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Presence / Absence

Porscha D. Banker

University of New Orleans, New Orleans, pdbanker@uno.edu

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Presence / Absence

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Fine Arts
Studio Art

by

Porscha Danielle Banker

BFA Rocky Mountain College of Art and Design, 2007

May, 2020

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Abstract

Presence / Absence is a visual and conceptual exploration of language and issues surrounding experiences of interpersonal relationships. In it I look at various approaches in which artist and writers have approached the subject of intimacy and coexistence as both a context and foundation for my own work addressing relationships. This body of work is specifically looks at experiences of the personally revolutionary presence of an other and the impact of their absence.

Keywords: Interpersonal relationships; coexistence; relating; intimacy; digital art

Introduction 3D Scans

For the course of my Masters of Fine Arts degree at the University of New Orleans I have focused on working in digital art, specifically 3D animation and scanning. My process of 3D scanning involves a reappropriated video game accessory that has both an infrared camera and low-resolution digital camera in it. The scanner is manually moved around an object, person or room while the infrared camera takes depth sample readings. The depth samples and digital photos are combined to create a digital render of three-dimensional objects and space. Something as simple as the sensor's inability to read depth and define form in a situation (such as a reflective surface) creates distortion in the recording of the figure or environment. The result is a fragmented representation with disintegrating edges, digital estimates in rendering of surfaces and glimpses into the hollow space of the digital "mesh." The deformation of the recorded image calls attention to the tension between reality, recorded image and the lifelessness of the digital realm. In its inaccuracies and variable process I find the limits, boundaries, and thresholds of relating in and to the digital

Chapter 1

Irreducibly Complex, the Language of Relating

“There is no meaning if meaning is not shared, and not because there would be an ultimate or first signification that all beings have in common, but because meaning is itself the sharing of Being. Meaning begins where presence is not pure presence but where presence comes apart in order to be itself as such.”

Jean Luc Nancy

French philosopher Jean Luc Nancy states “there is no meaning if meaning is not shared.” If plurality, or ‘an other’ is the foundation of all meaning, and sharing (meaning) is the circulation of *being*, relationships appear to be an incalculably important subject that shapes our entire perception of existence. Making work that addresses relationships I am interested in the simultaneity of meaning, perception and experience. The sign, signifier, signified tension is in constant transformation when addressing language of relating. Nancy explains, “language is the element of with as such: it is the space of its declaration. In turn, this declaration as such refers to everyone and to no one, refers to the world and its coexistence.” In a similar way, the work I make itself is an instance of relating, or *with*. Each piece is an other, an extension from presence and a declaration of coexistence, to no one and to everyone. It is itself an experience of relating to its meaning and as meaning. “But perhaps it is not an accident that language does not easily lend itself to showing the “with” as such, for it is itself the address and not what is being addressed.” When Nancy states *with* is the address and not what is being addressed, I feel it illuminates the silent profundity of relating. It is often not the subject, but foundational and revolutionary in perception of human meaning and experience.

Between, Spacings and Touch

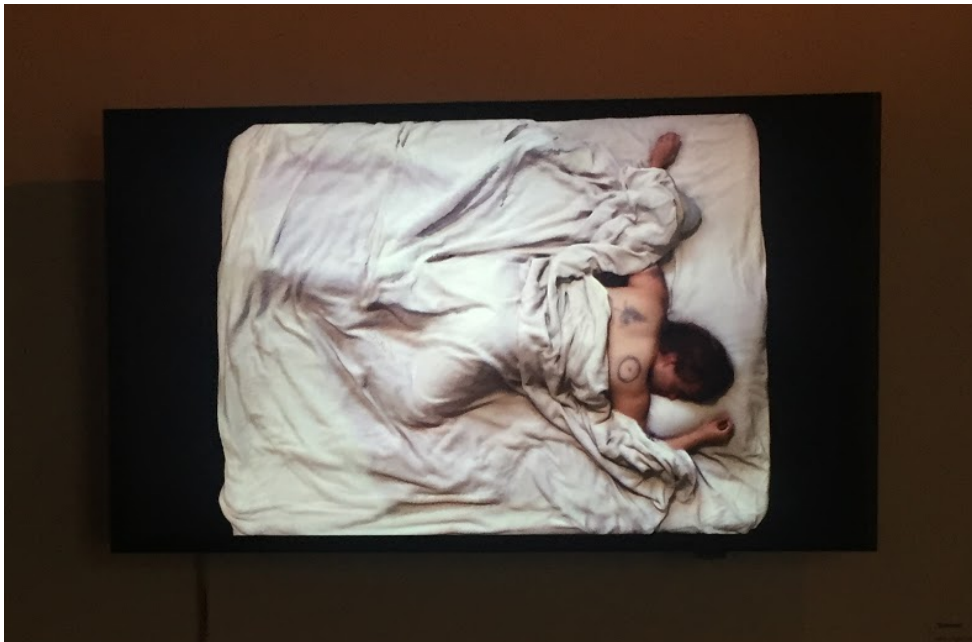
The work of postmodern philosopher Jacques Derrida, specifically his book On Touching - Jean Luc Nancy has had a significant and lasting impact on my work addressing interpersonal relationships. In it he aims to touch Jean Luc Nancy through a deconstruction of the history of philosophy and semantics on the subject of touch. Derrida is most noted for his theory of deconstruction which in short aims to expose “the usage of language in a given text, and language as a whole, are irreducibly complex, unstable, or impossible.” Different from his other more critical analysis’ of language, On Touching looks both at and with intimacy. I am inspired by its multifacetedness of being in part an examination, a sort of performance and an instance of touch. In it he asks,

“What is touching? What does “touching” mean? Is there an essence of touching? Is it sayable, intelligible, sensible, tangible, or not? Who or what touches what or whom? How can one remove it from its vast tradition even as the latter is never forgotten?”

Further he moves into the more abstract language surrounding the experience of touching,

“The heart of this other dialectic (diastole without systole), namely, the pleasure of taking pleasure, is the heart itself, namely, this the heart that self-touches you, that belongs to you, that gives pleasure only there where pleasure is made all the more intense by not returning to me, by returning to me without returning to me, where I self touch you.” Derrida

Derrida’s explanation of self touch exemplifies the (irreducible) complexity of the unseen aspects of interaction such as the simultaneous experience of self and other, a self because of an other, “a kiss from you/of you.” When addressing *with* or losing oneself in order to be *of* it, there is an implied sense of movement and action, a blurring of space and identity, and also a consideration of *between*. I am also interested in the perceivable conditions of the elusive spaces in *between* and *with*.



Bowen, digital 3d scan still, 2019

In *Bowen*, I am considering these concepts of looking at and with intimacy, conditions of spaces of between and the simultaneity of self-touch. An intimate moment and relationship from my life has been interpreted and redefined in digital language and placed in a visually formless, limitless void. I am looking at impossible intimacy in a lifeless environment and asking: Where is the instance of relating taking place? What intimacy is able to be recorded in the scan? What is being touched when I feel visceral familiarity in the image (“who or what touches what or whom”)? In my body or his? Derrida might ask, “When our eyes touch is it day or night?”

In the way Nancy suggests meaning is where presence comes apart to be itself as such, I feel this representation of intimacy, isolated and in a way disassociated, is the coming apart of the intimate moment to share in its meaning, which are so many. The non progressing timelessness of the still image and activated light of the electronic screen speak of perpetual presence while the digital approximation and otherworldliness brings a quality of absence. Movement in the lines made by the sheets are a history

of movement of the body. The body language and familiarity of a bed speaks relates to our own bodily experiences of rest or tenderness. With one hand outstretched, and the engagement with the pillow, one could even piece together a dialogue or narrative. It even brings up much larger narratives of artificial intelligence/authenticity and the question of what/where is life.

Dissociation



Rachel Whiteread, *Ghost*, plaster on steel frame, 1990

Rachel Whiteread's work speaks strongly to the presence / absence dynamic and giving form to the invisible. Casting the negative space in interiors and functional objects such as the bottoms of chairs creates visibility for the implications of functional forms in our lives as well as brings awareness to the unseen aspects of our experiences. In her process she moved progressively away from including the personal or human factors in her castings, eventually also opting out of titles for her pieces. She went with casting methods that would not pull things like soot or wallpaper, to completely fabricating the structures stating that it was more about the affects of form and function. I admire Whiteread's ability to approach subjects that border on romance and nostalgia (as my work also often does) yet look plainly at the form and function of living. Her work is a direct transmission, of its own language, about the conditions of emotional relationships to form and function.

I see similarities of dissociation within Whiteread's and my work, in the isolation of figures and interiors visually and conceptually, as well as their being made into literal objects. Whiteread replicates form to observe it. It is contemplative. The observational practice of mindfulness is in essence non habituation resulting in a sort of radical intimacy with presence/reality. I feel what can be seen as cold and dissociative can actually be a form of intimacy in an attempt to see something more plainly, clearly, closely.



Pamela Rosenkranz, *Our Product*, Installation view Pavilion of Switzerland at the 56th International Art Exhibition – la Biennale di Venezia 2015

Pamela Rosenkranz also looks at human nature and perception in a dissociative and critical approach. I find we often have overlapping attractions aesthetically and conceptually, but our paths of analysis differ. Rosenkranz seeks to question the “nature” of human nature citing that the changeability of scientific knowledge/understanding of what nature is undermines perception in human experiences. different outcomes. About her piece *Our Product*,

“It’s been said that the more skin that is in an advertisement, the more people will look at it. I am interested in how this trigger works on us biologically. I wanted to work with flesh tones at first because I was attracted to the colors. By asking myself why this was so, I became aware of the biological trigger, and I tried to establish a distance from it. It seems important to confront the constructed advertising image, where we encounter an idea of beauty, and to develop a deeper sensitivity for the physical basis of attraction.”

I feel we are both working toward a deeper sensitivity surrounding attraction and perception, however I am not as focused on detangling social constructs as plainly looking at what the perception of relating is and potentially can continue to mean. Rosenkranz’s process is often life-based examination through performance or installations with live and ephemeral materials such as water, colored light or mounds of pigment on the floor. I see similarities in our processes in the way she applies her questioning to her own personal experiences and fluidly moves through mediums to test these questions.

“In the face of such narrow and potentially tragic understandings of beauty, art can be a vehicle to develop new perspectives, fusing insights from different fields. Art is very powerful, I think, for encouraging greater independence in our perception of what is attractive.”

Chapter 2

Relationships

“And to you,” the incalculable”

Derrida

Interpersonal relationships have shaped my life more significantly and profoundly than any force both in their presence and absence. I am continually amazed by the (my) compelling desire for revolutionary transformation by way of another. Jacques Derrida describes an experience with his mother that exemplifies the complexity of relationships.

“When I asked her if she was in pain (“yes”) then where, it was February 5, 1989, she had, in a rhetoric that could never have been hers, the audacity of this stroke which she will alas, never know anything, no doubt knew nothing, and which piercing the night replies to my question: “I have a pain in my mother” as though she were speaking *for* me, both in my direction and in my place.”

This awe at the impact and importance of relating and relationships has led me to center the study and exploration of them in my work and career path. Interpersonal relationships fall in a range that includes personal (sometimes romantic) devotional relationships with the divine to the most profane exchanges, yet are irreducibly complex in their meanings. Second-wave feminism showed us that the personal is political. Our personal (private) experiences reflect a larger social structure. Looking at the history of considerations of relationships and ontology (to include Derrida), it’s obvious the conversation is and has been of and for the experience of a white male canon. Applying the personal is political to the desire to work with personal ontological subjects, I see my creating and exhibiting work about my life as creating visibility and giving voice to my experience and by doing so, adding it to the larger conversation of relating and ontology.

Photographer Nan Goldin’s body of work, *Ballad of Sexual Dependency* has been deeply affecting and influential to my work addressing relationships. I greatly admire Goldin’s work on many levels and often self-reference her integration of personal life and creative process as well her depth of intimacy. The *Ballad of Sexual Dependency* effortlessly speaks to the experience of relating and relationships in all their nuance, multiplicity, and simultaneity of experiences. At the same time it profoundly embodies the personal is political by creating (empathetic) visibility of marginalized experiences in her community in the wake of the AIDS epidemic.



Nan Goldin, *David and Butch Crying at Tin Pan Alley, New York City*, photograph, 1981

Goldin has said about her work, “I photograph out of love, and wanting to touch them in a way, so I only photograph people who touch me.” From a desire to extend experiences of my relationships, to touch them, and to learn from them (out of admiration and/or rumination) I work interactively with their image. This often brings up personal conflicts with issues of voyeurism, romanticisation and objectification.

I am aware that my work often exists on a fine line of romanticisation, nostalgia and potentially even being exploitative. Nan Goldin responds to the question of voyeurism within her work, “I’m not crashing; this is my party. This is my family, my history.” On a personal level I strongly agree with working with one’s history, but I also feel a great sense of responsibility in literally objectifying the image of people in my life by exhibiting. Traditional fine art mediums have a long history of process and how to view the work. Digital scans are still clumsy in contemporary art dialogue, and even within my artistic practice, there is still room for non predetermined outcomes and discovery. The scanning process is reminiscent of the earliest portrait photography where sitters would be propped and supported for the duration of the photographing process. There is an (unavoidable) heightened level of intentionality that goes along with it. With the people I scan there is a conversation about the process and a period of time spent settling into and living in the conditions of the scan before taking it. In this way it is an authentic process of awareness of relating to each other. Goldin addresses this sense of being able to see a progression of relationship through the work that I feel is the essence of the scans of my relationships:

“There’s a common belief that the photographer is stealing the soul of their subject. I believe that you can actually give people access to their soul and show them themselves. In my portraits of Pawel there is this quiet intensity where things are revealed slowly. There is a kind of serenity in this work. It’s all about learning about somebody and developing trust. And you can see the progression of the relationship in the work.”



Pawel's back, east Hampton, photograph, 1996



Bed, 3d digital scan still, 2019

The bed has become central to my thesis work *Presence / Absence*. In the 3d scans I took of my empty bed I was attracted to its seemingly autonomous visual vocabulary. In addition to the immediate feelings toward a bed, I observed in the sculptural appearance of the surface associations of materials like paper or clay, terrain and landscape. As found in Rachel Whitread's work of functional furniture, the bed speaks directly of the body. As an image it has associations ranging from the mundane to profoundly impactful. It can conjure feelings of safety, rest, intimacy, memory, trauma, loss, isolation, or death (among many other experiences). Symbolically it can represent a shift in course of action and time as well as the otherworldliness of the unconscious. To me it has become a powerful signifier of presence and absence.

Chapter 3

Loss and Isolation



Felix Gonzalez-Torres "Untitled", billboard, 1991

The work of conceptual artist Felix Gonzalez Torres moves between social critique and expression of his personal life. He claimed a sense of freedom to be able to move between subject matter and medium in a sort of unpredictable anti-consumerism. I believe by subverting the acutely capitalistic and critical art environment, it allowed for him moments of radical authenticity and tenderness. His body of work surrounding the loss of his partner Ross Laycock to AIDS related illness is a profound consideration of relationships and loss. His series of billboards of black and white photographs of an empty bed demonstrates the way the image of a bed has a direct, experiential language. A review by Fredrico Florian explains the power of the action of the piece and the weight of significance of the relationship stunningly well.

“A billboard with an unmade, empty bed, all over New York City. You made it after Ross’s death. Two pillows, bearing the marks of your heads; immaculate bedsheets—clinical, aseptic whiteness. Was that Ross’s deathbed? You multiplied it, spread it all around the city streets, announcing how incalculable your loss was. Although this picture can intimately speak to all of us, you said that your public was only one person, your long-time companion. A post-mortem declaration of love.”

In his piece *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*, which consists of two wall clocks set to the same time and displayed as they, over time, fall out of sync speaks to the dynamics of inevitable misalignments of

relating. In *Natalie and Maureen*, I am also aiming to look plainly at the dynamics of relating. Though it is an image of a couple touching, the separate frames do not pick up where the other one left off, it is not continuous. Most often the figures in my work are isolated sometimes both spatially and emotionally. With *Natalie and Maureen*, I am interested in what Nancy would refer to as “being singular-plural,” a sort of plain look at the singular within the dynamics of relating (plural), their inevitable misalignments.



Natalie and Maureen, 3d digital scan still, diptych, 2020



Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*, , Candies individually wrapped in multicolor cellophane, endless supply. Dimensions vary with installation; ideal weight 175 lbs, 1991

Additionally, Gonzalez-Torres' more well known piece *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* is a profound offering of his consideration of relationships, and in this case very specifically, of loss. The piece speaks around a body, it's transitioning weight, over time, loss and the immortality of remembrance. It encapsulates the quantifiable aspects of a body, unseen social aspects of stigma and the unseeable and unknowable experiences of relating to and loving an other.

In relation to my work, this piece prompts the consideration of sensation and representation. To reconsider the sensory experience of a consideration of a body, feeling or concept. Most often I work representationally, with images of people from my relationships and add lighting or water simulations post-capture. I consider these to be empathetic elements, meaning they assume the form of and reflect their environment like water, light or a reflective surface. In adding them to the scans I feel it is a form of interaction and means of touch, however Torres' piece speaks to another desire, to speak around a body, through it's sensory experiences. With the nature of the scans being three-dimensional, I have been progressing toward more live and installation applications.



James Turrell, *Breathing Light*, LED light into space, 2013

James Turrell in his work is interested in the “sense of presence of space.” He addresses the sense of space by dissolving the boundaries between the body, the walls and space between. His installation *Breathing Light*, viewers are immersed in saturated, atmospheric light and color in a suspended, sensory experience. Turrell’s aim is for viewers to experience the essence of space and their own awareness. I am interested in the sort of autonomous sensory language he works with. Further, his ability to blur the boundary between body and space in a way that is reminiscent of touch.



Sundown, digital 3d scan and animation, 2:00, 2020

With *Sundown* I am working with a specific moment in time, more specifically the sensation and emotional impact of the transition. It focuses on the moment during sunset presence of light that fills the room and touches everything with color, its following withdrawal and finally, absence.

Light communicates activation by defining form, presence and touch. The contrasting absence can come with a sense of withdrawal, loss and/or isolation. One could easily self-identify with the room as boundaries blur when edges and shape lose their definition in the dark. When installed for exhibition, *Sundown* is a to-scale projection piece where the room also fades to darkness with the viewer present. By making a piece where viewers can be environmentally immersed in the transition, I am interested in creating visibility and empathy for common but private experiences of isolation and depression

Chapter 4

Process - Empathy with the Ephemeral

In an attempt towards freedom in my creative practice and also in changeability of my perception of relationships, I am attracted to a sense of conceptual open endedness and a process that values non predetermined outcomes. The Situationists International, specifically the writing of Guy Debord, is a source of inspiration in its intent to interrupt and interact with life, essentially to create more instances of living. His concepts of psychogeography and the *dérive* (translates to drift) I often consider while working with 3d scans. As defined by Debord psychogeometry is "the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals." The *dérive*, or drifting, is the action of (aimlessly) navigating an environment actively responding to the effects of psychogeography. He cites the difference between the *dérive* and a stroll as the engagement with "playful-constructive behavior." This playful-constructive behavior with the emotional and behavioral responses to one's environment is very similar to my process working with the scans post-capture. It is not as much about creating an idealized environment as much as empathetically moving through and responding to the conditions captured in the scan. Although Debord's primary focus is on urban environments and disrupting the internalization of capitalism, the process he centers is a personal and poetic one that substantiates emotional experience.

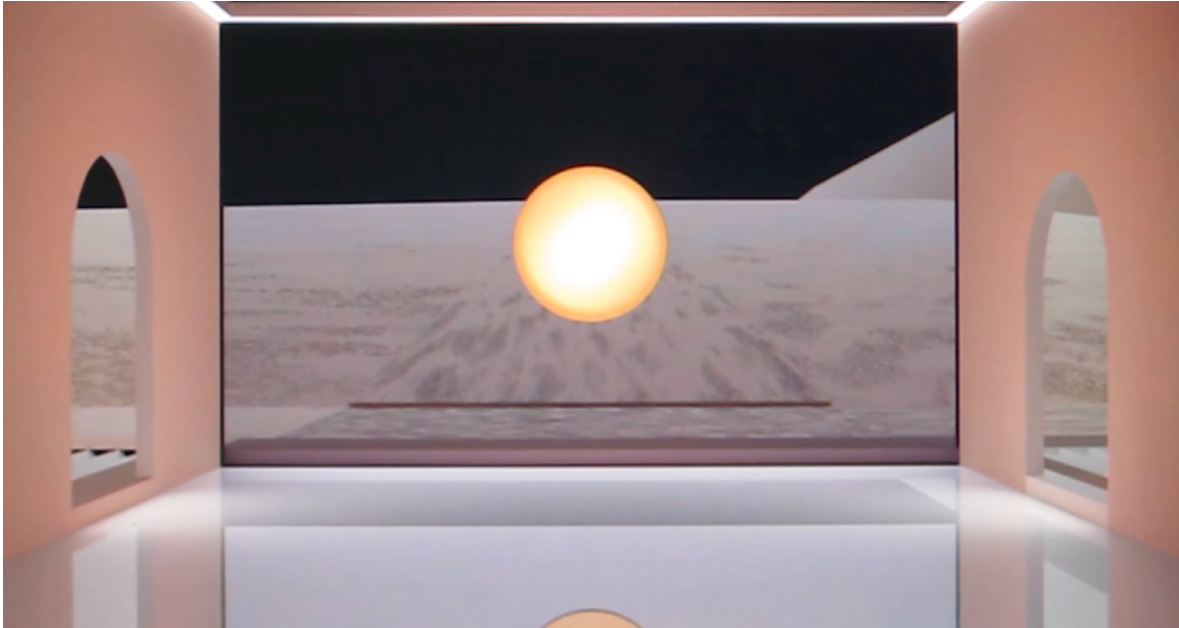
"So to speak, we have to multiply poetry subjects and objects - which are now unfortunately so rare that the slightest ones take on an exaggerated emotional importance - and we have to organize games of these poetic objects among these poetic subjects. This is our entire program, which is essentially transitory. Our situations will be ephemeral, without a future, passageways. The permanence of art or anything else does not enter into our considerations, which are serious. Eternity is the grossest idea a person and conceive of in connection with his acts."

Or as Derrida has written, "Salut to the vision that did not cling to forms or ideas, but let itself be touched by forces."

Digital Ephemeral

Digital art has its own ephemeral nature. It has a sense of impermanence, anonymity, and immateriality in which I find a sort of creative freedom. Often digital art has no real (tangible, quantifiable) sense of object or place. It is also often debated whether art that is produced digitally is even artist-made without the hand touch of the artist. Beyond legitimacy there is also great potential, even inevitability, the piece will be obsolete once technology has progressed beyond the piece. With the rapid advancement of technology there is almost a guaranteed time-stamp for a digital art piece. What this means to me is making digital work sometimes means possibly making work without a future. It also means defying the two of the most perpetual values in the art world, commodification and ever-lasting

life of the archive. I see digital artists as having a certain freedom and courage to make work in these circumstances. It is the courage to be vulnerable and ephemeral.



Sara Ludy, *Dream House*, HD 1080p video, 10:00, 2014

Sara Ludy is a digital artist I share many commonalities with, she addresses this issue of impermanence in an interview: “I back up work in the cloud/on drives/at my gallery while accepting obsolescence will occur. I don’t have anxiety about this, as digital media is inherently temporary and fleeting. Erosion and data loss are part of its aesthetic.” In the same path to digital art Ludy was originally a painter, moved through video art until arriving at new media. She works in 3d animation and shares common interests of domestic architecture and/in the digital realm as well as values an intuitive creative process. Ludy’s interest in non materiality is also an important consideration in my work, she describes it as “digital tools allow me to give form to the intangible without the form becoming physical.” Without becoming fully realized and defined as physical, intangible experiences and forms are still allowed to exist in what she describes as the “fluidity of spaces such as digital, dream, intuitive, psychological, emotional, psychic and spiritual.” Digital offers a freedom to work with infinite possibilities of an alternative reality.

Where we differ is in our areas of focus. Sara Ludy appears to attract more towards visual abstraction and the unconscious dream-state like in her piece *Dream House* which is a virtual tour of representations of her lucid dreams. Although I am also interested in the elusive aspects of perception and allowing for fluidity between experiences of them, I am more grounded in representation and the human

experience of reality. I in part, use the otherworldliness of the digital to contrast and compare perceptions in physical life.

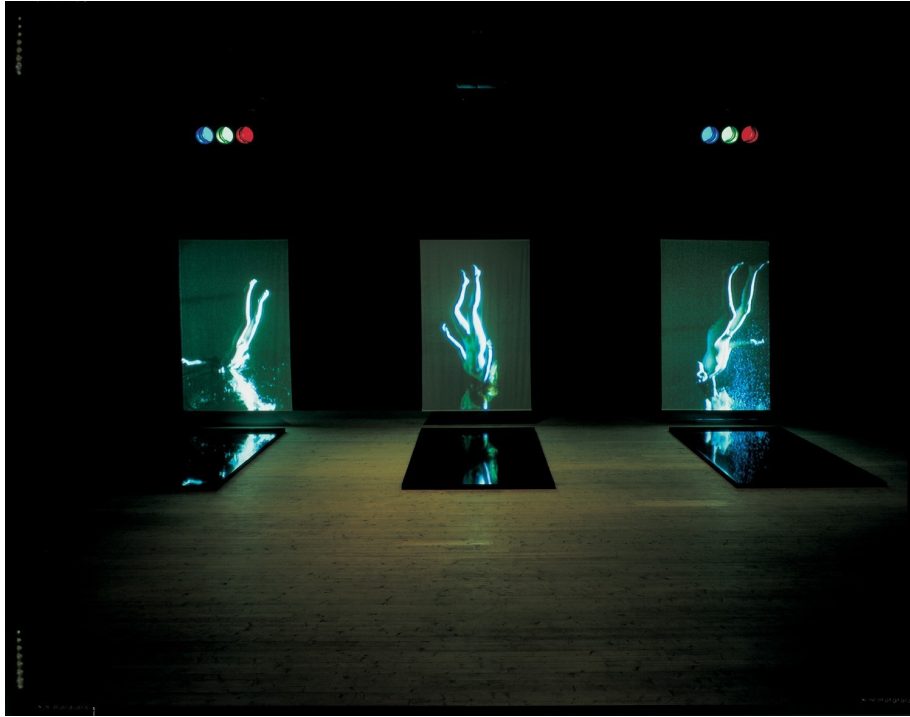


Ruth, 3d digital scan and animation, 2:00, 2019

Ruth uses the digital realm to contrast and compare within the domestic environment, exploring the emotional effects of abstracting familiarity. The video piece is an animation that revolves around a digital 3d scan of Ruth in her bathroom, in installation view it is exhibited as a to-scale projection. As the video reaches the back side of the scan, where the scanner recorded the figure in the mirror to be an additional three-dimensional space, the image progressively fragments and abstracts. The scene becomes less familiar and relatable, but still has hints of domesticity such as a framed artwork that becomes visible as the rotation nears the front of the scan again. This piece offers viewers an experience of abstracted familiarity that mirrors an internal experience of Ruth.

The scene also represents a mirroring of the internal environmental experiences of Ruth. The disintegration of structure and blurring between limitless space (void), as well as the fragmented ghostly second figure, compounds the existing body language to form dialogue of loneliness and private

experiences with anxiety and depression. It speaks also of family dynamics and isolation within that structure.



Bill Viola, *Stations*, video projection and granite, 1996

Bill Viola represents a point of reference in my digital work, as a foundation that I intentionally moved away from and have since found again in a new application. My introduction to digital art was (as a painter) through encountering video art. The work I was making was influenced by and of a similar aesthetic to the isolated figures in space and vicarious sensory experiences of Bill Viola's work. I was interested in the emotional experience of perceiving natural elements and the significant power to control those emotions with the ability to alter the speed and scale. However, my work was heavily autobiographical. What I wanted to depart from was the sense of the grand narrative and the constructed experiences of them. I wanted to work with my life and experience it more clearly more than coerce its meaning (for myself or viewers). The most lasting influence from Bill Viola's work is his vast experimentation with the relationship between light and physical space and materials. Although in digital work I value non materiality and impermanence, I still find that I am drawn to relationships with natural materials in physical space. It is a tension I am interested in exploring as my work progresses with 3d scans. To consider three-dimensional physical space and how and if the scans, and further, digital, integrate or relate.

Conclusion

Working with (and repurposing) the technologies of the time, and with the personal is political in mind, I am adding to the larger conversation of the conditions of coexistence in a contemporary language. As my digital work progresses, I expect to further integrate sensory experience and considerations of physical space to bridge the digital divide. Working in digital art addresses our digital lives and our relationship to it.

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Vita

The author was born in Fairbanks, Alaska. She received her Bachelor's degree in fine art from Rocky Mountain College of Art and Design in 2007. She joined the University of New Orleans fine art graduate degree program to further her career as a fine artist, art educator and designer. Her work has been included in international exhibits and has also exhibited locally in New Orleans, Louisiana. She has been the professor on record teaching introduction to drawing for the years 2019 and 2020 at at the University of New Orleans.