

Salty in The Sea: An Exploration of Softness and Empathy in the Age of Digital Coolness

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5/6/2020

My senior project piece is an animated environment that I invite you to enter. It is composed of two main parts, the animation video and the installation. I made the animation to invite the viewer into the space, while the installation space invites viewers to watch. Once the viewer is within the installation space, my goal is for the animation to create an immersive atmospheric environment for them.

My animation explores several themes — fluidity and transformation, dreams and illusions, melancholy and the afterlife. These themes are presented in a loosely polar approach, often contrasting each other visually and thematically. I worked with presenting these ideas both figuratively and abstractly. The viewer enters an abstract world in the beginning of the animation;



Still from opening sequence of Salty in the Sea.

symbols and moving objects establish a world of fluidity whilst also foreshadowing what is to come later in the film. When the scene changes into the hand-drawn scenes, the significance of the opening sequence becomes clear. This part of the film opens the space for the viewers to interpret what is happening.

The existing themes in my film developed from my exploration on the idea of softness. I wanted to know what softness was, beyond its general definitions. I looked to know how softness looked on a picture plane, to make a work that looked soft and “feel” or empathize in a soft feeling. Lora Mathis’ series, *Radical Softness* (2015) led me into my exploration. Mathis’ series, however, emphasized on the power of being emotionally vulnerable by “sharing [our emotions] in a society that prioritizes the lack of emotion.”

(White). I applied her idea conveying emotions and feelings that connect to my strong themes with my unlikely narrative.



Paik, Nam June. Zen for Film. 1965, MoMa, New York.

I was also inspired by artists such as Allan Kaprow and Nam June Paik. I discovered these artists in earlier research, and set the foundation for this project. It was Paik's *Zen for Film* (1965) that got me into thinking about video as a medium and its power to stimulate the senses without arguably having much content. Kaprow's essay, *The Legacy of Jackson Pollock* (1958) theorizes the idea of artwork as an environment, using Pollock's work as an example. He claimed that Pollock's paintings were an

environment because Pollock's paintings reached beyond the surfaces of the canvas.

(Kaprow). Learning about Kaprow's argument made me think of my own project as a form of an environment in which you can step into both mentally in the animation, and physically in the installation.

The story is nested within the dream-like abstraction of our protagonist's subconscious. The main character is an unnamed young girl, who goes



Storyboard notes for revelation scenes.

through a trance, much like a dream or coma. In this dream, we enter the girl's memories within her self conscious. The scene opens up with a net much like the one in the beginning of the film. Then, it cuts to two figures, the dark haired main protagonist,

and the light haired missing child. As the viewer watches, the girl's memories become distorted and her dream infiltrates her memories. She then wakes up to find that she has washed up ashore. The film sets in the wake of the main character losing her childhood playmate due to mysterious and ambiguous circumstances. The girl wants to look for her, but does not in the film.

This is loosely based on my inspiration of a personal family story that was meant to put my grandmother and great aunts to sleep. One of their childhood friends went missing for a day. My grandmother and great aunts were told that she was taken away by the mermaid who lived in the town's river to make them go to sleep instead of misbehaving. The friend was later found. I decided to take that family story and twist it to fit my themes. The childhood friend is not found in the animation and both the



Pitt, Susan. *Asparagus*. 1979. Vimeo. Still from *Asparagus*.

protagonist and the viewer are left with questions. Where is the missing playmate? Was the angel real or a product of the girl's imagination?

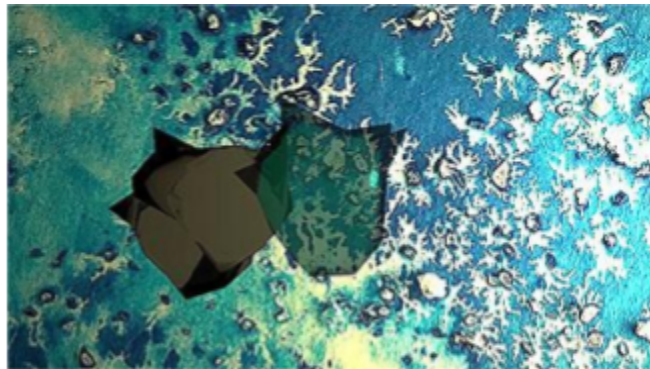
The animation's thematic concept and narrative is very metaphorical due to the

themes' duality. Susan Pitt's *Asparagus* (1979), brought metaphorical means to her piece through her symbolic use and repetition of asparagus. Her film reflected my concepts through forms of visual metaphors. It was because of her film that I decided to continue with my own play of words and visuals, and how viewers react to them. Not only that the butterfly net in the film acts as a transitional device, it also draws a theme

of its own. The function of an ordinary butterfly net is to catch butterflies and other insects temporarily. Here, the net symbolizes the girl's yearning for her childhood friend's return and frequent appearance in her subconscious. The missing child disappears in her dreams until they are released as the girl awakes. It ends with the dream sequence again, then completes the film's loop. The loop is meant for the experience to not end until the viewer exits the installation space.

The abstract morphing crystal seen in the opening sequence of my video and throughout my film is nicknamed

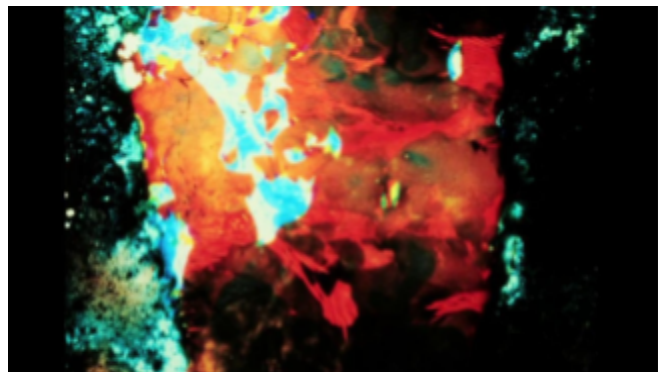
Salty. It is another form of the missing child, who is also an angel in the girl's dream. It is a part of the transformative character, the missing child. This form changes in physical



Still from Salty in The Sea, "Ghost". The character "Salty".

form and personality, it's an abstract side of the missing child. Salty's crystal shape changing from soft to hard edges is an abstraction of the child's "spirit". The form is ambiguous, but it still acts like a ghostly spirit, an illusion.

The protagonist acts as an unreliable narrator. She asks for the audience to figure out and piece together what really happened, to make sense of what they just saw. The way I delivered



Reeves, Jennifer. Landfill 16. 2011. Vimeo. Still from Landfill 16.

the film's symbolic revelation was deeply inspired by Jennifer Reeve's excerpt of *Landfill 16* (2011). Reeves' film has a fast tempo of colors on decomposed film. Her film later revealed its original content at the end. The sounds and music lightened up the mood and placed a certain innocence. With the film's rapidness, a suspenseful buildup towards the climax, it made me think of how I could reveal the girl's past through

nuanced means.



Salt drawing, photo. Early concept painting.

The mediums I chose for the project deeply influenced the nature of the animation: fluid and transforming, contrasting and dialectical. Within the animation, I switch from digital to handmade imagery, as well as from 3D to 2D. There is a world structured from the computer and a world created through my hand. The line between them wiggles, it bleeds and blurs like the ink drops with water and crystallizes like the saturated

puddles of salt water on paper.

I initially started with filming blue and black ink drops on paper. I wanted to record the movement and fluidity of the medium with my smartphone. I kept playing with the ink dropping and added salt. There were puddles of ink water in

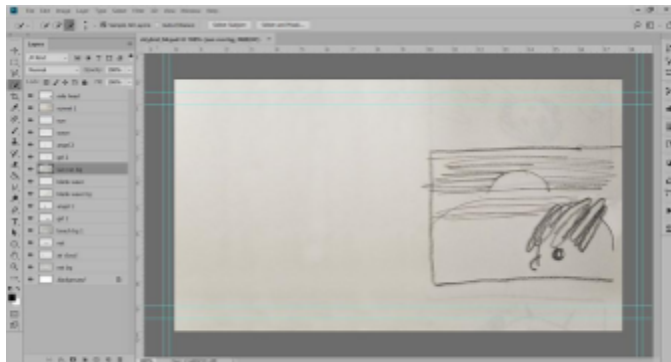


Still from *Salty in the Sea*, "Stare".

the pieces I created and from recording. The salt saturation filled and replaced what was the puddle, turning the smooth to pointy, cubic and dry texture.

The hand-drawn vignettes were from the storyboard in which I planned to fully animate by drawing frame by frame on digital software. Then I thought of using the actual storyboard as vignettes in place of it, then animating the figures. The pencil marking of the drawings added onto the childish characteristics of both the film and protagonist. As I kept working with the drawings and animating them, I thought of the drawings as those drawn by the protagonist.

The digital work in the film, especially in the opening sequence, was experimental. Before working on the more painterly aspects of the film, I worked with digital mediums such as Blender 3D animating and Photoshop photo manipulation. I worked with these mediums to draw out the concepts for this narrative. Amy Sillman's



Digital editing drawn sketches in Photoshop.

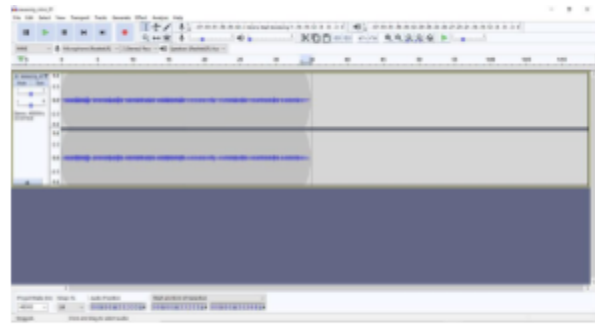
digital animations opened my consideration for digital abstractions in my piece. Her film, *Pinky's Rule* (2011) is an example of her process of creating digital 2D animations on her phone.

(Sillman). It led me to experiment with

capturing content and subject matter through my own smartphone. From photos to ambient field recordings, I decided to use my phone for the quality of the work. The pixelation was an artistic style choice. With the work of digital software, I was able to make the film a loop to even the dreamlike narrative. By utilizing such software, I was also able to alter the scale of my work to enhance the immersive qualities of the film.

Without such digital compositing, I would not be able to create such effects and scale for this environmental piece.

The incorporation of sounds in the project started with experimental field recording of ambient sounds. From distant construction noises to light flickers and the sound of the sea, these recordings were what I considered to be important for the film's atmospheric aspects. These low, subtle and ambient noises were used to draw out a calm mood and structure the tranquil atmosphere in the film. The field recordings later led me to make experimental music that I used as the score of my film. The repetition of



Audio editing on Audacity.

vibrations and tempo helped structure the atmosphere and helped transition from one mood to the next. Sound design was also dependent in terms of timing. I used simple editing methods such as using Audacity to efficiently create the sounds for the film. Sound is important in this piece because it goes back to my earlier exploration of empathy and the idea of softness. I found that these concepts connected to the sounds' sensorial aspects. It helps the viewers pick up on the atmospheric cues of the film, so much how most people would in everyday situations.

Salty in the Sea deals with a dream-like melancholy that washes up ashore like ocean waves. The childlike narrative and protagonist delivers the story in a way that the viewers are able to investigate and interpret her unsaid words. I wish the viewers to

experience the film with the protagonist, and to dream the same dream and subconsciously recollect past memories.

Bibliography

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Installation Proposal: The Mermaid's Net

Concept:

My project is not only an animated short film but also a built environment in which the audience could experience the film's atmospheric and immersive qualities. My work depends on sight and hearing, making it a sensorial piece. The installation would enhance these qualities even further with the animated film. I call the installation The Mermaid's Net to refer to the symbolic significance of the butterfly net in the animation shown within the installation.

Vision:

Depending on the space I would be given, ideally the installation would be best installed in a small room big enough to accommodate at least six to ten people. The room would be furnished with a rug for viewers to sit and stand on while watching the film. The film would be projected onto the wall that's furthest away from the door or entrance point. The room would be dark enough for the projection to be visible, but also easy enough for people to navigate through the installation. The entrance as an open door can let light in to make this possible. Along with a projector, speakers would be needed to amplify the sound of the film to enhance the atmospheric experience.

Technical Aspects:

It would be ideal to utilize any available room in the Visual Arts building that already has a ceiling projector and speakers ready for use. If the room has any windows, it would need to be blocked out of any outside light. The rug would need to be big enough to fit the room, so a plain roll over type of carpet would seem fit.

Concept Sketch:

