordinary chance encounter can leave one feeling as though something was “fate” rather than dismissing it as coincidence. I relate this to the combination of external sensory data and internal noise, the two levels of awareness, to produce a complete perception. Information about the external world is gathered via our senses, then translated from electrical impulses into sensory data processed by the brain. The brain uses what it has learned in previous experiences in order to make sense of the situation and predict an outcome.

Have you ever noticed that once something previously unknown to you is brought to your attention, you start seeing or making connections to that thing much more frequently than you did

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<sup>12</sup> Dalibor Vesely, “Surrealism and the Latent World of Creativity,” *Umeni / Art* 59, no. ¾ (June 2011): 268, EBSCOhost, (AN 65463658).

before becoming consciously aware of it? For example: You get a new dog, a beagle. You never paid particular attention to the other beagles you encountered in your life until after adopting your dog. Then, you start to notice beagles everywhere you go, walking down the sidewalk, printed on bumper stickers, or featured in films. The popularity of beagles has, most likely, not increased. You are probably not encountering more beagles than you were before. Instead, you have become predisposed to becoming aware of beagles when they enter your field of vision, so it seems that you are seeing them more often. Just like Google's artificial intelligence, your brain has sensed a pattern and projected that pattern into its awareness.

This accounts for why individuals can seem to have very different experiences of one event. One person may fear being underwater due to a childhood accident and perceive a glass-bottom boat ride as debilitatingly scary. Another person on the same ride may remember family boat trips with fondness and feel nostalgic about the situation. Neither is perceiving the *wrong* thing; they are just perceiving things differently due to differences in their backgrounds.

By interrupting these patterns of perception, you can retrain the brain. This is why exposure therapy, in which a patient is repeatedly exposed to the source of their fear in order to desensitize them to it, is so valuable. The perceived threat is re-taught as non-threatening. This is also why initiating discussions about difficult topics can be so healing. Discussion and de-stigmatization of issues such as mental illness, grief, and extreme stress could create actual change within a community and unite people in struggles that often result in self-isolation.

My work illustrates many of these emotions and the struggle to understand how these notions of self, community, and the world impact us on the individual and societal level; It simultaneously seeks out ways to unite people and ignite conversations.

## DREAM RECALL

Many artists across history have been using their art to explore how we come to understand our world. The questions they ask reflect the bigger ideas being contemplated by society on a larger scale. Scientists, philosophers, politicians, musicians, and religious leaders have attempted to answer many of these questions in their own ways. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Sigmund Freud laid the groundwork for modern psychoanalysis. His ideas about the unconscious influenced people all over the world and stimulated a wave of interest in dream interpretation. States of consciousness that are characterized by reduced self-awareness, such as dreaming and trance, are important because they provide access to parts of the mind we are not typically aware of, the subconscious. While dreaming, the subconscious mind works to produce images that we call dreams. And since we spend about a third of our lives asleep, why should we discredit the contents of these dreams as unimportant?

There is evidence to support the idea that dreaming plays a significant role in the regulation of our waking emotional lives. In “The Twenty-Four Hour Mind: The Role of Sleep and Dreaming in Our Emotional Lives” Rosalind Cartwright refers to multiple studies on sleep and dreaming that suggest that mood disorders such as depression are often related to abnormalities in rapid eye movement sleep (the part of the sleep cycle when dreaming occurs) and non-rapid eye movement sleep.<sup>13</sup>

Psychoanalysts often interpret dreams to compare unpleasant dream experiences to real-life worries of the patient. The world of the unconscious mind is incredibly influential on our existence within the external world, and dreaming is the most common way to access the unconscious mind. How can we tackle the problem of being unable to fully remember our

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<sup>13</sup> Rosalind D. Cartwright, “Sleep and Dreams in Depression,” in *The Twenty-Four Hour Mind: The Role of Sleep and Dreaming in Our Emotional Lives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 50-51.

dreams? How can we learn from our sleeping selves if we are only left with a faint afterimage? Breton complains that memory reduces a dream to a pale, shallow version of the dream itself and that the waking mind tends to strip dreams of their most important aspects.<sup>14</sup> In daily life, too, the conscious brain processes data to determine its importance, ignoring the subtle details that may provide valuable insight.

Vesely also addresses the problem of applying the logic of waking consciousness to our dream content as we attempt to recall it. Vesely states that the best way to avoid doing so is by inhabiting the “oneiric zone,” the state between sleeping and waking.<sup>15</sup> Robert Bosnak, a psychoanalyst who studies dreams, provides detailed information about this method of dream recall. Bosnak asks whether dreams are produced from deep within us, or if they are given to us by a high spiritual sources, reminiscent of philosophical pursuits regarding the source of our perceptions of reality. Like Vesely, Bosnak points to a state that is in between wakefulness and sleeping, which Bosnak calls “liminal consciousness.”<sup>16</sup> Bosnak uses liminal consciousness to facilitate the dreamwork he does with his clients, guiding dreamers into this state as they recall their dreams in order to improve their memory and help them better understand the significance of different elements within the dream. The intentional altered state is used to build a bridge between the unconscious and conscious parts of the mind.

When I first came across the term “liminal consciousness,” I strongly related it to sensations I have experienced in waking life. It is often as if my full awareness is not on the world around me, but instead anchored deep within my body. I sometimes feel as though I am floating through life stuck in this state. This nearly constant state of daydreaming or “zoning out” is, arguably, a mild altered state of consciousness experienced on occasion by everyone. The

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<sup>14</sup> Breton, *Manifesto of Surrealism*, 7.

<sup>15</sup> Vesely, “Surrealism and the Latent World,” 271.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Bosnak, *Tracks in the Wilderness of Dreaming: Exploring Interior Landscape Through Practical Dreamwork* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1986), 39-46.



atmosphere of this state is difficult to express in words. The concept of a *half-conscious*, *half-unconscious* limbo state is pervasive in the way I visually approach my artworks, often resulting in ambiguous spaces with uncertain boundaries and imagery that carries more than one meaning. Disparate images and settings are woven together. Like the impression of a dream that slips away just after waking, my work gives off an ambience, rather than narrating a story.

One exhibition stands out to me as being truly transformative in my artistic education. “Dream Machines,” curated by artist Susan Hiller, was exhibited in 2001 at Dundee Contemporary Arts in Dundee, Scotland. Though I have only viewed photos of the show and its constituent artworks, my enthusiasm for the collection is strong. Elizabeth Mahoney’s review of “Dream Machines” illustrates for us the atmosphere of the gallery space: “The main gallery, dimly-lit like the first moment of consciousness after sleep, is chaotically, madly arranged: work on the floor, screens in the shadows, swirly psychedelic projections, and half-crazed sounds. It is murky like a dream, and it makes about as much sense when you first step in the room.”<sup>17</sup> Works ranged from literal interpretations of altered states, such as Gilbert and George’s video documenting progressive alcohol intoxication, “Gordon’s Makes Us Drunk,” to machines that use motion and light to produce a trance-like effect within the audience. The show’s titular work, Brion Gysin’s “Dream Machine,” is a kinetic sculpture using motion and light to try to induce a hypnotic state. This compares to the effects of riding in a car while the sun’s rays rapidly flicker between trees.

This exhibition in particular inspired many ideas for me. I took special notice of the way that viewers were drawn in by works that involved more elements than a simple two-dimensional image. Many of them were works of installation art, a relatively new and very broad term that is used to refer to artworks that interact with the audience or the space in which they are installed.

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<sup>17</sup> Elisabeth Mahoney, “Dream Machines: Dundee Contemporary Arts,” *Art Monthly*, no. 235 (April 2000): 23-26, EBSCOhost, (AN 505858944).

Installation art is often reliant on viewer participation and other non-traditional means of capturing attention. The “Dream Machine” created by Gysin inspired the use of slowly pulsating light in my sculpture “Cocoon.”

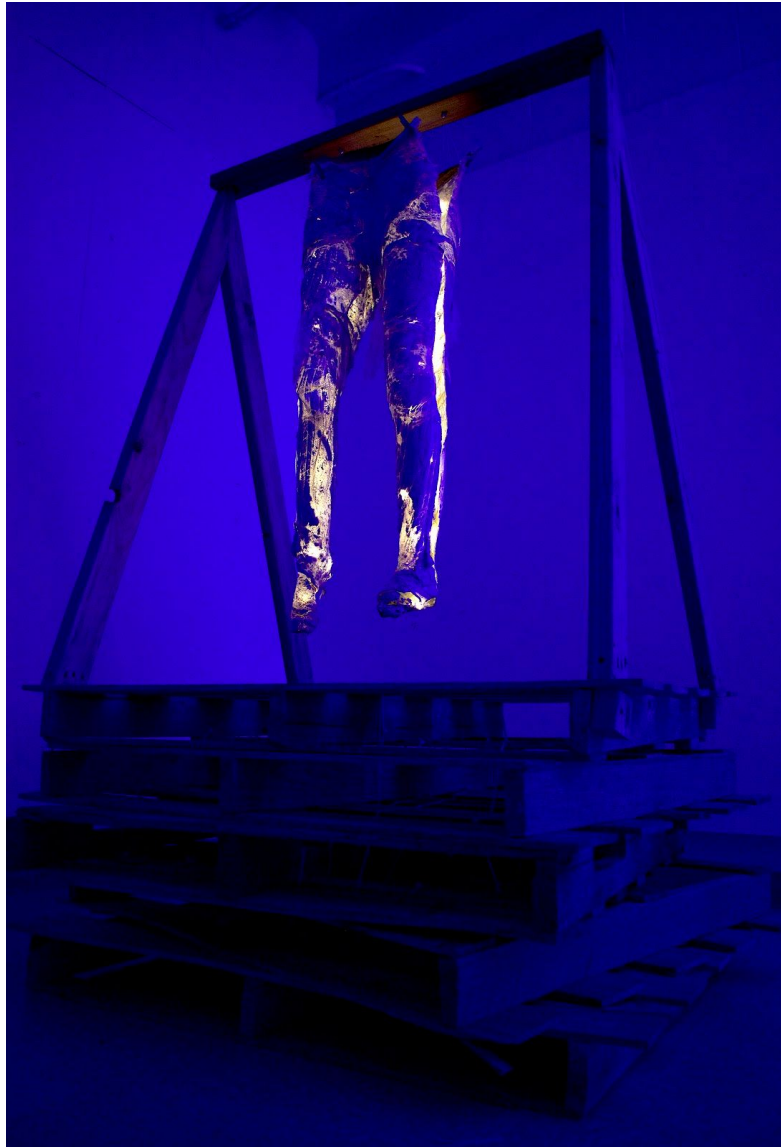


Figure 7, Sunny Shepherd, *Cocoon* (installation view), 2019.

## PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

The discovery of the “Dream Machines” exhibition set me off on a quest to find other gallery shows that used unique curatorial techniques with multisensory artworks to produce hypnotic experiences. I found something familiar and comforting in these types of collections, and I came to realize that it was because I saw a reflection of the whimsical headspace I usually inhabit.

In many cases, sensory experiences can be very grounding. A lot of my love of nature comes from the associated sensory information: the smell of the trees, the feeling of water on my feet, the way the sun’s rays rake across the sides of mountain scapes. The natural world has a rhythm and quietness that enhances every little detail. On the other hand, the rush of people, information, and happenings in the human world keeps us from making sense of everything, which can lead to sensory overload.

My unique relationship with my senses and my perceptions of the world around me drives the work forward. The creation of artworks is a process that allows me to express my own feeling of living waking life as if in a daydream. My works are often the result of a state of loose associations and blurred focus. Like the surreal experience caused by objective chance, certain ordinary objects take on a monumental role, their edges sharp and details clear, while other elements fade into the background and become nothing more than vague outlines. This is my own form of perception.

My own difficulties with sensory processing result in feelings of social anxiety, agoraphobia, and lack of community. I desire close, emotionally intimate relationships with others. Growing up I had a solid sense of home, family, friends, and the world around me. I was able to travel a lot, and the exposure to a lot of different landscapes left me with a longing to experience everything the natural world had to offer. I draw inspiration from around the world to

create my scenery. I also have a unique relationship with my senses. I become easily overwhelmed by sensory information, such as sights, smells, and tactile sensations coming in from the outside world. The wide, open landscapes and nearly-bare rooms found in my work depict social isolation and longing for peace and quiet in an overstimulating world.

## TIME, HISTORY, AND MEMORY

The remembered feeling of living and acting within the dream world is disappointingly dull in comparison to the real thing. Memories of the events of daily life, too, remove most details and warp the images our minds attempt to preserve. It is common human desire to not want to forget or be forgotten, and in a way, art is nothing more than a record of human presence and experience. Jackson Pollock used painting as a way of directly recording his physical presence through a series of actions. Viewers mentally recreate the act of painting as they view the work, in a way keeping the artist alive through memory and imagination even decades after his death.

Hiroshi Sugimoto's haunting photographs of old-fashioned movie palaces are the result of the photographer's questions about the nature of time. The images are shot with prolonged lens exposure, condensing the entire duration of a film into a single photograph. Sugimoto's images capture entire narratives, but not in a way that their details and individual parts can be sifted out. Instead, we are left only with the eerie glow of the movie screen. Sugimoto has recorded a

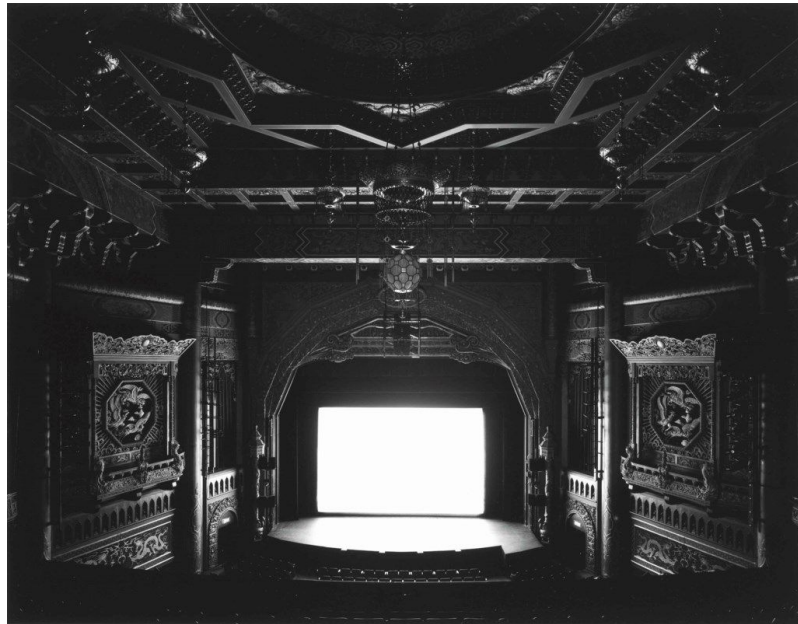


Figure 8, Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Fifth Avenue Theater, Seattle*, 1997.

specific experience, compiled into a singular image, reminding us of the shortcomings of human memory. My understanding of artwork that delves into complex cognitive processes has evolved as my knowledge of art has expanded.

Innumerable contemporary artists are creating work about memory. The German artist Anselm Kiefer's works are beautiful and haunting representations of a culture's struggles to come to terms with the past. He deals with the erosive effects of time on memory, reflected through the natural decay of life.



Figure 9, Anselm Kiefer, *Land of Two Rivers*, 1985-89.

Many time-based works are about the destructive effects of time. Some artists take this even further by deliberately introducing an element of destruction. Katrin Sigurdardottir is an Icelandic artist who creates works on both a miniature and life-size scale, questioning memory and perception as they pertain to specific locations and spaces. In an interview with Constance

Lewallen, Sigurdardottir discusses the important role that destruction has had in her most recent work:

“...I’ve made several works using a ‘method’ where the work is subjected to chance transformations. Maybe this speaks of a certain attitude of recklessness, but if you think about it, this is actually a very controlled act.... In the studio, all kinds of events happen all the time, events that, after the work is supposedly ‘done,’ would be seen as destructive. This sequence of events is stunted when the work leaves the studio. But take this little stool as an example: It arrived in San Francisco in its crate, in twenty pieces. What you choose to call this occurrence is qualitative, it determines the work’s value. You could say that is simply a transformation, a change of form. But before this was ever this stool it was a bag of plaster. By the same logic you could say that when I made the stool, I destroyed the bag of plaster.”<sup>18</sup>

Sigurdardottir’s site-specific installation *Supra Terram* leaves its wooden armature visible in the final piece, making no attempts to hide the wood or disguise it as decorative. Evidence of the work’s construction, based on the most basic materials, exemplifies the importance of the past in the creation of the present.

This idea of history and destruction as a part of creation itself translates into my artwork. I am not usually concerned about whether my work is archival or not, and I tend not to treat the objects I have made as fragile things. My love of natural and found materials is connected to the imperfections that make them unique and beautiful. Abandoned and repurposed objects have a private previous life that I know nothing about. It gives the materials energy and mystery because these manipulations were out of the artist’s control.

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<sup>18</sup> Katrin Sigurdardottir, “Chance Transformations: Constance Lewallen Interviews Katrin Sigurdardottir,” interview by Constance Lewallen, *Open Space*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, May 11, 2017, <https://openspace.sfmoma.org/2017/05/constance-lewallen-interviews-katrin-sigurdardottir/>.



Figure 10, Katrin Sigurdardottir, *Metamorphic*, (installation view), 2015.

I believe that any accidental damage or natural deterioration that may happen to a work can enrich the life of the object by giving it a personal history, its own collection of memories. In one of my earlier installations, I reclaimed used plastic grocery bags, turning them into an art piece that I hung from a bridge walkway leading to a library on my university's campus. The piece was repeatedly removed and thrown into a trash bin, probably by university staff who assumed the piece was just garbage. For multiple days I retrieved the discarded plastic rope I had braided and restrung the tattered remains from the bridge. It was an intriguing play with change, the cyclic processes creation and destruction, and an anonymous participant.



## VIEWER ATTENTION, MANIPULATION, AND INTERACTION

Museums and galleries serve a critical educational role in society by making it easier for the public to access information about science, history, and art. Exhibits traditionally display works and the information accompanying them along a singular midline at about eye level, but this is changing as our relationship with knowledge changes. More and more frequently, this traditional display method is being replaced by more dynamic installation practices. In “Visitor Attention and Communication in Information Based Exhibitions,” Soyeon Kim and Hyunju Lee demonstrate through experimentation that fully using the architecture of the exhibit space, including floors, corners, and the ceilings can have a lasting impact on a viewer’s experience. In Kim and Lee’s experiment, the average amount of time children spent looking at the elements on display was higher in an exhibition that used a unique installation of the information. In addition, the children showed that they had a more memorable experience and were able to recall more of what they learned from the exhibition than children who viewed the same information in a traditional eye-level display.<sup>19</sup>

This new way of looking at museum practices can also be applied to individual artworks viewed by audiences of all ages. In order to increase the duration and depth of attention given to the exhibit and its individual parts, elements can be displayed in innovative ways. Viewers may be asked to interact with the objects on display in some way, such as crouching and looking upward to view elements, or physically manipulating things.

Outside of formal gallery spaces, installation artists create their artworks using many of the same principles. Artworks can fill entire rooms and encourage children and adults alike to play, as seen with the works of Ernesto Neto. Both implicit and explicit manipulation of the

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<sup>19</sup> Soyeon Kim and Hyunju Lee, "Visitor Attention and Communication in Information-Based Exhibitions," *International Journal of Design* 10, no. 2 (2016).

viewer can be used to create an experience. Depending on the intentions of the artist, viewers may be given specific instructions for how they are to perform or interact with the work, or the artist may leave more subtle clues, such as leaving a chair for viewers to sit and observe from.

Paintings and other two-dimensional works often use scale as a means of creating an immersive experience for the viewer. Installation art does the same thing by drawing attention to the space the artwork is in and expanding the scope of the artwork to fill its room. Installation art is mainly concerned with activation of the space in which the work exists. Another way of looking at this is *audience activation*: how the changes made to a space by a work of art affects the viewer. Other ways of activating the audience include converting two-dimensional artworks, which can only be looked at from one direction, into three-dimensional objects. This forces the viewer to interact with it as a part of their space. They must move around a work to view it in totality. This concept can be further expanded with introduction of a fourth dimension, such as motion or sound, to further influence audience actions. Through three- and four-dimensional artwork, the audience may become more fully absorbed into the invented world, even without using a large scale.

There are plenty of historical examples of artists whose main goal was to create huge, detailed paintings in which the viewer could become immersed. Before the invention of film, the wealthy sought their entertainment in art salons that featured Biblical scenes, landscapes, and luxurious portraits, often painted in even more detail and saturation than real life. As the boundaries of art have broadened beyond the traditional techniques of drawing and sculpture, artists have begun finding ways to use traditional mediums as a springboard into more expansive, *avante-garde* projects.

Kai Althoff's 2016 solo exhibition at Museum of Modern Art in New York, titled *and then leave me to the common swifts*, uses the three-dimensional space as the picture plane. Althoff

curates an environment with a very specific atmosphere through scale, accumulation of objects, sound, lighting, and alteration of the architecture.



Figures 11 & 12, Kai Althoff, *and then leave me to the common swifts* (installation views), 2016.

## INSTALLATION ART AND PAINTING: BRIDGING THE GAP

Kai Althoff and Anselm Kiefer are both utilizing two-dimensional mediums as a basis for installation art. My own work is based in painting, but often utilizes physical space and viewer manipulation as an essential element in the final presentation of the work. I create paintings and sculptures that have a specific relationship with the space in which they are shown. Recycled furniture, paintings with sculptural elements, and works that act as spatial dividers bring the invented world into the space that the viewer navigates. The ethereal, dream-like atmosphere originally found in my paintings is brought to life through the expansion of the work to a life-size scale. It is not viewed through a window, but physically experienced as a dream is. As the viewer navigates the fantasy, they are taken on a journey of discovery that challenges their concept of reality.

Recently, I collaborated with my mother to create a sculpture, “Cocoon” (Fig. 7), using myself as a mold. Wrapped in cellophane from the waist down, I was unable to move as my mother covered my legs in cheesecloth and plaster. I was able to appreciate the way in which she placed each strip of cloth as someone who doesn’t typically make art. The result is undoubtedly different from the way I would have wrapped the cloth, being an artist and often a perfectionist. There are other ways that artists have given up a large portion of control over their work. Jackson Pollock infamously dripped and flung paint, relinquishing the control provided by a paintbrush. Yoko Ono’s *Cutpiece* gave the audience more authority than it did the artist.

Giving up control was difficult, but I also liked how having another person involved changed the work conceptually. It became a process of trust and communication as we worked together. The phrase “Two heads are better than one” comes to mind. Future community involvement in my artwork would change the ideas behind the work. Feedback from others can

provide valuable information about the experiences we share and how to best serve society with my work.

## MUNDANE MONUMENTS: A WORLD OF SYMBOLISM

Monuments commemorate a person or event at a specific location as physical stand-ins of memories. Literal monuments range from ancient structures such as Giza's famous pyramids to the more modern Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. Earthworks often serve as even larger monuments, built directly into the landscape they occupy. The symbols that appear again and again in my work are my Mundane Monuments: ordinary objects that have sovereignty and an emotional presence of their own.

My artwork is reliant on the use of symbols as imagery. I use a mix of universal and personal symbols that have multiple possible meanings to create complex metaphors. Motifs are blended with invented spaces and wordplay to create visual poetry. It has been helpful to my viewers and to me to provide guidance as to the significance of particular recurring elements, the Mundane Monuments.



Figure 13, Sunny Shepherd, *The Bridge* (diptych), 2018.

Laundry hanging from clothes lines appear in both the two- and three-dimensional worlds. The articles of clothing may stand-in for the human figure or simply serve as ghostly evidence of human presence. By casting the clothing in plaster, I am preserving it as a form and also removing its original function. Though it is a sign of vulnerability to display laundry, especially women's undergarments, to an audience the plaster gives the materials durability and strength that they previously lacked. The clothesline is also an extension of the home. It reminds one of domestic responsibilities such as washing and mending clothes and cleaning the home, back to the simple processes of daily life.



Figure 14, Sunny Shepherd, *Fissure* (detail), 2019.

I mimic the body and skin through the unstretched canvas, pulled taut onto the wall like an animal hide. Ripping and stitching the canvas is a mark of injury and healing, the body's own cycles of destruction and creation. My art seems to be fragile, like things are falling apart or could fall apart at any moment. The juxtaposed sensations of gravity and suspense are carried through my two- and three-dimensional work in multiple ways, but there is also a feeling of stillness, like a freeze-frame, where things are being held motionless in time and space. It is like a breath being held, waiting to be released. The picture plane is fractionated, the body is viewed in parts.



Figure 15, Sunny Shepherd, *Untitled (Cushion the Fall)*, 2019.



Often the homes seen among my landscapes are a place of refuge, offering shelter. In some examples, they seem more constricting, especially when viewed from the interior, but my more recent work is more airy and gives the eyes plenty of space to roam. Architecture may be painted solidly, or landscapes may dominate the setting, leaving only a few transparent memories of man-made structures. Furniture and bedding set a hospitable scene for the viewer to feel at-home in.

Though the landscapes that my paintings are set in are diverse, the sky is typically bright blue and cloudy. I was first drawn to the cloud as imagery for its universality and the calm quality that I associated with daydreaming, or having your “head in the clouds.” In “Sign and Symbol,” Hubert Damisch explains that clouds have been used in religious artwork to symbolize the space between heaven and earth.<sup>20</sup> The clouds are creating a division between the land and space, serving as a *liminal space*. Constantly transforming, changing shape, the clouds contain limitless associations to be made. Damisch contends that “cloud, in the ever changing variety of its forms, may be considered the basis, if not the model, of all metamorphoses.”<sup>21</sup> Visually, clouds provide important balance to the strong delineated shapes of the earth and architecture.

Imagery and materials in my artwork, just as in real life, always have multiple layers of meaning, multiple perspectives from which they can be understood or viewed. Each person sees the world through a different lens and interprets things based on their own intricate history of experiences. I arrange geometric planes over one another, mimicking these layers of interpretation and variations in experiences. I break my paintings into fractionated parts that allude to the perceived disjunction between people and events, and reveal patterns from under the forms that have been superimposed into each individual piece.

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<sup>20</sup> Hubert Damisch, *A Theory of/Cloud/: Toward a History of Painting*, trans. Janet Lloyd. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002,) 21.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

## CREATION OF THE FINAL EXHIBITION

Regardless of location, humans are bound to the natural world, which includes the landscape. Our consciousness lies somewhere within our biology. While humans try to separate themselves or elevate themselves from the “wild” natural world, we are subject to it just as much as the plants and animals. We can create shelters and clothing to provide a barrier between our bodies and the world they occupy, but we cannot control natural phenomena. Though we, as humans, often perceive ourselves as *apart from* the rest of the natural world, we are not really. We must perform certain activities, such as eating, drinking, and sleeping, in order to survive,



Figure 16, Sunny Shepherd, *Lenses (Meditating Blues)*, 2019.

regardless of our material experiences. Even the worlds that I create, which have their own laws of space, time, and physics, exist as objects (the “artwork”) that can be changed by the physical world they exist in.

As I have been working on this project for the past several months, my ideas have continuously evolved. This is a normal part of the creative process. As I have gained information and developed my ideas, the work itself has changed. I still want to return to my original conception as a point of reference, but it is important that I allow the artwork to develop organically.

Over time, I have noticed that it is more and more important to me that my work relates to others. Part of my original goal was to challenge perceptions and start conversations; I believe this is the way for the work to be most meaningful. Artwork that makes a viewer think or feel differently is the most powerful work there is. What exactly am I trying to communicate? I want to break stigma. By speaking about my vulnerability and creating work that addresses and celebrates it, I can open conversation among the audience about their own vulnerabilities.

The work is not just about perception of the world, but our perceptions about ourselves and other people. Like a self-fulfilling prophecy, if I perceive that I do not belong within my community, I am more likely to isolate myself from the community. As I have said above, I want to break down stigmas regarding mental health, emotions, and vulnerability. It is through being vulnerable that we show our true strength. Maybe by starting these conversations, I can build bridges between people who have similar experiences. I can show people that they are not alone. For those who find difficulty in understanding the experiences of others, I want to use the creative work to help them understand.

Even to those who primarily consider the aesthetic qualities of the work, I aim to encourage a dreamy, other-worldly ambience, much like the surreal experience described by

Dalibor Vesely. I think it is of particular importance that I separate the gallery space from the building around it, giving it its own set of rules and allowing the viewer to suspend disbelief. I don't want it to *look* like a gallery. Viewers have expectations and social norms associated with traditional gallery spaces. By changing the space dramatically, thereby changing viewer expectations, I hope to influence the audience's interactions with the space and interpretations of the artwork. The brand new environment has its own light, its own sounds, perhaps even a unique smell. The impossible becomes possible once disbelief is suspended.

Especially in my two-dimensional works, the spaces I create are painted in such a way that the viewer is given an entry point to insert themselves into-- somewhere in the foreground is an open space that can be mentally navigated. The rest of the painting is like a stage set, with props to be interacted with, space to investigate, and figures to become acquainted with. The more intentionally I paint the space, the more detail it is given, the more data the viewer has to react to. There is a sweet spot that has to be found: If there is not enough sensory information to react to, the viewer will quickly get bored and stop looking. With too much, the piece is overwhelmed and creates sensory overload. By processing my earthly experience through my own lens of perception, a cacophonous sensory experience has been honed to its harmonious specifics.

Keeping all of the above in mind as I have developed and planned this exhibition over the course of the last two semesters, I wanted to create an immersive experience for viewers to become enveloped in, even working with limited resources. Many of the works in this exhibition have been created by combining abandoned or recycled materials. By choosing materials previously used for something else, I give up control over certain details of the item. But by selecting these materials and manipulating them, I reassert my control over the work. There is a

constant, cyclical process that happens of intentional decision making and allowing chance to affect the outcome.

I inform the experience of the audience by creating a path to follow as the work is viewed. No explicit instructions are given in regards to the path, but utilizing the architecture and natural flow of the gallery space in conjunction with temporary boundaries of my own making implies clear direction. I also include furniture as part of the art, which implies an action to be followed, such as sitting to observe. I have chosen to include short instructions in this portion of the exhibit to encourage the viewer to touch the work, despite the traditional gallery setting.

To collect specific feedback, I will provide a short survey for viewers to complete after seeing the exhibit. I want the survey to be open-ended enough to allow personal responses, while being direct enough to elicit relevant answers. I do not want to intimidate people with a long list of questions or make it too intrusive. I have decided to only prompt the viewer to reflect: “Reflect on a time when you felt vulnerable.” The viewer should have the freedom to talk about things that made them feel vulnerable, without leading them to a positive or negative answer. I will additionally provide a book for visitors to write comments in order to receive less structured feedback.

The creation of this body of work has been transformational in my artistic development. I have gained professional experience through the curation of my own exhibition, while the written portion of the project has served as a platform to further develop the concepts that drive my work. Responses from teachers, classmates, and loved ones have inspired me and reaffirmed that my work is successful in its aims to bring peace and contemplation to the viewer. I look forward to future projects that build upon what I have learned through the development of this thesis, but in the meantime, I am proud of this culmination of my hard work and growth over the past several

years. This exhibition, *Metamorphosis*, is only the beginning of my artistic career, and I will be bringing what I have learned with me as I embark on exciting, challenging new journeys.

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