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"PERHAPS," SHE SAID, "LOOKING ITSELF COULD BE AN ANTIDOTE."

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"PERHAPS," SHE SAID, "LOOKING ITSELF COULD BE AN ANTIDOTE"

By

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Thesis

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“Perhaps,” she said, “looking itself could be an antidote.”

Chairperson: Matt Hamon

*She dreamt of floating, gazing.
Looking was more important,
possibly an antidote.*

*She knew a visual buzz could echo
arid emptiness, and yet,
because of her desire she dreamt*

*not of exploration or naming,
but of creation. She said to her,
looking was most important.*

*So in the darkness and silence,
“Perhaps,” she said,
“looking itself could be an antidote.”*

(–Sarah Moore)

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You enter into a dark room, a room that is no longer a gallery, but a theater. The walls, ceiling, and floor are all black. A band of white screens wraps around three walls of the space. You sit down on one of seven old theater chairs, feeling the excitement of the impending theater experience, because aren't theaters always just a little bit exciting? What follows is a 9-minute, 50-second film, transpiring over eight screens on the three walls around you. This is one version of what you see.

Flashing digital noise. Lapping ocean waves, a young man pointing into the distance; he advances to the distance with an older woman in tow. A portrait of a woman, maybe in her twenties with blonde hair, freckles, and a serious gaze. A white bird, fuzzy, perhaps dead. Cut to a brick wall, a hand's shadow delicately tracing the wall. There's a dark curtain across the room, with another hand sliding up the curtain, searching perhaps. The digital noise turned into a foggy landscape, a pier with no one in sight. Two women (the same woman) sink into a bathtub, stay under water for a few seconds, then come up gasping for air. A bright red flash. Riding on a bus, or a train, at dusk with trees rushing by. Palm trees swaying in the night, then moving. Another woman's portrait; she's in front of hills, wind beating on her face. Legs in a hot tub, water rushing closer and closer to the camera. Rushing water. An older woman's portrait; she's wearing blue and snow falls quietly behind her. Rushing water all around. A glass of brown liquid. Another woman's portrait—she's younger, beautiful hair lying on a blue carpet. The glass is raised and turns to flowers. A woman submerged underwater. Rushing water around a woman. She shakes her head. Dark flowers all around. Pink flowers fade into white. Long blonde hair over a white surface. A woman in a towel reflected into a landscape. Fogging mirror in a bathroom. A blonde woman's neck, caressed by her own hand. Another woman in a bathtub, she sinks slowly into it then disappears. A white sandy landscape; a woman walks slowly across it. Someone swimming in a pool, as seen from above. Another swimming woman. Driving through a snowy landscape on multiple screens. Clouds passing over the sun. A woman crying in a car, in the rain. The camera walks by green trees at night. That woman comes out of the bathtub gasping for air. A forest. Another woman crying in a car, yelling at herself. Another woman crying in a car. A woman perched on the edge of a cliff, watching the water, maybe the ocean. A snowy landscape, slowly getting brighter. All screens go black except the ones showing the four portraits of women. All screens turn to white or blue or grey. A woman swims. Birds fly. Hands reach for the windows. All screens turn black except one. A woman's hand hits a window, and then she disappears. The handprint then disappears. A bedroom with a red curtain shows up, the curtain moving gently. The old woman being led into the ocean reappears. She and the young man fade into the distance, leaving only waves. All screens turn to white.

Prelude: Looking

“There are circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure, just as, in the reverse formation, there is pleasure in being looked at.”¹

I am fascinated with seeing. My eyesight has been horrible since I was about six years old, which put me in glasses and then later, contacts. When I first acquired glasses, I would play with them to blur my vision or I would try and stare out the sides to see my abstract periphery. My obsession with seeing was also heightened because growing up, I saw things happen to my family that I should not have seen, and I saw darkness in the world that I couldn't un-see. I became infatuated with this darkness and how I could transform it or revel in it. It was from this place that I learned to control my gaze, reconstruct my memories of the world around me, and truly focus on the act of looking. I like to pretend that everything I love and hate about what I have seen in the world or *how* I see can be controlled through a camera.

Throughout my 9-minute, 50-second film installation “*Perhaps, she said, looking itself could be an antidote.*”², four women are seen gazing upon the audience. These are the women in my family—my mother, my two sisters and myself. We are the consistent reminder for the audience to look, and that the audience is being looked at. We are unblinking³, steadfast, and perhaps asking for an answer, or at the very least a listener. We are looking through instances of chaos,

¹ (Mulvey 1999)

² Shortened for the duration of this paper to *Perhaps*

³ Literally. The individual blinks were taken out of each video portrait, resulting in a continuous gaze, but one that is a bit glitch-y. Due to the fact that some portraits are in motion more, there seems to be a mechanical blink to them (see especially the

trauma and especially loneliness, “as if loneliness was something worth looking at. More than that, as if looking itself was an antidote, a way to defeat loneliness’s strange, estranging spell.”⁴

In the following pages, I will trace various stories of and influences from the women in those portraits. In each chapter, I will focus on one woman and consider the filmmaking practice adopted for her. Through this, an investigation of my filmmaking practice will unfold, during which I will discuss the ideas of space, time, landscape, and narrative/authorship. Aside from the research, all content is based on both fact and fiction. This writing uses extensive footnotes to both site research and to divulge new content, transparently mimicking a style often used by the late author David Foster Wallace. It is necessary to real the footnotes inline with the text, as they relate to how I expect audiences to read both my visual and written work—jumping around, creating their own content from what I give them.

portrait of Rachel). The fact that the choppiness of these portraits draws attention to the fact that something is not quite “right” works well for me—the audience would notice something was off and look for what it was, causing them to get even more wrapped up in the portraits than they normally would have. (See Figures 1-4)

⁴ (Laing 2016)

Chapter One: Jackie

“When I had nightmares, she told me that bad things happen to bad people. I just knew even as a child that that wasn’t right, that tragedy can happen to anyone.”⁵

We sat around drinking whiskey one night, discussing our first memories. Hers was still clear: she was young, in her crib, nestled in the blue-carpeted room, and she was crying as mom turned off the lights and she was left in the pitch black. A memory of darkness, fear, and sadness.⁶

Jackie is the only one of us who has spent her whole life in South Dakota, among the fields and enveloped by the horizon. The silence of that place and the silencing of the family allowed her to become a young woman completely unsuspecting of her childhood. This is probably for the best.

Jackie happily agreed when I asked to make a portrait of her lying on the blue carpet of that childhood bedroom—a place soaked in tragedy and mystery. She stared at the camera for fifteen minutes, perhaps the only time she began to understand what that carpet, that room, and her memories meant. Hers is the most still of the portraits I made, but the quick instances of Jackie glancing to her side or above her demonstrate an unease—a woman recognizing her own uncertainty. Of all the portraits, Jackie’s drifts throughout the space of the theater the most, changing her relationship to the story and the other characters quite often.

⁵ (Benning 2004)

⁶ It seems unlikely to me that Jackie actually remembers this incident. She would have had to be very young—young enough to still be sleeping in her crib. But, I am not one to talk about fictitious first memories, as you will see later on. In fact, most of the videos in *Perhaps* are based on largely false memories I conjured up. And aren’t most of our stories based on completely unstable memories?

Growing up, I remember Jackie would often hide⁷ beneath her hair, behind windows, and even under waves of water. The first climactic moment of *Perhaps* features Jackie in the center of the room, her hair masking her face, water rushing towards her on all sides.⁸ This is the only moment all eight video channels are synchronized together, and it was made to give the audience an overwhelming emotional feeling of being swallowed, which then gives way abruptly to a room full of dark flowers that flow into blurred red roses, inciting cinematic awe. To witness a room full of projections synchronized together can give the audience a shudder, an awareness of the technological sublime.⁹ Thomas Zummer describes the type of spectacular fantasy that occurs within projected videos as such:

“It is this, our ability to invest in the phantasy of projections—somatically, sensorially, conceptually—in conjunction with our commensurate ability to apprehend and partake in them at the same time as spectacle, that forms the contours of a complex prosthetic relation between sense, memory and technical mediations.”¹⁰

One of my primary goals for the construction of my thesis exhibition was to create a dark, quiet space where the stories told on the screens could have their

⁷ Obscurity was important for my youngest sister.

⁸ See Figure 5

⁹ I am consistently less interested in the notions of the sublime brought forth by Romantic-era landscape painters or photographers such as Ansel Adams who traversed the West to find grand moments of awe. Instead, I am much more intrigued by the awe that a built space can bring, or the way mundane or even completely abstract moments can still inspire that feeling of dread/wonder, pulling you inside yourself, into the abyss of uncertainty. The video installations of Richard Mosse and Isaac Julien (*The Enclave* and *Ten Thousand Waves*, respectively) show some of the sublime qualities I reach for in my work. These artists' built environments incite wonder and fear, partly because of the content of the work but partly because of the overwhelming displays of the videos (multiple channels, rear and front projections, awareness of the architectural space).

¹⁰ (Zummer 2015)

deserved presence and the audience would be allowed the room for contemplation. The area for this installation was very much a quintessential theater space—viewers entered through a black velvet curtain, and they sat in old burgundy theater seats in a very dark room. It was a space to match the serious devotion audience members could give to the work. Using the format of a traditional movie theater for this exhibition allowed the audience to give the work formal energy. I have witnessed many contemporary video installations that allow viewers to come and go at will and sit or stand wherever they want. While I appreciate this approach, I wanted to make sure my viewers entered the exhibition with their memories and expectations of a traditional theater experiences and then to jar them with the display and nonlinear format of my installation.¹¹

The silence of the room, aside from the hum of the projectors overhead, also lent itself to the experience, as silence can command attention (and it can be powerful in elevating or expunging voices).¹² It can also be imposing when it envelops you in a space usually filled with sound (like the contemporary movie theater).

¹¹ Despite the revered, formal mood of my darkened theater, the format for my installation was very much in line with expanded cinema discourse. Karen Mirza describes expanded cinema as that which interrogates the exhibition space, still in dialogue with cinema, but also questioning it. Perhaps like a good poststructuralist, I use cinema's costume to question many of its attitudes (like those on traditional narrative, depiction of emotion, depiction of women: I use nonlinear narrative, re-contextual unabashed emotion, and depict the women in my portraits as living, thinking, creating people—challenging some of traditional cinema's qualities). (Mirza and Butler 2015)

¹² "Silence is the ocean of the unsaid, the unspeakable, the repressed, the erased, the unheard. It surrounds the scattered islands made up of those allowed to speak and of what can be said and who listens. Silence occurs in many ways for many reasons; each of us has his or her own sea of unspoken words." (Solnit 2017)

To sit in a theater for nearly ten minutes, watching a silent film unfold around you along three walls and spanning eight screens could be a transcendental experience. For me, sitting in that theater space inside the Gallery of Visual Arts¹³ was as close to a religious experience as I have had in a long time. The magic of cinema never fails to seduce me, and the quiet contemplation of the theater I created helped sooth me and change me in ways I didn't quite expect.¹⁴

As far as Jackie is concerned, she is the one I know least in my family, partly due to our ten-year age gap. Yet, despite our emotional (and physical) distance, I know she, too, feels the awe of cinema, and in this, we can relate. We watched *The Little Mermaid* and *Peter Pan* together dozens of times when Jackie was a little girl. She was obsessed with the mysticism of flying and floating, while I was trying to hold on to some semblance of fantasy and hope. I have many videos that depict floating or flying—literally in water or abstractly through the landscape—and I can relate these pieces to the moments between Jackie and me, both absorbed in the desire to exist like the fantastical characters in movies.¹⁵

¹³ A gallery space so often filled with objects and/or traditional art pieces

¹⁴ I can probably say that many of the goals I had for the space of my exhibition came from the discourse around the Minimalism movement back in the 1960s and '70s and those artists' desires to make viewers interact with the space of their art, not only objects of art. I did not want to simply show my film to an audience, but I wanted the audience to become part of the film, part of the space, and have them be conscious of their participation in it. Obliging my viewers move their heads to optically take in all the work made them aware of their bodies in my theater, and fragmenting the story's information across multiple screens made the viewers aware of their consciousness and intellect.

¹⁵ It should be noted that the line from my artist statement "She dreamt of floating, gazing" came from a dream I had when I was back at home in South Dakota during a particularly tumultuous time. I dreamt I was floating, and it was after this dream that I wanted my video work to feel like that, if at all possible. The sequence towards the end of *Perhaps* alludes to this best. In it, all eight screens feature different white,

Jackie's influence on and presence in my work had much to do with fantasy. She is my version of Ariel, innocently exploring the depths of the prairie with long hair floating on her ocean of carpet. The blue that surrounds Jackie represents the magical unknown abyss of the ocean or the sky. Jackie's head is full of the dreams of blue, allowing her to sink into the thoughts and memories she has neglected and held dear.

The ways in which I don't know my youngest sister at all allow me to dream for her in ways I can't for my mother or older sister. The women in my videos who swim through blue waters or walk into unknown landscapes¹⁶ depict this hope and mystery that shrouds my relationship with Jackie, a young woman floating on a sea of carpet.

blue, or grey scenes depicting water, the South Dakota snowy landscape or sky. This ethereal sequence was created shortly after my floating dream. The endlessness of the prairie and ocean remind me of floating, and the figure of the woman swimming freely in the open water gives a feeling of freedom matched but also different from the scene of the old woman being led into the water at the beginning and end of the film.

¹⁶ See Figures 6-8

Chapter Two: Rachel

“As viewers we are plunged into a situation that is incomprehensible if we do not take the echoes of the past into account. Something of great magnitude – a rupture, a catastrophe, an unbearable moment of truth – has happened, and it appears to be our task to come to terms with this traumatic thing.”¹⁷

Through a series of events and over the course of many years, my older sister’s voice has been shattered and silenced¹⁸, her story both obsessed over and cast aside. As far back as my memory stretches, Rachel’s life has included turmoil I can’t imagine, and through time, the memories I’ve held on to and the recollections I’ve created for her have morphed into a strange narrative. One that has everything to do with time and memory.

When she was little, Rachel would throw temper-tantrums in stores during which she would hold her breath until she was blue in the face. These days, she lives with her drama via her favorite vices—drinking, smoking, and self-loathing. I often dream of Rachel’s past¹⁹, and I spend too much of my present worrying about her future. Sometimes I start to wonder what is even real in terms of her life.

I made Rachel’s video portrait when we were driving back from a trip to see the mermaids in Great Falls, Montana. Mermaids are an obsession of hers—another sister who longs for the idea of floating and swimming. Rachel hated growing up in South Dakota. She cannot go back there even to this day without throwing herself into fits of drinks and tears. By placing her in front of a backdrop of rolling hills with

¹⁷ (Birnbaum 2012)

¹⁸ Usually by men—in fact, many of the women in my family have had their stories shattered by men, which is one reason I chose not to include male characters in my film (aside from fleeting, incidental characters swimming in the ocean)

¹⁹ Do you ever have memories of someone else’s memories? That happens to me often.

the wind hitting her face, I was trying to place her in South Dakota again. Yet, this time, Rachel had the control. Her gaze is on us; she steadfastly stands in front of the landscape and in front of the audience, and she doesn't look away. Even when a single tear rolls down her face, she doesn't break down.

Rachel's portrait emerges on the screen after a scene depicting a woman coming up gasping for air after being submerged in a bathtub. This shot, appropriated from the crime show *The Killing*, is one of the first trigger moments²⁰ in *Perhaps*. The woman gasps for air; the screen flashes red for a couple seconds, and then Rachel is there, gazing outwards. I incorporated a few moments of women in bathtubs, usually alluding to a drowning²¹ or at the very least a giving up. These scenes directly relate to my relationship with Rachel and my memories of her as a child and young woman. Like my memories of Rachel's younger years, they are dramatic scenes, but they are fleeting.

Most of the time Rachel is shown in *Perhaps*, moving landscapes surround her on adjacent screens. She is present before the audience, while they are allowed to drift in and out of different temporal spaces. Philosopher Edmund Husserl believed we are continuously split between several tracks of awareness, several types of memory. According to Husserlian film phenomenology studies, we are at once aware of the images being shown to us as we are our own lived experiences and memories. So while we may be viewing images on the screen of a woman crying in a car, we are also recalling the moments we, too, have cried in cars in our own

²⁰ See Fig. 10

²¹ A reference to the character of Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, though not a reference I consciously made while making the film, as I have never read *Hamlet* and only really learned about Ophelia after I made my film.

life.²² The split awareness can be jarring, or it can allow yourself to exist in two places, times, or states. “While looking out of the train window seeing the landscape pass by, I may fantasize about a memory of a strange dream-image or I may remember an old daydream.”²³ As scenes from a bus window at dusk, palm trees at night, or snowy land during the day pass to the side of Rachel’s portrait, we are allowed to place her elsewhere, and perhaps we can remember being anywhere else.

For the past eight years, Rachel and I have talked on the phone every day. We exchange stories, grievances, and simple sighs. I act as both her younger sister and her attempted therapist. This process of talking to Rachel so much has left me very perceptive of the space of time, the space of stories. I began to reach for a space unaffected by time, or atemporal space. “This notion of an atemporal space as the space of *another* story is identified by Paul Ricoeur as the space of dreams, and by Judith Butler, following Walter Benjamin, as that of melancholia. More recently, Liedeke Plate has seen it as the space of memory, a form of spatial ‘haunting’ that refuses to recede into the past of ‘historical time’ but is instead insistently *present* in the ‘here-and-now of consciousness.’”²⁴

Creating a version of an atemporal space was important to me. I employed some methods found in polyvalent editing, something I learned from Nathaniel Dorsky’s filmmaking process. In this type of editing, associations between shots will

²² We have all had that frustrated moment of crying in a parked car, questioning life’s horrid moments, right?

²³ (Birnbaum 2012)

²⁴ (Thornham 2012)

often resonate many seconds or shots later.²⁵ Though I used parallel editing as well, the concept of leaving some associations to be discovered sequentially (and across various screens) was important to me.²⁶

Rachel has lived her life excavating new memories throughout the years. As such, I have lived my life trying to re-see and re-write her memories.²⁷ Memories often happen all at once in the brain—juxtaposed mental films of disparate, juxtaposed events and periods. There is a continuous montage of imagery going through our heads, and the goal for my installation was to bring some of my montages to life through abrupt, dialectical editing.

Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein believed in editing to create shots that were often jarring, sharp, and intellectual rather than linear and smooth. He thought cuts between shots should create new meanings, and smooth transitions would often abandon this opportunity. Many of the formalist Soviet filmmakers of the 1920s used intellectual associative montages to capture the essence and not just the surface of reality. Their juxtapositions could suggest emotional or psychological

²⁵ (Sitney 2007)

²⁶ A common example of polyvalent editing seen in *Perhaps* is when I use water in different ways across many cuts. The opening scene of an old lady being led into the ocean is followed later on with the scene of the woman drowning in the bathtub, and even later on with the flooding of water around Jackie. The drowning woman also re-submerges much later in the film, minutes after we initially see her. My parallel editing techniques are more obvious—such as two women crying in cars on simultaneous screens or the glassy reflection of a woman in a towel hovering over a landscape that cuts to a woman swimming in blue water.

²⁷ Video artist Lindsay Seers re-created her stepsister's identity in her 2009 installation *It has to be this way*. Her stepsister suffered traumatic memory loss after an accident, so Seers used archived imagery, videos, and stories to create a new story for both of them. My own sister's problem seems to be the opposite—perhaps she would benefit from some memory loss. Nonetheless, I have been trying for so long to re-structure Rachel's memories (and my own as well—see Footnote 19). (Bertamini, et al. 2010)

states, or even abstract ideas.²⁸ In my film, I primarily used quick cuts between shots²⁹ to at once play with the tension between the footage and to reference back to the visual flashes of memory so prevalent in my mind.

Time operated in a few different ways in *Perhaps*, allowing me to allude to memory and to further my goals of a nonlinear story.³⁰ I used real time and elaborated time, mixed together with the various editing styles and cinematography choices. Many of my shots depict seemingly real time, allowing characters to move through the space as though we were watching through a window. I also included a couple instances of elaborated time—such as the slowed-down moment of the blurry rose bushes or the opening and closing sequence of the older woman being led into the ocean in a very drawn-out sequence. The temporal qualities of the videos combined with my editing choices allowed viewers to linger on some moments, like the slow sunrise over a field. For other moments, I barely let them see a shot before it was over, like the flash of a woman’s body which appears on one screen for a split second. As it is all happening simultaneously across eight screens,

²⁸ (Giannetti 2014)

²⁹ There are only three cuts (out of dozens) in my film that have a smooth, faded transition, and even then, they fade to a shot quite different from the previous one.

³⁰ See Footnote 40. The ability to use time in this work was made my choice to move away from still images quite crucial. Though I could have made a film with still photographs cutting across screens, I thought it necessary to have the images move, even if only subtly to evoke the different types of time addressed above. Many of my videos were quite still—like the shot of a snowy scene shot through a window when a woman enters the frame after a few minutes—but they would not have been as effective with still images (the woman would not have been able to enter the frame unexpectedly!). Using moving images also allowed me to address the concepts of memory more directly, as many of our memories included movement, even if slight.

my film's story is depicted much like Rachel's reality—a bit like organized madness.³¹

³¹ Talking about Finnish artist Eija-Liisa Ahtila's 2002 three-channel video installation *The House*, Daniel Birnbaum said: "If, on the other hand, the structuring function of the ego is removed entirely, and each 'track' runs independently of the others it is clearly a question of a severe breakdown of the mental apparatus as a whole. This is madness." Ahtila herself described this piece as an account of psychosis. While I don't believe my film verges on psychosis, I do think the editing styles and multiple channels of my installation caused certain madness in viewers. (Birnbaum 2012)

Chapter Three: Kristin

“But for her the Icelandic landscape is not to be mapped but imagined, and we share for a moment her vision of a landscape marked by blue and white craters, water, ice and white volcanic eruption—not so much a country, perhaps, as the ‘material out of which countries are made’. It is a place of fantasy and desire, not exploration: a place, she says, that she ‘knew about and thought about and maybe even longed for, but...never did get to see.’”³²

I sometimes believe that due to all the years my mother has lived in South Dakota, she must sometimes look at the endless yawn of the prairie and wish it were the edge of the ocean. She feels lost in that land—a place she moved to because of my father and a place she has stayed in for 27 years because of being locked into other marriages, jobs, and situations. Feeling lost can be a wondrous experience, but it can also be frightening. To be lost in a landscape as unforgiving and brutal as South Dakota’s is all the more intense.

The idea of being lost is prevalent throughout *Perhaps*. The various videos depict lost places—in that they are placeless landscapes or empty spaces—but the structure of the film also leaves viewers lost. There is a longing that ebbs and flows throughout the piece, a searching for something stable or a solid answer. *Perhaps*’ loss is one I liken to melancholia, a condition of uncompleted grief and an unnamable loss.³³ It is the condition I see frequently in my mother.

If melancholia produces landscapes³⁴, the scapes I produced in *Perhaps* are ones that embrace my home of South Dakota, but reach for a new land as well. I am not interested in exploring my home; I would rather create a new space. Collaging

³² (Thornham 2012)

³³ (Thornham 2012)

³⁴ “To this Judith Butler adds, quoting Walter Benjamin, that ‘melancholia spatializes’, producing “‘landscapes’” as its signature effect.’” (Thornham 2012)

together the land of South Dakota with the waves of the ocean, the sandy desert of New Mexico, the skies of Montana, and the trees and dreams of Las Vegas allowed me to invent a new landscape for my mother to exist in. This new place was one that audience members could find their home in, yet one that seemed unknown all the same.

David Lynch is a master of placeless, timeless, and fragmented plots.³⁵ His ability to use the descriptive qualities of a place while all the while making viewers feel unsettled and uncertain is astounding to me. In his films, Lynch reveals the presence of secrets held in places, without divulging the true nature or context of those secrets.³⁶ In my film work, and previous still photography work, I also allude to dark secrets through ominous colors, lone characters, disjointed plots, and unprovoked displays of emotion; but I never truly reveal the roots of those secrets. If each landscape contains silenced secrets, my mother's South Dakota holds multitudes.

For her video portrait, I at once wanted to place my mother in South Dakota but also in a space of her own. For this, I had her sit at her dining room table, the snow of South Dakota falling silently behind her. She sat staring at the camera for nine minutes, only looking away at the very end. There is a resilient energy in her eyes, yet her mouth drops and frowns subtly throughout the video. Her video portrait moves throughout the gallery over the course of the film, finally ending next

³⁵ "Insecurity, estrangement and lack of orientation and balance are sometimes so acute in Lynchland that the question becomes one of whether it is possible ever to feel 'at home.'" (Davison and Sheen 2004)

³⁶ (Dodson 2011)

to the portrait of me. When she looks away from the camera, her gaze is turned towards mine.

If my mother's life has been punctuated by melancholia, she has rarely broken down and shown her emotions to anyone about this. Like the portrait of her, she is outwardly steadfast and strong, disguising her worry and sadness behind intensity or levity. Yet, she is lost in the way you can be lost if you are stuck. I wanted to move the landscape for her, making the snowy fields of South Dakota resemble the waves of the ocean. I wanted her to be able to gaze upon her daughters and see a strength and freedom that came from her.

I wanted pink flowers to transform the theater space into a dream for her.³⁷ Maybe a dream space is the perfect landing point for my mother, for all of us in the family. My mother loves flowers. She lives and breathes for her garden in the summer. She surrounds herself with pinks and purples throughout her house. When all eight screens turn to dark red images of gardenias and then flow into the foggy pinks and greens of rose bushes, I imagine my mother is dreaming. Though I generally eschewed warm moments like this in *Perhaps*, I thought it was important

³⁷ Of course, I did not transform those flowers into quite the immersive and playful dream that Pipilotti Rist did in her 2008 installation *Pour Your Body Out (7354 Cubic Meters)* at the Museum of Modern Art. That installation immersed viewers in the atrium of the MoMA, where they were surrounded by 25-foot-high videos depicting over-sized body parts (such as toes and fingers) playing with, eating, and traipsing through pink flowers. In this work, the camera is angled slightly up from the ground, and the larger-than-life images create an extremely tangible and sometimes uncomfortable embodied experience. Though I use subjective camera movements at times in *Perhaps*, my work is not nearly as embodied as Rist's work. The way the pink flowers enveloped her audience was a huge inspiration for me, as I could feel myself overcome by awe simply by seeing photos and videos of her installation. (See Figures 11 and 12)

to transform the space into that landscape for just a moment after the tumult of the rushing waters before it.

I don't believe my mother will ever get out of South Dakota. It is a place that has a hold on her. Perhaps the wandering I possess comes more from my father³⁸, but my hope is that my mother can at least create new spaces for herself, allowing any melancholia that exists to form a landscape where she feels free, not lost.

³⁸ My father is a character very important to my life and, in ways, my art practice. Sadly, I will not go into him or our relationship in these pages, as that is a whole other story to write. Suffice it to say—my father allowed himself the ability to wander, which is something I have also valued in my own life so far.

Chapter Four: Sarah

“For now she need not think about anybody. She could be herself, by herself. And that was what now she often felt the need of—to think; well, not even to think. To be silent; to be alone. All the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated; and one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others. Although she continued to knit, and sat upright, it was thus that she felt herself; and this self having shed its attachments was free for the strangest adventures. When life sank down for a moment, the range of experience seemed limitless...Beneath it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep; but now and again we rise to the surface and that is what you see us by. Her horizon seemed to her limitless.”³⁹

I like to tell people that my first memory is sitting in a dark movie theater when I was three years old, watching the opening sequence of *The Little Mermaid*. The memory is very romantic—the seagulls fly up above, the theater chair is much too big for my tiny body; the darkened room is full of hope and magic. It’s too bad this isn’t actually my first memory.

I like to cling to that ideal first memory, as it is a quixotic view of what I wish set the mood for my narrative. Throughout my life, I have spent so much of my emotional energy trying to stitch together the broken psychological fragments of my older sister that I now exist on a baseline tempo of chaos. I am only saying all of this because it helps explain my recent artistic practice. While seeing is important, *controlling* what I see and turning it into a story is why I made *Perhaps*.

When I was doing still photography⁴⁰, I thought it was exciting to be able to pick parts out of reality and re-contextualize them on a studio or gallery wall. This

³⁹ (Woolf and Hussey 2005)

⁴⁰ Which was most of my artistic career, from the years 2003 until 2016. Though I was adamant for years about not switching from still photography to video work, I eventually made the gradual shift after I ran out of reasons not to try film work. I have always been interested in cinema and how films depict stories. After spending

curating of reality is still part of my film practice, but now I also get to explore and exploit time⁴¹ and narrative modes.

I have a tenuous relationship with narrative. Though I grew up with tidy stories full of beginnings, middles, and ends, I now know that is a deceptive way of looking at narrative.⁴² Stories can affect lives, societies, histories, and of course movies. I am interested in the types of stories being told; but for my film, I was particularly interested in the *way* my story was told. I investigated the authorship of this piece, while also maintaining control throughout.⁴³

The mode of narration shifted throughout *Perhaps*. It was simultaneously being told from first and third-person perspectives. There were handheld shots of driving scenes or the scene when the filmmaker's hand lifts a cup of whiskey to the camera—showing reflexivity, the awareness of the process of filmmaking. In one instance, a seemingly embodied camera portrays the filmmaker's legs kicking in a hot tub, and the view zooms closer and closer to the water until it seems the lens

time making photographs that resembled film stills and utilized filmic mis-en-scène, I decided to add the element of time to my work. My ideas have not shifted much since the switch—I am still working with constructed memories, landscapes, and female authorship. Yet, the addition of time has changed my work drastically. Even the most photographic components of *Perhaps*—the portraits of my family—are more poignant as videos with the subtle movements of the women and the eerie glitch of the removed blinks.

⁴¹ See Chapter Two

⁴² I won't spill into my tirade against traditional narrative, but suffice it to say: most of us know that no narrative in real life has the packaged story arc that big-screen cinema (and small-screen media) so often follows. Of course, that is part of the reason we yearn for those packaged stories; they help rock us into a space where life could have a neat beginning, middle, and (satisfying) end. I yearn for these stories too—escapism is part of how I get through life sometimes. Yet, I recognize the problems with attaching traditional narrative to the real muck of life. This is one of the reasons I attempt to scorn linear narrative in my art practice.

⁴³ Or so I led myself to believe

itself must be submerged. There were also shots from a more neutral and detached eye capturing a character walking into a snowy frame or the shot of a woman rubbing the back of her neck in a mundane and drawn out gesture. These different narrative styles happened all at once across the screens, and the gazing portraits offered another layer—were these women telling the stories or were the stories about these women?

Along with mixing together different styles of my own footage, I included various pieces of appropriated footage to add to the narrative layers. And because the portraits of my mother, sisters and myself were quite the opposite of cinematically emotional, I wanted to include footage of women exhibiting theatrical and unabashed emotion in my film piece.⁴⁴ Using videos of women crying in cars appropriated from *American Beauty* and *The Killing*, I showed the emotions my family and myself don't allow others to see from us.⁴⁵

A display of emotion from someone else, without you, the onlooker, knowing anything about the cause, and especially when it's on a detached screen so you know you can't do anything to help the person being emotional, can be cathartic. The appropriated scenes I included of women crying, sinking into water, or gasping up

⁴⁴ See Figure 13

⁴⁵ Also a reason for the emotional women: conceptual artist Bas Jan Ader used the outward but decontextualized display of emotion in his 1970-71 video piece *I'm Too Sad to Tell You*. In this, he cries silently for the viewer, never divulging what is wrong. Without knowing anything about the content of his sadness, the audience still feels a very real emotion. "In this sense the works could be understood as powerful arguments against the psychological truism that an emotion is primarily defined through its conscious or subconscious content, through the biographical cause, be it desire, drive or trauma, that motivates it...Emotion is portrayed as a language, the truth of which lies in its power to connect people and cause effects in the real world." (Verwoert 2006) (See Figure 14)

for air are ripped from their original meaning, but a new meaning is formed in the context I provide. The emotion is raw, for each audience member to interpret on his or her own. Are these the emotions the women in the portraits wish to have? Are these old memories of the women?⁴⁶

It was important for all of the different, sometimes disparate, styles of filming and ways of narrating to come together in the theater space. Due to the nature of the installation, the audience member could be watching an appropriated scene of a woman crying, while in his or her periphery another woman was simply staring out, and on yet another two screens across the room, trees moved and shook above the camera or the sun slowly rose over a field. The fragments of the story happened all at once—preventing any easy summarization of the narrative. In this way, the audience was opened up to the experience of the film, the psychological content of the imagery, and the possibility of creating their own story from the pieces given to them.⁴⁷

The joy of making this work was that I maintained control—I dictated how long an image would stay on the screen, which information to divulge and how much of it, how people would sit in the space and how they would be forced to interact with the work. I was the author of this film experience. Yet, because of other strategies—using multiple screens, showing fragmented film pieces, having repeating characters—I was also able to leave the theater space open to the

⁴⁶ Likely, it is not about these women at all anymore—you remember crying in a car yourself. You remember trying to sink into that bathtub.

⁴⁷ One of my personal heroes in this type of open-ended, media-appropriating work is John Baldessari. Like me, he was interested in using recognizable pieces of narrative or mass media but to fragment them, re-shuffle them, and allow the audience to take their own meaning from what he showed them. (Sandler 1996)

possibility of the audience having control over what they saw and how they read the work. In this way, I happily admit that as much as I declare myself the author of my film, I also recognize that this film has no Author as Roland Barthes argued in “Death of the Author.” In my work, the viewer is as much the author of the story as I am, collaborating with me on the meaning they get out of the work.

As much feminist film work is community-oriented and hopeful for change, I happily accept the fact that I opened the stories of Jackie, Rachel, Kristen, and myself up to an active audience. While telling my stories was crucial to me, it is more important that I allow viewers to create their own stories from my given fragments.

Epilogue: Beyond Looking

“The auteure is a feminist filmmaker for whom narrating (from) the self is an open letter, a call to others not through sameness but for conversation and continuance.”⁴⁸

My inherent love of looking propels me to take pleasure in meticulously observing the world around me. It also causes me to look deep within my psyche and across the surface of myself.⁴⁹ My art practice has strayed in various directions throughout the years, but I always maintain a relationship with the camera and one with my story. As I’ve grown older, I’ve had the pleasure and horror of hearing other stories of women in films and in real life. I relish that I have the opportunity to tell my story in my own way—something many women, even the women in my family, don’t have.

I will not always feel the need to dive into my own narrative. As the years go on, I hope to work with other women to stitch together fragments of their stories. I have seen how much silence has impacted my mother and sisters, and I am acutely aware of how important a voice is. And this is a sad statement, because my mother and sisters are some of the incredibly lucky ones in this world. A goal for me as the years progress is to use my gift of looking and storytelling to give a voice to other

⁴⁸ (Mayer 2016)

⁴⁹ Which you can see a glimpse of in the video portrait I made of myself. Darting eyes, a pleading look, a serious gaze, and a final turn of my head. This video, made on a campground in Montana, places me completely outside South Dakota (unlike the ones of the other women in my family). I turn my head away from the viewer many times throughout the video, obscuring myself over and over again, and encouraging the audience to look at other screens, other parts of my mind. My video is also the only one that does not move throughout the theater, and I am the only character present for almost the entire duration of the film. Therefore, it could be assumed that I am the protagonist of this story. Which, I suppose if *Perhaps* had a protagonist, it *would* be me. And I only allow myself to take on that role in this film because it has so rarely been my role within real life.

silent or silenced women. At the very least, I want to let them know that they can speak up.

I don't pretend to have any answers for Jackie, Rachel, Kristin, or myself. But if I have found one way to cope with the loneliness, fear, trauma, and melancholy of our lives, it has been to ask questions. I hope that for a brief 9-minutes and 50-seconds my video installation asked (some of) the right questions and perhaps provided a possible antidote to the inexplicable moments woven into life.

Images



Figure 1, Sarah Moore
Jackie
video still, 2017



Figure 2, Sarah Moore
Rachel
video still, 2017



Figure 4, Sarah Moore
Kristin
video still, 2017



Figure 3, Sarah Moore
Sarah
video still, 2017

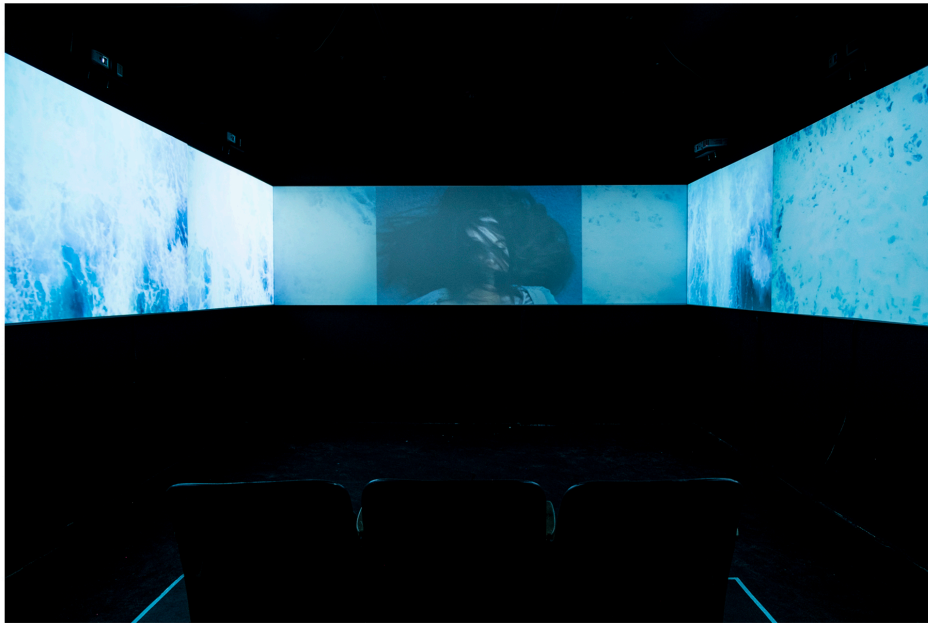


Figure 5, Sarah Moore
Installation view, *"Perhaps," she said, "looking itself could be an antidote."*
2017



Figure 6, Sarah Moore
video still, 2017



Figure 7, Sarah Moore
video still, 2017

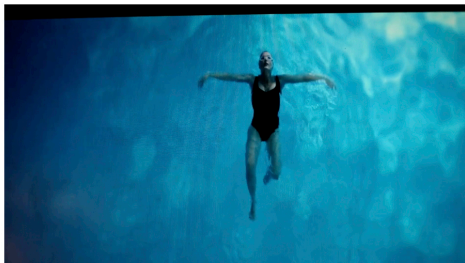


Figure 8, Sarah Moore
video still, 2017



Figure 9, Sarah Moore
video still, 2017

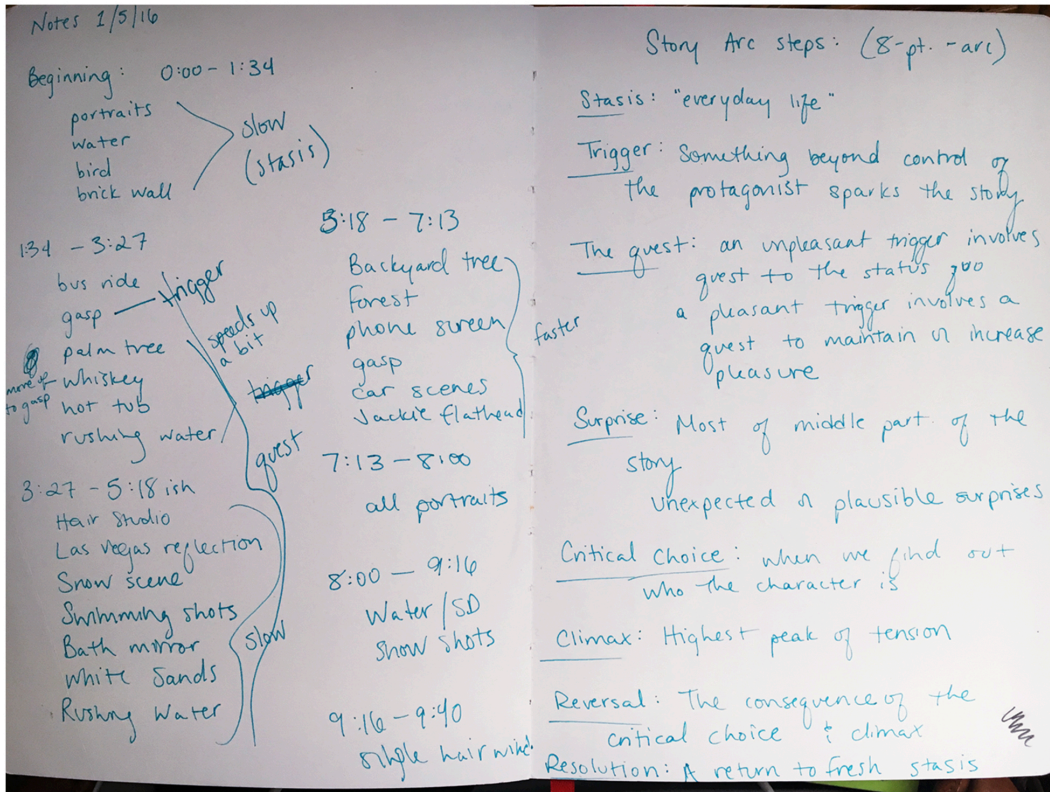


Figure 10
 excerpt from Sarah Moore's personal notebook

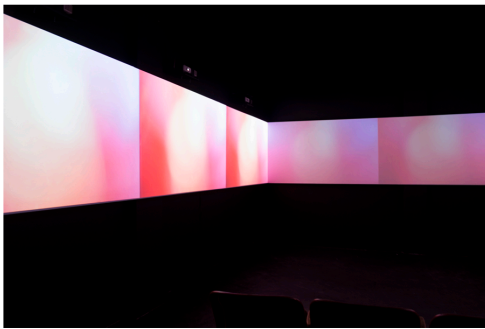


Figure 11, Sarah Moore
 Installation view, "Perhaps," she said,
 "looking itself could be an antidote."
 2017

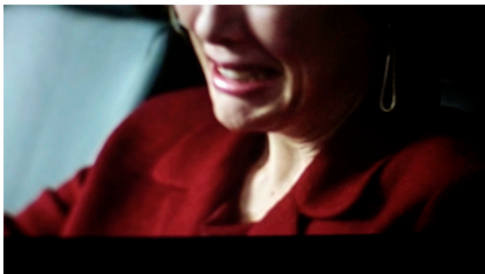


Figure 13, Sarah Moore
 video still, 2017



Figure 12, Pipilotti Rist
 Installation view, *Pour Your Body Out*
 2008

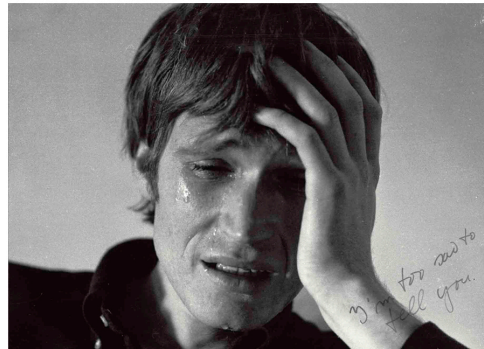


Figure 14, Bas Jan Ader
I'm Too Sad to Tell You, postcard
 1970-71

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