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2020

## **PREY BEGINS WITH PLAY**

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*Virginia Commonwealth University*

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PREY BEGINS WITH PLAY

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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Master of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2020  
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## Abstract

### **PREY BEINGS WITH PLAY**

By Seren Cleopatra Aspasia Moran, Master of Fine Arts

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

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2020.

Major Director: Hilary Wilder, Associate Professor, Department Painting and Printmaking

My work examines the lasting psychological and emotional torment of trauma focusing on sexual violence against women. My thesis consists of five short animated films recounting non-fiction experiences of sexual assault. To contextualize my work within cultural and historical representations of sexual violence, this text reflects my research on the mishandling of rape in Western art history as well as contemporary politics and cinema. In both my work and research, I address the complicated, and often contradictory, internal reality of experiencing and remembering trauma and how this relates to artistic strategies such as collage and maximalism. My personal struggles recovering from sexual abuse are woven throughout this research to illuminate specific choices made in my work, such as the use of animation and playful aesthetics.

**NOTE TO THE READER:** Sexual assault does not only happen to one gender; it happens to people of many identities and from many backgrounds. Violence is a theme in my art practice because it has been a theme in my life and in my life, sexual assault has been exclusively gendered. For this reason, my work and research focus on the specific and prevalent power dynamic of men sexually abusing women and how this behavior is continually perpetuated.

## THE FIDELITY OF FICTION

Facts might have normative power but they don't constitute truth. Facts don't illuminate.

Only truth illuminates. - Werner Herzog<sup>1</sup>

There is a translucency to truth. I fear admitting this, for it is often used to delegitimize victims. But truth is translucent. It allows for some light to seep through, but always lacks clarity in its details. So the telling of a truth should be translucent. My work embraces this. I translate non-fiction accounts of sexual assault through surreal imagery and fragmented narratives that embrace truth's murky uncertainty.



Film still, *Undisclosed Location*, mixed media animation, 2020

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Cronin. *Werner Herzog - A Guide for the Perplexed: Conversations with Paul Cronin*. (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), 288.



Fiction is a spectrum not a binary, for every depiction of nonfiction also has its biases and its alterations. In the book, *Introduction to Documentary*, Bill Nichols states that “every film is a documentary.”<sup>2</sup> Nichols explains how a Hitchcock film can say just as much about the sensation of fear and the nature of obsession as a historical documentary can teach us about a particular moment in history. He suggests that perhaps it is not about distinguishing between fiction and nonfiction, but rather determining what aspects of human behavior one is documenting, whether that is events or emotions. The ‘*what*’ happened and the ‘*how*’ it was experienced are never separated in my memory so I do not separate them in my storytelling. In my animations, I use the sequence of non-fiction events to structure the narrative while filling the story with abstracted details that prioritize the protagonist’s internal truth.

In my films, I balance the past with the present, for our understanding of the past is necessarily entangled in our current consciousness. In a recent conversation with a friend who shared their experience of being molested as a child, they spoke about their disbelief in their own memory. They said their memory was so broken it took years of therapy for them to accept it as truth. They asked if I fully trusted and believed my own memories of assault. At that moment I realized my only solidity in truth comes from my journal entries written immediately after the events took place; the very reason I have read those entries so often is because I am grasping at certainty that I do not trust without them.

It is necessary to note that none of this doubt suggests these events did not happen. The fact that I was assaulted will be a truth that never changes, and the same for my friend who was molested.

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<sup>2</sup> Bill Nichols. *Introduction to Documentary*. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 1-2.

The details may change with time — the when, where and the how, but the existence of those incidents will always be real. For while truth is translucent, by definition, it is never wholly false.

## TRAUMATIC MEMORY

Memory is dynamic, it's alive. If some details are missing, memory fills the holes with things that never happened. - Ari Folman, *Waltz with Bashir*<sup>3</sup>

Memories are never stagnant; our continuous reflecting of memories shapes the memories themselves. Elizabeth A. Kensinger, Professor of Psychology at Boston College, writes about the constant reconstruction of memory in her publication, *Remembering the Details: Effects of Emotion*. As Kensinger states, “the event details we recall often are shaped by our current mindset and molded by thoughts and experiences that have occurred between the original event and the moment of remembering.”<sup>4</sup> This means, for example, the more I learn about sexual assault, the more my present self understands, and even reshapes, my past experiences.

Memory first functions as an encoder (encoding information as semantic, visual, or acoustic) and then a storage container, separating short-term and long-term memory. Within long-term memory, which is formed in the hippocampus, there are two subgroups, semantic memory and episodic memory. Semantic memory is related to facts and language such as remembering the name of a president or capital of a country. Episodic memory incorporates information personally experienced. This includes autobiographical memory and is therefore the more

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<sup>3</sup> Ari Folman. *Waltz with Bashir* (2008; Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment).

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth A. Kensinger. “Remembering the Details: Effects of Emotion.” *Emotion review : Journal of the International Society for Research on Emotion*, 1(2) (2009): 99–113.  
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2676782/>.

relevant to my art practice and research. Episodic memory includes the recollection of emotions as well as visual imagery, but not all experiences are remembered the same way.<sup>5</sup> For example, people are more likely to remember events that elicit an acute emotional response, positive and negative, over mundane situations. Regardless of how significant an experience may be, no memory is perfectly accurate.



Film still, *Via de Neri*, mixed media animation, 2020

When remembering trauma, truth becomes even more opaque. In the University of Michigan Health Lab article, “A Traumatic Memory Can Be Near Impossible to Shake,” Jacek Debiec explains how we process explicit (conscious) and implicit (subconscious) memories differently. Debiec gives the example of a child burning their hand on a stove.<sup>6</sup> The child’s body will

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<sup>5</sup> Kathryn Dumper, William Jenkins, Arlene Lacombe, Marily Lovett, and Marion Perimutter. *Introductory to Psychology* (December 8 2014). <https://opentext.wsu.edu/psych105/chapter/8-2-how-memory-functions/>.

<sup>6</sup> Jacek Debiec. “A Traumatic Memory Can Be Near Impossible To Shake.” *Michigan Medicine, University of Michigan Health Lab* (September 2018). <https://labblog.uofmhealth.org/lab-report/a-traumatic-memory-can-be-near-impossible-to-shake>.

remember this so they will unconsciously avoid hot stoves in the future to protect them from pain; this is an implicit memory. When triggered by past trauma, our bodies can react in ways we do not consciously understand, often responding to the original event, and not the current situation. For example, a soldier who hears a sound in a grocery store, perhaps glass breaking or cans falling off a shelf, might duck for cover as if he were being attacked. On a conscious level he knows he is in a grocery store, but his body has built a conditioned threat response so he unconsciously reacts as if he is still at war. Debiec also explains how many researchers believe some remnants from all traumatic experiences remain inside our brains and bodies for our entire lives.<sup>7</sup> It is precisely this intense and lasting psychological effect that drives me to make work about trauma, because its residue is present with me all the time.

Traumatic memory cradles contradiction. It is often the most and least clear and can include both imprints of graphic imagery as well as enormous gaps. Kensinger explains how intense emotional arousal causes a narrowing of attention in which the “intrinsic” details (the central and internal experience) are recalled more accurately than “extrinsic” details (the peripheral and external context).<sup>8</sup> Survivors of sexual assault often remember certain elements in great (accurate) detail while other aspects are completely forgotten or are in confused fragments. This is why in the article, “Why Rape and Trauma Survivors Have Fragmented and Incomplete Memories,” author Jay Paul says it is unreasonable to expect any survivor of sexual assault to recall the traumatic event the same way they would their wedding day.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Debiec. “A Traumatic Memory.” *Michigan Medicine*.

<sup>8</sup> Kensinger, “Remembering the Details.”

<sup>9</sup> James Hopper and David Lisak. “Why Rape and Trauma Survivors Have Fragmented and Incomplete Memories.” *Time*, December 9, 2014. <https://time.com/3625414/rape-trauma-brain-memory/>.

Within the convoluted remembrance of trauma, time sequencing information is impaired by the sensation of fear. With traumatic memory one might experience both the forceful slowing down, and the drastic speeding up of a string of moments and emotions. Therefore, any art medium that incorporates duration, such as film, sound, animation, and performance, is well-suited to capture the collapsing, merging, and warping of time that happens with traumatic memory.

## **ANIMATION**

As children, my brother and I were not allowed to watch cartoons. For all of my life, my father existed in what he understood as the ‘real’ and had complete disregard, perhaps even disdain, for anything that deviated from it. He placed no value in fun unless it had a tangible relationship to something educational or practical. His strict rules around recreational purpose led all things he deemed frivolous to be characterized as cartoons. In our house, the word cartoon soon became a pejorative for what one considered worthless, idealistic, foolish, and fatuous. For my father, this included anything that existed in the imaginary.

When I was a young teen, maybe thirteen years old, I remember watching the movie *Enough* based on the Anna Quindlen novel, *Black and Blue*. In this live-action thriller, Jennifer Lopez plays a victim of domestic violence who develops self-defense strategies and ultimately kills her husband in the final fight scene. I remember telling my father about the film and him characterizing it as a “cartoon” due to its “unrealistic outcome.” In my father’s eyes, Jennifer Lopez successfully fighting off her abusive husband was just as detached from reality as an interaction between Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd. It certainly did not help my sense of agency in

the world, and with men, to have grown up with the idea that a woman successfully defending herself from abuse is simply preposterous.



Film still, *Arlington Park*, mixed media animation, 2020

It is precisely because I grew up with a complete disregard for animation as a *fictitious* method for storytelling that I find it an excellent medium to discuss non-fiction stories of sexual assault. I know that not everyone uses the word cartoon as widely as my father, nor does everyone wrongly conflate the words “cartoon” and “animation.” However, there is still a common assumption of light-heartedness in relation to animated films which is emblematic of how sexual assault is regularly dismissed as harmless play. This is reinforced through popular culture and politics, such as excusing language around sexual abuse as “locker room talk.” By contrasting disturbing non-fiction accounts with a medium associated with fantastical joy, I am mirroring our culture’s broad dismissal of sexual assault. This paradoxical pairing also highlights the contradictions that are embedded in traumatic memory. One example of animation’s unique

ability to capture the complexity and nuance of trauma and memory is in the film, *Waltz with Bashir*.<sup>10</sup>



Film still, *Waltz with Bashir*, Ari Folman/David Polonsky/Sony Pictures Classics.

*Waltz with Bashir* is an animated autobiographical film about director Ari Folman's memory of the 1982 Israeli-Lebanese war. Using audio recorded interview footage, the film animates real conversations of Folman questioning his peers about the truth behind his experience in the war. Due to trauma, his memory is convoluted, and he cannot parse the fictional from the real. The film follows his journey to understand whether his fragments of memory have seeds of truth.

*Waltz with Bashir* uses the medium of animation to embrace Folman's uncertainty of his memory by weaving realistic imagery with fantastical moments. In one scene, soldiers are shown

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<sup>10</sup> Folman. *Waltz with Bashir*.

speaking to one another on a ship in a realistic fashion, and in the next moment, the main character is depicted lying on a giant woman floating in the water. As he drifts on this body swimming in the Beirut sea, he witnesses the soldiers being attacked on the ship. This depiction represents the way traumatic memory often blends disconnected pieces together. Perhaps Folman did witness the ship's attack, and at a different moment he was swimming with a woman in the water, so his memory combines these experiences into exaggerated, surrealistic imagery that could never factually occur. Folman's approach to this film sheds light on what Dror Abend-David accurately describes as "the fragmented and malleable nature of traumatic memory."<sup>11</sup>



Film still, *Waltz with Bashir*, Ari Folman/David Polonsky/Sony Pictures Classics.

In the book, *Media and Translation: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, Abend-David investigates the relationship between animation, memory, trauma, and documentary in referencing this film.

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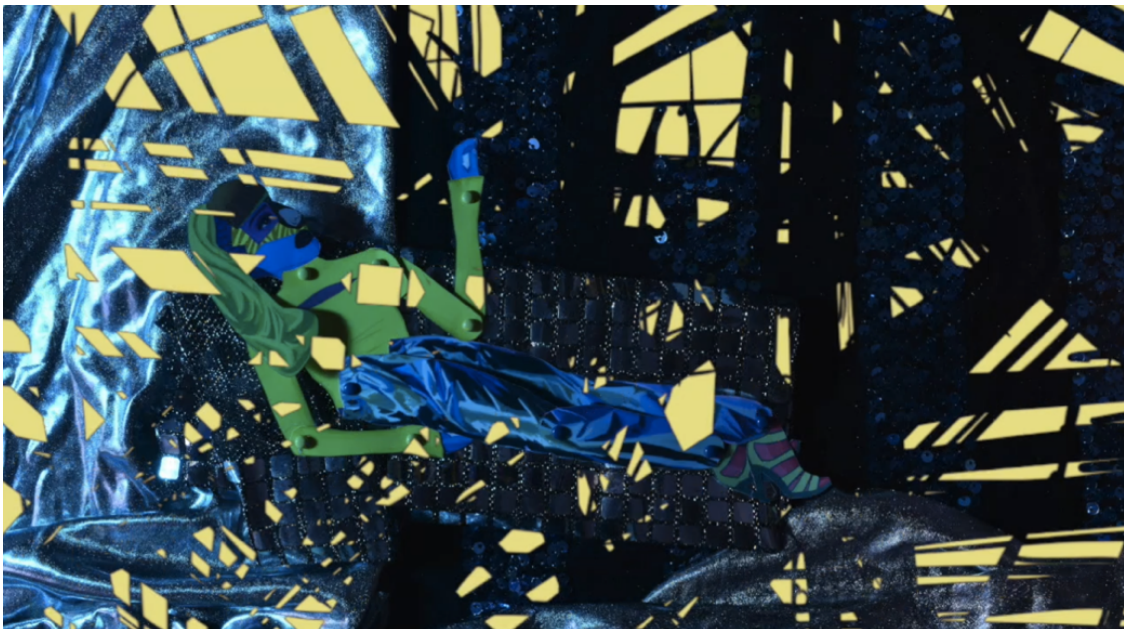
<sup>11</sup> Dror Abend-David. *Media and Translation: An Interdisciplinary Approach*. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2014), 230.



Abend-David states, “While traditional documentaries are restricted to an indexical relationship with reality, *Bashir*’s use of animation allows documentary to escape indexicality and extend its range of historical representation.”<sup>12</sup> Through the mixing of internal and external realities, *Waltz with Bashir* brilliantly captures the fluidity of memory and therefore the questionable certainty in historical “truths”.

### **STOP-MOTION: ALL GROWN UP AND ENCHANTED WITH TEXTURE**

There are many different types of animation and each form presents different opportunities and challenges. My films mostly employ 3D stop-motion animation and 2D under-the-camera puppet animation. Stop-motion films give tangible lifeless objects independence and personality. By animating materials that exist in the real world interlaced with the fabricated aesthetic in digital animation, I can further rattle a viewer’s sense of clarity and capture trauma’s erratic nature.



Film still, *Via de Neri*, mixed media animation, 2020

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<sup>12</sup> Abend-David. *Media and Translation*.

Stop-motion animation dates to the 1800s; unlike digital animation, which often tries to disguise human touch, stop-motion embraces the hand of the artist. This is discussed in the article, “Masters of puppets: Charlie Kaufman and the subversive allure of stop-motion,” written by Steve Rose. Rose argues that, contrary to popular belief, CGI developments are not replacing stop-motion animation, but rather it is experiencing a “grown-up renaissance.” Rose primarily credits Tim Burton and Henry Selick (who apparently also roped in Wes Anderson) for the flourishing of stop-motion animation in mainstream film.<sup>13</sup> When technology makes major advances, and therefore offers new discoveries for film-making, there are always artists who retreat to a pre-tech (or less tech) approach. This was the case with Lars von Trier when he co-founded the movement Dogme 95. This movement was created in 1995 as a response to the over-reliance on technology in film-making. Von Trier wanted to limit special effects and post-production editing to avoid superficiality and ensure that a film is telling the truth of its characters. Dogme 95 developed a list of regulations for directors to help abstain from technological trickery, such as rule #3, “The camera must be hand-held.”<sup>14</sup> This movement exemplifies a history of artists seeking naturalism in the wake of highly-manicured aesthetics.

I share the sentiment of longing for the raw and lo-fi over the polished. The texture and objects present in stop-motion provides nuance for my storytelling. In my work, I utilize texture to contextualize settings and seduce viewers. To me, texture is not solely tactile; it is an aesthetic like any other - it can evoke emotion. When seeing a gritty material on screen such as straw,

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<sup>13</sup> Steve Rose. “Masters of puppets: Charlie Kaufman and the subversive allure of stop-motion.” *The Guardian*, January 7, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/jan/07/subversive-allure-stop-motion-anomalisa-tim-burton>.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Schepelern. “Film According to Dogma: restrictions, obstructions, and liberations.” Dogme95.dk. <http://www.dogme95.dk/interviews/film-according-to-dogma/>.

viewers' minds are in a place of coarseness. The texture itself helps orient the content of the scene so viewers are less likely to perceive a character surrounded by straw as soothed and comforted. Texture and objects can also fuel a narrative through symbolism when they are brought to life in a way that deviates from their initial usage. For example, towards the end of my film, *Via de Neri*, the protagonist tosses her slippers inside a real condom that is then tied in a knot. In the film, the condom functions like a trash bag suggesting disposal and entrapment. Since we cannot entirely disassociate condoms from sexual acts, this moment suggests a particular kind of confinement and removal – one that is sexual in nature.



Film stills, *Arlington Park*, mixed media animation, 2020

I am attracted to artists who apply similar symbolism with objects and materials in their stop-motion films. Aideen Barry, an Irish mixed-media artist, often uses stop-motion to manipulate what her body can appear to accomplish in darkly humorous ways. Barry's use of absurdity in her exaggerations shines light on the unrealistic expectations of women and mothers, such as giving herself additional limbs made of vacuums in her film, *Not to be Unknown*. This is also exhibited in her stop-motion performative film, *Levitating*. In this film, Barry recorded herself jumping around her house and neighborhood for seven days while doing chores such as ironing, cleaning, and grocery shopping. She edited the film by retaining only the footage of her in the air to give the appearance of her floating while attending to her "duties."<sup>15</sup> Through the

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<sup>15</sup> Bean Gilsdorf. "At Home on the Edge: Interview with Aideen Barry." *Daily Serving: An International Publication for Contemporary Art*. <https://www.dailyserving.com/2011/08/at-home-on-the-edge-interview-with-aideen-barry/>.

manipulation of this footage, Barry conveys her emotional and psychological exhaustion and draws attention to gendered labor, often perceived as invisible. When creating work about gender inequality it is important to consider the implications of visibility and agency.



Aideen Barry. *Not to be Known*, 2015. Performative film, 5'30" single channel with sound. Originally commissioned by The Arts & Heritage Trust, UK, for The Gallery of Wonder. *Studio Aideen Barry*. <https://www.aideenbarry.com/nottobeknown>

## PUPPETRY AND PASSIVITY

Grace appears most purely in that human form which either has no consciousness or an infinite consciousness. That is, in the puppet or in the god. - Heinrich von Kleist, *On the Marionette Theatre*<sup>16</sup>



Film still, *Nathan's House*, mixed media animation, 2020

There is a ventriloquizing nature to many perpetrators of sexual violence. Abusers often take on the role of the puppeteer by enacting physical, as well as psychological, control over their victims. This oppressive behavior often results in victims of sexual assault fleeing into silence, or “speechless horror,”<sup>17</sup> as a means of survival. Victims are then in the precarious position of being malleable to the acts of their abuser. This power dynamic can be misinterpreted as passivity, so it

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<sup>16</sup> Heinrich von Kleist. *On the Marionette Theatre*. Translated by Idris Perry (Originally Published: Berlin Evening Paper, 1810.) Southern Cross Review. <https://southerncrossreview.org/9/kleist.htm>

<sup>17</sup> Bessel van der Kolk. *The Body Keeps the Score. Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2014).

is therefore challenging to create puppet animations that address gendered dynamics without reinforcing the false notion that women are inherently passive beings.

To combat this, in my films each perpetrator and each individual implicated in the act is a silhouette rendered in a glaring green color. By reducing the aggressors — which in these stories are exclusively men — to silhouettes, I am objectifying them and making them less important than the puppets. Each of these characters becomes a shell of a person, simplified to the action of a body. The aggressors are robbed of the pleasure and specificity of personality. The green color, in its relationship to a green screen, is a subtle hint at their interchangeability; it unifies the figures and reminds viewers of their similarities.



Film still, *Arlington Park*, mixed media animation, 2020

My use of silhouettes and interest in creating paper characters was inspired by the work of Lotte Reiniger. Reiniger, a female animator in the early 20th century, was known for her films made from cut paper.<sup>18</sup> Her paper silhouettes were inspired by the art of Chinese shadow puppetry, which dates back more than 2,000 years. As legend has it, Chinese shadow puppets originated during the West Han Dynasty as a way to bring back an emperor's lost love through the form of a shadow. The puppets were made of paper or treated leather and moved with rods and string. Over the decades, Chinese puppet theatre became a widely used form of storytelling and entertainment inspired by handcrafts and opera.<sup>19</sup>



A collection of Chinese shadow puppets from He Zehua's museum in Shuidong Town, Xuancheng City of east China's Anhui Province.

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<sup>18</sup> Pamela Hutchinson. "Lotte Reiniger: animated film pioneer and standard-bearer for women." *The Guardian*, June 2, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/jun/02/lotte-reiniger-the-pioneer-of-silhouette-animation-google-doodle>.

<sup>19</sup> Minjun Xu. "Eastern magic: traditional Chinese shadow play." Discover China. <http://discover.china.org.cn/trip-ideas/eastern-magic-traditional-chinese-shadow-play/>.



Lotte Reiniger, film still, *The Adventures of Prince Achmed*.



One of Reiniger's puppets. lotte-movie.com.

Similar to Chinese shadow puppets, the paper cutting in Reiniger's characters and sets were incredibly intricate. Following Reiniger, I flexibly joint my puppets in non-anatomically correct positions to allow for more malleability of the characters. Reiniger's films, including her full feature film in 1926, *The Adventures of Prince Achmed*, illuminate her ability to tell dense storylines with remarkably minimal materials. Reiniger was also the first person to create the multiplane camera that was later popularized by Disney in the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>20</sup>



Image of the backs of my puppets.

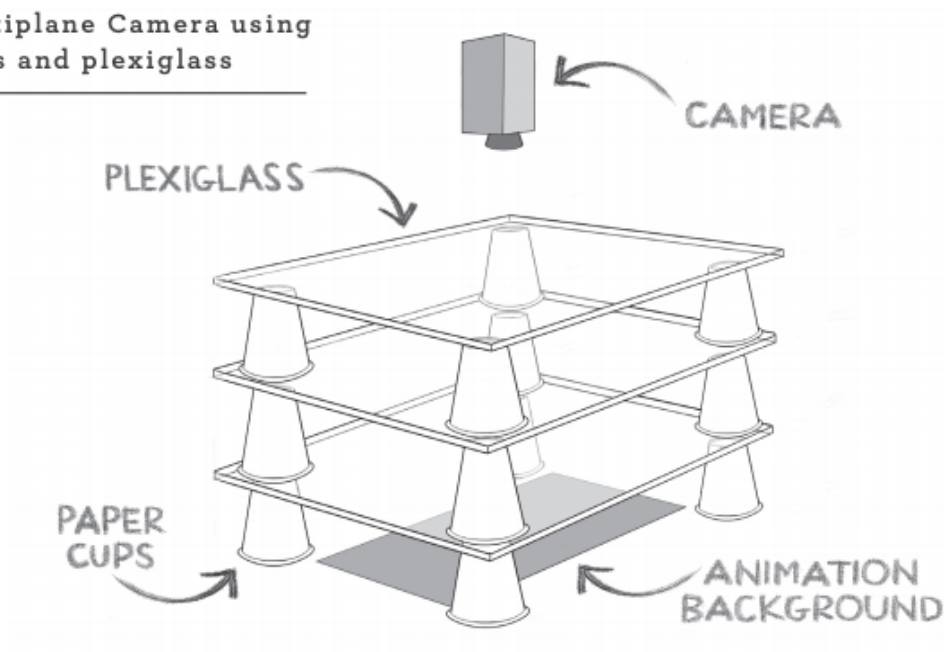
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<sup>20</sup> Alexander Sergeant. "Before Walt Disney, there was Lotte Reiniger - the story of the world's first animated feature." *The Conversation*, October 24, 2019. <https://theconversation.com/before-walt-disney-there-was-lotte-reiniger-the-story-of-the-worlds-first-animated-feature-125091>.



**Basic Multiplane Camera using  
paper cups and plexiglass**

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Simple Multiplane Camera. Diagram found: waltdisney.org

The multiplane animation technique, which is the method used in all of my films, involves several horizontal pieces of glass stacked on top of one another. The layering of glass allows the illusion of depth when animating a character on one plane that is above or beneath scenic elements. It also allows the manipulation of characters to seemingly interact with materials in ways that are not possible without the invisible glass barrier. For example, in my film, *Undisclosed Location*, I slowly cut an opening in a piece of black foam board to reveal the puppet's face. Glass is placed between the face and the foam board which allows me to cut through the board without also slicing through the delicate paper puppet.



Film still, *Undisclosed Location*, mixed media animation, 2020

There is no dialogue in any of my films, which was partially inspired by Jiri Trnka, a Czech artist and prominent film-maker from the 1940s to the 1990s. His work, alongside many other artists in communist Czechoslovakia, addressed the oppressive nature of totalitarian regimes.<sup>21</sup> This is captured in his last stop-motion film from 1964, *The Hand*. The film is about an artist who tries to build a flower pot until a large hand invades his home and forces him to make a ceramic hand instead. The act of submission forced upon the main character is symbolic of the political regime at the time and was banned in the former Czechoslovakia. The film evokes a kind of dark humor that is played out through non-verbal sounds and gestures; the puppet's face is never altered to change its expression, yet Trnka captures a full range of human emotions. Trnka does this through subtly concealing certain facial features at opportune times, like tilting the puppet's head

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<sup>21</sup> Peter Hames. "All creatures great and small." *The Guardian*, September 26, 2002. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2002/sep/27/artsfeatures1>.

downward to disguise his smile. One of Trnka's fellow animators, Bretislav Pojar, praised this approach saying, "Trnka always gave his eyes a look indefinable. With the simple turn of their heads, or with a change of lighting, rose smiling expressions, or unhappy, or dreamers. This gave one the impression that the puppet hid more than it showed, and its heart of wood stored even more."<sup>22</sup>



Film still, Jiri Trnka, *Ruka (The Hand)*. 1965

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<sup>22</sup> "Know about the exhibition of Czech puppet animations in Prague." Prague Puppet Museum. <http://www.praguepuppetmuseum.com/about/>.

When creating a film devoid of language and changing facial expressions, one must rely on accurate contexts which can be achieved through sets, body language, and pacing. My heavily collaged environments are created to match the layered aesthetic of my puppets. I often perceive men to feel entitled to the world and encouraged to take up space in a way that I have not felt without enormous effort. I wanted the aggressors to seem out of place and not the puppets; with the sets and puppets speaking the same visual language, the silhouetted male figures function as invasive eyesores. The level of care and meticulous detail invested in making each of the puppets, in contrast to the lack of complexity in the silhouettes, emphasizes how little the male figures are considered and adored in comparison. This optical polarization makes the puppets powerful and emphasizes that these stories are not about the men, they are about *her*, her perspective, and her pain.



Film still, *Arlington Park*, mixed media animation, 2020

## MAXIMALISM AND MACHINALIA

The play *Machinalia*<sup>23</sup> opens with a young woman on stage, and immediately as the lights come up, she runs chaotically throughout the room. The lighting chases her, never quite catching up to her sprinting. The actress is moving around the stage in sweeping body movements out of sync with the manic rock sound mix playing loudly. She shouts phrases in varying voices, volumes, paces, and mannerisms almost without a breath in between. The performance is instantly captivating and elaborately electric. Soon it becomes clear that this one actress will be playing all the roles.

Steph Del Rosso's *Machinalia* is a modern adaptation of the 1928 play *Machinal* by playwright and journalist Sophie Treadwell, which is based on the true story of Ruth Snyder, nicknamed "ruthless Ruth" who was convicted of murdering her husband and later executed. This case gained public attention from a photo published in the papers of Snyder's execution; it was the first photograph ever to be released of someone in the electric chair.<sup>24</sup>



Original photo by Tom Howard  
NY Daily News Archive.

<sup>23</sup> Steph Del Rosso. *Machinalia*. San Diego, 2017.

<sup>24</sup> James Mitchell. "The Gray Space Between Life and Death: The Ruth Snyder Execution Photograph." CVLT Nation, June 6, 2019. <https://cvltnation.com/gray-space-life-death-ruth-snyder-execution-photograph/>.

When I saw *Machinalia* in 2017, it was a style of performance I had never seen before. It captured the feeling of entrapment -- the entrapment of the protagonist's loveless marriage and the pressure to be a particular kind of woman, a particular kind of mother, and the necessity to accomplish those expectations for her survival. With the exception of a few sporadic breaks, the intense and frenetic energy continued throughout the play. I felt if I blinked, I would miss entire sections of this woman's journey. One of the stage directions at the beginning of the script reads, "Transitions are fast. Ideally they don't exist."<sup>25</sup> The violence was bizarre and abstracted, using



Photo by Alex Matthews. jackny.org

foods to represent people and later, blood. It was anxiety provoking, disturbing, and surreal, with the actress wearing yellow rubber gloves through half the performance. Yet, it was also empowering, as if reclaiming perceived notions of instability, of *hysteria*. No one could dismiss this woman, not only because she was the only person on stage, but

because she unapologetically took up space and demanded concentration from the audience. She was not a secondary player to anyone, she was the only player, and all the players. The play was a maximalist performance, told through maximalist means, with the most maximalist end --- an execution.

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<sup>25</sup> Steph Del Rosso. *Machinalia* (inspired by Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal*), 2.

Maximalism is not polite. It says fuck you to the pressure to please and, just like trauma, it has no boundaries. There is a vibration to the intensity in maximalism and it contains an excess of the good and bad. There is nothing small or minimal about sexual assault so there should be nothing small or minimal in creating work about of it. In *The Mind's Eye: Image and Memory in Writing about Trauma*, MacCurdy explains about how trauma survivors are often flooded with imagery.<sup>26</sup> By extension, artwork about trauma should then also be submerged in visuals, in an excess of color, pattern, and texture. This is seen in how my frenetic films indulge excessive color palettes, patterns, and materials leaving no surface untouched. I also employ these aesthetics to represent the all-consuming nature of trauma through imagery that is equally relentless and intense.



Film still, *Via de Neri*, mixed media animation, 2020

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<sup>26</sup> Marian M. MacCurdy. *The Mind's Eye: Image and Memory in Writing about Trauma*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 34.

Maximalism has been my aesthetic of choice since I was a child, but I did not learn to embrace it in my adult art practice until after my undergraduate degree. My appreciation for bold and intense visual strategies took hold when I began working for a small furniture and interior design business in Berkeley, California called *Mignonne Decor*, owned by Johnelle Mancha. Johnelle's title was designer, but she was an artist whose medium was furniture. One of *Mignonne's* most popular services was offering reupholstery for clients' vintage furniture and we were known for our eclectic designs. After the business grew, I became an assistant designer and I learned from watching Johnelle create couches with arms made of used leather jackets and Hudson's Bay blankets, channel back chairs patched with vintage curtains, and an ottoman trimmed with the lace from a client's wedding dress.



Reupholstery designs by Johnelle Mancha at *Mignonne Décor*, [mignonnedecor.com](http://mignonnedecor.com).

My introduction to pairing busy patterns with bold colors began in design, but I soon became infatuated with artists who explored similar approaches with paint, most notably Mickalene Thomas. Known for her contemporary paintings, famously dense with collaged rhinestones, Thomas pushes excess to the edges. She knows how to challenge the mind, move the eye across a canvas and back around, retain a viewer's attention, and seamlessly weave between figures and



abstract shapes. She dips her toes into caustic color palettes and obnoxious pattern pairings while managing to create works of beauty, elegance, and glamour.



Mickalene Thomas, New York. Courtesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong.

Maximalism can be both rebellious and inclusive. It rejects preconceived notions of beauty and clarity but does not discriminate in its choice of materials and imagery. Thomas' works often centers on black female figures who are "audacious, curvaceous beauties"<sup>27</sup> almost always bedazzled with accessories and heavily patterned accents. Thomas' work is a reminder of the fierceness of femininity in how her female figures exude complexity, power, and importance. Through her work, and the figures directly gazing at the viewer, Thomas critiques white beauty standards and confronts the lack of visibility of black women in Western art history. In an interview with the Smithsonian, she states, "What's happening in art and history right now is the validation and agency of the black female body. We do not need permission to be present."<sup>28</sup> To

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<sup>27</sup> The Editors of Artnews. "From the Archives: Mickalene Thomas on Why Her Work Goes 'Beyond a Black Aesthetic.'" Artnews, September 14, 2018. <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/retrospective/archives-mickalene-thomas-work-goes-beyond-black-aesthetic-2011-10971/>.

<sup>28</sup> Tiffany Y. Ates. "How Mickalene Thomas Is Ushering In A New Wave of Contemporary Art: The celebrated portraitist's glittering images of black women upend tradition." *Smithsonian Magazine*, January 1, 2018. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/mickalene-thomas-ushering-new-wave-contemporary-art-180967496/>

have a voice and take up space one has to be both seen and heard, and what maximalism does best is be undeniably visible and ferociously loud.

## COLLAGE: CRADLING CONTRADICTION

I've always claimed that the collage aesthetic - also the core image of postmodernity - is particularly feminist. Collage is about gluing and ungluing. It is an aesthetic that willfully takes apart what is supposed to be and rearranges it in ways that suggest what it could be.

- Lucy Lippard, *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Feminist Essays on Art*<sup>29</sup>



Film still, *Noe Valley*, mixed media animation, 2020

Maximalism is at its best within the art of collage. Collage necessarily agitates and fragments materials, images, sounds and words in a way that distorts reality and disrupts clarity. Collage

<sup>29</sup> Lippard, Lucy. *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Feminist Essays on Art*. (New York: The New Press, 1995.), 25.

creates something ‘whole’ by combining pieces and moments from varied sources without trying to hide the process and origins. Mickalene Thomas creates collages in the traditional sense (gluing materials together) when she incorporates rhinestones into her paintings but she also collages imagery in her paintings and photographs. *Machinalia* is a performative collage through which Del Rosso gathered fragments of stories of the original characters and pieced them together in a new way. The recollection of trauma is, in and of itself, a collage in its melding of fragmented memories. Within the complexity of collage exist two opposite - yet equally effective - approaches; to celebrate connection through bringing together various elements, or to use the forceful penetration of materials to simulate violence. This polarization is evident when comparing the works of Chitra Ganesh and Sheida Soleimani.

In 2017, I went to Chitra Ganesh’s solo exhibition, “Her garden, a mirror” at The Kitchen gallery in New York City. Upon entering I felt transported to another universe. The room was dimly lit with purple walls and patterned lights beaming onto the floor. A series of black and white prints, stylistically reminiscent of graphic novels, wrapped around three walls of the room. The center of the room contained sculptures, TVs, and a stack of papers indicating that visitors could “take one.” The printed text was based on the Bengali science fiction novella *Sultana’s Dream* from 1905 which chronicles the lives of women living in Ladyland, a world in which men are restricted to their homes while women invent new technology and rule the planet. While reading the story, I began to piece together the other works in the exhibit slowly realizing that Ganesh was presenting this feminist utopia through an assortment of media that encourages viewers to unearth the narrative at their own pace, and through their preferred medium.



Chitra Ganesh solo exhibition, “Her garden, a mirror.” The Kitchen, 2018.

Ganesh’s prints were dense with female figures roaming the planet freely, often depicted in confident positions and wearing accessories indicative of invention and discovery. In most of the images, the women were gathered together suggesting this world is run collaboratively. As I walked through the space, I noticed small pockets of sound coming from the ceiling. As I stood beneath the bubble speakers, I heard female voices from a diverse age range reading *Sultana’s Dream*. Through what appeared to be an intermingling of past, present, and future, I reflected on how historical myths were passed through generations in verbal, visual, and written forms. The entire exhibition was a collage. Ganesh took apart the story of *Sultana’s Dream* and rearranged the fragments through varied methods of storytelling to create a new *whole*. The unifying approach to seemingly reimagine this future in a collective and diverse function as a metaphor

for the female collaboration found in Ladyland, and perhaps, the intimate cooperation necessary for such a utopia to exist.

Ganesh uses collage to heal, clarify, and celebrate connection and inclusivity, weaving between timelines to offer hope for a utopian future. Conversely, the work of Sheida Soleimani destabilizes stories and encompasses the violence of collage through the disturbing agitation of punctured imagery. Soleimani is a first generation Iranian-American artist and activist mostly known for her photography. Her parents were both political refugees from Iran; her mother, an artist, was imprisoned and tortured by the Iranian government as punishment for her relationship with Soleimani's father, a political activist who went into hiding for three years. As a response to the violence her mother endured, Soleimani's early work addressed the many injustices experienced by women in Iran. In her series, 'National Anthem' Soleimani created fabric sculptures, inspired by Bobo dolls, made from printed images of Iranian women who were executed for a myriad of crimes, such as adultery.<sup>30</sup> These fabric doll-like sculptures were then arranged into still-lives and photographed. The layers in Soleimani's work, literally and figuratively, are expansive as she creates, what I consider, meta-collages. For many of her works, she begins with two-dimensional images (such as the prints of women), which are recreated as three-dimensional objects (such as the fabric sculptures), and are then returned to two-dimensional forms in the final photographs.

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<sup>30</sup> Rosanna McLaughlin. "Sheida Soleimani: 'Does someone really want to buy an image of an executed woman and hang it in their home?'" Studio International. <https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/sheida-soleimani-interview-iranian-american-artist-human-rights-abuses-iran>.

In these works, Soleimani is showing the brutality enacted upon these women by creating disturbing fractured images of victims. Her use of maximalist aesthetics serves to galvanize her viewers. By creating works that are dense with patterned figures, she makes these women markedly visible, thereby critiquing society's negligence of their oppression. I utilize a similar approach in my work. As a response to how sexual assault is often willfully ignored and dismissed, I seek to bombard viewers with visual information in order to demand their attention, both to the issue at large and to the specific accounts being presented in the work.



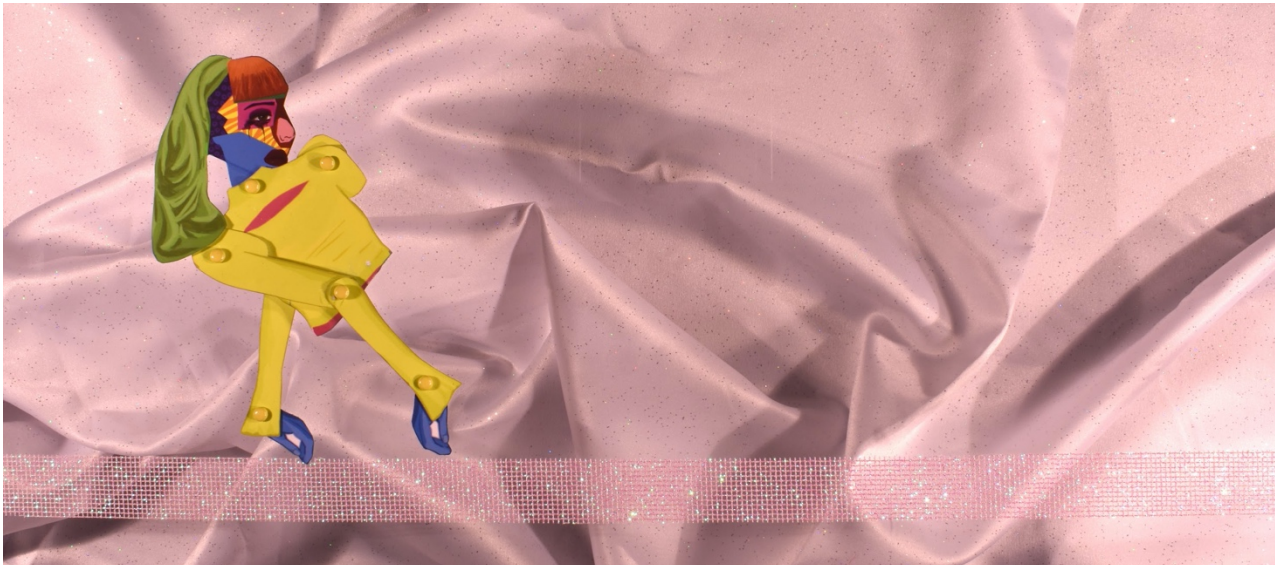
Sheida Soleimani, *Maryam*,  
archival pigment print, 2016.  
<http://sheidasoleimani.com/#work>



Sheida Soleimani, *Taraneh*,  
archival pigment print, 2016.  
<http://sheidasoleimani.com/#work>

<sup>31</sup> Cedar Pasori. "This Artist Is Giving Voice To The Plight Of Iranian Women." *The Fader*, August 26, 2016. <https://www.thefader.com/2016/08/26/sheida-soleimani-interview>.

While Ganesh and Soleimani do not address sexual assault explicitly in their work, they are both responding to the politics of national and international gendered oppression. Inspired by how these women confront gendered injustice in their work, I combine these two approaches to collage. Similar to Soleimani, I create fragmented figures that represent the internal breakage caused by violent events. The hinged bodies of my puppets allow me to morph characters into impossible positions, entangle them in textures, stuff them in unusual containers, and detach their limbs to further capture the violence and entrapment caused by sexual trauma.



Cropped film stills, *Via de Neri* and *Undisclosed Location*, mixed media animation, 2020

My narratives, however, are more similar to the approach of Ganesh. I weave through timelines, collectively patching together materials and imagery. Through the polarization of both ripping materials apart and piecing them back together, I create films that elucidate the complexity and instability of trauma while also retelling these stories in a healing and clarifying manner. My work is not just about representing violence, it is also about learning to be whole again after feeling broken. One of the difficulties of living with past abuse is having to settle with the lack of clarity. In creating these films, I have learned to compress my own memories into stories that are manageable and put the contradictions in traumatic recollection to use. As Lucy Lippard states, “Collage *makes* something of contradictions. It contains the possibility of visual puns, accessible contrasts to irony. It’s also the medium of surprise, which can shake us out of our stupors.”<sup>32</sup>

## **PLAY**

Play is freeing. It allows for an endless journey of reimagining, re-discovering, and re-positioning of experiences. Play releases rigidity and preconceptions. It makes us porous, which can be a productive and accessible way to address hardship. It invites viewers to engage with the story and to empathize with the characters before internalizing the horror of the events depicted. Many of the artists mentioned in this text have also employed the seduction of play in their work. *Machinalia* exuded playfulness in its manic music mix and dark comedic script. When performed in New York it was described as “[a] raucous exploration of feminism - part rock concert, part performance art.”<sup>33</sup> In a conversation with Steph Del Rosso I asked about her

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<sup>32</sup> Lucy Lippard. “From the Archives: No Regrets.” Artnews, March 16, 2017. <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/from-the-archives-no-regrets-63252/>

<sup>33</sup> “Machinalia.” Jack Brooklyn. <http://www.jackny.org/machinalia.html>



choice to create a fun rock concert-esque performance about a tragic story that ends in an execution. Del Rosso explained that for her, laughter can open people up to later get punched in the stomach in a way that is effective. Sheida Soleimani also spoke about this when discussing her choice to incorporate lively color palettes into work with dark themes. She stated, “I want to draw people in. And then, when they realize what the content is, they are forced to spend time with it.”<sup>34</sup> Applying playful filters to disturbing content can urge truth to seep into viewers in a way they might not otherwise allow.

We cannot fully understand the meaning of loss if we cannot see a glimpse of what someone has to lose. I begin each of my films with a depiction of pleasure, excitement, joy, or innocence. It is common for victims of sexual assault to know their assailants, so I want my films to begin lighthearted and slowly build tension to highlight how these atrocities can occur in places of comfort. This method also mirrors the behavior of many perpetrators of sexual assault; abusers often create a false sense of safety for their victims as a way to manipulate them into dangerous situations. Lest we forget, that becoming prey, often begins with play.

## **THE PHALLUSY OF HEROIC RAPE**

Rape is a metaphor of our times. Men rape the land and ravage the oceans. They even penetrate the skies. And, as a sort of environmental afterthought, they rape women. -

Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> McLaughlin. “Sheida Soleimani: ‘Does someone.’” Studio International.

<sup>35</sup> Susan Brownmiller. *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*. (London: Secker & Warbug, 1975), 472.

Rape has been a common theme in paintings and sculptures for most of Western art history. Since there are few historically famous Western female artists, rape was primarily portrayed by men. Many of these artworks depicted rape as glorified violence which Susan Brownmiller calls, “heroic rape.” In Brownmiller’s book, *Against our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*, she analyzes how historical artworks show women as luscious, gracious, and sometimes smiling during the violent event. There is rarely any direct visual representation of the act. Instead, the female bodies are often shown intertwined with that of the male figure in an almost poetic dance evocative of dramatized romance, certainly not the body language of suffering.

In her book, Brownmiller recounts numerous historical incidents, Western and otherwise, in which mass rape of women was conducted alongside war, showing that “war provides men with the perfect psychological backdrop to give vent to their contempt for women.”<sup>36</sup> Western art’s tendency to show rape as a “beautification of sexual violence” often appears in the context of war.<sup>37</sup> This can be seen clearly in artworks that reference the rape of the Sabine women – a story associated with the violent founding of Rome. As the story goes, since there were few female followers of Romulus, Roman men realized they did not have enough women to birth another generation that would carry on their legacy. According to Plutarch, after the Romans failed to persuade their neighbors to give up their women freely,<sup>38</sup> Romulus then planned an abduction of women from their neighboring tribe, the Sabines. This abduction<sup>39</sup> occurred under the disguise

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<sup>36</sup> Brownmiller, *Against our Will*, 42.

<sup>37</sup> Charlotte Jansen. “Why Rape of the Sabines Made Me a Feminist.” Elephant, February 23, 2019. <https://elephant.art/rape-sabine-women/>.

<sup>38</sup> The phrasing “give up their women freely” was used repeatedly in the material I found on this topic which exposes the depth of misogyny in the implication that women are property owned by their husbands.

<sup>39</sup> In my research I read articles from several male writers who felt compelled to distinguish between the words “rape” and “abduction” arguing that this event has been wrongly categorized as the “rape” of the Sabine women since they were *only* abducted. To be clear, the Sabine women were abducted in order to bear Roman children - they

of a celebration in which the Sabines were invited. The Romans then killed many of the Sabine men and kidnapped their women to marry and eventually procreate with. This event has been painted and sculpted by many artists throughout history, showing the ‘heroism’ of rape through brave soldiers and partial nude eroticized women. This misogynistic ideology is further defined in how the Sabine women playfully and elegantly resist their abductors, and in some cases are shown as joyful and willing participants.<sup>40</sup> This depiction perpetuates what I believe to be the false ideology that simmers in the minds of many perpetrators of sexual assault: that women ultimately want to be raped, that no means yes.



Charles Christian Nahl, *The Rape of the Sabines: The Invasion*, 1871. ancient-origins.net

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were raped. The desire for men today to push against categorizing this event as rape shows how violence against women continues to be disguised and diminished.

<sup>40</sup> DHWTY. “The Rape of the Sabine Women.” Ancient Origins, February 2, 2015. <https://www.ancient-origins.net/news-history/rape-sabine-women-002636>.

While the depiction of rape void of vicious and raw imagery is less common in contemporary fine art, contemporary Western cinema has presented its own errors in addressing rape. Of course, similar to Western art history, the majority of film directors are men. In stark contrast to historical fine art, rape in cinema is regularly shown as explicitly sexual, even at times bordering on pornographic, as portrayed for instance in *Westworld* and *Clockwork Orange*. This causes an opposite, yet equally destructive, representation of as exciting, courageously violent, and intensely sexual. Rape is further mishandled in cinema and television when it is used as the inception of a romance such as in *Game of Thrones*, *Blade Runner*, and *Pretty Little Liars*.

It is easy to point to cinematic moments in which rape is conveyed poorly, yet it proves challenging to find examples of depictions of sexual violence that refuse to indulge it as entertaining or that playfully gloss over the abuse. *Nightingale*, directed by Jennifer Kent, is one of the more accurate depictions of rape I have seen in modern cinema. Its narrative takes place in British-colonized Tasmania in 1825. The storyline primarily follows the female protagonist, Clare Carroll, an Irish convict, and her relationship with an Aboriginal man, “Billy” Mangana. The story begins with Clare enduring a series of unimaginable traumas, including a brutally violent rape, during which her husband and child are killed.

Kent received criticism for what some deemed an unnecessary level of brutality in the film, while others have given acclaim to the violent, yet not at all romanticized, depiction of rape. As Gary Thomson states in an article in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, “the violence here is to be endured and not enjoyed. Its purpose is to make the lives of the oppressed seem real by making

their suffering real.”<sup>41</sup> It is through the explicit ferocity of these scenes that Kent avoids slipping into a minimization of rape. In “When Rape Onscreen Is Directed by a Woman,” Cara Buckley points to how Kent focuses the camera on the victim’s face during the assaults is intended to create a dynamic in which viewers experience the violence alongside Clare.<sup>42</sup> This approach to filming invites viewers into Clare’s psyche and rejects the traditional male gaze by never depicting intercourse or partial nudity, and therefore not eroticizing the act.<sup>43</sup>



Aisling Franciosi in *The Nightingale*. Photography: Kasla Ladczyk. [theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com)

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<sup>41</sup> Gary Thompson. “‘Babadook’ director Jennifer Kent returns with grisly frontier drama ‘The Nightingale.’” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 14, 2019. <https://www.inquirer.com/entertainment/movies/the-nightingale-review-jennifer-kent-aislin-franciosi-20190814.html>

<sup>42</sup> Cara Buckley. “When Rape Onscreen Is Directed by a Woman.” *The New York Times*, August 2, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/02/movies/rape-film-nightingale.html>

<sup>43</sup> I am hesitant to attribute *Nightingale*, or any film, to representing rape “well”. There is still much to learn and about the potential harm of depicting rape in cinema. I also have reservations about how Kent handled the rape of an aboriginal woman at a later point in the film and the questionable choice to quickly abandon that character thereafter. However, Kent is handling this topic better than most filmmakers today. If I later identify faults in the representation of rape in *Nightingale*, then that is a good thing for it would mean we have further improved the attention given to this delicate topic and grown an understanding of the impact caused by sexually violent narratives.

The storyline for the remainder of the film appears to be a traditional revenge tale but evolves into something far more poignant. There are two moments in the film that offer unique insight into the psychological toll rape takes on a victim. In one scene, Clare has the opportunity to kill her assailant, but she freezes, missing her moment for violent revenge. This accurately reflects the emotional damage often caused by trauma and parallels the example I provided earlier in this essay about the soldier's response to loud sounds in a grocery store. Rather than react to the current situation, Clare's body is triggered by seeing her assailant and therefore responds to the original event instead of what is occurring in the moment. Towards the end of the film, the narrative takes a further unexpected turn when Clare verbally, rather than physically, confronts her rapist. This moment showed the emotional burden carried by survivors of sexual assault and the empowerment in publicly announcing what took place. The importance of this type of closure is evident in criminal cases such as the trials of Larry Nassar.<sup>44</sup> Larry Nassar, the former USA Gymnastics team doctor, was convicted of numerous sexual assault charges and sentenced to up to 175 years in prison after more than 150 women came forward about the abuse they endured. Judge Rosemarie Aquilina allowed all survivors to share their stories which elucidated how legal punishment is not the only closure desired for victims of sexual assault.

*Nightingale* also connects rape to a broader violent context. Through the relationship between Clare and "Billy," the Aboriginal man leading her through the terrain, this film draws parallels between the violence of raping one's body and that of raping one's land. Larissa Behrendt argues

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<sup>44</sup> Scott Cacciola. "Victims in Larry Nassar Abuse Case Find a Fierce Advocate: The Judge." *The New York Times*, January 23, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/23/sports/larry-nassar-rosemarie-aquilina-judge.html>.

in her review of the film that Kent is “falsely equivocating two vastly different experiences.”<sup>45</sup> It is important, however, to distinguish between linking the experiences of the victims, Clare and Billy, and that of the perpetrator. I interpreted the film to be addressing the white British man’s overwhelming motive to conquer all things and people and highlighting that it is he who is not distinguishing between the victims of his abuse. If this is the case then *Nightingale* is critiquing the notion of “heroic rape” and supporting Brownmiller’s claim that, “As man conquers the world, so too he conquers the female.”<sup>46</sup>



Film still, *Noe Valley*, mixed media animation, 2020

The topic of “heroic rape” has inspired many artists to create work that combats this historic tradition. Sheida Soleimani spoke about her desire to abstain from perpetuating an addiction to destruction in stating, “So I started to ask myself: “How do you get someone to pay attention to

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<sup>45</sup> Larissa Behrendt. “The Nightingale review - ambitious, urgent, and necessarily brutal. But who is it for?” *The Guardian*, August 20, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/aug/20/the-nightingale-review-ambitious-urgent-and-necessarily-brutal-but-who-is-it-for>.

<sup>46</sup> Brownmiller. *Against Our Will*.

violence, without showing violence? Is there a way to turn this on its head?”<sup>47</sup> In a conversation with *Machinalia* playwright, Steph Del Rosso, I asked about her choice to use food as a stand in for violence and blood. In her response, she stated a similar desire to protest normalizing brutality and explained she only felt comfortable depicting violence if it was stylized and surreal. I have also chosen to omit explicit depictions of sexual violence in my films. Instead, I often use minimal imagery paired with suggestive sounds to represent sexual acts. For example, in my film, *Via de Neri*, the sexual act is implied with subtle audio of a bed creaking and faint moaning paired with imagery of soft white threads rustling suggestive of bed sheets. In *Arlington Park*, the act is also indicated by sounds of pants unbuckling and unzipping paired with the image of a car door being locked (and later a hand attempting to escape). By shifting away from graphic violence, my animations give more space to the subtle, abiding power mechanics inherent in these acts. While not everyone can relate to the experience of being sexually assaulted, feelings of fear, shame, and isolation are at least some degree universal. In addition, by embedding the with the emotional damage they caused, I hope to connect us on a commonality that will lead to compassion for survivors and reduce the glorifying, eroticizing, and heroizing of rape.

In 2018, curator Monica Fabijanska addressed Susan Brownmiller’s research about heroic rape head-on in the exhibition appropriately titled, *The Un-Heroic Act: Representations of Rape in Contemporary Women’s Art in the U.S.* Included in this exhibition were works by Kara Walker, Ana Mendieta, Sonya Kelliher-Combs, Guerilla Girls, Yoko Ono, Jenny Holzer, and Naima Ramos-Chapman.

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<sup>47</sup> McLaughlin. “Sheida Soleimani.”





Installation view, *The Un-Heroic Act*, Shiva Gallery JJC. Photo by Bill Pangburn. newswhistle.com

Ramos-Chapman's film "And Nothing Happened" is particularly relevant to my project as it addresses the aftermath of sexual abuse through a naturalistic and raw depiction of the artist herself reporting a rape. The film is stylistically similar to a documentary punctuated with surrealistic moments. For example, in the middle of the film, Ramos-Chapman reaches into a cabinet to retrieve prescription medication in a realistic, almost tedious, fashion. The camera then focuses on the pill bottles exposing the satirical texts that read, "Take a little more than nothing - so with nothing you can take a little more" and "To give sleep the slip - you must slip yourself to sleep." Soon after, we hear her recounting the incident over the phone to a legal professional. In this draining conversation, the voiceover questions Ramos-Chapman about the incident in a disturbingly impersonal, yet overly enthusiastic manner that is clearly divorced from her painful reality. The contrast between the eager remote voice with the slow-paced, mundane visuals of the film accents the depressing and isolating experience of reporting sexual assault.



Film still. Naima Ramos-Chapman, *And Nothing Happened*. Naimaramoschapman.format.com

Ramos-Chapman’s film, as well as the other works in the show, prioritize internal suffering over physical sexual violence in what Jillian Steinhauer describes as representing “feelings rather than flesh.” In Steinhauer’s review of the exhibition for the *New York Times*, Ramos-Chapman is quoted as posing yet another question similar to that of Soleimani, “Is there a way to talk about sexual assault that doesn’t dwell on the brutality of the act itself on women’s bodies in a way that is treated as action or eroticized?” *The Un-Heroic Act* exhibition answers this question with a forceful affirmative. Steinhauer also aptly states that, “[The exhibition] demonstrates what art can do so uniquely: move beyond the negotiation of facts to embrace deeper truths.”<sup>48</sup> This exhibition was on display from September to November 2018, and although it had been planned years prior, its opening during the Kavanaugh hearings made it all the more relevant.

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<sup>48</sup> Jillian Steinhauer. “Female Artists Delete Rape’s ‘Heroic’ Underpinnings.” *The New York Times*, October 16, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/16/arts/design/review-the-un-heroic-act-sexual-violence.html>.

## LOCKER ROOM TALK

Indelible in the hippocampus is the laughter, the uproarious laughter between the two, and they're having fun at my expense. - Christine Blasey Ford<sup>49</sup>



Film still, *Nathan's House*, mixed media animation, 2020

In a time when our president outwardly brags about grabbing women's pussies, there is nothing apolitical about sexual assault. My first few weeks of graduate school coincided with the Kavanaugh Supreme Court nomination hearings. The testimony given by Christine Blasey Ford reminded me of the significance of storytelling and the importance in speaking truth to power. My own anger resurfaced as I watched those hearings and I was reminded of the excerpts I had seen of Anita Hill's testimony during the Clarence Thomas nomination hearing in 1991. It was

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<sup>49</sup> Meg Wagner, Brian Ries, Sophie Tatum, Paul P. Murphy. "Ford Says She remembers 'the Uproarious Laughter' the Most." *Cable News Network*, September 27, 2018. [https://www.cnn.com/politics/live-news/kavanaugh-ford-sexual-assault-hearing/h\\_605fc13629b6362becd969a8539eee0a](https://www.cnn.com/politics/live-news/kavanaugh-ford-sexual-assault-hearing/h_605fc13629b6362becd969a8539eee0a).

painful to realize how little had changed in the nearly two decades between the accounts of these two women.

The political and personal are not binaries, what happens politically influences me personally. Aileen Barry spoke about this in relation to her work in saying “Yes, it is personal and political, both are intertwined like a breath in and breath out. I absorb these circumstances and then make work that is tainted by my own lived experience.”<sup>50</sup> In thinking about the pressure placed on many survivors of sexual assault to provide detailed and ‘provable’ facts about their experience, it is important to remember that, as Kensinger describes, memories are both fragile and resolute.<sup>51</sup>



Left: Anita Hill at a press conference regarding the Hill-Clarence hearings (Photo by Ralf-Finn Hestoft/CORBIS). Right: Christine Blasey Ford testifies before the US Senate Judiciary Committee (Photo by Saul Loeb-Pool).

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<sup>50</sup> Caitriona Devery. “Vacuuming in an Uncanny Vacuum.” Rabbit, August 31, 2016. <http://www.rabble.ie/2016/08/31/vacuuming-in-an-uncanny-vacuum/>

<sup>51</sup> Kensinger. “Remembering the Details.”

Regardless of growing research about how trauma impacts memory recollection, the pressure for survivors to perfectly summon provable facts prevails. As a result, victims who report their assaults are often further abused through the scrutiny of their behavior. For women, this often includes dissecting their appearance to determine whether statements are credible. Shannon Proudfoot calls this the “rulebook” that victims of sexual abuse must follow in order to have a chance at justice:

You must be polished enough to seem credible, but don’t ever look uppity ... You must have an answer for everything, except when that seems a little too perfect to be trusted ... And, most of all, you must make a case—still—for why you are troubling everyone with all of this in the first place, why this thing that upended your life is worth the inconvenience of making everyone listen, much less why it should be considered a serious mark on the record of a man poised to vault up several rungs on the ladder.<sup>52</sup>



Film still, *Arlington Park*, mixed media animation, 2020

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<sup>52</sup> Shannon Proudfoot. “How Christine Blasey Ford and Anita Hill walked the impossible knife’s edge.” *Macleans*, September 27, 2018. <https://www.macleans.ca/politics/how-christine-blasey-ford-and-anita-hill-walked-the-impossible-knifes-edge/>.

Both Hill and Blasey Ford followed these nonsensical rules perfectly, and yet neither was given the justice they deserved. That is not to say that their testimonies served no purpose —

Anita Hill’s courage to come forward in 1991 prompted at least some political progress. In the article, “The Brett Kavanaugh hearing showed how little has changed since Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas,” Anna North explains how Hill’s testimony inspired an uproar of angry women. This led to the “Year of the Woman” in 1992, when an influx of women were elected into Congress. Hill’s testimony addressed the severity, significance, and prevalence of harassment in the workplace and exposed the merciless antagonism that can be present in behavior that does not include physical violence. Hill also set the stage for many women to come forward about their experiences, including Blasey Ford herself. Blasey Ford’s testimony, since it was about an incident decades prior, helped bring validity to survivors who were assaulted in the distant past and was an enlightened reminder of the impact these traumas have on victims for their entire lives.

## **#METOO**

“It takes great courage to violate the culturally pervasive rule for silence, but this courage is necessary for both creative and personal growth.”— Marian Mesrobian MacCurdy, *The Mind’s Eye: Image and Memory in Writing about Trauma*<sup>53</sup>

At the root of the #metoo movement is a refusal of silence. #Metoo was begun in 2006 by activist and sexual harassment survivor Tarana Burke. At the time, Burke was working with young women of color and heard numerous stories of their abuse. On the #metoo website, Burke

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<sup>53</sup> MacCurdy. *The Mind’s Eye*.

explains that the inspiration for this feminist movement came from an interaction with a young girl who shared her experience of being assaulted. Burke wanted to help the girl but explains that she could not bring herself to share the truth of her own experience; “I watched her put her mask back on and go back into the world like she was all alone and I couldn’t even bring myself to whisper...me too.”<sup>54</sup>



Film still, *Arlington Park*, mixed media animation, 2020

#Metoo began as a grassroots movement to speak truth to power and to provide tools for survivors in the hope of building advocacy. Burke helped individuals in low- wealth communities find paths for healing for nearly a decade before the hashtag #metoo went viral in 2017 through a social media post by Alyssa Milano. #Metoo’s strength came with numbers, and soon the hashtag inspired swarms of posts that led to a global network for survivors to connect

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<sup>54</sup> “About.” Me Too Movement. <https://metoomvmt.org/about/>.

and come forward about their experiences. As the movement gained traction, the alarming prevalence of sexual assault took hold in a growing national dialog. This included many survivors recounting abuse they endured from men in power, who had been notoriously immune to punishment. *The Chicago Tribune* published an exhaustive list timelining the highly public sexual assault cases dating back to the beginning of the #metoo movement including charges against Harvey Weinstein, Lawrence G. Nassar, Kevin Spacey, Bill Cosby, Donald Trump, and more.

While #metoo has reached people from all backgrounds, it was initially created to focus on the impact of sexual abuse on Black women and girls. Due to the popularity of this movement among white women, many stories from people of color, as well as other marginalized groups, have been overshadowed. While every victim of sexual assault faces challenges, anyone who deviates from white affluence is further subjected to alienation and less likely to receive justice. Black women face many additional challenges when victimized by sexual assault. In 2010, queer Black feminist Boya Bailey coined the term *misogynoir* to address the double prejudice of misogyny and racial bias experienced by Black women.<sup>55</sup> Some of the ways this takes shape with sexual assault is through further disbelieving Black female victims due to perceptions they are aggressive (which goes against the rulebook) and the oversexualization of Black women (which suggests they are less innocent and therefore less likely a victim). This is evident in the 2019 documentary *Surviving R. Kelly* which addresses misogynoir through the horrific tales of victims abused by the famous R&B artist, R. Kelly. Tarana Burke was interviewed in the documentary

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<sup>55</sup> Eliza Anyangwe. "Misogynoir: where racism and sexism meet." *The Guardian*, October 5, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/oct/05/what-is-misogynoir>.



and spoke about the appalling lack of proper investigation into Kelly's violence against Black women, regardless of over two decades of disturbing abuse allegations.

This movement has not yet impacted the level of social progress I, and many others, desire. However, it did have an impact on me personally. Hearing other women's stories and learning about many different forms of assault helped me understand my own experiences. In fact, my series of animated films about this topic would not have existed in a pre-#metoo era.

In one of my high school journal entries, I wrote about how I sprained my ankle falling down a flight of stairs while drunk at a party the night before. I wrote about feeling embarrassed and being angry that I let myself get that drunk. I wrote about how I felt shame in being that 'type' of girl and that I would behave differently in the future to make sure I did not let it happen again. This is exactly how I wrote about sexual assault; that I was ashamed of myself, disappointed in my own actions, and that I "let it happen." It was not until the #metoo movement that I realized I am not to blame.

I never posted the hashtag #metoo and I never came forward publicly about my experiences because, regardless of how much I learn and read and 'know,' the shame runs really deep. As Burke states, "Part of the work of the metoo movement is about the restoration of that humanity for survivors, because the violence doesn't end with the act. The violence is also the trauma we hold after the act."<sup>56</sup> This is why it was important for me to create films about sexual assault that

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<sup>56</sup> Tarana Burke. "Metoo is a movement, not a moment," filmed November 30, 2018 in Palm Springs, California. TED video, 16:15, [https://www.ted.com/talks/tarana\\_burke\\_me\\_too\\_is\\_a\\_movement\\_not\\_a\\_moment?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/tarana_burke_me_too_is_a_movement_not_a_moment?language=en).

do not focus on the act but instead address the violence that permeates the mind and body long after; since, unlike the pain from a sprained ankle, the torment of trauma does not fade quickly.



Film still, *Nathan's House*, mixed media animation, 2020

## CONCLUSION

At times, creating this work was emotionally draining, but it has also alleviated some of the pain I continue to carry from past experiences. Due to my internalized shame, it has been difficult for me to address this topic directly. Sometimes, however, an indirect representation can expose more truth. Abstraction can reimagine the real and reveal secrets beneath the surface. Jillian Steinhauer wrote, “So much of the discussion of sexual violence in the public realm centers on narrative and a quest for the truth, on what happened and didn’t, and who was wearing or drinking what. Visual art, because it doesn’t prioritize narrative or truth, liberates its makers. It frees them up to have different kinds of conversations that make clear how painfully limited the

prevailing ones are.”<sup>57</sup> Visual art *does* liberate its makers and creating this work did feel like an emancipation from the restrictions, expectations, and pressures to share these stories the “right” way. It is empowering to have complete control over how stories are shared. Like the actress in *Machinalia*, I played all the roles; director, stage manager, screenwriter, costume designer, set designer, actor. Through the process of making this work, I have gained some closure and revitalized my confidence and agency over past experiences. The making of this work is my version of coming forward, refusing silence and shame, and offering an emotional foundation for viewers to navigate the complicated truth of these experiences.



Film still, *Noe Valley*, mixed media animation, 2020

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<sup>57</sup> Steinhauer. “Female Artists.” *The New York Times*

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