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Media to Medium: Representations of Violence, War & Women in Pop Culture

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MEDIA TO MEDIUM: REPRESENTATIONS OF VIOLENCE, WAR & WOMEN IN POP CULTURE

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Virginia Commonwealth University
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Artist Statement

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By Althea Georgelas, M.F.A.

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Major Director: Hope Ginsburg
Assistant Professor, School of the Arts.

My work is inspired by the mass Media and how it affects the world around me. I am interested in how violence, war and women are represented in popular culture and how this has trickled down into social behavior. I also wonder how much entertainment media reflects deep social ideals. I define mass media as the viral proliferation of ideas using television, cinema, video gaming and the Internet. I am concerned about the social and psychological affects of violent media and how it impacts the lives of women and girls. This is of particular interest to me because I am a woman who has grown up in a media-saturated culture. Many aspects of my life and my identity have been shaped through media influence.
I frequently use source material collected from the Internet. My method is to choose a specific word or phrase, and then use search engines to retrieve the associated media. By doing this I am assured that, on any given day, the images and videos returned to me are those most disseminated in mass media for that particular subject. Once I have collected this media I regularly use it to create digital collages, multi channel sound compositions and animated video.

There are two threads within this process that intersect as I am working through an idea. At times I manipulate media and synthesize new material to represent my own personal vantage point. This allows me to directly comment on popular media and how it affects my life. The other thread in my practice is the subversion of media to challenge its meaning.

These two approaches enable me to comment on media using a format of art-making that is similar to mass media itself. By using appropriated images and sound from popular media I am adopting a language that is understood by media makers and consumers alike. Working in this vein allows me to insert my own voice into the ongoing media-driven dialogue and thus help shape its collective consciousness.

At the root of this exploration is a deeply unsettling concern for how mass media shapes social behavior in a way that reduces the individual voice and strips its power to resist. Mass media influences culture but it can also represent collective thought and action. There is a relationship that exists between media and how people act in the real world. Media and consumer are caught in a kind of feedback loop and I question how the individual identity fares. How do women survive in a culture where the blending of
entertainment and violence so often targets makes them a target? How has violent popular media affected my life and those around me? How can people secure a truly representative voice against the media that oppresses them? I want my art to push these boundaries so that marginalized voices can be heard.
Work Trajectory

When I began my MFA I was thinking about the tension that exists between our physical and virtual perceptions of reality. Television, social networking, online gaming and the abundant accessibility of information have all become important aspects of our lives. We seem to be living out more and more of our lifetime within this virtual space. I believe that this has distanced us from the tangible space of our physical lives.

This lure of media as an entertainment outlet is powerful because of its capability for instant and immediate gratification in our busy lives. However this detaches us further from our physical needs. I feel that this division is creating an unacknowledged stress within us. Our bodies are left in tangible space, with physical needs unmet, while media takes hold of our minds.
I started to think about how this media is brought into our daily lives. How does popular media reach out to us for consumption? Television, Internet and cell phones came to mind but what is it that enables the feed of media? The system is fueled by power. It takes electricity to participate in media as entertainment. Acknowledging the necessity of power and the power lines that facilitate this feeding became an important element in a series of my works.

I used power lines and poles as subject matter in a photographic series entitled *Power*. I wanted to show the organic quality of electrical growth that is continually required to deliver more and more power to people. Taking photographs of historic Richmond I documented the old power grids. These systems have been repeatedly built upon to handle electrical necessities. The twisting of power cables and the sheer visual chaos of their connections reminded me of old growth forests with their tangle of vines and brush. Both power and nature seem to grow in whatever way they can to survive.

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This exploration later led me to the creation of a projected video and sound piece called *PowerLines*. The manipulated image of a forest is layered with the periodic images of flashing electrical lines. The audio is made up of appropriated sound from popular television and is scored within a kind of electrical soundscape. The piece experimented with how to represent power lines as the vehicle of our media driven lives.

After completing these two pieces I pondered how certain elements of media can be more potent and consumable than others. I thought about the monopolization of images with which people are bombarded daily via television and Internet media conglomerates. Images are an integral part of the appetite of media consumers and culture today. I noticed that certain images are more often publicized and dispersed within media than others. This creates a cultural visual paradigm in association with popular topics.

Using Google’s Image search engine I did subject queries to see what types of images would come up. At first I did these investigations based on my own daily interests. I soon found the juxtaposition of the produced images very interesting. When I searched

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the word, “love” for example, the images that were returned were at once absurd, silly, frightening and moving. Doing the same search repeatedly over the course of a month I noticed that new and different visual associations were generated. By collaging these images together digitally, I found them to be a dynamic representation of what people presently see in relationship with certain topics. This further enabled me to assemble and arrange these images in a collage that represents my own feelings on the subject.

One topic that I focused on in this first series of collages was the word, “rape.” I wanted to understand what images currently represented this subject. The collages were very chaotic. The majority of images generated by the searches ranged from pornographic, fetishized, sexually violent, and euphemistic to satirical. I noted that most of the images representing rape were simulated or mocking and that few were depicting actual rape. Most of these images portray women in submissive positions and fully exposed. The rapist, who is the secondary character, is often completely or partially cut out of the image. These images are obviously used to titillate male consumers. Images of women in entertainment and advertising consistently objectify women in violent or comprising situations. This affects the perception and treatment of women in culture at the expense of female empowerment, safety and status.
In the physical world I feel that this image-driven consciousness diverts attention away from rapists and redirects it onto the woman. Why do we think of rape statistically in terms of how many women will be raped annually? Why don’t we focus on the perpetrator by stating how many men will rape annually? This is not to say that the survivors of rape are unimportant. Since women are thought of as lesser beings in human societies it is important to address both parties in the act of rape. If we address rape statistics by focusing on the perpetrators then we are not enabling men to remain safely invisible while the women become the prime visual symbols. I believe that the way rape is visually represented in entertainment media conditions the growing normalization of violence towards women. After this exploration I started to think of the image searches as a way of doing research on cultural perception.

During this same period in my work I experienced a new airport security appliance described to me as, “The Puffer Machine,” by a representative with whom I later spoke at TSA’s customer service line. The machine requires that you step inside of its large chassis

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and place your feet on markers as a computerized voice announces, “Firing jets!” Your body is then pelted with a jarring series of high-pressured airbursts. The Puffer Machine does this to sniff out explosives that may be on your person. I felt an eerie sense of anxiety as everyone in the security line realized that they each had to go through this machine. *Is this what it has come to for us to be safe?* I thought about the manufacturer’s decision to present a militaristic phrase like, “Firing jets!” to people who are about to board a civilian flight. It made me think of 9-11 and the current news coverage of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

I wondered how are people feeling about the militarization of their day-to-day lives? I think that people are rationalizing this militarization with a perceived need for personal security. It is apparent that surveillance and security have become major industries within our public and personal environments. Even our entertainment outlets, such as gaming and network Television, have taken on military aesthetics. I wanted to understand my own anxiety about being caught between the need for personal security and the perception of shrinking civil liberties. I began to do image searches using the words: airport, distrust, explosives, fear, firing jets, freedom, militarization, protection, security and surveillance.
The series of collages that I made were the beginnings of *FiringJets*, which was exhibited in my first year MFA candidacy show. The digital collages were animated so that the collaged layers would melt in and out of one another; they were very hypnotic and colorful. I installed the piece in Tin Can Recording Studios in Richmond. There were two rear projections, of the animations, through the control room windows into the studio area. I also created a sound piece for *FiringJets* that appropriated sound from video searches and placed it into a manipulated score. It was a six channel surround-sound piece that I ran through a uniquely constructed speaker array, which was placed on a low pedestal on the floor. The room light was very dim so that the collages created a visual focal point. The installation created a sense of low-level anxiety and induced a kind of hypnotic sci-fi paranoia.

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In my next piece *She Soldier* I went away from digital visuals and created a physical object. The idea for the piece came when I started doing research on violence within the military. I ended up focusing on the high rates of rape and assault of female soldiers in the military and the lack of Media coverage on the subject. I began by collecting previously recorded video interviews of survivors speaking about their experiences. The veterans ranged from those who had served in WWII through those who participated in our current war in Iraq. They told their stories and called for new training methods of soldiers. I also collected the interviews of retired and active military men and women talking about the treatment of women in the military and their denigration in training. They sited the misogynistic training methods of US military as creating a climate for female soldier assault.

After accumulating the videos I extracted pieces of sound from the interviews. I gathered short sentences and phrases, which I responded to emotionally. I thought for a

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long time how to represent these women’s stories without exploiting them. Then I began to identify with the trauma of a physical attack and started to think about how the body would speak if it could. I composed a series of sound pieces representing different parts of the body that are emotionally charged to me. I then bought an authentic US Army uniform from Ebay for $10, a uniform that a female soldier wore in Iraq in 2002. I glued small speakers in the uniform that corresponded with those areas of the body. The throat, chest, stomach, hip, thigh and ankle each had their own unique sound. I wove the extracted pieces of interviews into the sound score so that each part of the body would speak independently at different times.

During the exhibition of *SheSoldier* at 1708 Gallery in Richmond, Va I noticed that people wanted to engage with the piece by touching it. They often walked up and placed a hand or ear against the uniform or put an ear against the speakers. I felt that it was really important that people were drawn to the piece and the story it was trying to represent and

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that they would break the traditional restrictions of gallery experiences to reach out to the work. That type of interaction with my projects is something I will continue to aim for in the future. My goal with SheSoldier was to raise awareness about the violent acts perpetrated from within military organizations and promote the marginalized voices of survivors.
MFA Thesis Exhibition

For my thesis exhibition WarWeaponBody I chose to rework and expand upon a piece that I began over the previous summer for an exhibition at Sewanee University, in Tennessee. WarWeaponBody is a piece that explores how we as a culture perceive the body in applications of war and weaponry. It is much like FiringJets in its format as it has two animated collage video projections and a six-channel sound piece. In the previous version of this piece I experimented with software that automatically created the sound score from a sound bank based upon the color/contrast changes in the animations. I was interested in the play between creative control and automatic art making. It was an interesting experiment but I found that it did not sit well with my natural storytelling reflex. I wanted to give the piece new life by hand crafting the sound score to breathe my narrative thoughts into it.

I was interested in doing this piece because I felt that my own body has been commodified. The body is often seen only for its potential utility as war-time collateral damage, its brute strength, its sexual arousal and its weapon wielding capabilities. So I set out to understand if there is still any personal respect for the body left, and if so, how it is used in war and weaponry. I employed my Google.com image searches to create collages that reflected these ideas. The subjects I searched revolved around the words: war, weapon and body.
The collages for the word body were riddled with images of scantily clad young women, body building men, and pregnant women. The weaponry collages were made up of images that spoke to male power, the wielding of guns, sexual attacks and female subservience. The war collages were filled with civilian death, fighting, onlooking soldiers, home-front patriotism and weeping faces. I took these collages and created two animated projections. The collages moved in the same manner as *FiringJets*, slowly melting in and out of each other.

This piece was installed at Anderson Gallery for my thesis exhibition in May of 2009. The two projections were placed on opposite walls and cast a large image that was about 15 feet across. In the center of the space I installed a 4 foot cube which housed the projectors, amps and DVD players. On top of this cube sat a six-channel surround sound speaker system.

Also included in this exhibition was a large printed document. The document contained all of the images (along with the URLs) that were collected during my

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Google.com image searches Above each grouping of images was the search phrase used to draw up the images. I thought of this document as my source list for the piece. It addressed my appropriation and manipulation of these images from the Internet and their location. These images and sound files that I took from image and video searches were my tools, and they served as my creative material. With this project I hoped to create an environment where people could take a moment to contemplate their own bodies and how they are implicated in applications of violence.

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\[8\] Althea Georgelas, print graphic, *WarWeaponBody:Sources*, 2009
I’d like to offer a summary of a few artists that influenced the development of my work. Those whose work or performances existed in the public realm, such as Mark Jenkins and the Graffiti Research Lab, were of great interest to me. I was excited by the potential engagement of participants with their community and the promotion of individual voice. Also I was attracted to works of art that engaged me on a personal level, such as the works by the Vasulkas’ like Noise Fields and Janet Cardiff’s Audio Walks. The sensory and emotionally immersive environments these artists created got me thinking about personal voice in the public realm.

Just prior to beginning my MFA studies I stumbled upon the work of an artist who calls himself The Storker who is also known as Mark Jenkins. It is unknown whether this is his (or her!) real name as he keeps his identity private on his website and in the video and image documentation. Jenkins uses clear plastic packing tape to make adult and infant human forms that he anonymously places in urban environments during the night. His “tape people” sculptures draw attention to those issues that are unseen or avoided in city life. Murder, the homeless, workaholics and trash-buildup are all addressed by Jenkin’s tape sculptures.

Jenkins is based in Washington, DC and has placed his tape people and tape babies all over the world. In Rio de Janeiro, Jenkins placed the form of an adult person in a trash
dumpster. This simulated the disposal of a murdered person in a city with some of the highest documented rates of violent crime and murder in the world. I like that the bodies are placed in these environments anonymously. It is almost as if the city itself created these people out of the trash and refuse collecting in the cracks. They lay waiting to be stumbled upon by local citizens.

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10 Mark Jenkins, image documentation of Washington, DC public installation, 7/2006.
In Washington DC, Jenkins placed adult human forms on sidewalks and dressed them to suggest that they were homeless people. The plastic forms looked entirely lifelike in their clothes. In the video documentation, which can be found on his website, people are startled and intrigued when they find that these people are not human. I feel that Jenkins points a finger at the invisible in these places by recontextualizing everyday urban experience. It is a kind of performance for general public and the metropolis they inhabit. These tape people inspire city dwellers to ask certain questions with fresh urgency: Why was this person put here? Who and what are they?

The GRL, or Graffiti Research Lab, is a group of public artists that pushes the boundaries of graffiti by using digital technologies to engage large audiences to voice their opinions in a public setting. I am particularly interested in the group’s LED “Throwies.” The “Throwies” are made up of tiny LED lightsbulbs attached to a small magnet and

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fueled by a lithium cell battery. Each “Throwie” is about the size of a quarter. They are called “Throwies” because they can be thrown at metal surfaces where they magnetically stick creating a Christmas light effect in urban environments. These little lights are made in the thousands by groups of volunteers for the GRL. They are then passed out to people at night inviting city communities to interact with their environments in a new playful manner.

The GRL also works with powerful video projectors that they set up in metropolitan areas. These projectors are used to cast video upon tall buildings. The GRL calls on people passing by to write or draw on these buildings whatever they wish to say. They have a system that allows people to draw out things in the air using a laser pointer while a computer interprets these movements and translates them into a video projection. The video projection simulates a massive paint pen, which is iconic of graffiti culture and drips down the sides of these buildings as people write. I love this because it stresses the power and freedom that people feel when they have a chance to voice their own perspectives. It is also empowering because citizens can make their marks on giant corporate buildings as well as have their voices seen for miles. I feel that it is essential for individuals to have their voices acknowledged in a time when the onslaught of mass media has seemingly diminished the power for individuals to speak and be heard.
The experience of viewing Woody and Steina Vasulka’s *Noise Fields* for the first time was both physically and mentally jarring. I first encountered this piece in my first semester graduate seminar taught by Stephen Vitiello and Hope Ginsburg. The piece is a single channel video projection with accompanying sound. It was a simple visual of alternating color fields between the shape of a circle placed in the center of the frame and the surrounding 4:3 video rectangle. The color changes were harsh and sudden and the eye could not keep up with the rapid flux. The sound was strong and siren-like. It was a test of will to encounter this six-minute piece. I kept watching and listening assuming that something would change. That *something* would happen eventually.

What I noticed, after prolonged exposure, was that I began to feel like I was staring at my own aggravation, which had manifested itself inside that chaotically flashing circle. This got me thinking about violent entertainment in media. I thought that it must be an

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outlet for some unresolved physical and mental conflict in our current culture. I started to think about media as creating culture but also responsive to cultural needs.

Another person that influenced my work was the Canadian sound and installation artist Janet Cardiff. I first learned about Cardiff through her *Sound Walks*. These walks are prepared audio pieces where she manipulates binaural recordings of her movements through a city, building or forest. Throughout the sound piece are threads of her speaking about the place through which she is walking. She also voices internal thoughts and memory as well as edits in historical description, which breaks down the linear time of the walking trajectory. Cardiff invites people to experience her sound pieces by wearing headphones and an audio player and asking them to go on a walk “with” her. To me it felt like a very intimate exchange. I had the sense that I was walking through Cardiff’s memories intermingled with my own as I walked. I started to think about how people have personal engagements with public space.

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These artists inspired me to consider public space and how the individual can sustain or create a situational platform to voice personal perspective. My work was then shaped to contemplate and experiment with the representation of marginalized voices. Those who are survivors of violence, such as soldiers and rape victims became my focus and I used the Google.com image searches as a way to understand their current and historical representation and exploitation.

Conclusion

My work revolves around the idea that personal and individual voice is imperative in communities that wish to thrive. Mass media is here to stay and personal voice has been diminished by the hypnotic lure of instant visual entertainment. Through small acts of playful and resolute confidence, art can be an outlet for the marginalized voice. It is on this stage, where idea meets action, that the voice will reclaim its importance. This is already happening in the seeds of the blogosphere and public performance. I hope to continue to add to this dialogue. It is crucial to protect and promote the confidence for each of us to speak.
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APPENDIX A

A year ago I began to consider how violence permeates women’s lives and identities. Over the past few years I began to ask women around me if they themselves have ever had a violent experience with men. I asked this question to good friends, relatives and acquaintances. I also opened a forum online in which strangers could answer this question. The results were astounding. Each woman had had at least one or more violent incidents with male aggressors. Every single woman, whose ages ranged between 16 and 87 years old, had been raped, beaten or attacked by men that they either knew who were complete strangers. I was shocked. This was the first time in my life that I had the strength to talk to other women about this and I had no idea that violence towards women was pandemic in our culture.

One of the greatest problems with violence against women is that it is so hard for survivors to personally speak about past incidents. We live in a climate that so often ridicules and mocks violence against women and even treats it as entertainment. Women are raised in this atmosphere and they are disempowered through this disembodiment. I am strongly disturbed by my perception that women are not yet culturally considered equals.

As I began my study at VCU I had the idea that I wanted to focus on violence against women. Specifically, I was interested in how the mass media’s representation of this violence influences men and women’s relationships. I had the idea of doing a project called, EveryWoman, a title which stems from the Shakespearean monologue, “All the
World’s a Stage.” This monologue speaks about all the stages of a man’s life and I wanted to simulate this from the perspective of the modern women’s life. It was a slow emotional process for me and ultimately I was not able to complete the project in the two-year span of my MFA degree.

In my last semester of graduate school, I initiated a project about this topic which I believe will be ongoing. It is called *MontstrousMouth* and it deals with the image representation women currently have in mass media. Below is a piece I wrote while thinking about the proposed outcome of this piece. I feel it is a good way for me to end my thesis because it points to where I am headed with my work.

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**Monstrous Mouth**

*MonstrousMouth* (working title) is a project inspired by the journey I took to understand how images have created my perception of myself. I came to a point in my work where I could not avoid looking at the visual depictions of women and feeling that they have greatly shaped my life. I felt that I needed to understand them to better understand myself.

I started to think about what it is to be a woman today and how I feel about it. How are we represented by images? How have they affected my life? How have they affected the lives of the women around me? What could I change if I could? How can I better represent women? I came to the conclusion that it is the voice of women that is being drowned out by our overwhelming visual representation in mass media. It became clear to
me that women are gazed upon before they are listened to. It is our voice that must be brought to the forefront.

I began to think about literally eating the mass media images. Consuming the images via intimate oral passage (the mouth) but chewing and grinding them down. I see the obscured head of a woman actively inhaling and internalizing the representation of women as a kind of violent act. At certain intervals she forgoes the swallowing of these images and instead she speaks. She refuses to unconsciously inhale and accept the indoctrinated perspectives of herself. She manipulates them and returns fire with her own voice.

*Monstrous Mouth* is made up of a series of animated collages, recorded interviews and the animated sequence of an anonymous female head opening and closing her mouth. The installation of the piece requires a large space with large opposing walls. On each wall is a video projection of the animated sequences and in the center of the room is a six-channel surround-sound speaker array. The viewers will be immersed in the environment of sound and image.

The collages consist of appropriated images and video collected from internet searches. The recorded interviews are voices of women speaking about experiences of violence in their lives. I also asked my subjects to talk about how others reacted when they voiced their thoughts about the visual portrayal of women. Incorporated in the score are collected sound bytes from sexist mass media entertainment and popular music. The mixture of these elements creates a space where women have power that equals the media that exploits them.
MonstrousMouth will become a web installation. I feel that it is important to do this so that Monstrous can become a part of the online media dialogue. It is also important for this message to be widely accessible. Monstrous addresses the importance of owning of our voices by utilizing the same media that oppresses them. I hope that Monstrous will empower women to fearlessly use their own voices to combat exploitation.
APPENDIX B

VITA

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EDUCATION
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2003 VCU, Richmond, VA, Bachelor of Fine Art – Communications Art +Design

Curriculum included: Video, sound, and web technique courses

ADDITIONAL TRAINING
2006 Rhode Island College of Design, Graduate Summer Studies - Painting

2005 Corcoran College of Art & Design, Continuing Education - Painting

2004 Loudoun County Community College, Non Degree Seeking - Printmaking

TEACHING EXPERIENCE
2009 VCU School of the Arts: Kinetic Imaging Department, Richmond, VA, Adjunct
 Teacher, Sound Communications

2008 VCU School of the Arts: Art Foundation, Richmond, VA, Adjunct Teacher,
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2008 VCU School of the Arts: Art Foundation, Richmond, VA, Adjunct Teacher,
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2007 VCU School of the Arts: Kinetic Imaging Department, Richmond, VA, Adjunct
 Teacher, Computer Techniques.

2007 VCU School of the Arts: Kinetic Imaging Department, Richmond, VA, Adjunct
 Teacher, Introduction to Video
2006  VCU School of the Arts: Kinetic Imaging Department, Richmond, VA, Adjunct Teacher, Computer Techniques.

PROFESSIONAL & STUDIO EXPERIENCE
2003-2009  Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., Documentary Film Editor
2007  Hand Turkey Studios, Richmond, VA, Audio Engineer, Sound Designer and Audio Editor
2003  Henrico County Television Channel 37 (HCTV37), Richmond, VA, Assistant Documentary Editor
2003  Public Broadcasting Station (WCVE) – State Capital, Richmond, VA, Studio Assistant and Camera Operator

EXHIBITION RECORD
2007  Adjunct Faculty Exhibition “Auxiliary”, Virginia Commonwealth University
Triptych Prints, Fine Arts Building Gallery VCU, Richmond, Virginia.


2006 Arts in the Alley Exhibition (invitational), Arts in the Alley Painting Series, 23rd Street, Purcellville, Virginia.

2006 Folding Chair Exhibition (invitational) Painting Series, Leesburg, VA

2003 Kunst Museum Exhibition (invitational) Video & Sound Series, Kristiansand, Norway

2003 Senior Student Show, Virginia Commonwealth University Video & Sound Series, Richmond, VA

2002 Urban Light Works Festival Video Projection, Richmond, VA

2002 “Faces Without Spaces” Exhibition Video & Sound Installation, Richmond, Virginia

2001 “Althea Forgot” Guerilla Projection Video Projection, Richmond, VA

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2008 1708 Gallery, “MediaX” Exhibition, Richmond, Va. Artist participants panel discussion.
2008 Sewanee University, Sewanee, TN. Artist talk.
2008 Georgetown University, Washington, DC. Video and sound production for documentary.