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TIDES

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

by

Isa Newby Gagarin

Bachelor of Fine Arts, Minneapolis College of Art and Design, 2008

Master of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2018

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Dedication

In memory of my uncle Hector Gagarin,
my grandfather James Newby, philosopher and surfer,
Teto Elsiddique, who taught me about iridescent shells,
and Elyse Stern, who planted gardens and sailed oceans:
you all inspire me to live my fullest life.

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Abstract

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By Isa Newby Gagarin, MFA

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Major Director: Hope Ginsburg, Associate Professor, Department of Painting and Printmaking

My artistic practice creates relationships between the abstract and the personal. I define the abstract in the context of my studio work as a material exploration of color and form. The personal encompasses autobiography in relation to my sense of time and place. In this text, I use my concept of oceanic tides (considered as a temporal and spatial shift between states) to chart my activities as an artist. These activities include making objects that change in character over time, and durational work including performance and video. Interwoven throughout *Tides* are narrative passages based on my personal experiences, including witnessing the total eclipse of the sun, a purple garden, a coincidence, and the death of a friend.



Image stills from *Tides*, HD video, 8 minutes running length, 2018



Image stills from *Tides*, HD video, 8 minutes running length, 2018

Introduction

I imagine the Pacific Ocean in its entirety, slowly expanding and contracting. Tides occur across time and space. Oceans rise and fall in tandem with the moon's orbit around the earth, at a tempo that varies. Visually, high and low tides are evidenced at the shoreline, but the speed of tidal movement is not as immediately perceptible as other aspects of the water, such as waves. In this sense, I conceptualize tides in abstract terms, because they involve a whole body of water which extends beyond the visible horizon.

In consideration of tides, I write this thesis about my practice as a visual artist. I write from a position at the locus *and* the horizon. I am in the dredges left on shore as the tide recedes. I am out on the distant horizon where the sky blurs into the ocean. This text is written as a wayfinder from the center out. It is a compass, a way to orient my work towards a structural and magnetic center and outwards towards exploratory and unknown experiences.

There are two primary ways to name the tide in its fluctuating states: high and low. Occurring across time and space, the changes of the ocean between high and low tide differs from a singular line between two points. Tides are spatial, similar to the way my breath fills my body. In and out. Outward, inward. With this notion in mind, there are two primary states that my work fluctuates between: the abstract and the personal. I define the abstract here in the context of my studio work as a material exploration of color and form. The personal includes my autobiography and a sense of place originating from the Pacific Islands. Conceptualizing my artistic work in terms of tides is a way to create a structure that is mutable, and whose changing character is one of expansion and contraction. For example, it is expandable in terms of artistic medium, as I have pursued painting, sculpture, installation, performance, writing, and video. It is collapsible in the sense that at times my work forgoes any signs of the personal altogether in an

effort to place attention on the presence of abstract colors and forms. And yet, even when I focus on abstraction, it is through the process of doing so that particular sensibilities of mine start to emerge. When I engage with the personal in my work, I recognize how those sensibilities are shaped by my sense of self, including my biography and identity.

The Abstract

“Who has not gazed in wonder at the snaky shimmer of petrol patterns on a puddle, thrown a stone into them and watched the colours emerge out of the ripples, or marvelled at the bright rainbow arcing momentarily in a burst of sunlight against the dark storm clouds?”

Derek Jarman, from *Chroma*

I am perceptive of color as something that occurs as an experience. I am walking over a carpet of pale yellow ginkgo biloba leaves on the sidewalk. I notice a bright circular shape cast on to a ceiling: it is a reflection of someone’s watch. I am eating a grapefruit, experiencing the bright colors of its rind and flesh along with its scent and taste. Color is embodied in the objects I make, and my attention to color continues from those objects to the environment around me. In my experience, developing an inquiry into color has lead me down many forking paths. My work is influenced by studying areas of knowledge such as perception and optics, philosophy, architectural lighting design, and artists who have worked with light as a material.

My sensitivity to color as a perceptual phenomenon is often so heightened that I get lost in a reverie of process. In its least productive, my hypersensitivity results in a loss of hierarchy and an inability to discern where my work begins and ends. I made an effort to capture my sense

of awareness by making an audio recording during a long walk alone. I set forth with a simple objective to describe, aloud, the colors I observed around me. The resulting audio features my breathless voice attempting to keep up with what I noticed, accompanied by an ambient landscape of passing cars, birds, and footsteps. I describe white magnolia petals, a silver fire hydrant, a woman's blue shoes, a patinated green grate on the side of a house, and the earthy red of a brick which has "dissolved into pieces." At one point in the solitary journey, I laugh at how difficult it is for me to try to express, in real time, the speed and frequency which I notice colors in my environment. Functioning as part of my ideation process, listening to the recording provided a way for me to consider the inadequacy of language to accurately or wholly translate my sensory and optic experience of color.

Informed by my dedicated practice of observation, the material processes in my studio work are guided by Josef Albers' principle that color is the "most relative medium in art," described in his 1963 educational text *Interaction of Color* (Albers 1). My activities in the studio are predicated on a state of constant flux. I have used painting, staining, drawing, and other processes to apply color to raw canvas and undyed fabrics such as silk and cotton. I have also worked with paper, cardboard, cotton string, and other familiar materials. Last year, an errant piece of twisted wire that I found on the ground led me to collecting and creating a series of petite, unique wire forms. These straggly, curly, and kinked pieces of wire exist not as isolated artworks, but as objects in relation to the other materials in my studio. After bringing together a pair, set, or collection of disparate colors and materials, I manipulate them in sculptural ways by hanging them against windows, draping them over tables, rolling, folding, layering, pinning, tacking, gluing—any manner of activity that creates new relationships between color.

I am significantly influenced by painters who have worked inventively with materials and approached painting as an unrestricted and expansive medium. The artists that I have looked to during the development of my thesis work have primarily been abstract painters who engage with color, and particularly those who approached the painted substrate as textile. The catalogue for the 2006 exhibition *High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967-1975* motivated me to develop my vocabulary in abstract color and form sans the use of the stretcher as the painting's internal physical structure. Harmony Hammond's braided rug paintings, Al Loving's stained and sewn assemblages, and Alan Shields' vibrant work in fabric and materials as various as cotton string and paper towels have all informed my material explorations. In addition, the variable orientation of Richard Tuttle's 1960s *Cloth* series, made of canvas dyed in pale pinks, purples, and blues, cut and sewn into simple and yet eclectic geometric shapes, have shown me how simply a painting can be activated as a spatialized object.

Researching the work of this group of painters, many of whom have been receiving belated recognition and scholarship in museum surveys since the 2006 exhibition and ongoing, diversified my knowledge of the activities of painters in New York during late modernism, as well as my sense of who was making abstract painting at that time. While identity and autobiography do not play a role as the primary content of many of these painters' work, it is important to give recognition to the diversity of painters from a period of art history that is undergoing increasing re-examination.

Maggie Nelson's book *Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions* (2007) has additionally provided me with a feminist reading on abstract painting and poetry from the same time period. Nelson offers a compelling look at the artistic inquiries in abstraction by women poets and painters of the New York School in the context of the significant social and

cultural changes in the late 1960s, arguing that “to declare the death of an art form (i.e., the last avant garde) ... just as its demographics and fields of interest undergo a profound and hard-won diversification- strikes me as deeply troubling” (Nelson xxiii). Her analysis of abstraction in the work of painter Joan Mitchell and poets Barbara Guest and James Schuyler was influential on my attempt to create a relationship between the personal and the abstract in more complex terms than a dichotomy: “Both Mitchell and Schuyler are enthralled by the riddle of subject-object relations, but neither has a compulsion to settle the matter.” (Nelson 27).

The Personal

Autobiography is the partner to abstraction in my practice, and like tides, elements of autobiography are at times approaching and other times receding. My work in the personal is strongly influenced by a journal that I have kept daily for over five years. Documenting my life experiences through writing has highlighted my sense of the passage of time, including thinking about cycles of days and seasons in relation to the circular movements of the earth, sun, and moon. My interest in the temporal as it relates to the cosmos is influenced by my experiences being raised in Hawai’i, and spending time surfing in the Pacific Ocean.

In my artist book *When Her Son Flies in the Sky* (2011), I wrote a text that attempted to chart connections between my biography with themes of aviation and the cosmos. My first name means *rainbow* in Chamorro, the language indigenous to Guam (and hybridized with Spanish as a result of Guam’s colonized history). I was born in Guam in 1986, when Halley’s Comet was visible from earth. While pregnant with me, my parents viewed Halley’s Comet from an elevation of 10,023 feet at the summit of Haleakalā (Hawaiian for House of the Sun), a dormant volcano on Maui. My surname is shared with Russian cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, known for being

the first person in space. There is a crater named Gagarin, located on the dark side of the moon. These fragments of naming and stories were braided together and accompanied by drawings based on photographs from my research into the various topics.

When Her Son Flies in the Sky created a constellation out of personally oriented information, and elements of the book have continued to appear as motifs or subjects of my work. I have integrated elements of autobiography into my visual work by accompanying different bodies of work with personal essays (published as artist books or exhibition take away texts). I have also experimented with the language of titling my work as a way of framing disparate subject matter. Writing has provided the primary means for me to explore autobiography, although this thesis represents a time when I have started attempting to use other forms to convey self-representation.

I am the third generation in a family of surfers, and was raised mostly in Hawai'i. In the 1950s and 60s, my late grandfather Jim surfed at Huntington Beach in California. My mom and dad surfed in Guam in their high school years, and windsurfed on the windward side of Oahu in the 80s. My brother and I were raised surfing at Kalaeloa Beach on the south shore of Oahu. My dad and his friends have lost and broken their surfboards to powerful waves on the North Shore, which features dangerous shore break during the wintertime and is as still as a lake in the summer. When I was a teenager, my friends and I would check tidal forecasts to determine what time of day to surf at Threes and Fours, an offshore break in Honolulu which produced nicer shaped waves at low tide.

In a 2015 interview, the late painter Jack Whitten described having a conversation with John Coltrane in the 1960s, in which Coltrane said to Whitten, "Don't you understand? It's like a wave" (Whitten 53). Inspired in part by the complexity of jazz music, Whitten's work expanded

on the musical notion of “sheets of sound,” employing his ideas through paintings that embody complex temporal and spatial perceptions. My experiences of sitting on a surfboard and waiting for incoming swells has been one of a heightened sense of solitude, considering my body in relation to the enormous scale of the sky and ocean. Sometimes the sky and horizon of the Pacific Ocean appear to seamlessly dissolve into one another, as if they are one continuous, infinite form. One aspect of surfing that I find difficult to describe is how to read the incoming waves: I can anticipate, by *feel*, the incoming set of waves before they are visible in the distance. Likewise, it is hard to articulate how to chase the “best” section of a wave as it approaches. My relationship to the ocean is felt through my internal senses, and my knowledge of surfing is based in a bodily understanding of the movements of the ocean.

I find the idea of tides compelling because they describe the ocean’s changing state. Oceans exist not as static bodies of water, but as actively fluctuating forms. This distinction is important as it relates to what I value in terms of making art: the work that I make is mutable, evolving, transforming, and becoming. In this sense, tides are not just an analogy, but an attitude, a sensibility, and a politic. Through the process of mapping relationships between the abstract and the personal, I will depart from graduate school with newfound questions, in pursuit of discovering more complex dimensions of my present and future self.

An Occurrence of Color

I can't stop thinking about the intensity of the colors.

Michael and I are sitting underneath a striped canvas tent,

Eating savory garlic shrimp with our hands.

Next to the tent stands an autograph tree.

Lovers' initials are scratched into its waxy green leaves.

A canopy of letters providing shade.

I am mesmerized by the contrasting stripes of red, orange, green -

Backlit by the sun, the colors are vibrating intensely, nearly burning my eyes.



Sun Study, acrylic, silk, orientation variable, 2018

This is the story of an occurrence of color. The color is yellow. The story begins one morning in my studio, last spring. Drinking yerba mate, I meditated on the shape and form of my teapot. Dark blue, squat, and round, the teapot sat next to a pile of grapefruit peels, which rested on top of a piece of pale blue canvas. That morning, I painted a large swath of silk in a sunny monochrome of bright canary yellow, and hung it to dry on a line of string. The yellow cloth, light and gauzy, was dry by the afternoon. The daylight had shifted to a warmer temperature, casting everything in energized, bright light. I folded the delicate silk, stiffened from the plasticity of its acrylic paint stain, several times over and hung it against my south facing window. In the late afternoon, the sunlight entering the window caught on the fabric and glowed brightly, as if light was emanating from the material itself. The bright hue buzzed with cheerful, citrus lemon energy.

The yellow glow continued to emanate from the window of my studio for a month. It was springtime, and my peers and I were looking for a space to host our MFA candidacy exhibition. After an exhaustive search, the nine of us got permission to use a historic storefront space in downtown Richmond. It was nicknamed the Martini Bar, a reference to its original use on the ground floor of an early 20th-century hotel. It featured a massive, lofty front room with eighteen-foot-high windows. The entire space was in extremely aged and weathered condition. The walls were comprised of crumbling concrete and brick, sometimes covered in peeling antique wallpaper and pocked with exposed insulation and metal infrastructure. The tiled terracotta floor was coated in years of dust. The light in the south facing front room had the ability to change in response to the conditions of natural light let in by tall, eighteen-foot-high ceilings. The overall character of the space was one of expansive architecture, filled with dark colors, and rugged, worn, and crumbling textures.



4:12 p.m., late, for Hector Gagarin, acrylic, silk, orientation variable, 2017



4:12 p.m., late, for Hector Gagarin (detail), acrylic, silk, orientation variable, 2017



I forgot his age, our anniversary is in the afternoon, studying for solar eclipse in the Smoky Mountains 1:30 p.m. August 21st, 2017, acrylic, tissue paper, orientation variable, 2017

When I brought the yellow cloth into the exhibition space, the buzzing glow of yellow ceased. The cloth appeared much smaller than its previous environment, emitting a quieter presence in relation to the expansively sized room. The dark colors of the walls and floors, and partially shaded light caused the yellow to totally transform in character: its chroma was dulled, its hue and value became quieter and greyer. The fabric looked subdued, soft, velvety. Formerly emitting a radiant energy, the yellow took on new qualities in response to the different environment. It now appeared delicate, like the downy feathers of a newborn chick encountered in the burrows of its nest at dusk.

The rest of the body of work I brought into the space also changed in character, including their colors as well as their scale and proportions. Their vibrant hues were now set in contrast with the dull, sooty, highly textured and variegated surfaces of the floor, walls, and ceiling. Through a process of trial and error, I started hanging my work throughout the room as freely suspended forms. Since I couldn't tack up the work the way one can temporarily install paintings on a wall to see how they look, every time I wanted to shift a painting up, down, to and fro throughout the space, I had to install long wires across the room.

In the studio, I had given the occurrence of yellow the title *Sun Study*. A study in bright light and glowing color. Cast into a new space, the piece became a different study in perceptual (and psychological) experience of color. Suspended a few feet off the ground, the yellow occurrence looked fragile, sensitive to subtle currents of air created by a viewer walking past it, the slender sheet of muted and transparent yellow quietly wavering and rippling. Given that the piece had transformed in character in response to a different environment, I felt that it departed from its former title.

During the installation period, my maternal grandfather and paternal uncle were both very ill. Grandpa Jim was in Hawai'i, and Uncle Hector in Maryland. They entered hospice care around the same time. I was spending long periods of time in the exhibition space, day and night, struggling to anchor screws into the crumbling walls and attempting to psychically will my paintings into midair. Receptive to the conditions of light, I would note how the space changed in tone throughout different times of day. One afternoon, the dappled light of recently budded spring trees started to enter through the windows. An hour later, direct sunlight cutting through the rectilinear grid of windows created strong geometric panes of light across the entire floor of the room. At nighttime, the warm yellow light of the street lamps filtered throughout the space.

On the day of my MFA candidacy review, the weather brought in dark clouds and threat of a rainstorm. The conditions of light in the exhibition space were cool and gray. I had given the occurrence of yellow a new title: *4:12 p.m., late, for Hector Gagarin*. I thought of the titles as temporary ones, since the setting they were set in was temporary. The works were set in a specific time and place, amidst the intensity of my artistic development, spring thunderstorms, and Jim and Hector's deaths. Nearby, a blue painting was installed against the windows, with small perforations punched into its surface. *4:01 p.m., late, for James Newby*. While the majority of the works in the exhibition hung suspended throughout the space, one of the works found its way to the floor: a sheet of bright fuchsia tissue paper, folded over on one end. By painting the thin tissue with accumulative layers of acrylic paint, the paper took on a warbled texture. Laying against the dusty and earth-toned terracotta tiled floor, the high keyed chroma emitted a hot pink energy that vibrated in contrast with the cool, soft light in the space.

I thought of my work's temporary titles as similar to my journal entries. I started keeping a daily journal in 2013. The entries are brief, and the design of the journal is such that when I

write an entry for a day, I can see what I wrote on the same date from previous years. Within two months of starting to keep my daily journal, my friend Elyse died unexpectedly. She was struck by a drunk driver as she biked home at night from an evening spent with friends. Amidst the experience of intense grief following her death, I continued to write daily. The year following, when I began encountering the entries I had written after she died, the process of reading them was vividly emotional. I continued to fill the pages over the next five years, and the pages became populated with other deaths, as well as births. My friend Margaret gave birth to Ursai. Susie gave birth to Helena. Ginny gave birth to Lewis. Paige gave birth to Aaru. Grandpa Jim passed away. Uncle Hector passed away. Teto passed away.

A year later, the evolution of this color, this yellow hue, continues across time and space. As I write, it is in a passive, resting state, behaving simply like an object: a yellow piece of cloth, folded in half and draped underneath a pile of unstretched paintings on a table in my studio. It is no longer a site and experience imbued with a sense of elegy. Over the course of the year that has passed, I have also filled up the pages of the journal I started in 2013, the year that Elyse passed away. I have started keeping a new, second journal, and put the older one up on a bookshelf. The process of transitioning to a new, empty volume of pages felt like the psychological version of shedding a snake skin. I still look at the older one from time to time; but it is less present in my daily life. It represents an older time, while the new pages and the new days continue turning.



Filtered sunlight, witnessed during the installation period of my MFA Candidacy Exhibition,

2017



Dappled light underneath a tree during a solar eclipse in South Carolina, August 21, 2017

Solar Eclipse

My dad and I drive south, to see the solar eclipse.

We park near a large, grassy lawn next to a public library.

When the moon starts to pass in front of the sun,

The changing light is not immediately perceptible.

A few small and unassuming trees stand nearby.

Standing underneath the canopy of a tree,

The dappled light starts to reveal what we can't see directly above us.

The tree has become the indicator of something extraordinary:

On the asphalt ground underneath the tree are flickering projections

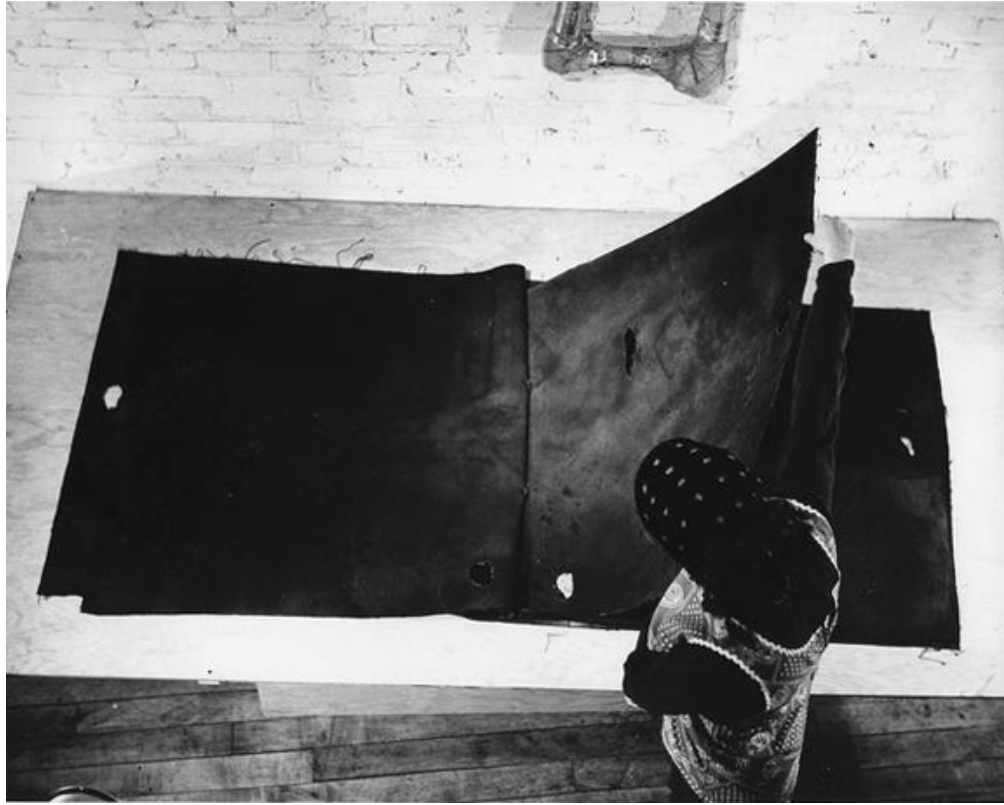
Of crescent-shaped light.

The ground is dark and textured, mottled with pine needles, seed pods and leaves.

In order to see the solar projections more clearly,

I rip a sheet of white paper out of my notebook and lay it on the ground.

I marvel, at the dancing C's of light.



Mary Heilmann, *Book of Night*, 1970

Mary Heilmann's *Book of Night* is a painting as a book, which she made and performed at the Whitney Museum Resource Center in 1970. The raw canvas pages are painted in fields of dark black, punctuated with sparsely placed holes that appear simultaneous like stars and yet physically material as the edges of the circular holes are fringed with raw threads and encrusted with white paint. In this photograph, Heilmann can be seen turning its large pages. In looking at this piece, it occurred to me that the pages of my daily journal turn like the arc of a sun across the sky, in miniature. A year passes by in 365 sunrises, sunsets, and page turns.



Presenting an experimental folio in my studio, October 2017

There is a gradual, gentle process in the experience of opening a cover of a book, followed by turning an end sheet, a title page, perhaps a table of contents, and then encountering the main body of the book. This experience is also evidenced in labyrinth paths. A person entering a labyrinth walks along a zig zagging spiral, taking an indirect route towards the center. Last fall, during a midterm review in my studio, I shared a piece with my committee that was inspired by the book form, and operated as a hybrid folio and performance. Although the contents of the folio still exist, they are no longer assembled into the unique folio that was presented at the time. Its contents included individual paintings on silk, canvas, paper, and other materials in various sizes. The piece was structured by two elements: the first being large, cloth pages that were bound simply by being nailed down to the table (the nails centered along what might be considered the gutter of the book), and the second being various loose elements that were tucked between the pages and compositionally rearranged as each spread was opened. When open, each spread of the folio covered the entirety of my eight-by-four-foot studio table. Some of the pages were made of transparent tulle, so that the shapes and colors layered underneath were visible. As Corin, Holly, and Hope stood on one side of the table, I stood on the other and began by removing small objects sitting on the cover of my book: a curled, bent piece of copper wire, a hot pink tendril of silk ribbon, a circular disc of blue glass the size of my palm, and a handmade book weight made out of a slender tube of painted and sewn cotton filled with lead weights. I then rolled open the cover of the book like a scroll, made of silk painted in thick, dark ultramarine blue.

The first spread of the book featured an assemblage of smaller watercolor paintings on paper, and a wrinkled scrap of bright orange tissue paper. The spreads were composed of varying montages created out of loose pieces of paper, fabric, and other materials cut out into various

abstract shapes such as long irregular rectangles or ovoid circles. With each turn of a page, I encountered new compositions that I had assembled beforehand: each one acting as a kind of scene wherein I improvised how I was going to approach turning them from one side to the other. Objects were flipped, rolled, unfurled, turned, and lifted. Some of the larger pages were made of semi-transparent colored tulle, which partially obscured the colors of the shapes and forms underneath until lifted.

As I began to turn the pages of the book, each page was so large that it became an event, like an act of a play, as I experimented with different ways of turning them. I spoke casually at first, remarking on the material qualities of the contents of each spread. At one point, I uncovered a watercolor painting with a distinctly earthy burgundy colored shape, which I noted was painted with beet juice. Eventually, I settled into silence, as each new abstract composition revealed itself and demanded my attention as a visual experience. The tenor of the space took on a hushed tone, as my audience of three observed the objects and the deliberately quiet cadence of my movements. The experience became highly performative, in an intimate scale and setting.

The interior of the space of a book is an intimate one. After that day, I continued experimenting with artist books and folios as a visual, material, and performative experience to be shared with one or very few other people. During studio visits I performed various iterations of this process, sharing collections of abstract forms made out of paper, fabric, cardboard and other materials, stacked and wrapped and bundled into gift-like packages that I unfolded and unfurled for guests over tea in my studio space. Some of them were fairly modest in scale, such as a collection of monochrome blue paper and cloth forms that were wrapped in grey and blue painted cotton and enclosed with a small metal clasp. Others were larger, such as a series of pressed banana leaves that I had previously collected from my parents' backyard in Hawai'i, and

presented as a kind of folio (acting like loose leaf pages of a book) in a hard cover folder that I made by wrapping cardboard in light cloth painted in verdant green hues.

The tone and energy of how I shared each collection of objects was quiet and contemplative. As I performed for each individual visitor, I tried to calibrate the tone of the room so that it felt like I was conjuring subtle wavelengths that would otherwise be lost in the overwhelming energy of larger spaces, or in the context of a performance with a larger audience. In terms of sound, it was as if I had my ear to the ground, listening for low frequencies. The feeling of those low frequencies was one of somber quality, in relation to the harmonious and beautiful colors and forms of the objects that I opened, revealed, and unfurled.

These studio experiments provided a durational form for me to develop my ideas, a form that intersected between a book and a performance, and a form that started to convey the emotional tenor of solitude that I experience in my studio. In an effort to convey a sense of intimacy, I began using video to privately document my process of handling the abstract objects and materials I was making. At first, it was a surprise to me that making books led me to consider performance and video as a medium. As a durational medium, video resonated with my particular pace of experiencing the book form (a cadence that feels like slow inhalations and exhalations), and with the sense of intimacy that I associate with books.

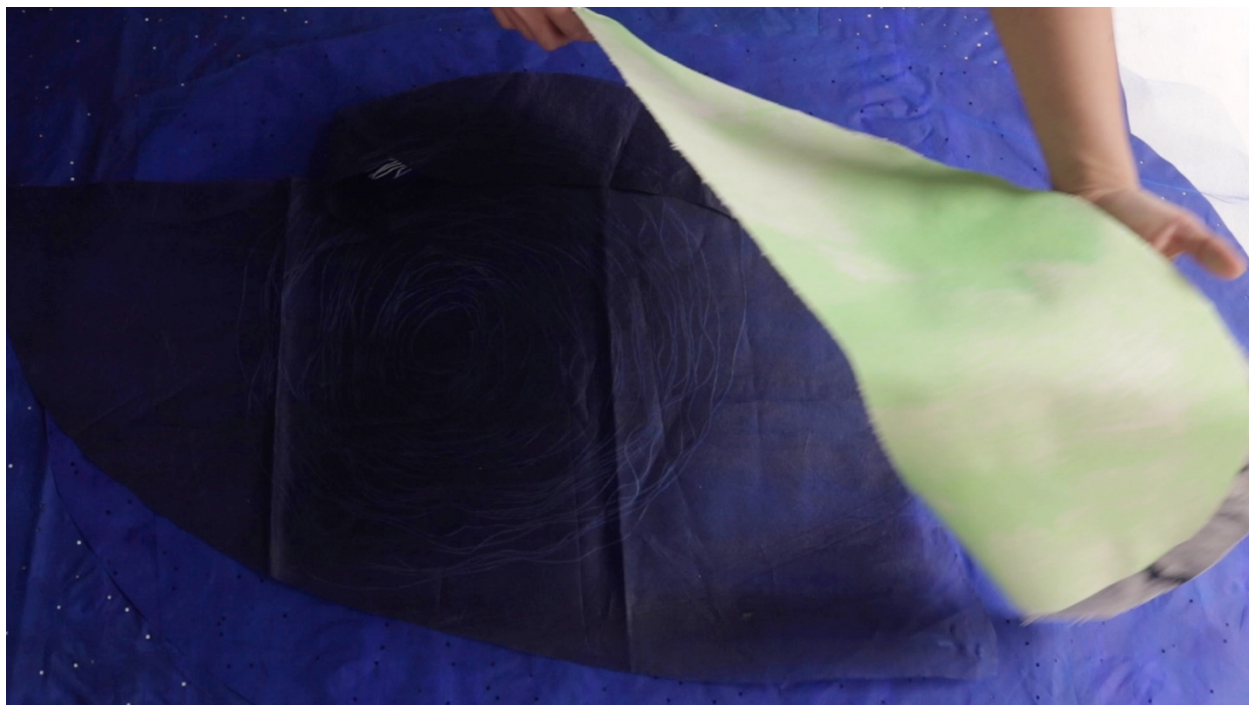


Image stills from *Tides*, HD video, 8 minutes running length, 2018

In my thesis installation *Tides*, one of the videos in the two-channel work was shot from directly above my studio table. The opening shot has a hazy, dark quality, as the image is composed of several layers of dark blue semi-transparent tulle which obscures a vertical, overlapped row of pressed banana leaves. My hands enter the frame, and lift the dark tulle, revealing the warm brown hues of the banana leaves. I then slowly lift away each large leaf, one by one. Underneath the leaves are elongated and curved panels of canvas, painted pale green with dark blue undersides, which are seen when they are picked up, turned, folded, and lifted out of the frame. The overall effect is one of an animated painting, a series of abstract vignettes. Visual compositions of color and shape are transformed through a continual process of removal. At one point in the video, a warbled spiral made of cotton string which is variegated with white and cobalt blue, is rolled into itself with its underlying panel of transparent silk. Later, an ultramarine blue field which covers the entire picture plane gently sways out of the composition, its perforated holes appearing to rapidly blink and shimmer as they pass over the colors underneath.

Elyse's Funeral

Annika comes over to braid my hair

I pull a hat box out of my closet

It is filled with plumes of ostrich feathers

The feathers are dyed in extremely bright colors

Hot pink, orange, vivid green, electric blue

She separates out the black feathers

I show her the black dresses I have to choose from

Pit-stained vintage dresses

Sewn with delicate French seams, musty

She braids my hair, in a spiral, around my head

The sensation of her hands is comforting

Until the braid starts to coil, tighter, against my scalp

We fashion a crown of black ostrich feathers by weaving and tucking them into my braids

I look in the mirror

I look elegant, but not right

That afternoon, at Elyse's funeral

Rachel's hair also looks strange to me

Brushed out, like a giant cloud, ratted with tangles

There is a bike procession from the funeral home

It is quiet

I am thrashing amidst a thick mosh pit of my closest friends

Flailing, my black dress ripping along the seams

Ricocheting off other bodies

Screaming to test where my body begins and ends

My voice is absorbed into the cacophony

We are level with the band as they play on the floor

The drummer's high hat crashing to the ground

It is as if the music is a wave

Everyone and everything in the room is crashing to the shore

Tumbling and churning

There is a narrative motif in popular Hawaiian music about the experience of being away from the islands, feeling homesick and longing. Landlocked, the islander sings of the scent of plumeria carried on the trade winds. In relation to the experience of grieving the deaths of people in my life, I am unsettled by a certain longing, a Pacific Islander melancholy that runs through my work. Perhaps I am unsettled because it suggests a linear way of conceiving time and place, of looking backwards on a temporal line and losing sight of my present state.

Guam is a small island in Micronesia. 30 miles long and 8.5 miles at its shortest width, Guam is located in the Pacific Ocean next to the Mariana Trench, which is the deepest point in the world's oceans. Micronesia: tiny islands. My parents grew up on Guam: my dad's family immigrated from the Philippines in the early 1960s, while on my mom's side my grandfather Jim came from California to marry my grandmother Josephine, a local Chamorro woman. While I was born on Guam, I grew up primarily in Hawai'i. I have only been to Guam twice, briefly, in my adult years. My dad flew there recently, and commented that whenever he steps off the plane in Guam, he can smell the island's distinctive scent. I asked him if it smells like Hawai'i (fragrant, floral, salted, fresh, airy), which always carries an intense feeling of homecoming when I visit. He described it as having a completely different character, one that for him, also strongly evokes his childhood and memories of place.

I only know the scent of Hawai'i, not of Guam. While my idea of the Pacific Islands is steeped in the rich visual beauty of tropical foliage and white sands, there is an undercurrent to my associations with those places that is melancholic. It is a sadness that comes from a sense of loss, and a sense of the diminishing environment and maternal Chamorro language. Of a tiny island colonized and territorialized. The Chamorro language is a hybrid of the indigenous language and Spanish, as Guam was colonized by Spain for two hundred years. It is a sadness in

reaction to the generation of my grandmother's ambivalence in passing down Chamorro language and culture, in the context of trauma and Americanization in Guam after the Pacific campaign of World War II. A sadness in response to narratives around economic stagnancy, stories of family leaving the Philippines and leaving Guam to find opportunities elsewhere.

There are photographs of my parents visiting Yap in the early 1980's, where they danced with local women wearing traditional Yapese skirts and flowers, and swam in the hyper clear water, encountering endangered giant clams. I previously had a tendency to romanticize my linkage to Micronesia since the early development of my practice. That tendency is complicated and problematized (not necessarily in an unproductive way) in consideration of my mixed-race ethnicity and my experience living my adult years as an artist on the mainland, USA.

Underscoring the contrast in environment from my upbringing in Hawai'i, I set my roots in Minnesota, where water is present in the landscape as lakes and rivers and the weather performs extreme changes between more than 100 degrees throughout the four seasons.

It is common for surfers in Hawai'i to have an "Eddie Would Go" bumper sticker on their vehicle (I have one on the back of my truck). The Polynesian Voyaging Society was formed in the 1970s, signaling efforts of native Hawaiians to restore and preserve Hawaiian language and culture. In 1976, using ancient methods of navigating by the stars, a crew assembled of members of the Society successfully sailed from Hawai'i to Tahiti on Hōkū'lea, a traditional outrigger canoe. On a separate expedition in 1978, Hōkū'lea capsized off the coast of Lāna'i. Eddie Aikau, crewmember and renowned big wave surfer, left the stranded crew on a paddle board towards Lāna'i for help. He left alone, and disappeared, lost at sea.



Occultation, performance with perforated cardboard discs and projector, 2017

Occultation

Occultation (2017) was a performance that I developed out of an exploration of light as a material that, using the simple techniques of a shadow show, I could manipulate to create abstract movements and forms. Before I began the performance, an audience was gathered in a dark room, standing and sitting on the floor. The room was a simple gallery, with tall ceilings and a fairly large floor space. In the center of the room was an overhead projector, its light blocked by a stack of something, undetermined, on its surface. Tiny shreds of light leaked out of the box that contained the projector's light bulb. I entered the space. It was quiet. I took off my jacket, releasing a hushed sound of tintinnabulation, as I had sewn dozens of tiny bells on to my long-sleeved shirt underneath. I approached the overhead projector. Not visibly apparent to the audience, I had made a series of cardboard discs with small holes punched into them in various patterns. There were eight of them, stacked on top of one another on to the surface of the overhead projector, where transparencies are typically placed.

I removed the top portion of the stack, leaving one disc on the surface, and held a second one close to the mirror attached to a periscope-like arm. A small, circular reflection of light appeared on a wall fifteen feet away. The circle of light quivered. Slowly, I began to pass two perforated discs underneath the mirror arm of the projector. The movement and interaction of the punched holes caused the light to emit on to the wall in a variety of patterns. Some lights randomly appeared at a similar pace of a field of fireflies, while other patterns of light were more complex, undulating and psychedelic moiré patterns. The patterns of light evoked associations with celestial bodies, shooting stars, and dancing constellations.

In recalling *Occultation* one year after I performed it, I now perceive connections between the patterns of light with the cosmos, and the solemn manner in which I performed it as

connecting to a sense of solitude and mortality. But I also sense the representational receding away from the piece, leaving behind nothing but abstract patterns of light in a dark room.

Elements of the personal and the abstract feel paradoxically close and yet distant from each other in this piece. Does my autobiography always play a role in my abstract work, even when I don't consciously intend to convey specific aspects of my life experience?

Occultation is, like tides, a temporal and spatial movement. The term describes the passage of one celestial body over another, blocking the other from view. During a solar eclipse, the moon blocks the sun, and its shadow casts the daytime landscape in darkness. Regarding the relationship between the abstract and the personal in my practice, my intentionality in the *Occultation* performance has remained unclear to me. But it is unclear to me in the way that a solar eclipse paradoxically evinces qualities of revealing and concealment. The solar corona, an aura of plasma that extends millions of miles from the surface of the sun, is invisible to the naked eye from earth, because the sheer brightness of the sun's light conceals it from view. Counter to the idea of revealing as an act of opening, the solar corona is made visible when the moon blocks the sun during an eclipse. By blocking the sun's light, the solar corona can be seen. Rooted in the Latin word for "crown," the corona appears as cool white, elongated and wispy tails that slowly and eerily undulate.

I feel as if I am looking directly at my work, from both the locus and the horizon. I look and look, straining to *see*. In the words of a solar physicist I once met, who described her experience of watching a solar eclipse: "All I could do is stare at the sky, and it's like you're seeing it, but you're not able to absorb it." It's as if I am looking directly at the personal and the abstract and yet I can't seem to clearly discern their relationship or distinction from one another. They feel present and approaching, and yet distant and receding.

Interlude: Sun Chaser

Shortly before my twenty-ninth birthday, I was living in Minneapolis and had flown to Hawai'i to visit my family. Upon arriving, I made plans to see my childhood friend Emily. Like me, Emily had pursued her higher education on the mainland. She had recently moved back to the islands. Living apart from one another, she and I don't see each other very often, but continue to feel a strong connection as friends. Emily is an interdisciplinary artist and self-described story designer. When she and I were twelve years old, we would go to the public library and set up camp at a table with a tiny sign labeled "Storyland Travelers," and write fiction, poetry, and plays together. For many years, Emily and I thought we had known each other since the age of eleven. While that is still fairly true, there was the instance when Emily discovered a photograph of her as a three-year-old attending a friend's birthday party. By chance, I was also a guest of this birthday party, and happened to be in the frame of the camera. When she showed me the photograph, we laughed and marveled at the coincidence.

As my birthday approached, Emily called me and announced that we were going to lunch and we were to be joined by a special guest. She had arranged for us to meet with Shadia Habbal, a solar physicist she had recently met and who worked at the Institute for Astronomy at the University of Hawai'i. The majority of her work involved observing and studying solar eclipses around the world: a career of sun chasing. We ate lunch together in a shady courtyard at the Spalding House Cafe, which was part of the Honolulu Museum of Art. Growing up, Emily and I often visited the museum nestled in the steep, bamboo covered hills overlooking Honolulu. We were sitting underneath the dappled light of an ancient banyan tree. Across the museum grounds, next to a traditional Japanese garden, was a permanent installation of David Hockney's opera set

design for *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* (1981), set inside a stand-alone building. The installation was filled with dreamlike red-colored light and immersive sounds of the dramatic opera, set within gesturally painted backdrops for fanciful wooden sculptures of kings and queens, bats, purple fairies, and a black cat with yellow eyes lurking in the shadows.

Shadia told us of her various expeditions to observe the solar corona. “If it had not been for an eclipse, you would not know that there’s something beyond this bright disc. You wouldn’t see it!” Shadia and her crew of astrophysicists had to be extremely prepared for every observation so that they could collect as much information as possible. Despite all the technological advancements of astronomy including telescopes and spectrographs, contemporary solar physics continues to be reliant on information collected during the limited three to seven minutes of a solar eclipse. As neither of us had seen an eclipse, Emily and I asked Shadia to describe the experience. She shared a fascinating description of seeing the eclipse while simultaneously feeling a sense of incomprehension. It is as if one’s physical senses aren’t properly prepared to encounter the experience of an eclipse. The sudden change in environment doesn’t compute with the intellectual understanding of the experience. The landscape, suddenly passed over by the moon’s shadow, has an eerie quality, as if there is an upside-down sunset in all 360 degrees of the horizon. The animals and insects go quiet. The air temperature suddenly drops.

I asked her about a phenomenon that I was fascinated by, having seen them in photographs taken during solar eclipses, where the filtered light underneath trees projected miniature images of the eclipse happening in real time.

“Have you seen this phenomenon a lot?”

“Yes...” She seemed ambivalent.

“Are you too busy doing your work to pay attention?”

“Yes, unfortunately. I’ve also seen people putting little holes in cardboard; or some people will take a colander, like a sieve, and it creates the same effect.”

“So, the fact that the sun is x big and x far away from the earth, and that the moon is x big and x far away from the earth, such that when viewed from earth, it appears the exact same size as the sun... That’s just a coincidence?”

I felt dumb asking the question, but it had occurred to me that if the moon was a different size or a different distance from earth, and same with the sun, that they wouldn’t match up in the same way. Shadia smiled at us and laughed. “Yes! They have no correlation with one another.” She told us of an observation trip that took her to Kenya one year. After a year of preparation with her crew, they entered the country, struggling to convince the authorities of the scientific purposes of their expensive equipment and gear. They traveled for days by vehicle into the arid desert and undergoing extensive preparations with their equipment. When the morning of the eclipse day arrived, they woke to clear skies. An hour before the eclipse, a wall of grey clouds appeared on the horizon. All because of those passing clouds, they missed the eclipse that year.

At the end of our meal, Emily and I insisted we pay, in gratitude for her taking time out of her busy day at the university to meet with us. She said, “Thank you! Well, that is very kind because today is my birthday.”

Emily and I stared at her in shock. Bewildered, I said, “Today is *my* birthday.” Emily and I begged Shadia to tell us what she thought of cosmic coincidences. She was amused, but stated very matter of factly that, as a scientist, she knows that there are so many aspects of reality that are unknown to her. She went on, “I think of a friend, and she calls me on the phone at that very moment. I have no way to conclude a cause, but I also cannot explain it.”

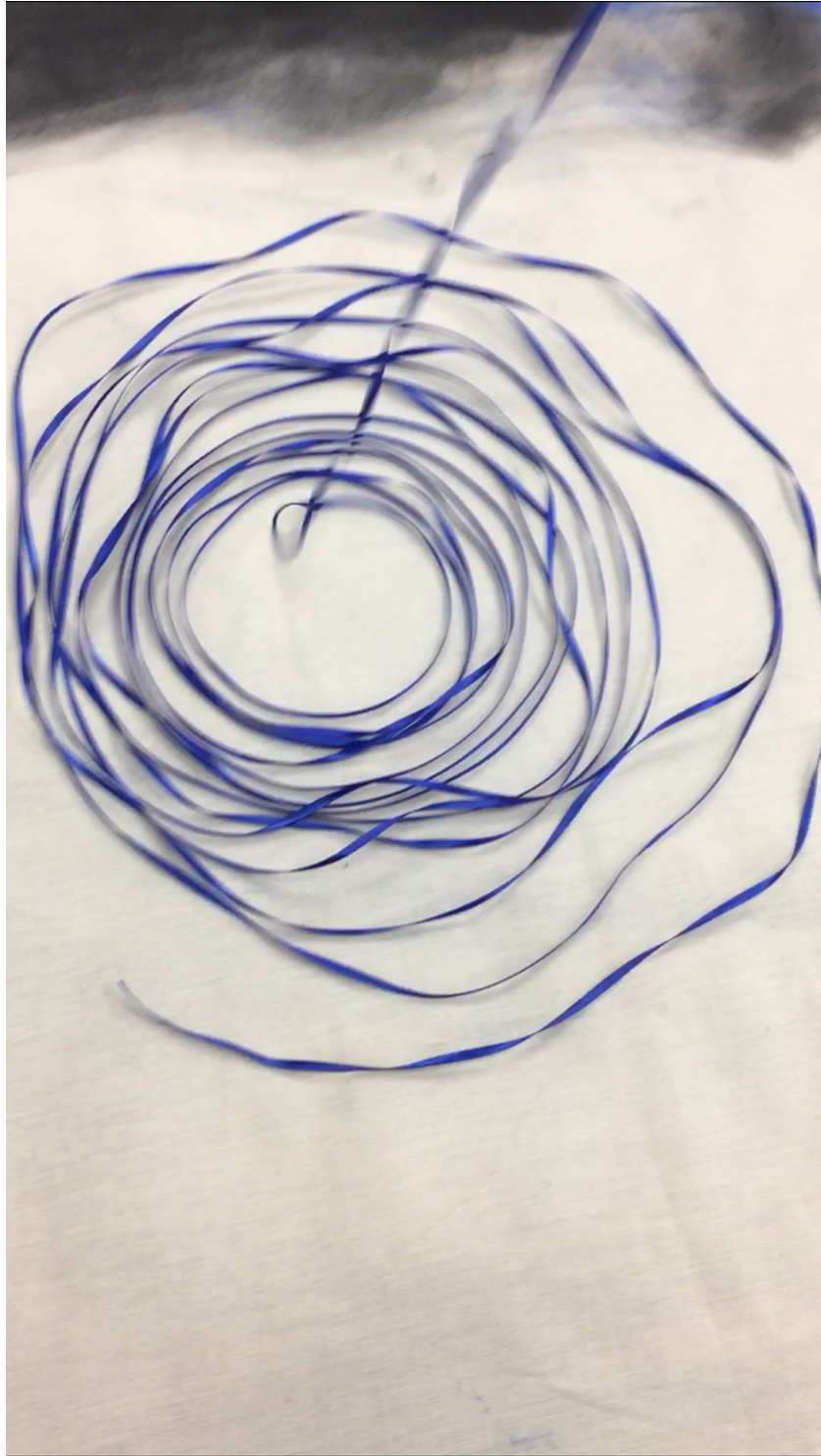


Image still from video taken in my studio, 2018

The Purple Garden

A scorching hot day in Los Angeles.

The heat is amplified by the white concrete landscape

Blinding outside, heat radiating from the pavement.

Rachel and I step inside the cool and quiet building

A four-foot tall sphere greets us, its surface radiating ultramarine blue

The high key color makes the sphere look hyper flat and yet dimensional

The dense hue buzzing against the sculpture's soft white environment.

Nearby, an orange and black painting asserts its stocky presence

It has a very direct quality: a blocky orange shape,

two-stepping like a ziggurat against its neighboring black shape.

We meander through the gallery

We live apart now, but we talk about how it's good for us

We had to move away from Minneapolis for a while

Before the house, filled with Elyse's things, tethered our friends too strongly to the past.

A taupe grey diagonal shape cuts through a thickly painted purple plane

We talk about ways we can celebrate Elyse's birthday, rather than her death.

A small bar with barstools is set along one side of the gallery

Elegant, built with a simple wooden structure

Along the back of the bar are stacks of glassware

Some of the cups are filled with colorful markers for drawing,

A deck of cards, and a chess set

A quietly burning candle sits next to a small, framed photograph of Noah Davis.
A tribute to an artist who died young.
Like the orange and black painting,
The bar has a very direct quality,
Supporting the gallery as a space for art and for being together.
I think of Elyse's unfinished quilt
She died just as spring was arriving
On one of the first warm days,
Rachel invited our friends over to finish the quilt together
We sat around a picnic table in the backyard
The quilt laying across the surface and spilling over the sides on to our laps
We quilted lines of stitching in arcs and patterns over Elyse's landscape of diamonds.
Next to the back door of the gallery is a tall bucket filled with purple paper parasols.
We each select a parasol for ourselves and open the door outside
We find ourselves in a sunny, open-air garden
Planted entirely with plants that flowered purple
Showering jacaranda trees nestled against tall and regal hedges
Pale pebbled footpaths leading us around a bone white water fountain
A stone, winged figure stands nearby.
We shelter from the bracing sun underneath our paper umbrellas,
resting in the garden and in each other's company.

whirl wind



fire



accompaniment



/ vortex illumination



In the opening section of dancer and choreographer Simone Forti's *Handbook in Motion* (1975), her informal pen and ink drawings accompany short texts based on personal experiences. She describes a childhood memory of seeing the shadow of a turning buggy wheel. She ponders a fir tree, "spinning imperceptibly on its axis." Driving along a highway, Forti stops her car, wanting to chase a twirling dust storm to its center. All of these fragments of Forti's experience point to her interest in spiraling movements and an equilibrium of energy and weight. In particular, her ideas around balance in relation to turning, spinning movements resonate with my experiences as a surfer. What strikes me the most about *Handbook in Motion* is Forti's ability to connect something as simple as the weight of an onion sitting on top of a glass bottle with choreographing the body through space and time.

In my practice, colors and materials that I encounter in my daily life hold significance for me in a way that the onion does for Forti. Light filtering through the canopy of a tree can embody the cosmos. My work, then, tries to convey this embodiment: slowly lifting and turning a panel of silk can create the feeling of a wave. Through visual art making and writing, I work to calibrate the distances between abstraction and the personal. During my graduate studies, this has meant learning to discern the difference between illustrating an idea with representations versus making ideas *tangible* via perceptual and sensorial experience.

For example, last year I was fascinated by the use of pasta colanders to project images of the solar eclipse happening in real time. I had stumbled on a recurring image in photos taken by self-described umbraphiles (people who are obsessed with experiencing solar eclipses, *umbra* meaning shadow). Inspired by the basic technology of a pinhole camera, umbraphiles often use colanders or other objects with small holes in them to project images of the solar eclipse happening in real time on to a flat surface. These curious photographs depict the shadows of

hands holding colanders aloft, the various patterns of the holes transformed by occultation into crescent shapes. As my work developed, my interest in these images was distilled into its formal elements: light passing through small apertures. I experimented with creating patterns of holes in different materials, in combination with the use of color and light. Using a circular-shaped leather punch tool, I perforated constellations of holes in fabric and paper, using them to filter light. The visuality of constellations of light, shimmering light, and dappled light became part of a visual grammar woven into my work. These forms of light are related to the original photographs from my research process, but rather than reproduce their original context, I create experiences for the viewer in which they experience patterns of light in the context of my work.

A year later, this visual motif has continued to re-emerge in my work in different forms. The installation of my thesis work, *Tides*, is comprised of two videos shown on separate monitors. Both videos have formal qualities that evoke the passage of natural cycles. Their differing lengths continually reorient their beginnings and ends in relation to one another. Presented together as a singular work, here I will refer to the two channels by separate names for clarity's sake: the first being *Tides* (an eight-minute video comprised of an evolving abstract composition manipulated by my hands which enter in and out of the frame), and the second being *Tides (Blue)*, a text-based video.

In the final passage of *Tides*, the composition is covered in dark ultramarine blue fabric with small white dots throughout its surface. My hands enter the frame, and gently lift the fabric in one piece. As the fabric slides out of view, the light and dark colors of what is underneath are seen changing through the holes, creating a shimmering visual effect. For me, this two-second moment is one of the most significant sections of the video, as it conveys color as a durational experience which is impermanent and fleeting.

Both videos in this piece have formal qualities that evoke the passage of natural cycles. Their differing lengths continually reorient their beginnings and ends in relation to one another. *Tides (Blue)*, is shorter than *Tides* by three minutes, and takes its form as text captions that slowly fade in and out of a black screen. Pairing a video of animated assemblages of shape and color with a narrative, text-based video came out of my interest in the changing relationship between the abstract and the personal, and an interest in finding new forms for my autobiographical writing. Appearing as illuminated white text, the lines of language can be briefly perceived as afterimages as they disappear.

Adapted from the narrative passage of this thesis that describes my experience of my friend Elyse's funeral, this piece is perhaps the most experimental of my graduate work. While the presentation of *Tides* is fairly minimal, both videos underwent countless iterations throughout this spring semester. At one point, *Tides (Blue)* existed as a sound recording of my voice, reading the text aloud. At other times, I used different sections of my personal stories, including *The Purple Garden* and *Sun Chaser*. I chose to highlight the funeral text because of its emphasis on color, and the similarities between the experience of losing my sense of bodily boundaries in a mosh pit with my perceptivity to color as a constantly changing experience.

I also chose this text because Elyse's death had a profound impact on me, and my artistic pursuits during graduate school have formed a significant period of shedding and growth. Themes of mortality emerged again and again throughout my thesis work, compounded by the deaths of people in my life that occurred during my graduate studies (my uncle Hector, grandfather Jim, and friend Teto), and it feels important to acknowledge that in a direct way by sharing the specific experience that led to processing the notion of death in my art work. Death is

just one of many themes and subjects that are woven throughout my interests and practice, and, in a personal way, it feels cathartic to articulate my confrontation with death in *Tides (Blue)*.

My thesis exhibition also points to future endeavors and ambitions. In particular, I will continue pursuing new forms which can help to convey the importance of duration in my practice. I am interested in the potential of video, performance, and sound. The exhibition also points to the continued importance of object making; which are made present as incorporated into the design of the seating platform made for viewers to watch the videos, and in the way the materials are visually animated in *Tides*. The colors and shapes I produce are meant to be experienced as active forms, and I embark from graduate school with a newfound ambition to activate them with an audacious sense of beauty and vitality.

The Duk Duk Crab

The duk duk crab is a species of small hermit crabs that live on Guam, no bigger than a pinky nail. Throughout Micronesia, the blindingly bright shores are lined with sand made of crushed shells. Against the smooth, bone white sand, duk duk crabs are difficult to notice at first. But they are everywhere, skittering across the sand as you walk towards them, disappearing into tiny, perfectly circular holes that they have dug into the sand. If you are swift enough to catch one, the duk duk crab will retreat into its shell. As you hold it in your hand, bring your hand up to your mouth, and quietly murmur: “Duk duk duk duk duk duk duk duk...” The sound will calm the crab, and it will slowly emerge out of its shell, and begin to crawl around your palm. “Duk duk duk duk duk duk duk duk...”



Simone Forti, page from *Handbook in Motion*, 1975

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