MONITOR

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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Abstract

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Major Director: Gregory Volk, Associate Professor, Sculpture + Extended Media

Descriptions of a scene interwoven with thoughts on how aesthetics set behavioral expectations, observation as proof, views from a single perspective, casting of characters, spaces that evoke complicated histories, and my own history.
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Revolving doors divide two sheets of automatic sliding glass into equal parts. Hallways with numbered doors multiply into four right-angled lanes. A symphony of hiccups and superimposed soft ballads mixed with electrical popping comes from unseen speakers.

A woman walks along the north hallway. She peers through thin slits of wire mesh glass into a room. The periphery of the room is lined with numbered exam stations, each separated by striped curtains. These striations appear to have slight color distinctions of purple, green and blue, but fade into an overall tone of cadet grey. Tracking on the ceiling forms circular paths for these thick fabric walls. They close and open to reconfigure spaces for temporary and limited privacy. Between the divisions are vinyl-cushioned tables covered with flimsy, protective paper. This paper rolls like a conveyer belt around
each table. Rotations bring the body secretions and foreign matter through a narrow slit into the concealed interior in the base of the table. No one is on the tables.

Similarly wrapped in a monochromatic palette, bodies march almost in unison into the room. They split into two groups, A and B. Group A turns to the left side near the window. They organize themselves automatically in a semicircle facing the center of the room. At the center of the room is a cushioned bed draped with light blue blankets. The subject has been waiting. She removes her clothes and situates herself on the table. Group A sets up their equipment which consists of an assortment of papers, cloths, and pencils. Group A looks closely.

Monitor, video still, 2016
1. The Aesthetic of Expectation

Physical appearance is encoded with invisible rules. Describing the surface qualities of a space allows me to set the logic of my videos. Simple actions, color, implications of site, and spatial arrangement undercut the importance of linear narrative as a driving force of understanding motion picture. The visual theme does not act as background for the plot—but is the point itself. The aesthetic and history of site set the expectations of our behavior. I am interested in how we instill the same kind of order and psychology within ourselves that is defined for us through the aesthetic realm. And conversely, how is the visual used as a space for resistance? For these reasons, the image is primary.

Monitor opens with an eye. It is slightly damaged. An anonymous blue glove directs the face left to show the ear. The view shifts to a tongue that has adapted with age to the curvature of each tooth like a tree enwrapping itself around an impeding fence. The man sits upright on the exam table. He wears a button-up shirt and has neatly trimmed hair. For what purpose this man is being inspected is unclear, but the fleshiness of the sense organs continues to haunt after the mouth is closed and the eyes are veiled with glasses.

We later see this character, an older white man standing in the front of a room assuming the role of a professor. He is slightly clumsy and his motions seem directed to assume this position of power; he is a puppet of authority.

Three parallel rows of tables fence in five pupils. They are still. Five drawers equidistant from each other squint, bending and refocusing the lenses of their eyes as they shift their heads slightly forward and back, side-to-side. They observe a nude woman figure model.
In synchrony, seven people stretch in two lines. They pull their left arms to the right forming a right angle and inversely repeat the action. Their ears attempt to touch their shoulders, alternating back and forth. They stand still. When the alarm sounds, the model releases her pose. Her shoulders roll, and her arms stretch to repeat the same action performed within the two lines. She now has tied-back hair and a button up shirt.

Through video editing, bodies are layered with other bodies, and it becomes difficult to locate our empathy and understanding of the situation. We are not certain if and when a character is a patient, a life model, an instructor, student or dancer. In the latter half of the video, the “professor” removes his clothes and our assumption of him shifts as his multiple piercings on his nipples and genitals are revealed. We also discover near the end of the video that the figure model is a transwoman with many tattoos. These moments reveal that the characters within the video do not fit neatly into expected categorization. In effect, the power dynamics and projections of empathy and subjectivity also shift. We are stripped of a theoretical viewer, but we, as ourselves bringing our own bias and experience, have to ask ourselves with what kind of eyes are we going to place upon the world.

In my videos, everyone is surveilled. Through this project, I am trying to understand my own way of looking and its implications— and how I come to understand my body personally and historically operating within similar systems. Showing how it physiologically and psychologically feels to be consumed as a spectacle, a feeling of physical closeness but emotional distance, a frustration to the point of expressive paralysis feels pertinent now. This tension is coated with politeness, a thin layer of neutral paint, and a weak topical anesthetic cream that leaves a tingling sensation.
2. The Eye Touching

In my video *Monitor*, the viewer is unable to puncture the surface. Intimate stroking over backlit glass is the most intimate type of touch. A stylist rubs a surface. Gloves nudge skin. Touch is mediated and rehearsed. Through a layer of glass, characters see their image returned over Caravaggio’s *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* and Rembrandt’s *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*. Within this setting, the paintings romanticize depth of a spiritual and inner body. Yet also present in these famous images is a gesture of priority: immortalizing surgeons/patrons standing over an anatomically inaccurate corpse of an executed coat thief. Rembrandt highlights the individual facial expressions of the surgeons. Their eyes point in various directions: the teacher’s face, the book providing reference, the viewer, the lifeless hand. They are in close proximity to the corpse of Aris Kindt, a man around the same age of Rembrandt at the time, 25. Such procedures took place in an anatomy theater and were social events.

Observation and touch act as proof of a perceived event or reality. Historical painting, the cortical homunculus diagram, medical checkups, and life drawing classes document a subjective truth. Viewing is never neutral, but rather an experience that is inherently biased and most often patriarchal. The ways images are framed in mainstream culture overflow into the psychology of how we imagine our image existing in the world. Policing is implicit in the gaze and in the projected self-image.
Monitor (above and below), video still, 2016
3. The Center

Buster Keaton is a master of missed expectations. His jokes rely on the misunderstanding of a character's perception of a physical space, and on the difference between the framing of an event through a camera and the perspective of a character. Jaques Tati plays with similar ideas in *Playtime*.

*The Navigator*, 1924 film, directed by Buster Keaton and Donald Crisp
How an object or body moves or remains still, how it is cloaked or exposed, how it is positioned within a space, all define how we arrive at knowledge through observation. This relationship is personal. In Maurice Merleau-Ponty's 1961 essay “Eye and Mind,” he states that the body is aware of itself as a seeing subject and a seen object. This reciprocal and “undivided” relationship between the body and perception is a way of noticing the inseparability between consciousness and embodiment, for without a body “there would be no humanity”. Being aware of oneself as object and subject is something inherently human, and perhaps at the root of our ability to empathize. If the body is able to perceive itself as a seeing body then we are capable of having multiple perspectives simultaneously— our immediately view, the presumed gaze of other objects and beings,
and a self-reflexive projection of oneself looking. The cyclical nature of observing, creating images, and becoming images ourselves opens up a space of self-reflection.

I consider space as an amalgam of different points of view, each providing a different locus of reality and the impossibility of an entirety. In considering the limitations of a singular visual plane, I accentuate conflicting points of view and offer a way of looking from outside of our bodies in order to enhance our understanding of our own bodily limitations as seeing subjects and “knowers” of information. For example, in my video Monitor I employ dueling cameras, dolly and fixed tripod shots, alternating between points of view through a mechanical eye. As bodies appear and vanish behind objects, and reflections reveal other people outside of the enclosed world of the video, we are unable to locate a single subjective observer.
The sharp crinkling sounds of newsprint ripped from group A’s notepads crescendo with each attempted study. There is an immediacy in relocating the image of this body from the retina to the paper as if every elapsed second creates a more distant doppelganger. In cycles of fifteen minutes, waves of flipped paper reverberate from the back of the room to the front. Acoustic remissions advance and recede rhythmically in the same hypnotic way of undulating water on a shore but without the comfort of endless time.

Lead instruments scrub bleached paper, sometimes screeching, and other times like taps of soft rain. Favored students have learned to colonize the entire frame of the paper, stretching their arms and marks across vast planes with confidence. Less celebrated learners move their wrists within a self-designated diameter of a few inches, and their modest world exists in miniatures.
The subject’s nipples are puckered. Metal rings with a decorative ball pierce each nipple. The air conditioning is off, but perhaps it is wet outside. The windows are drawn just letting a finger’s width of cool light pass. The buzzing fluorescent tubes strive to cast a neutral layer of light over all forms, but some curtains block the even distribution of light. There are many dim pockets not fully visible through the polyester shields.

Diagram in my sketchpad for the planning of Monitor
4. Character from Body

As opposed to typical casting in movies where people adapt to fit an on-screen character, I do not assign my characters thoughts. Rather, I rely on their mannerisms and appearance to develop their personhood. Tattoos, piercings, hairstyles, and body alterations within *Monitor* are intimate spaces of autonomy and liberation that sharply contrast with the regulated cool palette in clothing and interior design.

The bodies in my video are people mostly performing tasks that they already typically perform. A drawing student draws. Figure models pose. People stretch, sit, and look. Their natural physical and behavioral idiosyncrasies are captured on camera almost in a documentary style. With some actions directed and others captured, personal moments of contemplation become conflated with choreographed sessions of stretching and meditation. Monotonous actions and emotionless expressions rendered in washed-out color seemingly rob characters of their very humanity. And yet, small acts of rebellion disrupt the order. Equipment malfunctions, and moments of humor break through the ennui.
This is one of my favorite scenes and inspiration for a few shots within my video. At this institute, apathetic men voluntarily attend a school that teaches them to become servants. No one ever leaves to get jobs.

*Institute Benjamenta*, 1995 film, directed by Stephen Quay and Timothy Quay
Behind the subject there is a tall mirror set up to reveal her back. The mirror leans against a moveable wall that divides the groups. For group A, the mirror reflects a corner of the room where the wall color changes from grey to taupe. From this point of view, a body can be seen standing in the front of the room. The mirror cuts off the top of the head.
5. Somewhere Between Hope and Compliance

Exchanged glances, shifting questions of touch, and waiting create an atmosphere of uncertainty. There is a rising tension, a humming eroticism, which is embedded into the bureaucratic strangeness of my videos. This system, much like the ones we have built for ourselves, relies on compliance. The unsatisfied inevitably enforce a system they oppose.

Spaces that imply a sort of social regulation, in the case of Monitor—a hospital, an academic institution, and a life drawing class—are equally the protagonists in my videos. I evoke spaces with complicated histories. The history of medical progress and biases/inaccuracies within education elicit conflicting emotional tensions somewhere between hope and an unenthusiastic acceptance.

It is difficult for me to make work that attempts to challenge the political correctness of an image. The oversimplification of news shared through Facebook memes, political opinions formed by Tumblr activism, and snap judgments of potential partners through a tinder photo are frightening platforms that validate an idea that we can understand something almost instantly. Absurd scenarios become objectification of mental images that attempt to portray a psychological realism. The space before you have fully formulated a thought is suspended.

A montage of perceptions culminates in our judgment and actions, and if we live in a set of relations, one meaningful manipulation will cause others to inevitably shift.
6. Objects, Portation Devices, and Time Machines

My videos are obliquely related to personal experiences. Part of my interest in social control comes from my upbringing in a small town in East Texas where social acceptance is linked with church attendance. I led Bible studies at my public high school on Friday afternoons by the flagpole.

I continued to study theology in college and became interested in what kinds of symbols become conflated in our minds. I snapped a photo of my friend’s neighbor’s front yard. Jesus sprouted wings.

Within this sculpture, the face is carved and built up with putty. It is maintained with retouches of paint throughout the year. But for me, I couldn’t shake the poster image on the VHS of one of my favorite childhood movies, *The Silence of the Lambs*. I was interested in psychological thrillers at a young age. Watching them now is frightening in a way that I couldn’t relate to back then.
The silence of the lambs
When choreographing camerawork and the movement of actors, I often reference optical devices such as surveillance cameras, filmstrips, or spinning animation disks. These objects that give form to images allow me to show something from a state of personal removal.

Slowly surveilling a space and detouring around bodies and corners offer an opportunity for noticing, a hypnosis that does not limit awareness of our immediate surroundings, but rather emphasizes our bodies' position within a larger sociopolitical space. Using images, I am interested in how I can conflate these visual social cues and make apparent the contrivances latent in our own world—how we organize ourselves and reinforce systems designed to oppress and maintain a status quo.

Monitor, video still, 2016
A broad bare landscape stretches across the wall. A man in a green button-up shirt is facing the board. He moves his head back and forth as if to discover for the first time that his motion dictates the framing and movement of the mirrored image.

A curved black line smears across the board. Partially abstracted outlines of exterior body parts pile on top of each other and drape over a hill. He says, “You can see the hand is bordered below the face, above by the upper arm and shoulder.” He proceeds to diagram the part of the somatotopic map associated with speech—the mouth and larynx.

“This map of body surfaces coordinates a part of the body to a point on the central nervous system providing a visual to how we organize spatial stimuli, how we perceive our body—and how we construct a so-called ‘body image’.” His diagram is clumsy. Group B slouches in black adjustable chairs. Black hair with gel, short and shaved. Blonde hair in a high ponytail, grey-brown locks tied in a low bun, another shaved round surface. From behind the wire mesh glass window of the door, one can see the top of Group B’s heads. The woman’s breath continues to collect on the glass.
Bibliography