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MOMENTUM, MOMENT, EPIPHANY:
THE PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERSECTION OF MOTION PICTURE, THE STILL FRAME,
AND THREE-DIMENSIONAL FORM

by

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B.A. The University of Chicago, 1986

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the School of Visual Arts and Design
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
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ABSTRACT

My journey from Hollywood Film production to a Fine Arts practice has been shaped by theory from Philosophy of Mind, Cognitive Psychology, Film, and Art, leading me to a new visual vocabulary at the intersection of motion picture, the still image, and three-dimensional form.

I create large mixed media collages by projecting video onto photographs and sculptural forms, breaking the boundaries of the conventional film frame and exceeding the dynamic range of typical visual experience. My work explores emotional connections and fissures within family, and hidden meanings of haunting memories and familiar places.

I am searching for an elusive type of perceptual experience characterized by an instantaneous shift in perspective—an “aha” moment of epiphany when suddenly I have the overpowering feeling that I am both seeing *and* aware that I am seeing.

To Lori, Joshua and Maya,
for your infinite patience and unconditional love.

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I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge all my Studio Art colleagues who have so graciously tolerated my presence in their sandbox over these last few years. In particular, I want to thank my Thesis Committee: Carla Poindexter, my chair, for her nuanced critique, encouragement and unwavering belief in the potential of my work, and ability to embrace the seemingly contradictory roles of mentor and colleague; Jo Anne Adams, for her attention to detail and narrative sensibility that comes from our shared background in the film industry; and Ryan Buysens, for showing me the possibilities of technology and interactivity, and reminding me to never lose sight of the meaning in my art.

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INTRODUCTION

In *Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant makes the following assertion about the nature of perception: “the imagination is a necessary ingredient for perception itself.”¹ Because the senses present appearances of an object that vary (for instance, seeing it from different points of view and lighting conditions), it takes “an active faculty” to form them into a single image or concept. In other words, perception is a two-way street between passive senses and an active mind.

This proposition has become the central metaphor of my studio practice and accompanying artist statement: *How much does the world reveal to us, and how much do we project onto it?*

I create large mixed media collages by projecting video onto photographs and sculptural forms, illuminating emotional connections and fissures within family, and hidden meanings of haunting memories and familiar places. This work challenges the visual conventions of photographs and film by breaking beyond the boundaries of the rectangular frame and pushing into three-dimensional forms. The spatial and temporal ambiguity of the precisely superimposed video, photography, and sculpture emphasizes a fundamental tension between our *sensation* of things and what we *think they are*—the difference between appearance and understanding. This friction is amplified by an unusual combination of additive and subtractive light spectra, which has a vastly expanded tonal range between black and white that transcends normal visual experience. With some pieces, interactive technology breaks down the passive relationship

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 239.

between image and viewer, creating an immersive experience that echoes the active nature of perception. It is the very act of trying to understand the world out there—by *projecting*—that gives these pieces their distinct visual impact.

Epiphany

With a professional background as a film editor in mainstream narrative television and feature films, I left Hollywood to pursue teaching and the writing/directing of my own personal films. In my early years as an academic, I integrated a college study of Philosophy of Mind with lessons learned from the film industry, developing a theory of narrative closure which I call, “Moments of Epiphany.” As I became increasingly frustrated with the limitations of narrative conventions, the nature of these projects gradually evolved to an experimental fusion of fiction and documentary. With a recent shift in modalities from the traditional film screen to a fine arts gallery space, my work now explores aspects of epiphany in a pure form without expository constraints.

My interest in epiphany can be traced to several sources. First, it has always been an essential part of my creative process in filmmaking, starting with an obsessive circling and scrutinizing, searching for something to be revealed from a given group of elements—what my wife calls the “third week hell.” During this inevitable period of despair in a typical film schedule, I am unable to bring the disparate pieces of a film into a coherent whole. But with time and discipline, the parts coalesce and I find breakthrough. These revelations appear suddenly and without warning, a mysterious product of my unconscious thought processes.

The second source is Roland Barthes. In *The Third Meaning*², he examines several still frames from two Sergei Eisenstein films. Beyond the semiotics of the “informational” and “symbolic” levels, he finds another level of meaning which he sees but cannot describe—a kind of visceral response that he compares to the feelings evoked by the minimalism of haiku, something in the empty space between words that is “evident, erratic, obstinate.”³ He would later refine this idea as the “punctum” in *The Camera Lucida*,⁴ a frisson that “shoots out of it like an arrow...[an] accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).”⁵ The experience is beyond language, subjective and revelatory.

For all its emotional quality and elusiveness, Barthes’ meaning seems grounded in an unconscious and personal semiotics—a contingent set of associations between image and viewer that are ultimately conceptual, even if their vast complexity makes it impossible to articulate. Recently I have discovered a new way to think about epiphany that is phenomenological (about the raw experience of perception) and maybe even more resonant⁶. In the *Optical Unconscious*, Art theorist Rosalind Kraus describes a transcendent visual experience that is suddenly self-aware, a kind of metacognition—a seeing *and* awareness that one is seeing.⁷ This revelation is self-evident without recourse to language. It shares the mystery of Barthes’ punctum, but with the profundity of being an affirmation of one’s existence. With this discovery, I would learn an even more important lesson about my own demons and what drives me.

² Roland Barthes, "Third Meaning: Notes on Some of Eisenstein's Stills," *Artforum* 11 (01// 1973).

³ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁴ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida : Reflections on Photography* (New York : Hill and Wang, 1981).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁶ See discussion of *Punchthrough*.

⁷ Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Pr, 1994), 19.

Fine Arts Context

My work can be situated within the broader context of the fine arts in a number of ways. As a medium, projection art has a long and varied history in Western art, from metaphoric origins in the shadows of Plato's cave to the seventeenth century fascination with "magic lanterns." In the twentieth century, innovators in Epic theater used film projection on elaborate set pieces.⁸

Today, outdoor projection mapping of imagery onto architectural spaces and nature has become a pervasive spectacle, from commercial explosions of light and sound on public monuments to a guerrilla style of political activism, a fleeting, high-tech graffiti on structures without an owner's consent.⁹

Against this backdrop, my work uses the projected image on a smaller scale to explore more intimate emotional spaces, and can be compared with several contemporary video artists. Wyn Geleynse is perhaps the closest in intent, using projection, real and imagined family photographs, and sculptures of idealized domestic spaces to explore perception, memory and nostalgia.¹⁰ While Tony Oursler is best known for his strident projections of grotesque faces and paranoia in the surveillance age, some of his quieter works evoke a drama of personal relationships and communication.¹¹ Other video artists like Pablo Vabluena¹² and Javier Riera¹³ parallel my interest in creating meaning out of abstraction by alternately imposing a projected

⁸Annette Roland, "Epic Theater," University of Chicago, last modified 2018, accessed 2018, 2018. <https://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/mediatheory/keywords/epic-theater/>, 2/28/18.

⁹ Adrienne Day, "When Skyscrapers Are Your Screen," *The New York Times*, 1/25/12.

¹⁰ Wyn Geleynse, "Wyn Geleynse" Canada Council for the Arts (Video), posted 2018, 2018, accessed 3/20/2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wesz5z9ij0o>.

¹¹ Tony Oursler, "Tony Oursler Space," accessed 3/20/2018, 2018. <https://www.tonyoursler.space>.

¹² Pablo Vabluena, accessed 3/20/2018, 2018. <http://www.pablovalbuena.com/para-site/3-plinths/>.

¹³ Javier Riera, accessed 3/20/2018, 2018. <http://javierriera.com/?lang=en>.

geometry on seemingly incongruous surfaces or allowing the geometry of three-dimensional forms to transform the projected image.

It could be argued that the form of my work—a visual vocabulary of mixed media that inherently questions the way we look, see, and understand the world around us—is as much about itself as its underlying content, a self-reflexive stance that would seem to put the work firmly in the camp of Modernism. Stanley Cavell writes that there is something circular and almost comic in the way that Modernism in the arts “...seem[s] simultaneously to be free of the imperative to philosophy and at the same time inevitably to reflect upon itself—as though the condition of philosophy were its natural condition. And then I [am] lost.”¹⁴

Although there is something vaguely quaint in Cavell’s observation, my work also has footing in Postmodernism. In some of my films and studio art, I have mixed other people’s work, from existing imagery, animation, and design to film clips and sound recordings, an appropriation and recombination that transforms the meaning of the original material. In two of my experimental films, there is a yearning for but ultimate rejection of the kind of objectivity that Jean-Francois Lyotard argues is characteristic of Modernism.¹⁵ Instead, the films embrace an ambiguity in the way we see our place in the world and about how we judge the subtleties of our intimate relationships.

Does my work have a place in a new period beyond Postmodernism? Philosopher Alan Kirby argues that the hallmark of Post-postmodernism is the instant gratification and shallowness of electronic and social media, degrading authorship by taking it away from the artist and giving

¹⁴ Stanley Cavell, "North by Northwest," *Critical Inquiry*, no. 4 (1981): 761.

¹⁵ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition : A Report on Knowledge* (University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

the viewer an inflated sense of control.¹⁶ This essay anticipated by a decade the descent into the “ignorance, fanaticism and anxiety” of our current populist climate. One could argue that the interactivity of my work—in the way it frames perception as an active process, inviting viewer scrutiny and interpretation—puts it squarely in the crosshairs of this indictment. The work also has a powerful visual impact, a superficial beauty which some might describe as eye candy. If Post-postmodernism “*takes the world away*” by inducing a trance-like state of submission, then I can only hope that the hypnotic quality of my work seen in the context of significant world events can be seen as a cautionary note rather than as a surrender to Kirby’s “weightless nowhere of silent autism.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Alan Kirby, "The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond," *Philosophy Now*, no. 58 (11//Nov/Dec2006 2006).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

CONCEPTUAL ORIGINS

To fully appreciate the ideas I have been exploring in this mid-career shift to the fine arts, I find it necessary see them within the context of a larger artistic and intellectual journey, to look back at my roots in film and philosophy.

Cognitivism

As an undergraduate, I studied the Philosophy of Mind. My thesis, *The Explanatory Relationship between Cognitive Psychology and Neuroscience*, was an attempt to reconcile the quickly expanding body of research about low-level sensory processes with a particular kind of explanation of mind in Philosophy and Psychology: Cognitivism. This theoretical framework would influence my filmmaking and studio practice in two important ways. The first is the requirement for an accounting of mental activity in explanations of behavior. This seemingly uncontroversial position can be best understood in Psychology as a historical response to Behaviorism, which dominated psychology for the first half of the twentieth century, and which ignored or radically constrained the role of *thinking* in behavior. Behaviorist explanations focused exclusively on observable events, reducing behavior to a series of unmediated reflexes. For example, if I am driving toward an intersection and the traffic light turns yellow (stimulus), I will step on the brake and stop the car (response). Cognitivism adds a third element to the equation: mental states. If I think “I’m on time,” I will indeed stop the car. But if I think “I’m

late,” I may try to get through the intersection—the outcome is different. To fully explain behavior requires consideration of thought in addition to external events.

The second important feature of Cognitivism is the way it conceives of the architecture of mental activity, and how thoughts come into consciousness. Cognitivism equates thinking with a kind of information processing one might find in a computer program. In *Modularity of Mind*¹⁸, Jerry Fodor proposes that mental activity is subdivided into a series of specialized modules that exchange information in a hierarchy. The key feature of this structure is the “opacity” of the inner workings of each module to others—that is, a given module knows only the output of the preceding module, not how it arrived at the result. For instance, the visual system builds a representation of the outside world using a series of rapid shifts and fixations of gaze (saccades), but we are only conscious of the final static image. While Fodor describes these processes as limited to low level sensory processing, others have proposed that this modular architecture may go much higher, perhaps up to consciousness.¹⁹ This idea that much of mental activity is unconscious dovetails nicely with over a century of psychology since Freud. It also gives a functional explanation for why epiphanies seem to come out of nowhere.

Emotional Transition

In the early stages of my career as a film editor in Los Angeles, I quickly noticed patterns in the way my mentors approached their work. Sometimes they could articulate their thought process, but more often than not they acknowledged they were working by instinct. Informed by the

¹⁸ Jerry A. Fodor, *The Modularity of Mind : An Essay on Faculty Psychology* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1983).

¹⁹ P. Carruthers, "The Cognitive Functions of Language," *Behav Brain Sci* 25, no. 6 (Dec 2002).

acting theory of Charles Jelhinger,²⁰ I began to explore why some cuts seemed to “work” better than others. Instead of deep psychological probing into personal emotional memories, this theory adopts an analytic technique that is remarkably similar to the precepts of Cognitivism. A character’s initial emotion or objective (mental state) can only change in response to an external event (stimulus) or another emotion or objective, which is then externalized in action (response).²¹ As I gained experience in editing, I noticed that cuts of dramatic beats seem to resonate when capturing a character’s change in thought on camera—an *emotional transition* that can be seen in their eyes and body language. Whenever the shift falls off-camera because of a lapse in performance or a mistimed edit, the moment feels flat and artificial. Of particular interest is that this moment precedes any outward action. In other words, with the right edit of the right camera angle, we know that the character is going to do or say something *before* they actually do it.

The Decisive Moment

While editing *The Call of Story: an American Renaissance*²², a particularly complex documentary about the tradition of oral storytelling, I was confronted with a problem: how to cut down and maintain the integrity of a live performance that was far longer than the PBS programming limitations would allow. Coincidentally, I was reading Henri Cartier-Bresson’s *The Decisive Moment* at the time, which seemed to offer insight:

²⁰ Jelhinger was the director of the American Academy of Dramatic Arts from 1923 to 1952, an alternative to the “Method” schools that descended from Stanislavsky. Its graduates have included Katherine Hepburn, John Casavettes, and Jessica Chastain.

²¹ Don Richardson, "Acting without Agony," (1993).

²² *The Call of Story: An American Renaissance*, directed by Lori Ingle (PBS, 2004).

“To me, photography is the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as of a precise organization of forms which give that event its proper expression.”²³

There is a unique photographic frame that can best capture the essence of a moment in time—a convergence of psychology and optimal form. For instance, in his photograph, *Man Cycling Down Street*²⁴, a bicyclist is captured as he passes a narrow visual opening between exterior stairs and an adjacent building. The moment is emphasized psychologically (his slight blur against the rigidity of his surroundings suggests a determination and focus) and its form (a spatial point of emphasis according to the traditional compositional theory of thirds). Similarly, in *Behind the Gare Saint Lazare*²⁵, a man stranded in a flooded street, having made a leap for it, is frozen in the last possible moment before his heel will plunge into the water. Against a muted backdrop of urban decay, we feel an exhilaration in this brief moment of escape before the cold splash of reality.

The solution to my editing problem was to translate this idea of an optimal representative frame into a narrative space—to find the emotional core of the story, a pivotal moment of transition, and rebuild a condensed version that preserved its logical and emotional continuity. I started by pinning a still frame that represented the decisive moment on a wall, and built up a

²³ Henri Cartier-Bresson and E. Tériade, *The Decisive Moment* (New York, Simon and Schuster 1952).

²⁴ Henri Cartier-Bresson, "Man Cycling Down Street," accessed 02/28/2018, 2018. <https://www.csmonitor.com/The-Culture/Arts/2010/0507/Cartier-Bresson-A-master-s-black-and-white-world>.

²⁵ Henri Cartier-Bresson, "Behind the Gare Saint Lazare," accessed. <http://100photos.time.com/photos/henri-cartier-bresson-behind-gare-saint-lazare#photograph>.

photo collage of the new version of story around that image.²⁶ My final cut was guided by that structure.

Moments of Epiphany

The conceptual threads of Cognitivism, the Emotional Transition, and The Decisive Moment finally came together in a theory that I began to call *Moments of Epiphany*: our understanding of a character is unraveled and remade in a single moment. This flip in thinking is larger than the emotion of a dramatic beat within a scene²⁷, or even the structural “turning point” described in screenplay studies literature²⁸. It is a point of transition when we are forced to reevaluate the entirety of what we have seen through a new lens, revealing a new path ahead.

Over the next few years I wrote and directed several short films focusing on this idea, using the key visual element of the Decisive Moment in simple symmetry: a bookend of nearly identical images/words at the beginning and end of the film, but with entirely different meanings.

Detour (2007) and *No Worries* (2009) are narrative films about people at a crossroads, examining life decisions and regrets, and what do with the time they have left. In the opening shot of *Detour*, the protagonist is leaving her husband and way of life—she is walking right to left against the current; her performance and inflection is angry, defiant, determined. But by the last shot she is walking left to right, back in the flow, her same words delivered with a gentle

²⁶ I would later discover that Walter Murch had made a similar connection to Bresson years earlier, though he was using the still frames to capture the emotional essence of a particular setup (camera angle) rather than its role in the larger narrative.

²⁷ Walter Murch, *In the Blink of an Eye : A Perspective on Film Editing* (Silman-James Press, 2001).

²⁸ Robert McKee, *Story : Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* (New York : ReganBooks, c1997, 1997).

acceptance and resolve. In the same way, the opening shot of *No Worries* shows a child joyfully running toward us in slow motion through a nestled olive grove, revealing the title card of the film. But by the closing, the action is reversed and changed: a grown man says the title wistfully, and returns to the magic of his childhood memories.

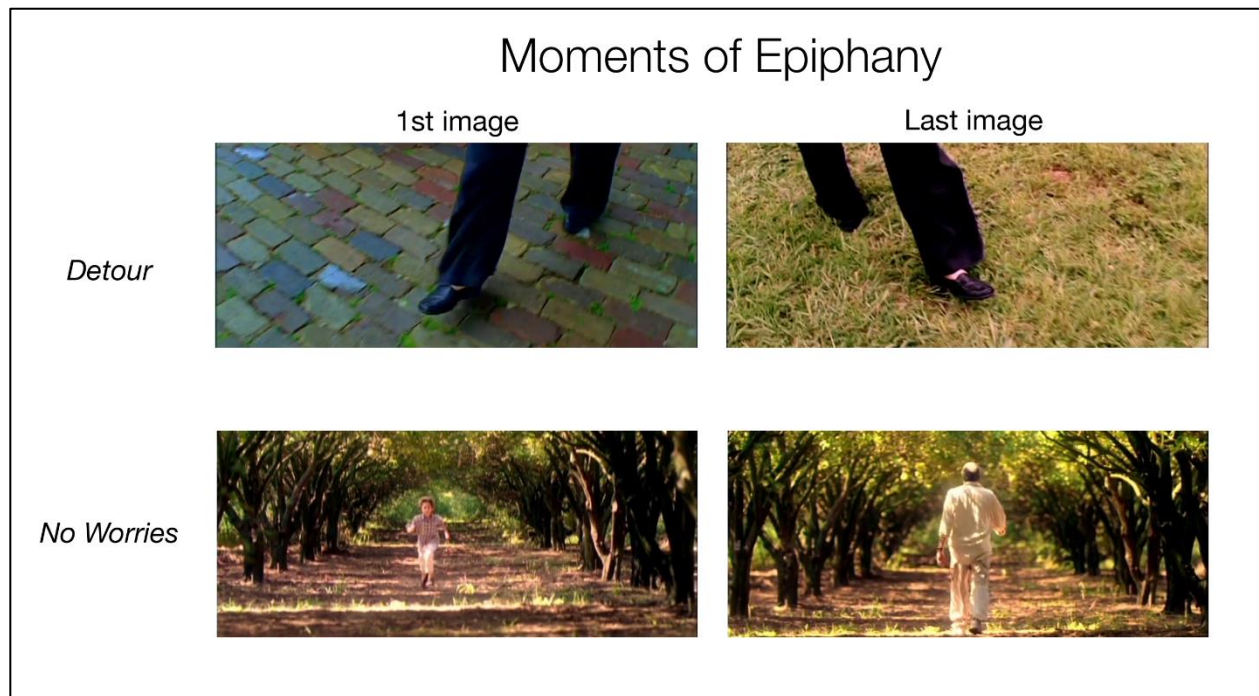


Figure 1: By Author, film stills from *Detour*, 2007 and *No Worries*, 2009

In both these examples we come to understand the similar image in a different way because of a sudden shift in the way a character sees his predicament. This is the crux of the Cognitivist argument against Behaviorism: you cannot understand behavior without access to mental states, which can come into existence suddenly and without warning.

DISCUSSION OF STUDIO WORK

Transition



Figure 2: By Author, film still from *Overunity*, 2012

Moments of Epiphany take on a Cosmic scale in *Overunity*, with identical first and last images that could indicate either the beginning or end of the universe depending on how we choose to look at it.

This film was a radical shift in form, a break from my conventional narrative past and a first foray into a discursive fusion of various categories, including experimental, narrative, and

documentary. This kind of film using free association has been described as a “complex thought that at times is not grounded in reality but can be contradictory, irrational, and fantastic.”²⁹

Overunity, or perpetual motion, is the fabled state when a system creates more energy than it consumes—a holy grail of power sought by mystics and pseudo-scientists for centuries. The film is a search for hope in a time of chaos, a conceptual odyssey through an alternative history that interweaves my haunting memories and obsessions (e.g. perpetual motion, numbers stations, infinite regress) against a backdrop of late 20th century zeitgeist: the energy crisis, ecological disaster, and political paranoia.

The theme of interconnectedness is captured in a unique animation style that I call “conceptual zoom.” Influenced by the Charles and Ray Eames seminal short film, *Powers of Ten*³⁰, this central visual metaphor for the film echoes the ideas of fractal geometry and infinite regress; it relates images of seemingly disparate events by placing them on the same visual plane, but at radically different scales—the connection can only be realized with three-dimensional camera moves that are orders of magnitude in relative distance.

²⁹ Rascaroli Laura, "The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, no. 2 (2008), 27.

³⁰ In the spirit of interconnectedness, I cannot resist pointing out that this film, which left such a lasting impression on me at a young age, was preceded by Eva Szasz's *Cosmic Zoom* (1968), which itself was an adaptation of the book *Cosmic View: The Universe in 40 Jumps* (1958) by Keese Boeke.



Figure 3: By Author, film still from *Entropy*, 2013.

Moments of Epiphany took on a more personal note when I thought my father was dying. If *Overunity* was a fantasy of cautious optimism, then my next film, *Entropy*, was an emotional counterpoint, ending on a note of regret. The film continued my obsession with epiphany and symmetry, beginning and ending with an identical image and words that have entirely different meaning.

Entropy is the general trend of the universe toward disorder and death. The film is about a subtle form of neglect, in which a single utterance becomes a haunting trigger for a series of early memories. Capturing that ethereal state during times of prolonged stress and exhaustion when we hover between confusion and absolute clarity, the film raises questions about how we perceive vivid moments in time. Do we remember them as discrete images, or as a continuous

experience? This question led me to my first formal challenge to a conventional understanding of the nature of film and its relationship to the photograph.

Film perception is an illusion—a representation of continuous time and motion even though the medium is made up of rapidly displayed still frames, essentially a series of photographs. It is produced by two distinct perceptual phenomena, which are often misunderstood and conflated.³¹ The first is Persistence of Vision, a lingering perception of individual frames even after the original stimulus has stopped, and is the reason why we see a continuous image (what Perceptual Psychologists call “flicker fusion”) rather than a flickering of many images. The second is Short-Range Apparent Motion, a product of the same low-level visual mechanism responsible for motion detection, and which is indistinguishable from the perception of real motion.

In looking for a way to capture this dichotomy between the singular moment and time, I turned to two different film approaches, *La Jetee*³² and *What I’m Looking For*.³³ Both of these films use photomontage (the editing together of photographs) as a form to explore the essence of film, memory, and experience. *La Jetee* is science fiction, a time travel paradox that plays on the ambiguity of past, present, and future by manipulating our sense of the passage of time. In one

³¹ There is an ongoing misconception in Cinema Studies literature, which continues to use Persistence of Vision as an explanation for perception of motion, or mistakenly adds other perceptual phenomena, like Phi and Beta movement to the mix. Nevertheless, Perceptual Psychology settled the argument nearly a century ago (despite some confusion within the field). See “*The Myth of Persistence of Vision Revisited*” (Anderson and Anderson, 1993).

³² *La Jetee*, directed by Chris Marker (Criterion Collection., 1962), <https://login.ezproxy.net.ucf.edu/login?auth=shibb&url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat00846a&AN=ucfl.PDA000983575&site=eds-live&scope=site>

³³ *What I’m Looking For*, directed by Shelly Silver(2004). <https://login.ezproxy.net.ucf.edu/login?auth=shibb&url=http://ucf.kanopystreaming.com/node/113478>.

particularly poignant sequence, time dilates and then stands still as we watch a sleeping woman: the moment she opens her eyes is captured with the only motion picture used in the entire film. In the essay/poem *What I'm Looking For*, Silver interviews people hoping they will reveal something of themselves. She declares she has an obsession with time, wanting "...control, to see the same movement over and over...to make time stop." She is searching for an elusive truth that can only be revealed in the gaps between moments.

Combining Marker's ambiguity of time with Silver's hidden meaning between frames, I began with a series of photographs that I used to create various animated layers of digital hand drawings and filters. These subtly pulsating images are visually isolated with forced depth-of-field, and connected by camera moves over a figurative narrative space rather than film cuts. Many of the images masquerade as motion picture even though they are stills with added film grain and induced camera shake. Only two shots are actually live action, arguably capturing the most vivid, yet static moments in the film. A motion picture that is essentially still, yet made up of a series of photographs that are in motion, this film is an implicit challenge to the questionable dichotomy between cinema and photography.



Figure 4: By Author, *Cold*, 2014, book/flip-book hybrid, 8.5" x 10"

Cold was an opportunity to further deconstruct film by adapting *Entropy* to the Book Arts. Partly sculptural, the book is made up of three chapters of different dimensions, stacked in the form of descending steps reminiscent of Penrose stairs featured in *Overunity*. The cover is a mirror image of the steps into which the pages fit when closed.

The middle chapter is a conventional book covering nearly the entire film. It translates the source's cinematic language to the visual language of graphic novels, breaking action into

discrete sub-frames, spreading larger camera moves across the gutter and multiple pages, and using negative space to signify the passage of time.

The first and third chapters, however, take another form: the flip book. This early primitive form of motion picture³⁴ subverts the static nature of the first and last shots in the film, the same close up of an arm with an IV. Indeed, the attempt to translate the subtle action of the original motion picture into a flip book renders it as a series of indistinguishable frames that still have to be viewed over time, having the contradictory effect of amplifying both their motion and essential stillness.

The Studio: A New Form

My shift to the fine arts studio began with the discovery of a new form. Whereas the film and book versions of *Entropy* implicitly addressed the relationship between the still image and motion picture, each did so either within the medium of film or the medium of photography (a book). This new chapter gave me a chance to explore the interaction simultaneously by combining the two mediums. I set out to challenge assumptions—use motion picture to capture stillness, use the still frame to reveal motion. What I discovered was a new visual grammar with fascinating properties that would underlie much of my later work.

I began to experiment with video projected onto photographs. This combination of reflected and projected light has intriguing visual properties—an emergent tonal range that exceeds typical visual experience. The effect is uncanny, an apparent luminescence that is

³⁴ The origin of flip books, like the rest of motion picture technology, is subject to debate. There are many unsubstantiated online references to a patent filed in 1868 by John Barnes Linnet. One of the first commercial instances appeared in 1895 (see Giannetti, 5.)

difficult to describe and cannot be documented sufficiently in photos or video—it must be seen in person. A synergy of two different color spectra creates blacks that are deeper than video can generate and whites that are brighter than photographs can reflect. The subtractive color spectrum of photography relies on ambient light, mixing three primary colors of pigment (cyan, yellow, magenta) to reflect color and value. Equal combination of all three creates black³⁵ while their absence reflects white. In contrast, the additive color spectrum of video generates its own light, mixing three different primary colors (red, green, blue) to emit color and value. Equal combination of all three creates white while their absence leaves black.³⁶ The apparent luminescence of combining these two spectra is not a visual illusion. Using a spot light meter, measurements of a black and white chart with ambient room lighting and projector illumination reveal an expanded tonal range:

³⁵ This is a simplified explanation. In practice, black pigment is usually added in printing (hence CYMK) because impurities in the pigment rarely yield a true black.

³⁶ Bruce A. Block, *The Visual Story : Creating the Visual Structure of Film, Tv, and Digital Media*, 2nd ed. (Amsterdam ; Boston: Focal Press, 2008), 137-40.

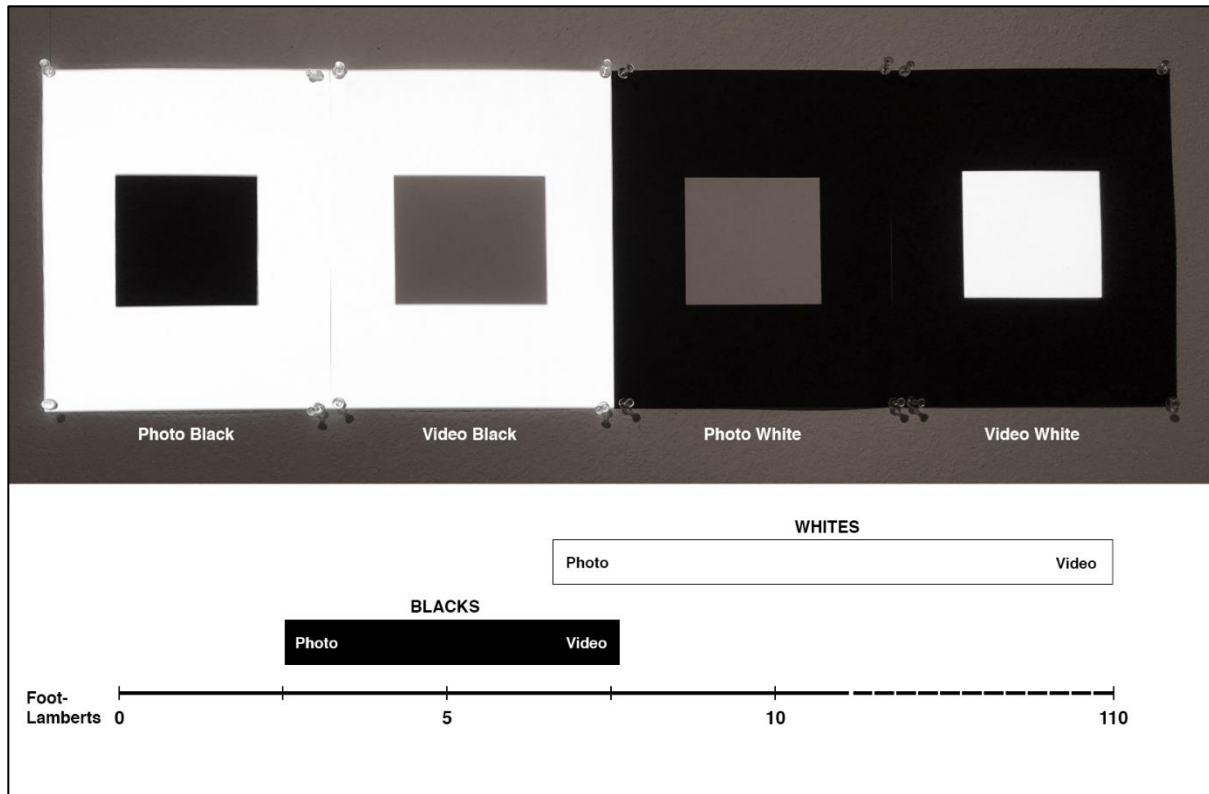


Figure 5. Expanded tonal range of hybrid photograph/video. For legibility, the exposure of this image is reduced to keep the illuminated white areas from over-exposing. The areas that appear gray are in fact white surfaces when seen in person.

In hybrid form, photo black is darker than video black level by more than a factor of 2, while video white is brighter than photo white level by nearly a factor of 14.

Family

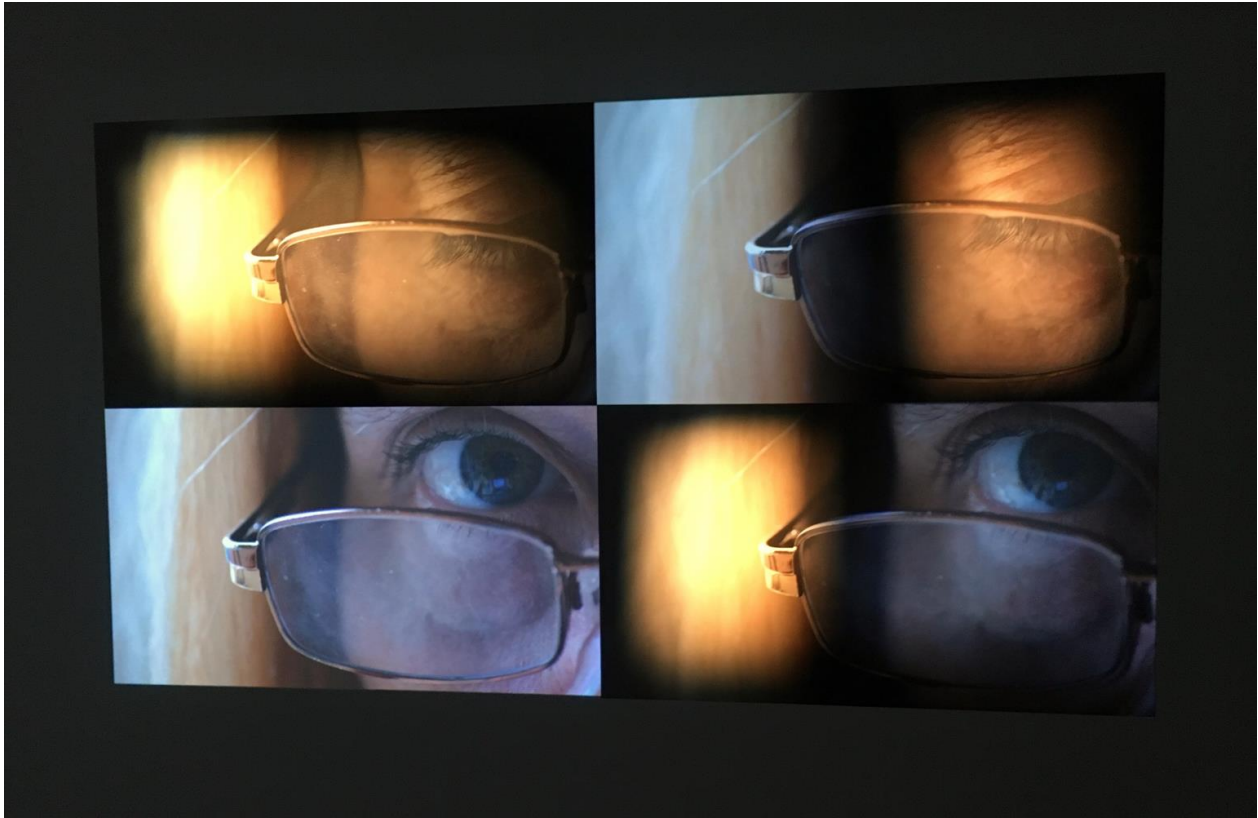


Figure 6: By Author, *What.*, 2014. Photographs, video projection, spot lighting, 46" x 82"

The first of the series, *What.*, is a matrix of four iterations of a close up of my wife. A combination of photographs, video projection, and spot illumination, the work deconstructs time and space with different intersections of still/motion picture and reflected/projected light.

At its first public viewing, a colleague suggested this was a full realization of the potential of Cinemagraphs. First popularized on the internet in 2011,³⁷ these animated GIFs (Graphic Interchange Format) are short video loops that highlight subtle motion in an otherwise

³⁷ Meghan Niewland, "Framed in Time: A Cinemagraph Series of the Everyday & Grounded Theory of Cinemagraphy" (McMaster University, 2012), 3.

still image, such as a flickering candle or a single blade of grass blowing in the wind. Having the appearance of a photograph, they are nonetheless partly in motion. But they are confined to a strictly video modality, having to be watched as animations. In contrast, this new visual vocabulary of hybrid media offers the possibility of actual photographs that appear to move.

The piece gradually builds over the course of a minute. She is looking down, intently focused on something. As revealed in areas of the image that are motion picture, her eye appears to be scanning, maybe reading or texting a message. Suddenly aware of being watched, she looks up and holds us in an intense and unnaturally long stare before returning to work. She repeats this cycle four times, each with increasing duration and intensity. In one quadrant—what we at first assume to be a still image—she gradually looks up at us in extreme slow motion.

I had stumbled onto a new formal vocabulary, but the subject matter continued with a preoccupation from earlier work: psychological states. This simple experiment about the nature of motion picture perception quickly became a study of the emotional core of relationships and marriage. In dramatic terms, it is a performance. Her emotion is subtle, somewhere between curiosity, annoyance, and dismissiveness. The title, “*What.*”, echoes this mood with a punctuation convention from film scripts, deliberately replacing a question mark with a period—suggesting an abruptness that is emotionally more laden than just a neutral question would be.

The framing and large scale imply a proximity that is clinical yet intimate. According to Proxemics in film theory,³⁸ which signifies a viewer’s psychological state depending on the apparent location of the camera relative to the subject, such an extreme close up shot at eye level

³⁸ Richard Meran Barsam and Dave Monahan, *Looking at Movies : An Introduction to Film*, 5th edition. ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015), 232.

implies a figuratively short emotional distance between subject and viewer, and also a neutrality without judgment. We can approach and possibly violate personal space only in a relationship with significant history and trust. Ironically, this intimacy is a double-edged sword—it bites back: our relentless intrusion is met with an equal or greater emotional intensity.

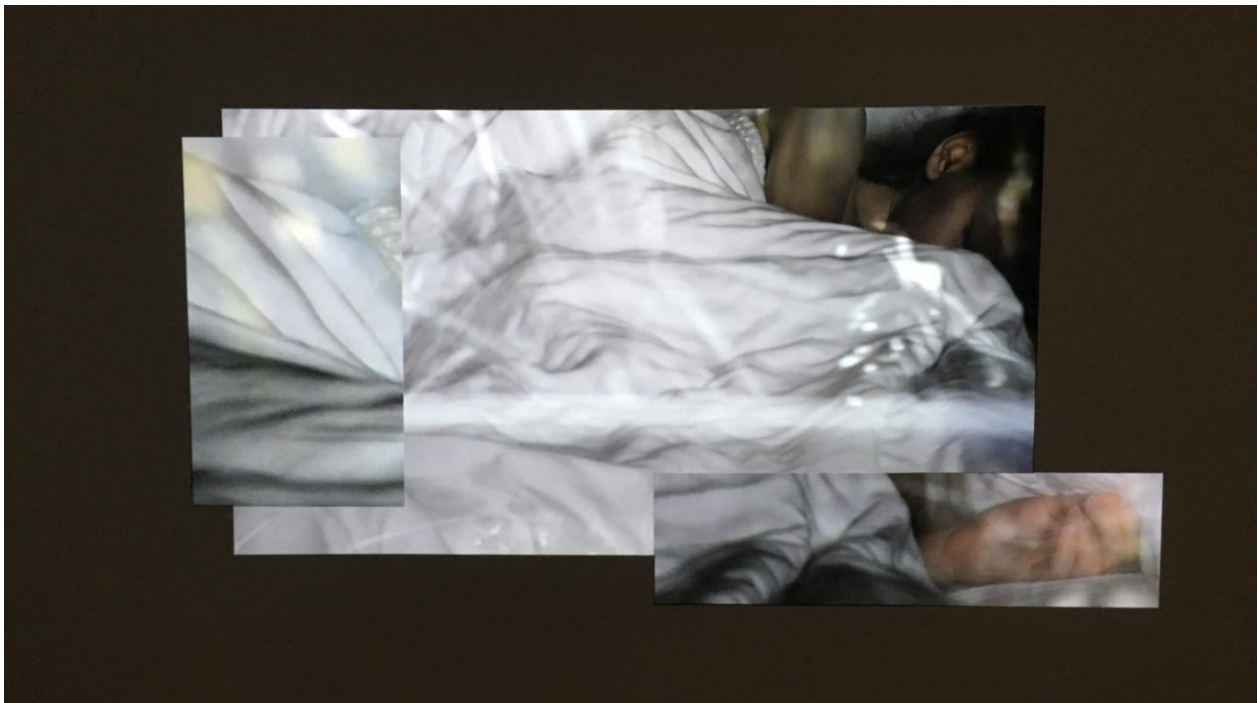


Figure 7: By Author, *Who Are You?*, 2014, photographs, video projection, 49" x 96"

Who Are You? and *Translucence* began by accident. I was shooting film for a different project from a hotel balcony, when I glanced over to see my daughter sleeping through the window. She appeared utterly still, alternately cradled and occluded by a reflection of nearby palm fronds waving in the wind. But I could also see other details that suggested she was having a nightmare. In that moment, I realized how difficult it is to see who she really is—seemingly

quiet, still, angelic. To catch a glimpse of a tumultuous inner life that I could only guess at, I would have to look carefully enough in just the right way. To do that meant finding a way to get around the confines of the conventional frame.

In *Who Are You?* she appears frozen, occupying a small portion of the dominant rectangular frame, spilling off the edges and lost in a sea of a white comforter. Beyond the extremely slow-moving reflections of flora, the only indications of life are contained in two panels that break beyond the dominant frame and offer closer views: her hesitant breathing revealed in the wavering rise and fall of an exposed shoulder in one, and the echoing twitch of a disproportionately sized hand in the other.

This was the first instance of a spatial analogue to film editing in my studio work. In a conventional master shot sequence, the editing mimics the way we might approach an unfamiliar situation, beginning with the general observations of a wide shot, and then cutting to closer shots to see the specific details.³⁹ In this case, however, instead of a linear sequence of images, they occur simultaneously in different frames. The larger rectangle can be thought of as the master, while the two smaller rectangles are the close ups, their differing sizes even suggesting a temporal sequence from large to small: from a girl sleeping, to her unsteady breathing, to her moving hand.

³⁹ Also known as the master scene technique, this editing convention is a hallmark of industrial, continuity-driven film production.



Figure 8: By Author, *Translucence*, 2014, photograph, video projection, 48" x 96"

Translucence came from the same source material (the sleeping girl) as *Who Are You?* but used a different form of intersection of photograph and video. Whereas the previous work kept the two mediums isolated in the frame or gradually blended, this was my first attempt to fuse the two in a complete overlap. The underlying photograph is heavily defocused, while the overlaid video is focused, giving the image an ethereal presence and illusion of depth.

I wanted to capture the process of trying to see who she is, but also the futility of looking too hard. Starting from just the defocused photograph, the projected video gradually paints her with light, building up an image in ever increasing waves, eventually blowing out to incoherence, and fading away. The more we look, the less we know.



Figure 9: By Author, *Self-Portrait*, 2015, photographs, video projection, 58" x 100"

Self Portrait addresses my feelings of fragmentation—as husband, parent, teacher, and student. Placed next the other pieces in this family series, it captures those moments when I can focus on the people I love.

This mixed media mosaic pulls from the spatial pattern, hybrid form, and editorial sequencing in the three previous works. It breaks the conventional film frame into six overlapping photographs of various sizes and aspect ratios. The images are incomplete or abstract: an extreme close up of an eye, a hand, a possible reflection. It also uses the full overlay technique of focused projection onto the entire surface of underlying defocused photographs, which amplifies the illusion of depth of the seemingly stacked images.

An implied sequence of size works in parallel with an actual edited sequence of events—a larger narrative arc of images working both simultaneously and in a coordinated dance. Focusing at first on an abstract reflection, the steady breathing and gentle hand movements suddenly pause as a wave of motion washes over the view, and a quizzical expression turns to a smile. The blurry glasses and barely visible blinking eyelashes come gradually into focus. A glimpse of clarity.



Figure 10: By Author, *The Space Between*, 2018, photograph, video projection, 40" x 101"

After a long hiatus, I was able to complete the family series with a portrait of my son. I had come to realize that my studio work, like my recent film work, was straddling a conventional divide between the documentary and narrative/dramatic point-of-view. On one hand, the perspective of these pieces is a document of relationships as I see them—a type of autobiography

with a certain claim (however dubious) on neutrality and objectivity. On the other hand, they are also detailed constructions using all the artistic and cinematic form at my disposal: shape, proximity, value, rhythm etc. The mere act of choosing a camera angle is to adopt both a literal and psychological point of view—a subjectivity that has as much in common with fiction as non-fiction. With this piece, I decided to embrace these two modes of film genre in a hybrid form. This would be a document of a psychological state that uses a traditional production process normally associated with drama—a performance captured on a soundstage.

The Space Between depicts a teenage boy lying sideways in a wide rectangle of black negative space. Though perfectly still, we see the subtle evidence that he exists in time: the blinking eyes, the gentle breathing captured in the rim-lit rise and fall of his shirt. In extremely dilated slow motion, he pulls his legs and arms to his chest in a fetal position, while a faint residual image of his open form remains behind.

I was interested in the emotional transition between two psychological states—from an open vulnerability to a closed defensive posture. By slowing down time I hoped to chase down that elusive shift in thinking to a specific moment. But even though we know that a transition has taken place, we may never be able to pinpoint the exact moment in time it happens, no matter how closely we look. That suggests there may a period of time in which we occupy both states simultaneously.

Until I had an opportunity to exhibit these portraits together in a gallery setting as a *family*, I did not appreciate their proximal and temporal synergy. The visual intensity that threatens to overwhelm in such a confined gallery space is nonetheless strangely reassuring because of its intimacy. What at first appears to be a snapshot of domestic bliss evolves over

time to reveal not just individual details but also a dialogue of sorts—a complex family economy between husband and wife, between parents and children. The more or less immediate apprehension of a photograph is illuminated by the progressive unfolding of cinema.

But then the brief calm of this epiphany is punctured by an abrupt recycle back to the beginning of the videos. We are caught in a loop, our newfound insight only a glimpse of what we hope is a larger narrative. Can we break beyond our prescribed roles? Or are we doomed to repeat these patterns forever?

Memory

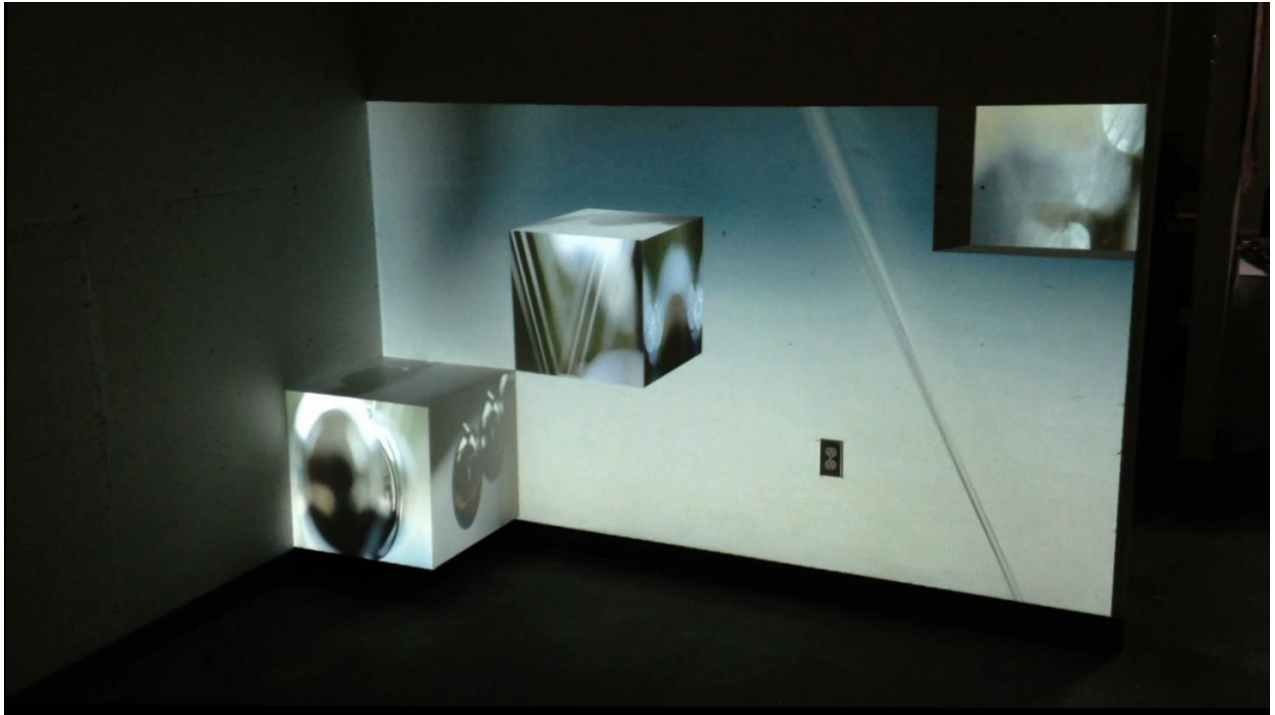


Figure 11: By Author, *Newton's Cradle*, 2014, Foamcore, projection mapping, sound, 96" x 54"

My work explores the connection between memory, fantasy, and a search for meaning. The way we remember the past can distort or illuminate the way we understand the present. The reverse is also true: new revelations in the present can be the Moments of Epiphany that completely rewrite the narrative of our past and help us see the path ahead.

Newton's Cradle is a response to childhood memories of spending hours at a time playing with a physics toy that demonstrates conservation of momentum with a series of swinging spheres. I was convinced that its inexorable slowing could be overcome with just the right perspective—that by squinting and tilting the head just so, I could will it to move forever. Yet in

the back of my mind was a lurking fear of unleashing some darker force that I would not be able to contain.

Newton's Cradle explores these conflicting feelings by challenging the conventional flat surface of projected motion picture, and how we understand it to represent reality. This was my first attempt to project into the third dimension. Occupying the larger space of a traditional screen, an abstract line vibrates against an unfocused background. More discernable views of the swinging spheres are arranged in perspective as a cube—still a two-dimensional representation of a three-dimensional object. In the foreground, the screen itself projects out as a real cube containing the most explicit images of the balls moving roughly in correct orientation in space. Finally, in the extreme background, a small portion of the traditional screen appears to be “punched out,” revealing something in perpetual motion beyond the picture.

A sound track of children at a playground is juxtaposed with the distinctive clicking of a Geiger counter, its increasing tempo mirroring my sense of dread.

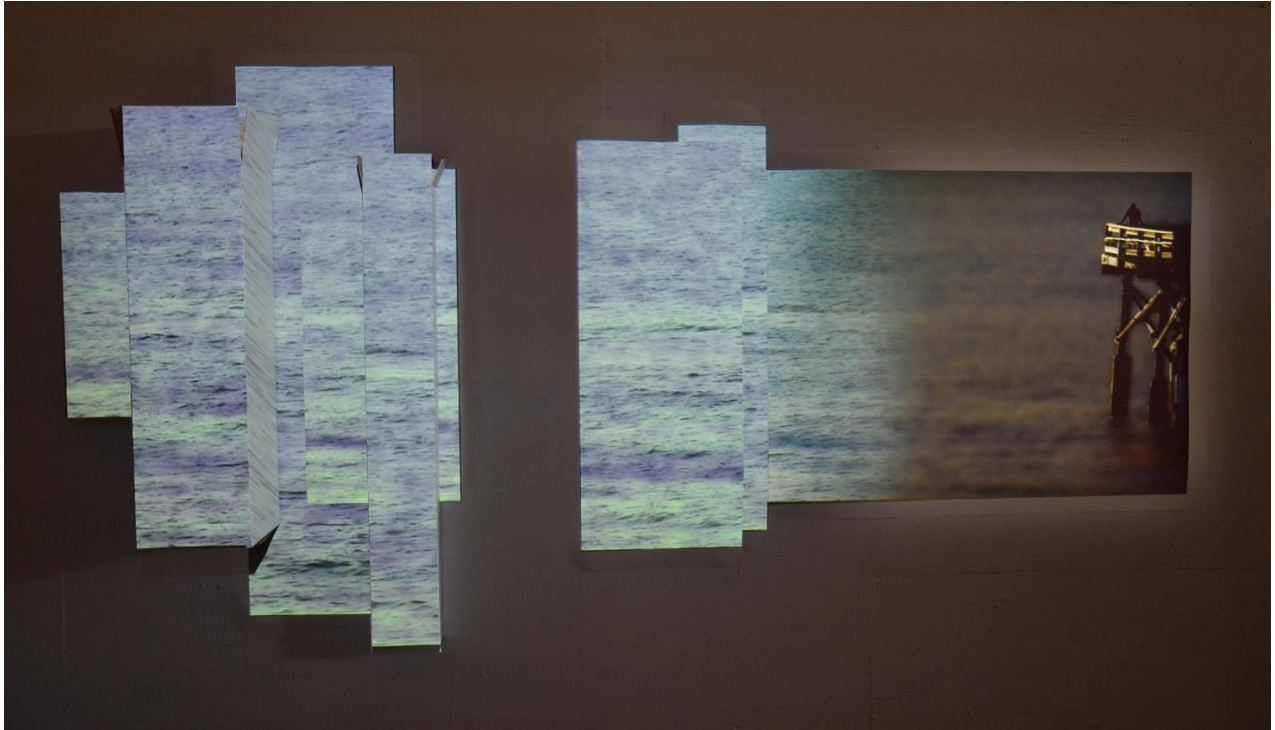


Figure 12: By Author, *Capture*, 2015, photographs, video projection, packing boxes 60” x 120”

As memory succumbs to disorder, can we recall a moment with clarity?

I was shooting near the beach when I noticed a man on a pier looking out at the water. Seemingly lost in thought, he remained in place for nearly half an hour. This scene reminded me of paintings by Edward Hopper—the isolation of *Nighthawks* (1942)⁴⁰, of course, but also a surrealism or distortion of memory in *Rooms By the Sea* (1951)⁴¹. The moment struck me as a perfect subject of the *experience* of memory and how it might differ from the experience of the present.

⁴⁰ Edward Hopper, "Nighthawks, 1942," accessed.
http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/111628?search_no=1&index=1.

⁴¹ Edward Hopper, "Rooms by the Sea, 1951," accessed.
<https://artgallery.yale.edu/collections/objects/52939>.

Capture attempts to paint this picture as a struggle, the difficulty of holding on to a memory that is fragmenting into the past. It is a mixture of the various techniques I had been using with video and photographs projected onto three-dimensional surfaces. The man and the pier are a photographic silhouette with video highlights of the early morning sun. He looks off to the left across the defocused ocean, which begins to flow almost imperceptibly, and then fragments into overlapping frames of increasing speed. The water disappears below the surface and then reappears across the surfaces of a series of different size rectangular boxes, before disappearing again into the ocean.

A different iteration of this material, *It's Not About the Fish*, shifts toward minimalism and reverses the metaphor. The motion of the projected video occupies a small but distinct portion of the image on one side, while the man remains fixed in silhouette. The recall of a memory is even more vivid than the original perception of that event.



Figure 13: By Author, *It's Not About the Fish*, 2015, photographs, video projection, 72" x 44"

Life out of balance



Figure 14: By Author, clockwise, *Intersections 1,2,3*, 2016, photographs and video projection, dimensions variable

The *Intersections* series came out of a research grant I worked on with two colleagues: *Layers of Transformation: Voices of Mosquito Lagoon*. A proposal for a group exhibition and community outreach responding to the tensions of industry, development, and conservation confronting the

lagoon and the adjacent Canaveral National Seashore, the program invited the public to become better observers of the delicate balance between man and environment.

I was intrigued by the irony that funding for the National Park Service is tied directly to the volume of visitors every year, which itself causes most of the ecological damage to the region. Its primary mandates of education and preservation are at odds. The *Intersections* series is a variation on this theme, using the hybrid of projected video and photography to emphasize the importance of *looking* in a self-conscious way, to appreciate that you cannot observe a system without affecting it.

A mosaic of competing windows, color, and movement, *Intersections 1* rides a wave of water and its retreat, punctuated by the random rhythm of fleeting high-speed traffic. Reflecting a world in conflict, a soundtrack of orchestral strings plays in reverse and extremely slowed down.

Intersections 2 offers a more direct confrontation, a binary opposition of nature and artifact that is more than it first appears. Despite its seeming stillness, the foreground betrays hints of real time motion against an energetic background of extreme dilation. But the decaying wood and rusty nails give a hint about which one will persevere, while the soundtrack of a Tibetan singing bowl suggests taking the long view.

A hopeful perspective that man can only do so much damage, *Intersections 3* moves beyond the collision between man and nature and asks us to slow down and take notice. There is beauty and strength in just being.

Color, The Third Dimension, and Meaning

So far, the meaning in my work was largely contained within literal and symbolic content. I became interested in the way color and form might also convey meaning without recourse to content or overt symbolism. I was intrigued by elements of the Formalists, like Mondrian, who were exploring the formal relations of line, shape, and rhythm, the color fields and geometry of Abstract Expressionists like Rothko and Stella, and even the phenomenology (pure experience) of color and space in the work of James Turrell. I began to explore the interaction of projected color on sculptural surfaces.

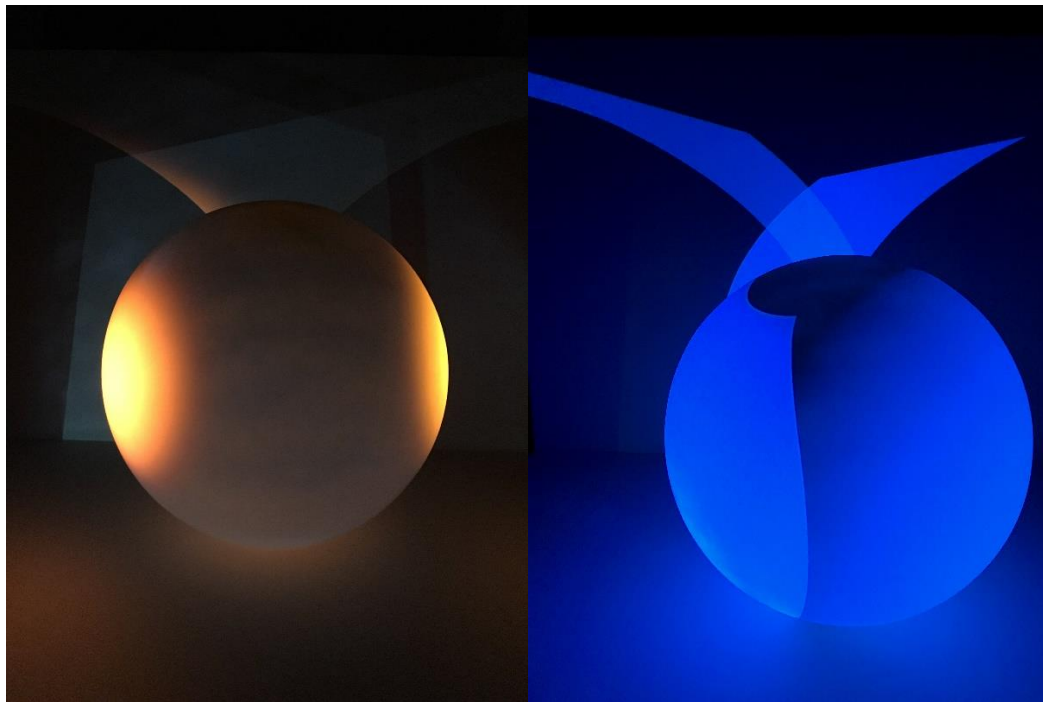


Figure 15: By Author, *Untitled*, 2017, Polyethylene Sphere, Dual Video Projection

Untitled consists of two projectors focused on a large plastic sphere in an asymmetric pattern. An identical video signal is fed to both projectors with an animation of abstract shapes and color, striking the spherical surface, the floor, and the wall beyond.

Here I discovered a rationale for the third dimension: it must transform the projected image. The surfaces in this piece interact with the image and light in various and unexpected ways. The curvature of the sphere transforms the original geometry depending on the location and angle, while the floor and walls reflect both the glow from the sphere and the distorted shapes and eclipse that spill out beyond. There is a random quality to this transformation; although the input pattern is controlled, the outcome is unpredictable.

The most fascinating characteristic turns out to be the way the light from the two projectors intersects to create new shapes that are not contained in the original images. This emergent behavior is similar to what is described by Montage theory (see *Tertium Quid*, discussed later), and also resonates with my awareness of my own process—the intuitive manipulation of elements yielding unexpected results.

Despite the mesmerizing quality of light and shape, neither color nor the third dimension were creating the additional meaning I was looking for. The effect remained an abstraction.

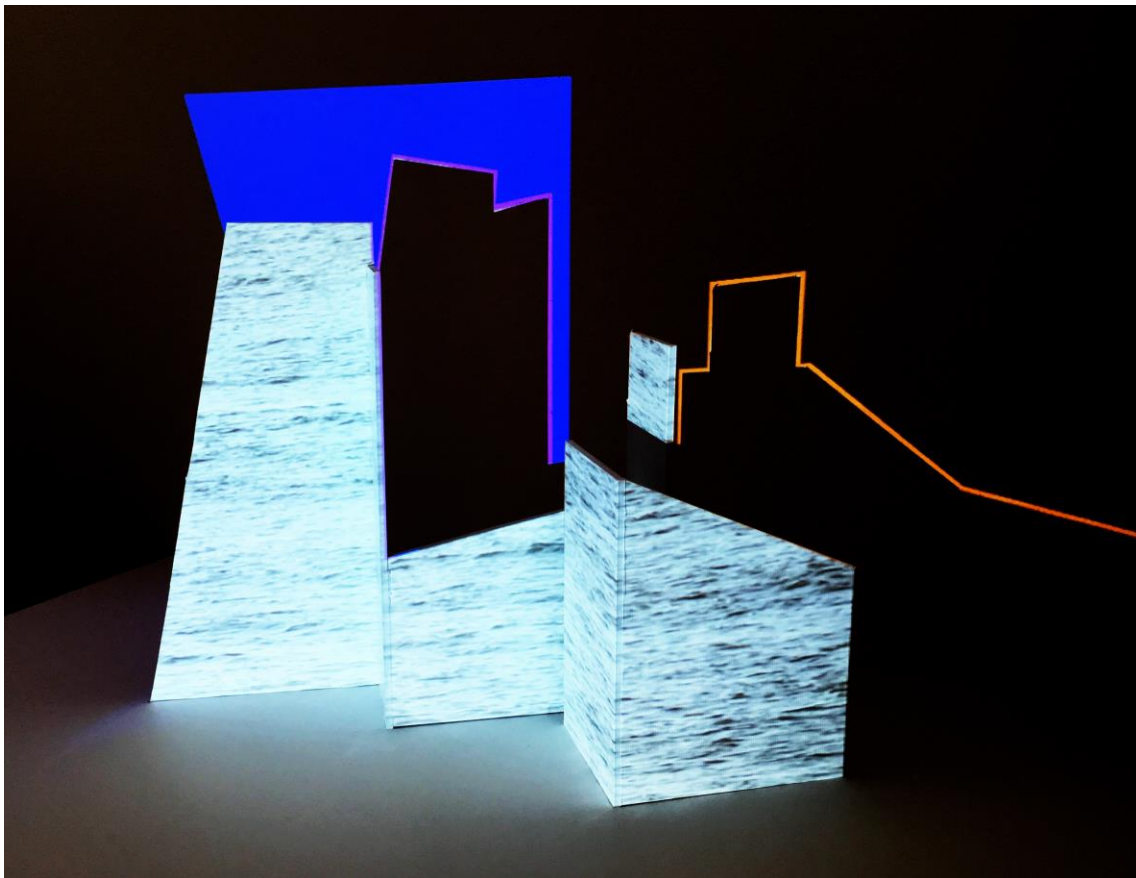
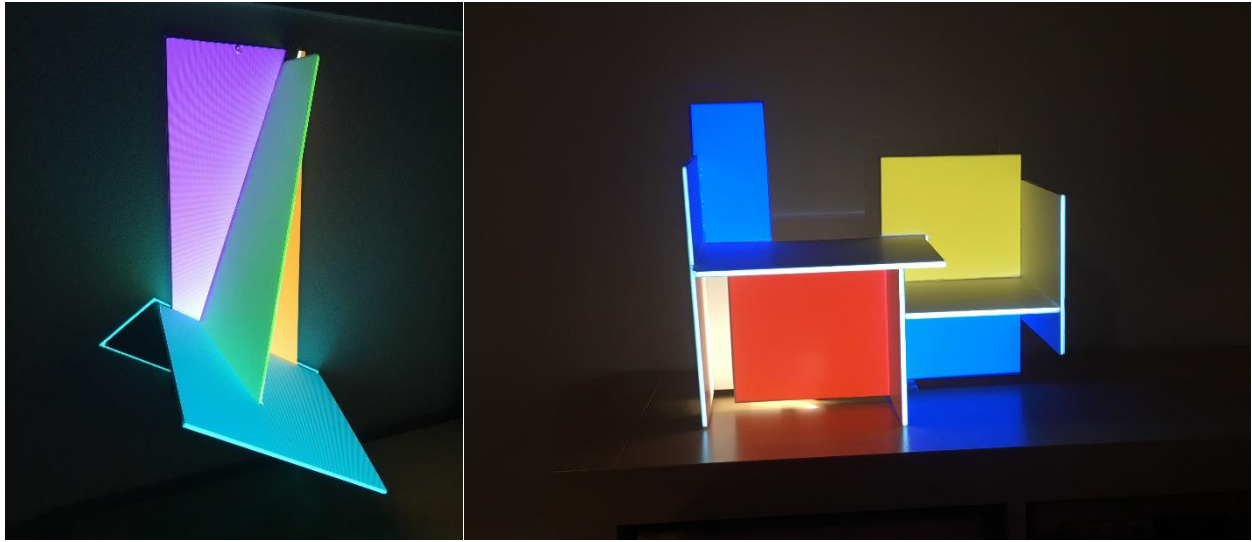


Figure 16: By Author, *Illuminations* 1, 2, 3, 2016, Foamcore, projection mapping, dimensions various (clockwise from upper left)

I turned to content with which I had strong associations. In the *Illuminations* series, I created sculptural projection surfaces that drew inspiration from established architecture and design language.

#1 is a reference to Frank Lloyd Wright, particularly the intersecting planes of some of his later buildings like the Beth Shalom temple in Elkins Park, Pennsylvania. A flickering animation of light evolves through a series of colors on various surfaces. The intersecting planes alter the color of an adjacent surface or form a color scheme. For instance, a two-dimensional tetrad is transformed into three-dimensional triad and split complement. This is a kind of color theory in space.

#2 is a reference to the De Stijl movement of the early twentieth century, particularly Mondrian and the Rietveld chair. Its horizontal and vertical planes are a dance of primary colors.

These first two pieces share a motif of blinking light. Meant to evoke mystery, these are more personal associations from my earlier work than the horror movie trope of flickering florescent light fixtures: secrets behind closed doors (*Overunity*), the ebb and flow of life (*Entropy*), the flash of epiphany (*Detour* and *No Worries*).

#3 is a combination of references: The German Expressionism of a Fritz Lang film, such as *Metropolis*, and the roofline of a waterside English industrial city like Liverpool—perhaps an early impression of a Beatles album cover. Flowing water is projected onto a zig-zag wall of angular shapes that cast thin outlines on the wall. The wall intervenes with the ocean current as an obstruction, slowing it down in places, but also accelerating it as the image wraps around a diagonal corner. This transformation of speed is a reference to Einstein's theory of Special

Relativity, which uses geometry and the fixed speed of light to show that time is affected by motion⁴². On a diagonal surface the image has to travel a further distance but get there in the same time as it would on a perpendicular surface—it has to move faster.

I was beginning to find meaning with the introduction of symbols and associations to the raw color and sculpture. Still, I felt there was a flashy quality to this—all spectacle without enough substance to decode.

⁴² Joseph Schwartz and Michael McGuinness, *Einstein for Beginners* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979).



Figure 17: By Author, *Unfolded*, 2016, Foamcore, projection mapping, 24" x 36"



Figure 18: By Author, *Little Boxes*, 2017, Sintra, Ikea shelf, video projection, sound, 12" x 75" x 10"

For the next two pieces, I reintroduced a type of content from my past to sculptural surfaces, and also found a way to integrate color that was transformative.

Unfolded and *Little Boxes* deal with an early childhood anxiety. My experience growing up in the post sexual revolution of the early 1970s, becoming suddenly aware that behind the bedroom doors of all those houses—maybe even mine—something scary was going on: sex, drugs, or something worse.

Using appropriated film and television clips from or about that era, *Unfolded* projects video onto a model house that is partially opened and flipped upside down. Metaphorically set on its head, the house reveals its sordid underbelly as a collage of adultery and domestic violence. Unable to contain the drama, some of video spills through an open window and door onto the wall beyond.

I exploited this detail for *Little Boxes*, but instead reversed the point of view from inside to the outside. A row of six cut outs of an iconic home sit on a shelf, echoing the “ticky-tacky” of identical tract housing from Pete Seeger’s classic satire of suburban conformity,⁴³ while a child’s voice recites *Good Night Moon*⁴⁴, a classic children’s bedtime book. The houses at first fade in as white, then turn to various colors, revealing scenes of domestic drama projected through the windows onto the wall. The small scale invites close scrutiny, but as the viewer moves closer he blocks the projection, occluding the images inside. This suggests a defensive

⁴³ Pete Seeger, "Broadside Ballads," recorded 1963, Broadside Records, n.p.

⁴⁴ Margaret Wise Brown and Clement Hurd, *Goodnight Moon* (1947).

strategy for a child, and a dilemma for the vigilant or the voyeur: we can only catch glimpses of hidden transgressions out of the corner of our eyes—we can never *see* them directly.



Figure 19: By Author, *Punchthrough*, 2017, Foamcore, photographs, video projection, LED lighting, 24" x 60"

The idea of a cutout window revealing truth between planes provided a key to another vexing problem. I found myself continually returning to footage I had shot of ocean current two years earlier, which captured a recurring experience going back to childhood. In this meditative

state, I imagined that if I looked in just the right way I could freeze the current, push through the now and capture the moment.⁴⁵

Punchthrough is a metaphor for Cognition—an active mind finding order in sensation. A five-foot-wide rectangular plane with a cutout window overlaps and floats several inches out from a smaller plane. The front plane is illuminated by projected video of ocean current, which begins to separate into segments of increasingly time-dilated motion that comes almost to a standstill. Through the window a photograph of the water is frozen in time, illuminated by hidden LED lighting.

A colleague referred me to *The Optical Unconscious*, by art theorist Rosalind Krauss, which begins by describing how 19th century art critic John Ruskin spent his childhood vacations at the beach, spending hours at a time lost in the abstract visual field of the ocean. The similarity to my work was clear: a fixation with the ocean, of course, but also a kind of immersive state focused exclusively on the sensation of movement. This would prefigure the twentieth century Formalist goal of pure vision unconcerned with content. Later in the passage, Krauss suggests that such a state could reach transcendence if it suddenly becomes aware of itself, a “Cogito for vision.” This is a reformulation of Descartes’ philosophical proposition, “I think, therefore I am,” as: *I see, I am aware that I am seeing, therefore I am.*

I had found a new way to think about my goals that resonated with my interest in perception and epiphany. I am searching for an elusive type of perceptual experience

⁴⁵ There is a linguistic connection between moving water and time. From the latin *currens*, *running*, we get current as a noun meaning *flow*, and as an adjective meaning *now* or *passing in time*.

characterized by an instantaneous shift in perspective—an “aha” moment of metacognition when suddenly I have the overpowering feeling that I am both seeing *and* aware that I am seeing.

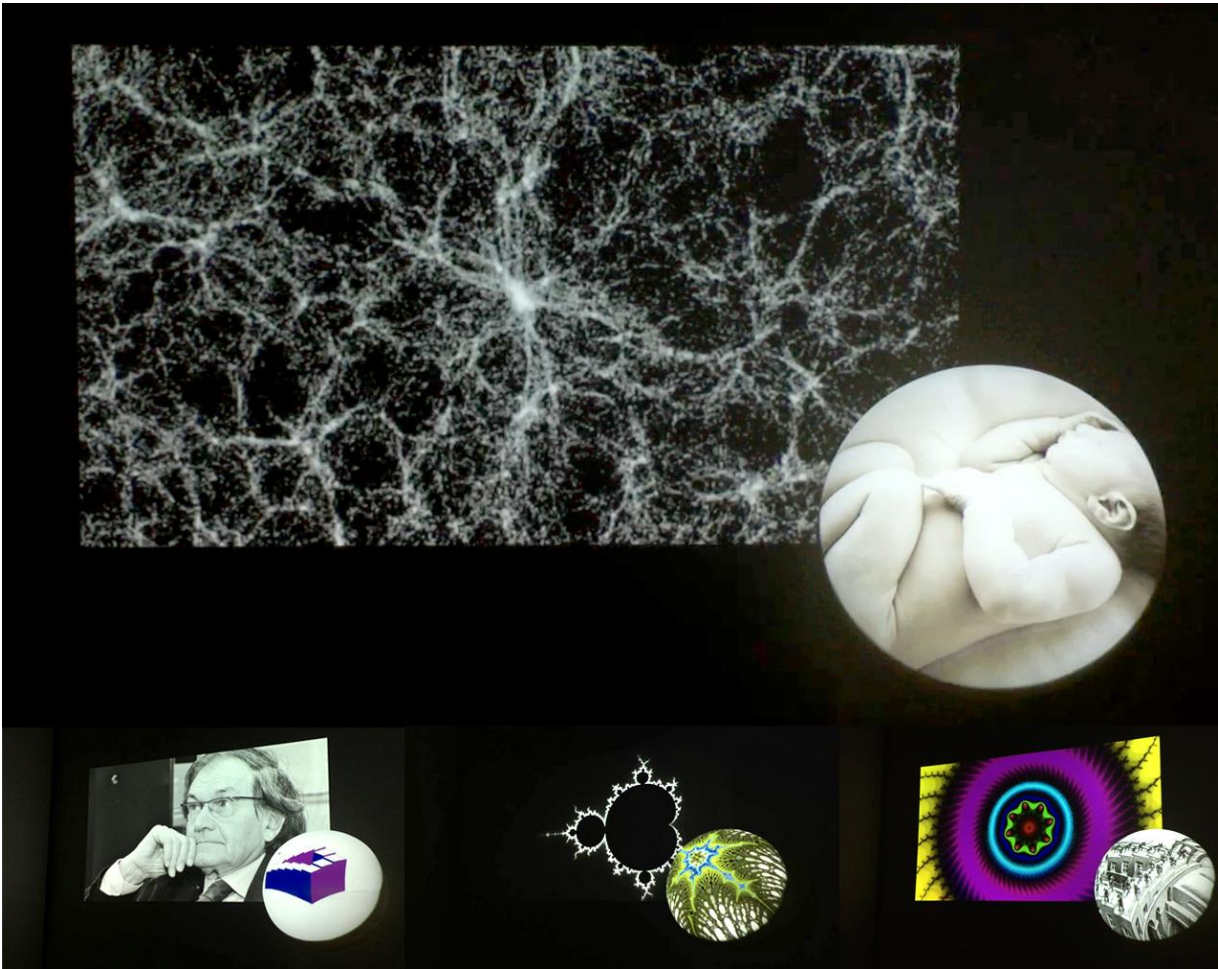


Figure 20: By Author, *Overunity Revisited*, 2017, Polyethylene sphere, video projection, sound, 60” x 72”

It could be argued that the larger trajectory of my work has been a move from coherence to abstraction. Yet I have recently begun to experiment with ways to return to my roots, to find a way to emphasize the narrative film elements within my new visual vocabulary.

This piece is a two-pronged experiment, pulling elements from my earlier film, *Overunity*, but extensively reedited to deemphasize its narrative structure and focus instead on its raw emotional core of hysteria and hope, as well as its visual graphics. The film is projected onto a wall in a standard 16x9 aspect ratio, and onto the partially overlapping surface of a two-foot diameter polyethylene sphere. The soundtrack alternates between actual EBS radio news during the crisis and shortwave broadcasts of cold war era numbers stations.⁴⁶

First, it is a continuation of my ongoing attempts to break the boundaries of the conventional film frame, searching for a rationale to push beyond the flat surface into the third-dimension. The spherical surface distorts the image towards its edges, becoming a potent metaphor for the circularity of the film's themes, a warped and paranoid lens through which we experience its underlying tapestry of great thinkers and their ideas.

Second, it is a manipulation of the essence of film as a time-based medium. Building on experiments by film historian David Thomson,⁴⁷ the film runs both forward and in reverse simultaneously, revealing hidden visual symmetries and thematic connections. Artists and their work, scientists and their theories, a circularity of hope and despair—all imagery that lies at opposite locations in the original film but here runs simultaneously in a sort of cinematic

⁴⁶ These one way coded radio transmissions date back to World War II, and use dry recitation of seemingly random numbers and words to communicate with spies in the field.

⁴⁷ David Thomson, *'Have You Seen ...?' A Personal Introduction to 1,000 Films* (New York, NY: Knopf, 2008).

palindrome. This mirroring of time works particularly well because most of the footage is drawn from still images that are ambidextrous regarding the direction of time—there is little sense that one version is running backwards until the two converge at the half way point. It has a special resonance with the identical first and last shots, which are a metaphor for perpetual motion when running forward, but a metaphor for entropy when running in reverse—an irony and Moment of Epiphany that is exactly the point of the film.

The most interesting discovery was that the temporal patterns in this work emerge entirely by chance—they were not part of my original design. One could ascribe these connections to coincidence and illusion, or evidence of unconscious cultural/narrative/linguistic patterns. Or the more mystically inclined could see it as an indicator of a deeper, synchronistic order to the universe and our place in it.

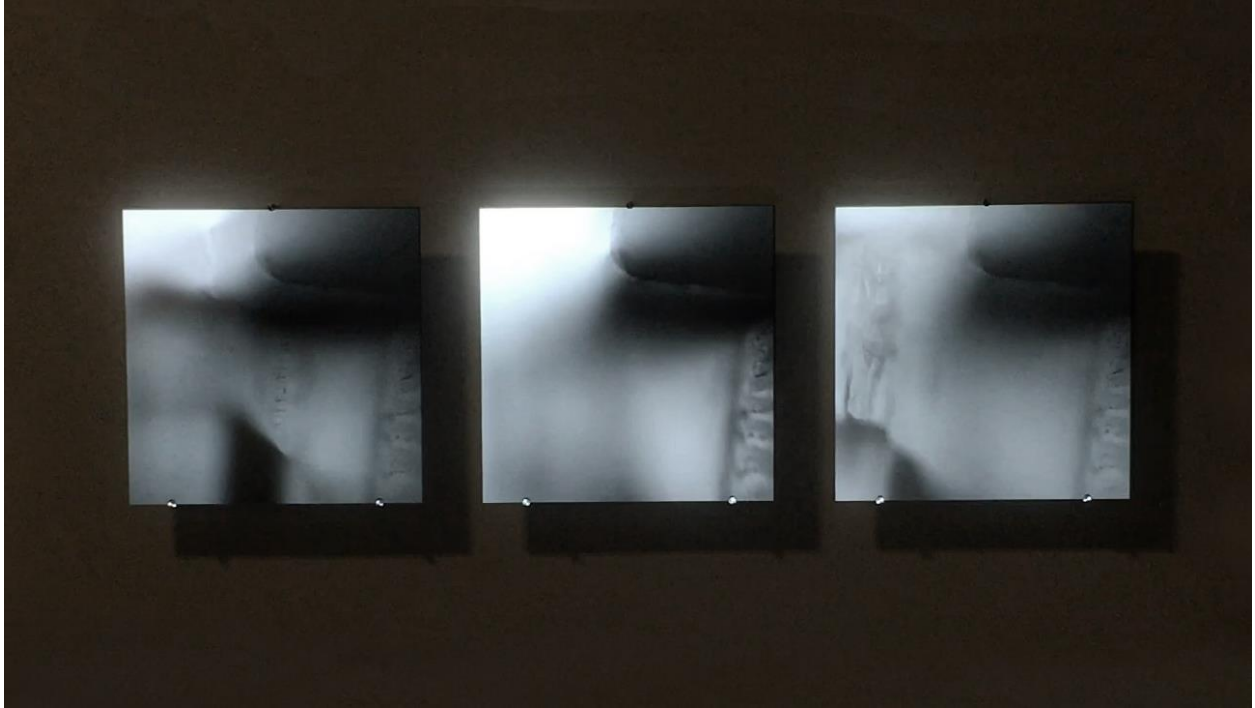


Figure 21: By Author, *Tertium Quid*, 2017, Photographs, acrylic, video projection, 20” x 68”

Tertium Quid is a third thing that is indefinite and undefined, but related to two definite or known things. From its Greek and Roman origins, used to describe a mixed substance with composite properties, it came to be associated with alchemy. It has also been associated with Montage editing theory, in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.⁴⁸

I approached this series as a continuation of the search for meaning in abstraction that had begun in my earlier color/sculpture experiments. I was looking for a pure illustration of cognitive perception—how we project our knowledge onto an ambiguous environment. What I rediscovered was how my own creative process creates meaning in a totally unexpected way.

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These triptychs of evenly spaced squares are mounted on acrylic sheets that float two inches off the wall. The vaguely familiar yet indistinct imagery seems to straddle various categories: organic/artifact, interior/exterior, terrestrial/alien. The ambiguity of the images is heightened by the multiple pathways of the projected light and ambient light: a reflection off the photographic surface, a partial penetration and internal reflection within the acrylic which glows at the edges, and a full penetration out the back, creating a glow on the gallery wall. Although the shapes at first appear identical, the flanking squares begin to evolve over time into related but similarly abstract imagery.

I was experimenting with meaning at two levels. The first was with the static images themselves, shapes and forms manipulated to remove all sense of the original subject matter. In this sense the imagery functions as a Rorschach test, inviting viewer interpretations of content and mood based on individual associations. The second level of meaning is contained in a kind of dialogue between two competing film theories, *Mise-en-scene* and *Montage*. Translated literally as “setting the stage,” *Mise-en-scene* is an adaption of a nineteenth century theatrical term to a pure form of cinema that relies on the sustained master shot to capture the visual elements that evolve in front of the camera—performance, blocking, composition, production design etc.⁴⁹ In this vein, the left squares of the series morph almost imperceptibly from one image to the next, as if the camera is merely recording change over time. This is in some sense the antithesis to *Montage*, an editing theory in which the sequential combination of two images creates a new meaning not contained in the original images.⁵⁰ The corresponding squares on the

⁴⁹ André Bazin and Hugh Gray, *What Is Cinema?* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1967).

⁵⁰ Sergei Eisenstein and Jay Leyda, *Film Form, Harvest Book* (Harcourt, 1949).

right use film edits of varying frequency to create new meaning—a range of perceptual effects, from the transparency of the singular edit to the intensity of rapid flickering between images. Cavell has argued that there is an inherent violence to the film edit,⁵¹ and it may be that aggressive use of this technique can evoke associations that are similarly intense, particularly in the absence of explicit subject matter.

While I set out in some sense to create meaning out of nothing, colleagues have suggested that the juxtaposition of the precision of these pieces and their resolute mystery is their real power—that the control and certainty of the form belies the opacity of the content.

⁵¹ Cavell. 11

Interactivity

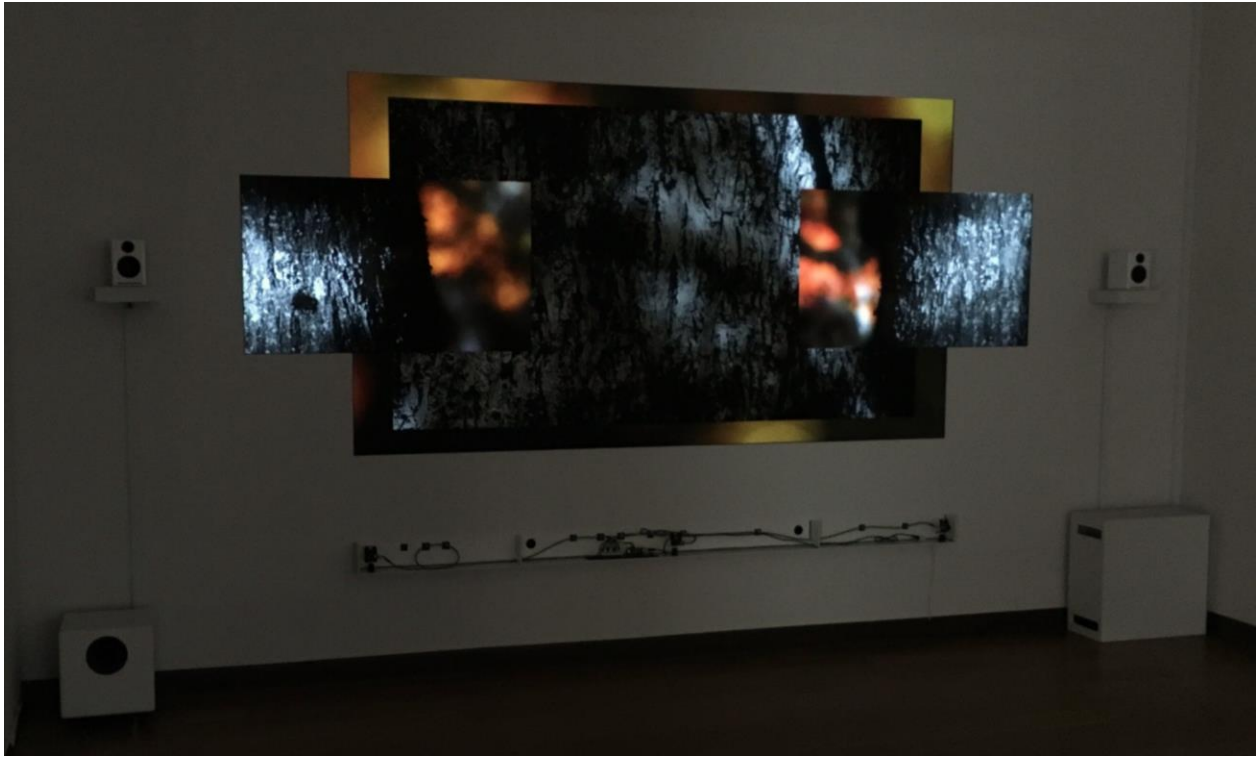


Figure 22: By Author, *Broken Branches*, 2016, photographs, video projection, sound, ultrasonic sensors 54" x 126"

There has always been some measure of interactivity in my work with video and photography. The initial intensity of scale, luminescence and movement begins as passive experience. What quickly follows is a pushing back as a viewer might try to understand what he is seeing, casting shadows and getting in close to convince himself that the apparent depth is an illusion. A third, more contemplative phase begins with the realization that the static and animated images are evolving over time, rewarding patient observation with small revelations about character, relationships, and place.

Broken Branches adds a new dimension to interactivity by using technology to echo Proxemics film theory, in which a viewer's discovery of—and psychological relationship to—subject matter is determined by changes in relative position and viewing angle.⁵²

This is a response to my children's questions about a family tree that hangs on a wall at home, the many broken branches representing those killed in the Holocaust. Although some were killed in concentration camps, many were marched out into the woods and summarily shot. A symmetric black and white photo collage of forest views is overlaid by shifting color video of foliage and sunlight through the trees. My voice and those of my children recite the names of the dead, while an array of ultrasonic sensors detects the viewer's position, signaling a computer to shift the perspective of the projected imagery and sound.

I was after something more visceral than intellectual, something that would resonate with ambivalence—to acknowledge that beyond the things that we see and the things we cannot see, there are things we *do not want* to see. Caught up in our preoccupation with the present, what is our connection and responsibility to the past? How can we keep from trivializing the memory of tragedy as public fodder, and instead hold on to it as personal experience?

⁵² Barsam and Monahan, 232.

CONCLUSION

My work has spanned the intimacy of personal relationships and larger historical events, real and imagined. I have also been fortunate enough to exhibit alongside other artists whose work focuses on political strife and human suffering. In these juxtapositions, I see a connection between the emotional intricacies of the day-to-day and a collective experience of trauma—perhaps a grand cosmic scheme of things. The mystery of living in the moment is all-consuming, our judgments torn between the inconsequential and the far-reaching. In my art, as in life, I have found that details matter—that the observation of minute subtleties is what resonates and leaves a lasting impression. Taking notice of an angry wayward glance or the hesitation in a breath can ripple beyond the here and now. Meaning resides in this interplay between the seemingly trivial and the significant, between the gesture and the potential for catastrophe.

I have always been driven by a humility about my place in a mysterious emotional and physical universe—a deep compulsion to explore the contradictions of relationships and family life, and to uncover the hidden meanings of haunting memories and familiar places. In this process of self-discovery, I am gradually coming to realize that the search for epiphany in my art is really an echo of this need for existential answers that reveal themselves if the pieces are arranged in just the right way—a kind of artistic alchemy.

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