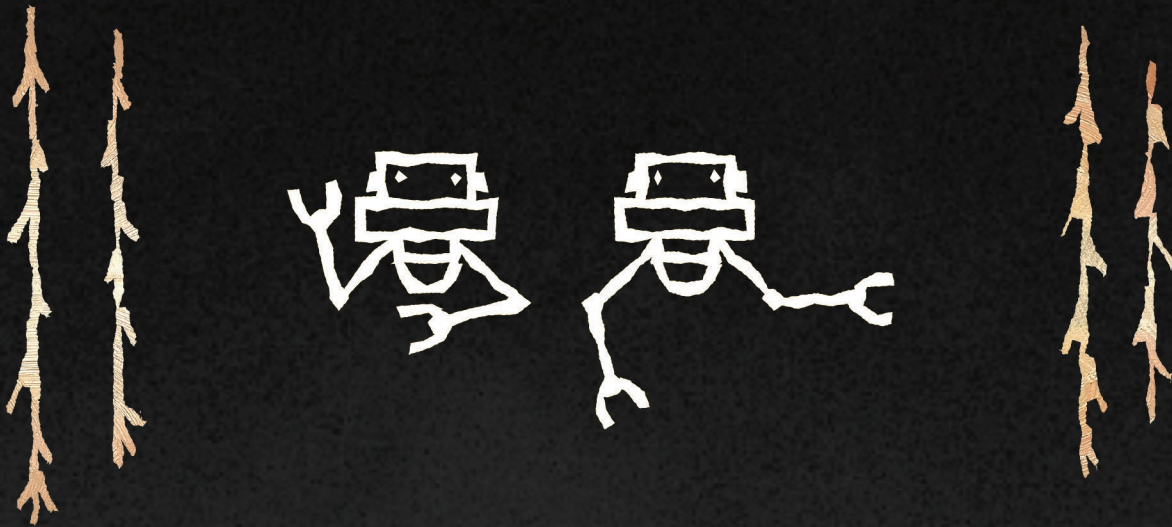


MFA IN CREATIVE TECHNOLOGIES THESIS



making space  
for daydreams

Trevor Finney

# Making Space for Daydreams

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# Making Space for Daydreams

Trevor G. Finney

## Abstract

I describe and reflect on the creation of my exhibition Making Space for Daydreams, containing two large sculptures and a collection of conversational audio recordings. The sculptural artworks utilize interdisciplinary techniques and both digital fabrication and handcrafted approaches, including: woodworking, hand-cut paper, laser-cut illustration, motion capture, projection mapping and pencil drawings. The exhibition explores themes related to daydreaming, and the value of recognizing and building spaces that help make daydreaming possible. In addition, the work explores presence, memory, and inner child relationships as way to understand and frame my own relationship to daydreaming. By engaging in an act of imaginative play, I collaborated with my inner child and benefited from a strengthened sense of self-identity. Through acts of obscuring in the artwork I create allowances for imagination and invite the viewer to reflect on their own experiences and daydreams.

# Making Space for Daydreams

Trevor G. Finney

## General Audience Abstract

I describe and reflect on the creation of my exhibition Making Space for Daydreams, containing two large sculptures and a collection of conversational audio recordings. The exhibition explores themes related to daydreaming and the value of recognizing and building spaces that help make daydreaming possible. By engaging in an act of imaginative play, I collaborated with my inner child and benefited from a strengthened sense of self-identity.

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What would it be like to re-enter spaces of daydreaming from childhood? As a kid my reality was nebulous and ill defined. I found that specific spaces offered me potent vehicles for daydreaming, and the daydreams themselves were informed by the spaces they occupied. As I grew up, these spaces transitioned from being all around me to a few odd and transient corners of my adult life. I wanted to know what it would feel like to have more of those spaces back. Why were they gone when it was so easy to make them before and what would I gain by reentering those spaces? How could I re-enter those spaces of daydreaming from childhood? I found my entry into these questions through therapy and artmaking. As much as I wish this was a linear process with knowable steps it was really a messy process and involved a constant back and forth, pulling lessons from therapy into artmaking and artmaking into therapy.

As an investigation into re-accessing more intentional spaces of daydreaming I developed three artworks: two physical sculptures that revisit and recontextualize memories of personal spaces and an audio composition of friends sharing memories of their own experiences. In my exhibition work, I reconstructed spaces of childhood daydreaming and in doing so changed my relationship to my inner child.

These overlapping journeys began in 2022 when I had a baby, started my MFA program, and began inner child work in therapy. Looking back, it's hard to know where those topologies begin and end. Early in the journey I took a photo while working on my laptop and holding my son. I love that photo because it very accidentally captured the feeling more authentically than I intended: blurry and out of focus but so very excited. Although I was excited to be a new dad and an MFA student, I initially balked at the idea of inner child work. The idea sounded infantilizing and regressive, even the term sounded then and still

sounds somewhat ridiculous. Even still, when my therapist had me write with my dominant hand what people call me today, and with my non-dominant hand what people called me as a child, and then asked me to continue that conversation between those two hands and two identities I froze. The unrefined marks made by my non-dominant hand resembled so clearly the writing of a child and I did not want to be pulled back.

I worked hard to grow up, to feel some measure of control in my world, to build my identity and to frankly leave behind that kid. What I didn't appreciate at the time was that in my haste to leave behind the memories of that kid, I also left behind his delights and memories and free-flowing, nonjudgmental imagination. I have grown around my old identities and, through my memories, I carry them with me whether I accept them or not. The living memory of my childhood self is my "inner child."

I will share my journey through the parallel processes of making space for daydreaming and how I found a connection to my inner child. I will share lessons I learned from my foundational experiments and my final works as well as my findings, conclusions, and my hopeful future directions.



# Foundational Experiments

In my foundational experiments I explored connections between memory and space and how we experience them contemporaneously. Gaston Bachelard, a philosopher and epistemologist wrote about these themes in his work *Poetics of Space*:

... the places in which we have experienced daydreaming reconstitute themselves in a new daydream, and it is because our memories of former dwelling-places are relived as daydreams that these dwelling-places of the past remain in us for all time. (2009)

For me this spoke to the strong relationship I found between memory and daydreaming. Not only do I keep the spaces I once occupied alive through revisiting them as daydreams, but I can develop even more transportative memories of those spaces by first daydreaming in them. This observation came into focus as I developed my foundational experiments and reflected on them. The interplay between constructing new spaces and revisiting old ones in memory, and the daydreaming that happened along the way, became a slow discovery through my foundational works.

## On Daydreaming

Throughout my work, research, and conversations with others the word daydreaming, and its implications, have meant something different in each context. As my research developed further, my understanding of daydreaming found an uneasy anchor in my readings from psychologists. Finding solid ground on daydreaming was difficult for a few reasons. First, psychoanalysts, psychologists, and epistemologists have described daydreaming for many years but it has been, “rarely studied by non-clinical psychologists” (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015). Second, its definition appears to change based on context and intention and is often complicated by mixed terminology such as “fantasy” (Winnicott & Rodman, 2010) or conflation with “mind-wandering” (Newby-Clark & Kajalaxy, 2018). Finally, its connection to creativity and memory has been discussed and debated since at least Aristotle (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015).

There were some apparent commonalities that resonated with me however. Tania Zittoun and Alex Gillespie’s book *Imagination in Human and Cultural Development* offered me a foundation of understanding. In their book they write that daydreaming represents a subset of imaginative experiences, which they describe as, “experiences that escape the immediate setting (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015).” This core psychological process, they explain, is pervasive and occurs, “in all domains of life from play to work” (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015). Psychoanalysts can “conceptualize daydreaming as a form of imagination that draws on inner experiences, the emotional and embodied traces of past experiences, to construct images or scenarios that are emotionally satisfying and/or preparations for possible futures (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015).” Other attempts have been made to define daydreaming as a type of “altered consciousness” that refers to “spontaneous, subjective experiences in a no-task, no-stimulus, no-response situation (Vaitl et al., 2005),” or even more broadly as simply, “imagining events” (Newby-Clark & Kajalaxy, 2018). The importance of daydreaming begins during imaginative play in childhood and is also complex, varying, and deeply connected to our psychological development and emotional state (Winnicott & Rodman, 2010; Singer, 1975; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015). To me, this all speaks to how highly individualized, dynamic, and common daydreaming is.

My relationship to daydreaming, by contrast to the multitude of definitions described above, is one of simply being an observer of an altered reality. It's an act of sensorially imaginative play, but it's also a real-time experience of a what-if change to an external aspect of my world. Although I agree with Zittoun & Gillespie's observation that daydreams are often constructed to be, "emotionally satisfying and/or preparations for possible futures (2016)," I have found that daydreaming is far less direct, and much more ambivalent, than that idea might imply. For me, it's not always a rehearsal for a real future nor always an indulgence in positive emotion. I do not need to be the central figure of the daydream and a daydream does not exist in the future or the past but right now, around me. Also, as the above definitions indicate, in psychology there is a preeminent interest in understanding why daydreams happen and where they come from. In my research I am more interested in the experience of the act itself. Daydreaming is a layering of multiple realities. Because of this, daydreaming does not transport me to somewhere else as much as it brings somewhere else to me. At its best, daydreaming has no requirement of being pleasurable or reflective but it may be experiential or involve many different senses. If I sit in front of a hill I might imagine that the hill comes to life, breathes deeply and exhales softly. Much like a memory, I can experience that imagining visually, tactilely, olfactorily, or even emotionally. Also like a memory, my relationship to that daydream is not inherent to its content but a separate function and may change over time. What is important to me in my work is that the features of a daydream are simply external, they happen to the world around me, and I am both an observer and the knowing generator of them. For me, framing daydreaming as a neutral act without implicit emotional connotation, utility, or reflection, separates it from other words of imaginative acts such as reverie, rumination, musing, or contemplation that we use and indulge in as adults. As Singer and Winnicott both note, daydreaming is an essential component of childhood and imaginative play (Singer, 1975; Winnicott & Rodman, 2010), and it is that particular childlike act that was ultimately at the center of my investigations.



Figure 1. Duck on the Hill.

## Duck on the Hill and Allowances

About three months before my first part-time semester in the program my son was born. Obviously, a lot changed when I had a kid, but one that was particularly relevant to my development as an artist was that I felt that I had suddenly been given a lot of allowances. Allowances to delight in my newborn, to take time, to engage in non-optimized efforts, to not reach for high achievement after a long day, to allow a sleep deprived mind to wander and daydream.

In my artmaking and therapy, these same allowances also offered a kind of open permission for more curious, experimental, and wandering exploration than the rigidity I found in much of my goal-oriented work. Those allowances enabled a shift in my attention from accomplishment to process and observation. Giving myself permission for non-optimized time and open curiosity became an incredible antidote to self-criticism and self judgment, both of which I found stifled my artwork and therapy. In my later work, I strived to build in allowances for my viewers into my work as well.

I learned that making allowances for delight was sometimes enough to engage in daydreaming. I engaged in what I enjoyed and delighted in small things, and I started thinking about shifts in perspective. I started to wonder what my son saw when he looked around him. What was this new world to him? He spent so much time looking up. Watching him, I remembered that I used to spend a lot of time looking up too. I imagined what I might see if I was small and seeing the world from his perspective. I looked at mundane things and began seeing them as magical again.

An early manifestation of these ideas came in a digital painting of an enormous glowing duck sitting atop a foggy hillside in the dead of night. The painting positioned the duck as large and warm, strange and comforting. Through these changes I recontextualized the duck from a little night-light on a shelf to a beautiful beacon in the dark forest of 3am diaper changes.



Figure 2. Paper Airplane Wall.

## Paper Airplane Wall, Interpretation, and Early Influences

Over the following year I began to practice curiosity more intentionally and make more allowances for delight and interpretation. Which is just to say I pursued things for their own sake. I also made more time and allowances for daydreaming. Along with that I started making more room for interpretation in my work and in reflecting on my life. The genesis of my piece, Paper Airplane Wall, was in contemplating existential threats to children both externally and, reflecting on myself, internally. In this work I reflected on the awareness that sometimes things are sad, impossible, and without easy answers. Sitting with that observation and taking time to reflect on it is an allowance too.

Paper Airplane Wall is a sculpture in which a paper airplane is tied to a freestanding wall with a fan in the center that continually pushes the airplane up and away from the wall. The airplane is lit from above by a spotlight that casts its shadow onto a scattered pile of other paper airplanes on the floor. The paper airplanes are made out of yellow tissue paper, a color commonly associated with joy and an incredibly light and delicate material commonly associated with gifts. The wall is a thin frame, 80" x 80", covered by a sheet of painted black cardboard with a standard 2' x 2' black box fan in the center.



Figure 3. Alexander Calder. (1976). *Untitled, 1977*. [Aluminum and steel]. National Gallery of Art, East Building, Washington, DC, United States. Copyright Calder Foundation, New York.

By making allowances for an evolving interpretation of this piece as I created it, I also made room for curiosity and discouraged self-judgment. I have found that self-judgment often limits my imagination. In making this work I found myself unintentionally engaging in materials of childhood and viewers noted that the materials, construction, and forms were ones of domestic life. Although I initially resisted this connection I eventually leaned in. I wasn't entirely clear on exactly what I wanted this piece to look like, I just knew there was a tone I wanted to see. The fact that the materials, forms, and assembly are visible and common creates a sense of accessibility and familiarity.

Three artists influenced my approach to Paper Airplane Wall. In making this work I thought about the work of Alexander Calder, who used natural air movements to animate his mobiles (Calder, 1976). I thought about his mobiles not only for the characteristics of the wind and movements but also because mobiles are a symbol of childhood. He took a symbol that I associate with infancy and recontextualized it into a monumental wonder that invites me to look up and pulls me into a contemplative space. I had also been learning about the works of Felix González-Torres who created stunning works that took everyday objects, such as the lightbulbs on strings in his work *Untitled (North)*, and created gestures that saturated a space in atmosphere (1993). I was also learning about the work of Olafur Eliasson and I was similarly captivated by his ability to take simple objects



*Figure 4. Félix González-Torres. (1993). "Untitled" (North). [22 light bulbs, porcelain light sockets, and electrical cord]. Félix González-Torres Foundation. Photo by Nuit Blanche Paris.*



*Figure 5. Olafur Eliasson. (1993). Beauty. [Spotlight, water, nozzles, wood, hose, pump]. Photo by Anders Sune Berg.*

and through their gestures, transform not only the objects but also the rooms they occupied. Through light, mist, air, and time, these artists invited contemplations on our relationships to ourselves, our memories, and our world. Their work would continue to influence me throughout my foundational experiments as well as my thesis works as I tried to cultivate similar atmosphere and transformations.

I found a great deal of beauty in their work's simplicity and clarity. Like a nod from a partner or the empathetic heartache of seeing someone's shoulders drop after a defeat, these simple gestures contained within them a wealth of metaphor and meaning if I was curious enough to want to understand them. Even through photos of their work they connected me to the artist's work and made me want to gesture back.

In Paper Airplane Wall, I tried to learn from them and create a simple gesture of a paper airplane suspended on a string in an impossible, unnatural wind. It is blown around and out of the fan's turbulent airflow only to land back in its path again. As it spun about the axis of the string it slowly winded itself up and inched closer to the fan and out of the wind before unwinding and falling back down once more. The animated action created a space for meditation, it never moved the same way twice but was nevertheless constrained. The somber light and black monolithic wall created a juxtaposition to the softly whimsical nature of the dancing plane. To me and some viewers who shared their observations, these actions gestured toward the feeling of helplessness and unrest in the shadow of a large structure designed to keep us away but not gone.

## Dappled Light Projection and Memory

Although I didn't realize during its making, I further explored the relationship between daydreaming, memory, and the spaces we use to access both through my contribution to a collaborative installation. This public installation was co-created with several of my fellow grad students for a collaborative group show. My contribution was a several-minute animation that was intended as a kind of immersive portrait of the dappled light that came through 3 local plants. This animation was projected onto a custom built wood and mesh screen, installed onto 3 benches in an often-overlooked space. After making this piece, I kept thinking about childhood memories. Specifically, I kept thinking about my Nanna's house, laying in her bed after a nap one afternoon. Looking at her curtains and the light filtering through leaves and fabric, I felt safe and warm and most of all I felt like I had time.

In both my ongoing therapy work and in reflecting on the dappled light animation I found a connection to childhood memories that I had previously viewed with discomfort and difficulty. I had an emotionally fraught childhood and I worked hard to grow up and leave behind the kid who struggled—the kid who was sad. I avoided looking back at that kid because with him came that sadness. In therapy we practiced the idea of non-judgmental observation and radical acceptance in order to reorient myself to my values. I spent time revisiting memories and acknowledging how, despite my efforts to avoid them, they nevertheless manifested in me as different impulses, fears, and dreams. Even if I have the ability to navigate through the challenges that arise in my life now, I couldn't as a child. Those memories still influence me and I was beginning to see that by looking inward I could lend the memory of that kid a hand by using my adult capacity to navigate and process those challenges. In doing so I could alleviate some of the weight of his struggles, the struggles that still had weight on me. By thinking about who I was as a kid and the spirit and value he had, I was becoming more comfortable playing and imagining without burden. In revisiting the space of my Nanna's room in memory I didn't mind so much that the little kid Trevor was there too. In fact it was nice to see him.



These works were experiments that left me centrally interested in creating artworks that transformed spaces, explored memory, and made room for daydreaming. Another piece of writing from Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* helps contextualize my final works:

Thus we cover the universe with drawings we have lived. These drawings need not be exact. They need only to be tonalized on the mode of our inner space. (2009).

I took from this quote that our acts of living, the marks we make on our world and the daydreams and memories we create are the drawings that cover the universe. As I learned in my foundational experiments, the drawings need not be exact. They only need to reflect the tone, the atmosphere, the gestalt of our inner world. This also reflected for me an awareness that we cannot create these drawings without first knowing our inner space, our inner selves. Getting to know my inner space was often an act of therapy and self compassion. My final works continue the investigation into both daydreaming and its connection to getting to know these inner selves.

*Figure 6. Trevor Finney, Sarah Hammer, Ben Hornyak, braden perryman (2023). Untitled Group Installation. [Projection onto wood frame and mesh screen].*



## Thesis Works

For my thesis exhibition I created three works:

Projected presence, two screens, each 8 feet by 3 ½ feet, with projected animation of a shadow figure; A Table to Be Under, an 8 foot long, 5 and a half 5 foot wide, and 8 foot tall table, with an illustration on the underside; and Visiting Narrators, a 15 and ½ minute long audio collage of interviews about daydreaming spaces. They are each interconnected in their investigations but vary in their forms and approach.

In my thesis exhibition I created two works that reconstruct and recontextualize the memories of spaces that I went to daydream in childhood and one work that collages the memories of others. I created these works as a way to reconnect with the kid who occupied those spaces and the imaginative play that he engaged in. These spaces of daydreaming are ones of myth, magic, and mystery and to be daydreaming here is to be imagining without being burdened by judgment, time, purpose, or evaluation.

In these works I also invite the viewers to join me in my spaces for daydreaming and reflect on their own memories of the places they once went to daydream. In doing so I hoped that they might consider the value of surfacing those memories and connect to the child that made them.

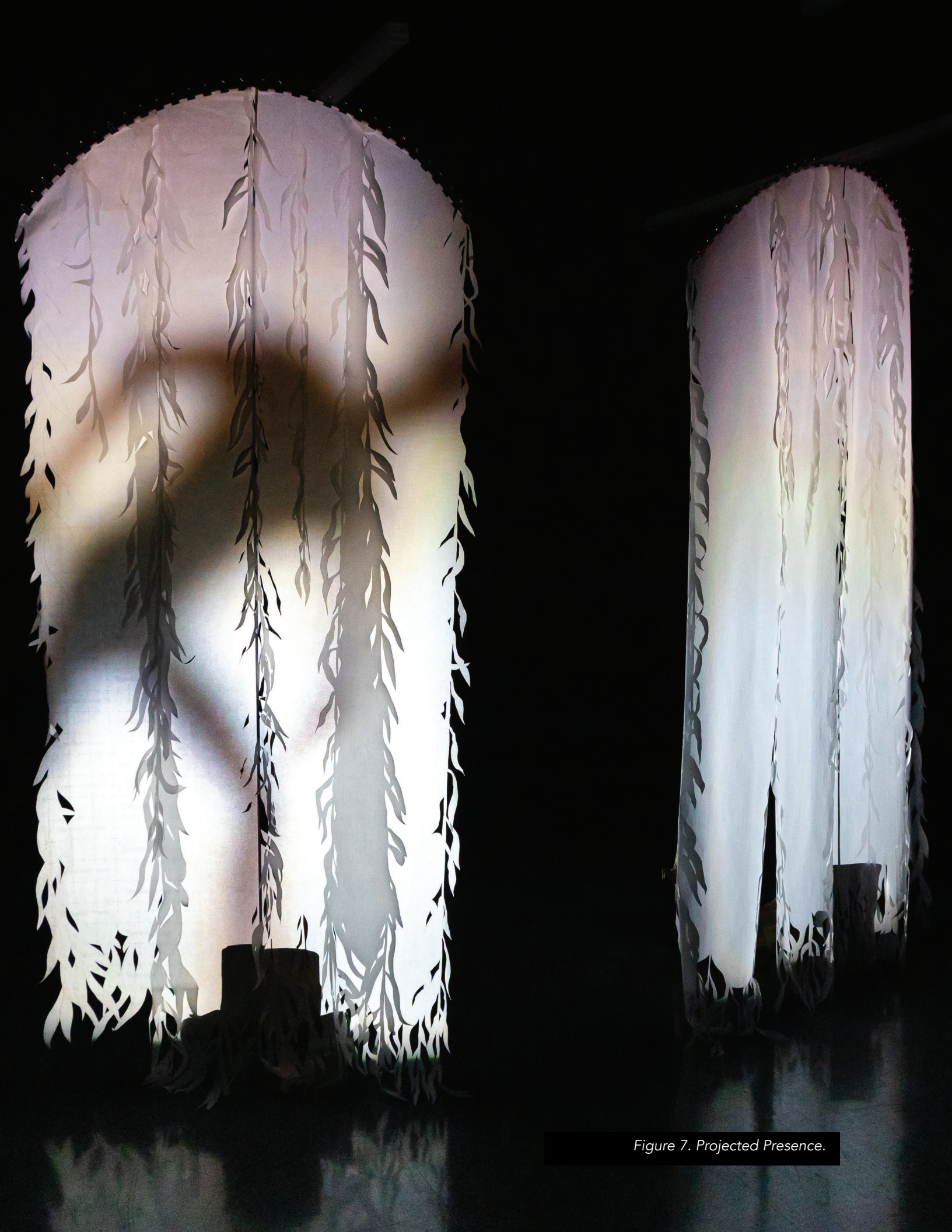


Figure 7. Projected Presence.

## Projected Presence

In my piece Projected Presence I created an ethereal space that invited reflection on our relationship to the objects and memories in our life. The final sculpture consists of two delicate projection screens that are separated by a small gap and a projector that back-projects the 4 and ½ minute animation onto the screen. Together the screens were hand drawn and hand cut to resemble the curtain of a willow tree out of 100 square feet of parchment paper. The strips were then hung from a thin steel frame that swayed gently back and forth as air pushed against the paper, causing the entire structure to animate ever-so gently in the breeze.

Alongside the artmaking of this piece I continued to work through Acceptance-Commitment Therapy exercises with my therapist. Core processes of Acceptance-Commitment Therapy helped me identify my values, recontextualize and understand my relationship to events in my life, practice non-judgemental acceptance, and observation (Hayes et al., 2006). I now view these as a critical part of both my artmaking and therapy efforts. I had also been learning about Play Theory and Object Relations theory, pioneered by early developmental psychologists Melanie Klein and Donald Winnicott, and the contemporary theory of Internal Family Systems by Richard C. Schwartz. All of these spotlighted for me the importance of recognizing my inner selves and my relationships to them. Inner selves, plural, is a concept I learned about primarily through reading through Schwartz' book "No Bad Parts," which described how our inner selves form from major experiences in our lives as a way to protect ourselves or embody characteristics brought out by those experiences (Schwartz, 2021). One meditation exercise in the book led me to imagine meeting different parts of myself and observing what their reactions might be. From these readings, I wondered: What does the shadow of their presence look like on the other side of the veil of

memory? If I look directly at those memories I feel their weight, I feel that presence. How do I and will I relate to those figures? What do I bring to those ethereal and delicate relationships?

I started sketching ideas of representing the presence of my inner selves as a virtual shadow that I could see on the other side of a veil. The idea of presence became important to me as both a feature of my inner selves and of daydreaming and I set out to investigate and play with how we experience feelings of presence, especially social presence, the feeling that someone is occupying the same space as you (Caroux 2023). Rendered first as a digital concept sketch, I quickly landed on the idea of projecting a shadow figure against a thin screen as if it was a membrane or spiritual wall that separated you from it. Through experimentation I learned that by controlling the way a shadow blurred I could indicate depth and atmosphere in order to create the appearance of a virtual otherworld. More than the familiar flatness of a shadow puppet, I hoped this would create an illusion that acted more like a window. A foggy space that stretched back away from the viewer and into the world in which the virtual figure resided. I read about the advantage of creating this type of virtual space from virtual reality researchers Leighton Evans and Michal Rzeszewski. They claimed that virtuality was a feature of a space that had, "the sustained relation of creating something new, the possibility of experiencing something unexpected (Evans & Rzeszewski, 2020)." I also read about how proxemics, our comfort with the physical closeness of others, replicate in virtual reality spaces at roughly 60% larger distance (Kim & Sung, 2024). Finally, I learned that presence in virtual reality is both separate from immersion (Evans & Rzeszewski, 2020; Korzel & Łupkowski, 2023), and that presence can be further split into subgroups that all constructively interact with one another: social presence, defined above; spatial presence, the feeling of being physically connected to a virtual space; and

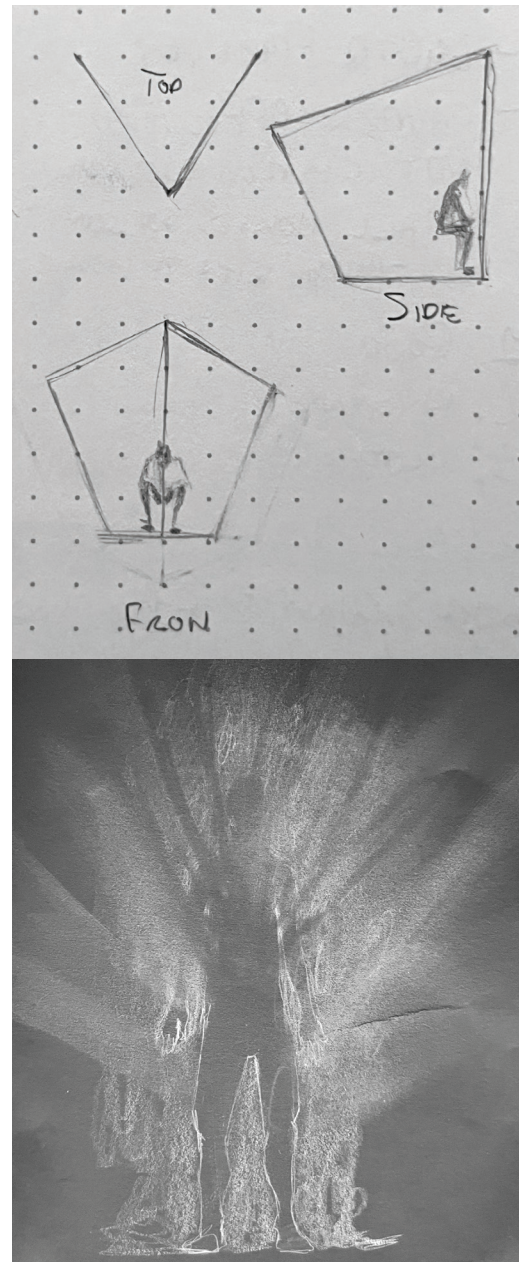


Figure 8. Note. Projected Presence planning sketches.



*Figure 8. Note. Projected Presence planning sketches.*

self presence, the feeling one's body extending into the virtual space (Caroux, 2023). Though these researcher's work focused primarily on virtual reality, I found their investigations inspiring. From their findings that the separate-but-related concepts of presence, immersion, and proxemics could be applied in some ways but not others I wondered if I could replicate the feeling of social presence in a projection-based mixed reality space as well.

To create my own virtual space I decided to replicate a 1-to-1 scale environment in both the physical world and a virtual world, with a projector in the physical world replicating a light source in the virtual one. I placed a figure, modeled to my proportions, in the virtual space and animated it to move around and explore. The shadow cast by the figure onto the virtual screens was then exported out and projected onto the physical environment so that when the figure moved in the virtual world we saw its shadow in the real one. I hoped that the experience of seeing the shadow of a figure move about a shared physical space would help establish feelings of presence and connect the viewer to the figure.

While making this work I revisited the work of Olafur Eliasson and saw that he too had created a piece that explored projected shadows. In his 2022 piece, *Tomorrow*, he projects the crisp shadows of people walking by windows onto a screen in a gallery space (Eliasson, 2022). Viewers don't know what exactly is producing the shadow effect or how to get to where the shadows are coming from until they progress through the gallery. They later find themselves in the room with the windows and powerful spotlights and realize that it's now their



shadows being cast to invisible viewers back on the other side of the room. Rather than casting the shadows of one physical place onto another, in this work I wanted to layer different realities. Instead of the cast-shadows representing primarily the displacement of people in space, I also wanted to explore the idea that the shadows represent the displacement of a person in time. Multiple realities intermingling through the window of the screen.

*Figure 10. Olafur Eliasson. (2022). Tomorrow. [3 spotlights, wall mounts, rear-projection screen, colour-filter glass]. Copyright Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi, Florence.*

While Eliasson's work in *Tomorrow* used an analog approach, as my work developed I was also influenced by artists working with digital art to create immersive installations. Joon Moon's *Chasing Stars in Shadow* in particular was a source of inspiration for the way its projections interacted with the space to create an added dimensionality or multi-layered reality (Moon, 2022). Moon's work is restrained, ethereal, and above-all plays with dimensionality in a way I find compelling. In this way Moon's work distinguishes itself from other emerging "immersive experiences" such as the myriad of Van Gogh experiences that have been on the rise over the last few years and often act as "a large-format art-historical projection show" (Wiener, 2022). I feel those immersive experiences often have an overwhelming focus on surface texture and immersion instead of presence, which was my critical interest. Moon's work is also narrative, interactive by necessity, and situates the viewer as a de facto participant in the artwork. Storytelling and interactivity would both become increasingly more important to parts of my work as

it developed but for Projected Presence I wanted to maintain a clear separation from the viewer and the virtual figure, with the viewer on the other side of a shared veil not a traveler embodied in another world. Even though Moon's shadow figures are connected to a single viewer-held light, they appear to be characters in and of themselves which is charming and creates a clear social connection. Because my interest was in feeling the presence of an invisible inner self however, I knew I didn't want to show my viewer the actual virtual figure, only the shadow it cast. Outside of projection artworks, in Maarten Baas' series Real Time, he used custom video displays to play with ideas of social presence and perceived depth by putting what appears to be a person behind a frosted glass painting hands on a clock (Baas, 2016). I am overly-acustomed to monitor and mobile device screens and I felt that the work was more effective because of the non-standard video format and circular form factor, something I hoped would benefit my screens as well.

My approach to animating my shadow figure was to record motion capture data of myself in a motion capture suit. I recorded a performance as though I was the one inside the virtual space, investigating it, attempting to connect to the imagined entities on the other side of the screen in the future real space. I then transferred that motion data onto a 3D character inside a virtual equivalent of the same room I recorded in. I placed a single light in the virtual space and filled it with fog which created a shadow that blurred the figure's silhouette relative to its distance from the wall. This worked in a similar way to real fog, where depth information is communicated primarily through clarity. A similar shadow effect can be seen in the ambient occlusion (the blocking of ambient light) that happens in a room with many lights or windows, as an object gets closer to a surface its shadow rapidly changes from a blurry blob into an increasingly more crisp appearance. The commonality of this effect in everyday life, the rapid gradation of blur to crisp, is the



Figure 11. Joon Moon. (2022). *Chasing Stars in Shadow*. [Projection mapped animation]. Copyright Joon Moon.



Figure 12. Maarten Baas. (2016). *Schiphol Clock*. [Sculpture and video]. Photo by Thijs Wolzak.

necessary information the viewer needs to understand the dimensionality of the object. An advantage of using both a cast shadow instead of the figure itself combined with the quick falloff in the shadow's clarity was that it preserved the depth information even when viewed at odd angles.

With the animation and atmosphere in place, I rendered the shadows that the 3D character cast against the virtual walls as a movie file. This movie file was composited with additional effects to alter the look and the tone of the piece. I projected that final composited movie file onto physical walls in the exhibition space, replicating the shadows in the virtual world. In doing so I brought together the past real space, a virtual 3D space, and a present real space. Three worlds merged into one and viewed through the window.

In the first version of this work, the figure was inscrutable and haunting, which I thought gestured toward the fear I bring to looking at past versions of myself or imagining future ones. In the exhibition of this version, many viewers noted that although they didn't feel the shadow's presence, they missed it when it left. One viewer said it, "brought back parts of my memory that I didn't know I had." However, the walls and prominence of the corner created a cage, and the areas where the paper overlapped looked like bars. The feelings of presence were undermined by the uncertainties in its intention, recognition, and blurring form. The work spoke more to a bad dream than a daydream.

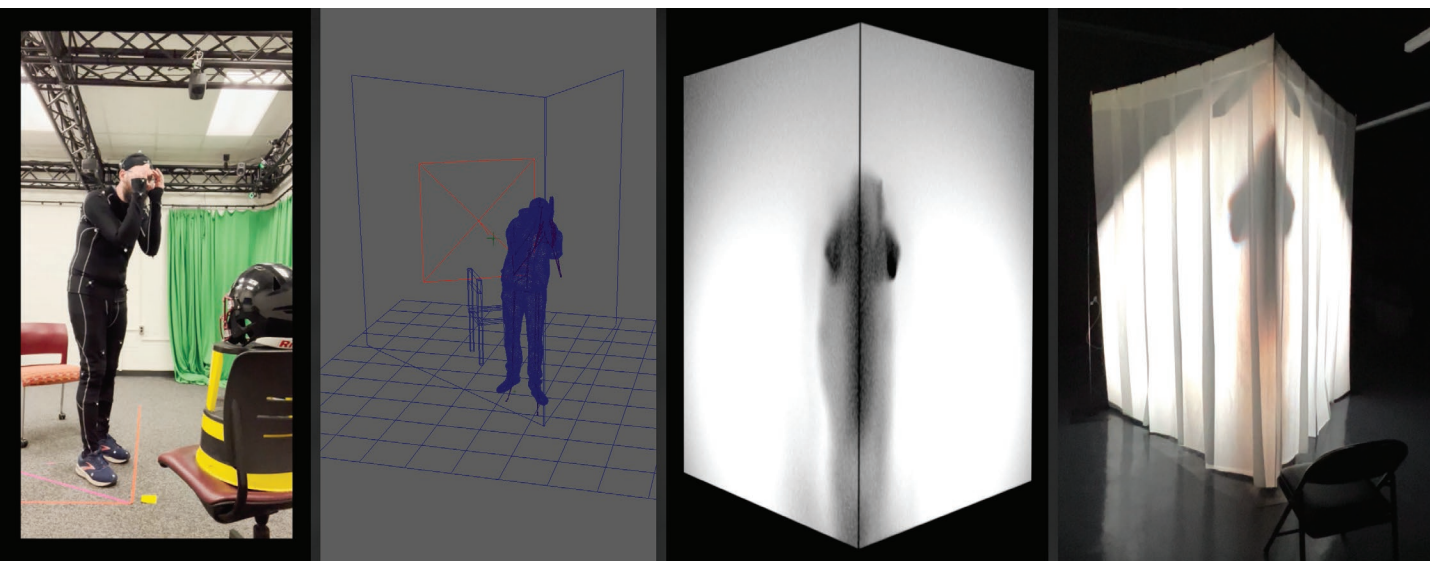
In my second attempt I wanted to move the work back toward a clearer space of daydreaming and playful curiosity and so my mind returned once again to dappled light and spaces of magic from my childhood. The memory of visiting with my Nanna at a pond and looking out at the light filtering through a weeping willow tree across the water, enamored by their beautiful and somber canopies, quickly became



*Figure 13. Note. Hand casting shadow over table.*



*Figure 14. Note. Hand casting shadow in Projected Presence.*



*Figure 15. Note. This figure depicts four steps used in the making of Projected Presence. From left, 1) Capturing a performance via a motion capture suit. 2) Converting motion capture data into a 3D animation. 3) Compositing renders of animation into a single video file. 3) Projecting the video file onto the sculpture.*

a fixation. As magical as the inside of a willow tree's umbrella canopy was, I spent more time sitting outside of them, looking at them and imagining what might be underneath, hidden by the leaves. It was important that the space under the tree was familiar but obscured. With that in mind, instead of bars of paper, I drew new concept artwork of the long hanging branches of a willow tree. Instead of a solid wall and strong corner, by moving the figure across a gap in the screens and having their shadow presence disappear I would call attention to their physical absence and gesture toward the virtuality of the space. In addition to the figure I also added another character of mystery and magic, a will-o'-the-wisp. Will-o'-the-wisps are entities that appear

in folklore and fantasy stories as ghostly orbs that float alongside water at night and lead travelers towards new paths (Meredith, 2002). Stories of will-o'-the-wisp appear across the world and vary in meaning from tragic, to benevolent, to mischievous or downright deadly (Meredith, 2002). In childhood I loved all things faerie and fae-folk, and I was fascinated by the wisp's haunting beauty and uncertain presence in the stories and media I consumed. Like the figure in Projected Presence itself, I like to think of my will-o-the-wisp as a figure that maintains its ambivalence, it has no agenda other than to invite change. It is a being of redirection and your experience with it entirely depends on what you bring to your encounter with it. In the animation the wisp leads the

figure into the virtual space, then disappears when the figure fully commits by leaping into this magical and shared world, and finally calls the figure back out toward a new journey after the figure realizes it can't cross over.

I felt the final work was strongest in its mysteries and paradoxes which offered me and the viewers allowances for reflecting on how we relate to objects and memories. It was at once monolithic and imposing as well as delicate and flimsy. The aesthetic played in ethereal dark fantasy while the material was conventional. The conventionality of the material ended up being an important and inescapable part of this artwork for me. Parchment paper is something from home life and seeing it used this way speaks to me of childhood crafts, just scaled up and benefited by my adult skill set. I built for myself this old space of daydreaming and sitting with it - I brought the memory of that place and the kid who sat there, some thirty odd years ago, forward to where I am now.

The role the figure played in the relationship to the viewer varied. Viewers reported seeing a ghostly veil holding back a spirit, saw a playful but lonely figure, or a malevolent spirit. How people related to those feelings and objects was also varied. Some found comfort in the hope for connection while others felt uneasy or afraid. While many adults noted that the work appeared spooky or haunted, among the children who saw the work, only one appeared afraid of the shadow and after some time all kids were curious and attempted to physically interact with the shadow or mimic its movements. In the final piece, nothing about the figure's movements were intended to be inherently or overtly aggressive or threatening. Justified or not, any fear is what we as an audience brought to the work. Many other viewers reported feeling pulled towards some form of longing or connection, some watching it for quite a long time or stepping up to it to investigate. Others continued coming back to it in short visits. I felt that the yearning for comfort and connection was an act of imagination shared among the viewers who made allowances for curiosity and time. In the process of making this I reflected on how imagination manifested as a tool for projection and identity construction.



Figure 16. Projected Presence.



*Figure 17. Note. Shadow of a young viewer standing in the projection of Projected Presence.*



*Figure 18. Note. Viewer standing in front of Projected Presence.*

For me, that is what I was most excited to sit with in the final work. This figure represented the complex and at times ambivalent struggle of greeting an inner self. It offered an opportunity to reflect and to ask where are these feelings coming from and what am I bringing to this virtual, but not entirely imaginary encounter? The shadow self is me, what I was afraid of becoming, and what I actually became. It is not just the detritus of myself, or cast aside residue of who I am, but a projection of my efforts to create something that would travel through time and give my past and future self hope, albeit an uneasy one. If this shadow self can find comfort in the quiet, find peace in the unease, stop running from his fears, and reach out to those who might connect with him, he will bridge these words and he will be okay.



Figure 19. A Table to Be Under.



## A Table to Be Under

Figure 19. A Table to Be Under.

Continuing to think about spaces of daydreaming, I thought about how much daydreaming in my childhood benefited from having a physical location. For me, these spaces were often repurposed areas that were typically used for other functions. They were little pocket dimensions within my larger world but were typically just for me. One physical place of daydreaming that stood out in my memories was under the dining room table.

In creating A Table to Be Under I collaborated with my inner child to reconstruct a physical space for reconnection to daydreaming as an adult. A Table to Be Under is an approximately 8' tall, 8' wide, and 5.5' deep sculpture of a dining room table. Underneath the table is an illustration cut into layer sheets black construction paper with gold paint showing through the cuts. The table is exhibited in a dark room and visitors are invited to explore and investigate the illustration with low-power flashlights. In making it, I recalled and reconnected to memories of being under my dining room table from my childhood and looking up at the underside of the table and daydreaming. I would imagine great councils of spirits, faeries in the forest, robots, space travel, and dynamic battles over interesting briefcases. The table is something of a symbol, it is almost entirely unusable as a standard table but it's a perfect sanctuary for imagination. Daydreaming under the table as a kid was an act of imaginative play without a goal or clear value. I wasn't attempting to grow, re-litigate a past argument, or practice for a future event. Daydreaming was free-flowing and unburdened by worries of originality or purpose. I did it just for the delight of its own sake. My memory is that the kid who was under the table was really good at that, and it felt good to return now as an adult.



*Figure 20. Note. In-progress construction of A Table to Be Under.*

Being under my dining room table as a kid was a space of simple sanctuary, but I needed something different as an adult. The things I loved about the dining room table then, a small enclosed and encompassing space, are things I now find unsettling, claustrophobic, or just physically uncomfortable as an adult. The odd spaces above, below, and between things in my home simply aren't a space for me anymore. So I recontextualized the table into a different space, one that fit me for what I needed today. I wanted something big enough to both stand and lay under, something that encompassed me but didn't enclose me. Even with the changes, as long as I'm imagining using the table the wrong way, being under it is still a great space for daydreaming.

I also wanted to create an illustration for the underside of the table that would spark the memory of not only being underneath a table but also the daydreaming that would happen there. For the illustration, I wanted to explore the use of obscuring the imagery to encourage curiosity and imagination, two things that are harder for me to do now as an adult. Obscuring the form of the shadow figure was a byproduct of the method I used to indicate depth and greatly benefited its sense of mystery. I found further inspiration in the work of surrealists like René Magritte. In his painting *Son of Man* he obscures the face of a man with an apple (Magritte, 1963). The denial of an easy answer for why the apple is blocking his face, and what's behind it, pulls me into an act of imagination: If I could just crane my neck, what else would I see? What does that man look like? Is there even anything there at all? What I found in this gesture of obscurity was once again an allowance to spend time being curious, even and especially while knowing that there was no real answer to be found. Because there is no real answer, no way to look behind the flatness of the painting, our curiosity can have no objectively correct, or optimized output. To wonder what secrets the painting holds, to be curious about its mysteries, is then an act of imaginative play that is generated in large part because of the simple obscurity. I wanted to spark a similar allowance for curiosity, a permission to engage in open imaginative play for my viewers in the illustration under the table.



Figure 21. René Magritte. (1963). *The Son of Man*. [Oil on Canvas]. Private Collection. Copyright Charly Herscovici, Brussels / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



*Figure 22. Note. Early foam, paper, string, and marker prototype of A Table to Be Under.*

Working to create a sense of wonder and a call to look up, I tried different forms of obscuring the illustration. I first started by building off the idea of once again using air movements, like in Paper Airplane Wall, to shift and move dozens of hanging paper tiles that obscured an illustration. I built a prototype from foam, PVC pipe, a marker drawing, and a grid of seven-by-nine hanging paper squares that you could move by moving your body or blowing. I liked that when standing under it you couldn't see the entire scene all at the same time and had to piece it together in your mind. Even still I felt that the illustration was ultimately a little too visible, a little too unspecific, and the interaction of the moving tiles was too unreliable and distracting. I once again returned the memories of specific daydreaming adventures I had as a kid. As a kid, a favorite daydream of mine was of being an adventurer, exploring mysteries in a dark forest or cave with a flashlight and backpack.

Ultimately, I decided to recreate my childhood love of mystery and adventure by obscuring the illustration with darkness. By using a flashlight to see the images, I created an invitation for myself and the viewer to physically engage in an act of exploration. The flashlights were low power and the beam was centralized to just inches in diameter with a cardboard tube roughly cut to resemble a cartoon torch or crown. Even though nothing was physically obstructing the work, because it was impossible to see it all at once, there was still plenty of room for curiosity and imagination. Using a flashlight was inspired in part by how Yoko Ono invited viewers of her work to become participants in the work.

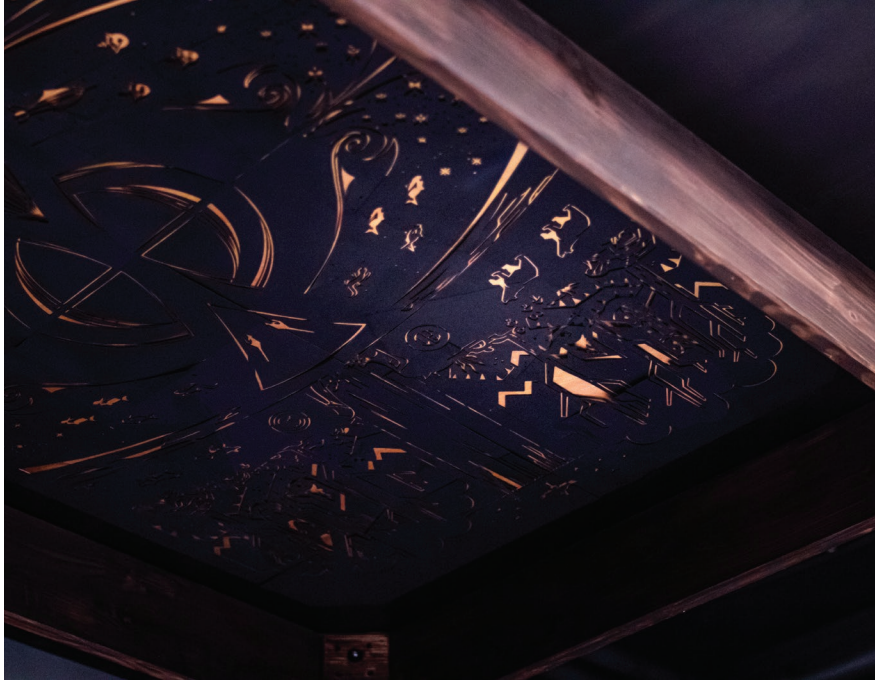


Figure 2. Note. Detail of laser-cut illustration on A Table to Be Under.

In Ono’s piece, *Ceiling Painting / Yes Painting*, she asked viewers to climb a ladder and investigate with a magnifying glass a hanging panel containing a single small instruction, “YES,” (Ono, 1966; Radjavi, 2019). Ono said that, “the smallness of the yes and the difficulty of reaching it” was “rewarded by some kind of hope” (Jones, 2014). “I wanted to invite my viewers to engage a similar, albeit smaller, act of discovery. Even if they didn’t directly, Ono’s lesson is that “to imagine is enough; even if you can’t physically do it” (Radjavi, 2019).

The illustration featured symbols from my ancient past and the process of dreaming up the mysteries and clues in the illustration became a collaborative project with the kid who originally occupied the space under the table. I brought the skills I’ve developed as an artist, and he brought the imagination. Through this work, I felt a reconnection to my inner child and a new appreciation for him. Previously, it had been awkward to imagine a conversation with my inner child. As a kid I didn’t much care about someone coming up to



Figure 24. Yoko Ono. (1966). *Ceiling Painting, Yes Painting*. [Text on paper, glass, metal frame, metal chain, magnifying glass, painted ladder.] Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, Bizkaia, Spain. Photo by Oded Löbl.

me and saying, "Hey champ, it's a beautiful day, how are you doing?" I did enjoy, however, being included and invited to collaborate and I found that approach worked for me here. In preparing for the illustration, I went back to my childhood fascinations, to those things I found delight in and pulled together many of the influences that were coming up in this collaborative work with my inner child. I landed on thick linework in large part because it lent itself so well to symbols and that feeling of ancient glyphs. I also grew up going to an episcopal church and gained a love of stained glass windows, which are an easy canvas for daydreaming for me with thick lines and large shapes. And I grew up with a love of sci-fi, folk stories, and high fantasy, especially when told through animation or games. I saw similarities across all these domains in their shape-language, architecture, and storytelling and I wanted to rebuild that in my illustration. The final illustration is rendered in thick lines that depict three environments: a forest, outer space, and a robot hub. The forest environment contains trees, rocks, a waterfall, and a variety of animals that were frequent fixtures of my childhood. The robot hub likewise features a variety of robots going about their work, some sit together, some carry nondescript supplies, some work to forge new things, all of them center around a central hub that resembles an engine or computer interface. Both the robot hub and the forest spill over into the outer space



*Figure 25. Note. Viewer using a flashlight to explore A Table to Be Under.*

that separates them, sending explorers out to discover what lies on the other side. This layering of worlds I thought echoed not only the gestures in Projected Presence but also the ease with which I moved between imaginary worlds as a kid.

Whether it's the stories I tell myself about my history, that I relive through memory, or that I imagine in the world around me, I am often operating from a place of storytelling. Stories are how I imagine and remember and storytelling is often how I connect with others. By adopting the role of storyteller I give myself an allowance to foster imagination and to curate what is remembered and the tone of its remembering. I liked the idea of further building obscurity through the



Figure 26. Stefan Scheepmaker. (2024). A group of people standing in a large building. [Photograph]. Unsplash License. Note. Sainte-Chapelle. Paris, France.



Figure 27. Neil R. Jones. (1936). Little Hercules. [Illustration]. From Brian Aldiss (Ed.). (1975). Science Fiction Art: The Fantasies of SF (p19). Bounty Books.

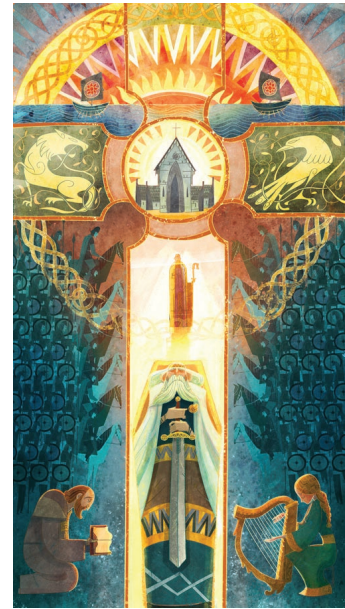


Figure 28. Vermillion. (2014). Brian's Funeral and Legacy. [Illustration]. Copyright Trinity College Dublin.

mystery and narrative the illustration's symbols gestured toward. To encourage imagination and daydreaming I didn't think it would be enough to just show the viewer a dream as I saw it. I wanted to create travel time between the questions the illustration raised and the answers that one might look for. Moreover I wanted to extend to the viewer room for their own interpretations. I really wanted to foster a feeling that if I, or the viewer, were to look at the illustration long enough that some grand truth would be revealed. That a portal would open up and invite you into another realm, just like I had wished for, and frankly expected, as a kid.

What I found in collaborating with my inner child on this illustration was that I could surface him, I could bring him forward to where I am now. Working with him is not being a child again, it's letting him benefit me as an adult. In reconnecting with him I was reconnecting with that act of daydreaming. The free flow of imagination offered me a moment to appreciate and recognize the value of my young self, and a moment of unification of my inner worlds. Him delighting in his interests was me delighting in mine.

In the exhibition of the work every viewer recognized the sculpture as a table and by virtue of its height quickly spent time looking up. Early viewers took some time before realizing they could explore the underside of the table

with the flashlight but it quickly became an activity people invited others into and joined in on. Viewers were then delighted and gleeful in exploring the work. More than anywhere else in the exhibition space, standing under the table was where people seemed to congregate the most. People discussed what they saw in the illustration and what stories they imagined the symbols were telling. To my own delight and surprise some commented on the construction of the table as well, noting how it echoed a piece of furniture from their youth. People leaned against the table legs casually or ran their hands over the wood. This was a stark contrast to Projected Presence in which the material was commonly overlooked until pointed out. For me, despite intending to stand under it I ended up laying down and looking up, and although I felt like I knew too many of its mysteries it eventually pulled me through to my memories and I was a big kid looking up at a table and daydreaming.

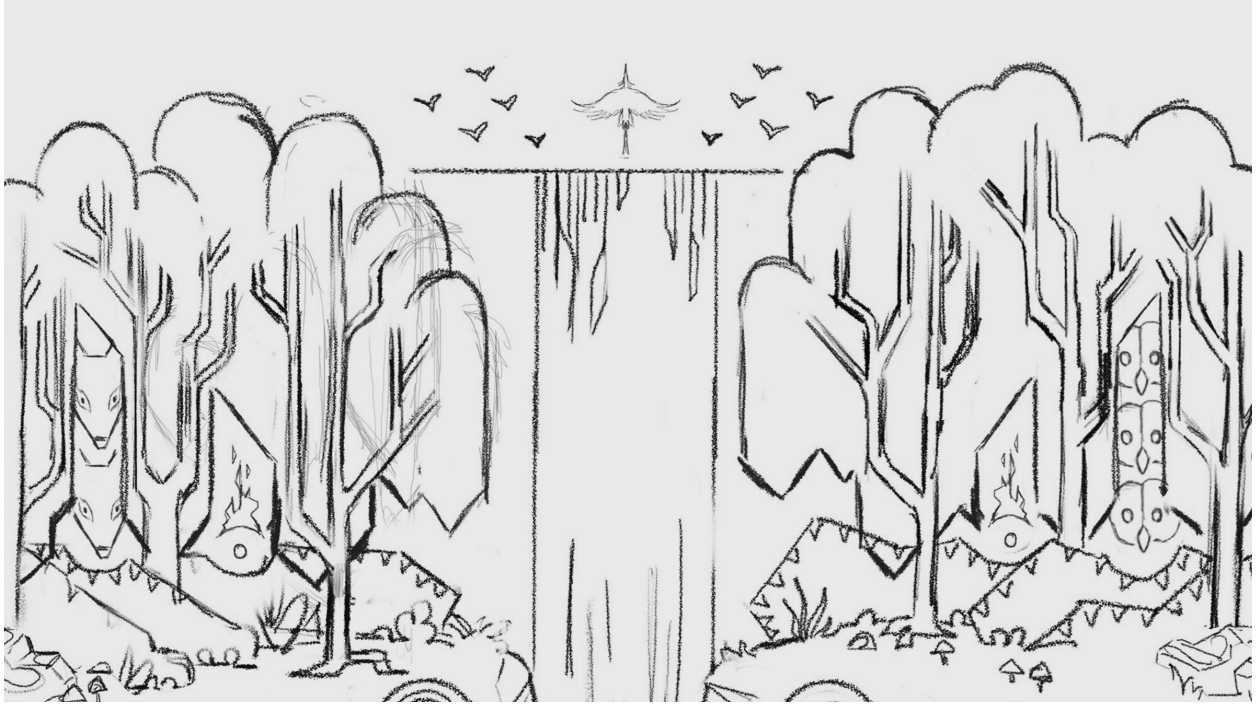


Figure 29. Note. Cropped drawing of the illustration used in A Table to Be Under.



Figure 30. Note. Cut paper illustration installed under the table, illuminated by flashlight.

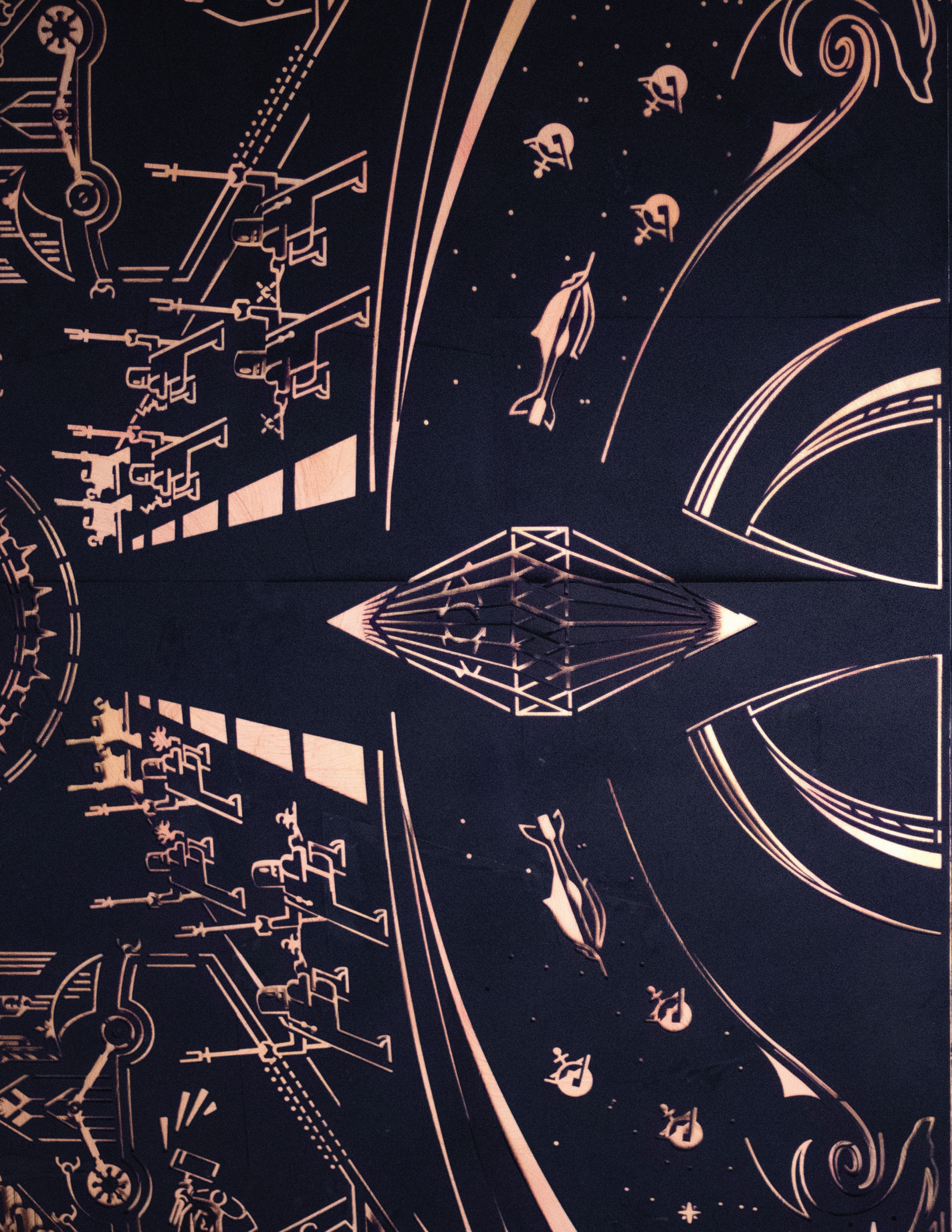




Figure 31. Note. Cropped final laser-cut illustration in A Table to Be Under, approximately 70 x 40".

## Visiting Narrators

Alongside my thesis sculptures I began interviewing people to create Visiting Narrators, a 15-minute audio composition that collages six different voices together along with clips from my home life. These were people from my cohort, my old workplace, and even a former student. All of them had indicated in the past a unique outlook, experience, or relationship to daydreaming and to space. In the interviews, each person shared memories of spaces they went to daydream, why they went, and what they got out of visiting those spaces. Together, the mixed voices co-construct many of the experiences I resonate with when thinking about and discussing space for daydreams, even if I didn't experience their specific locales.

In addition to the audio composition I created a visualization of their voices to bring the will-o'-the-wisp entity I used in Projected Presence to life. To make it I used the peaks and valleys in the recorded voices as literal peaks and valleys on a 3D, glowing sphere. I liked that it gave the wisp a human touch and a spirit that is hard to achieve through digital animation alone.

One thing that I was struck by in talking to the people in the interviews was that although there was very little physical overlap in their remembered spaces, there were some common characteristics I was able to identify that resonated with my own history. Among those findings, common characteristics were: First, spaces were unoccupied and secluded, even if they were located in a common area they were used uniquely by the daydreamer. Second, all spaces included a feeling of transformation, using a space for something other than what it was intended to be used for. Finally, although less explicitly shared, I was once again reminded of Evans' and Rzeszewski's concept of virtuality, the feeling that anything can happen (Evans & Rzeszewski, 2020). I learned from these interviews that there are no inherent spaces for daydreaming, even in childhood they must be repurposed, constructed, or claimed. My act of reconstructing spaces for daydreaming was actually an echo of the need to build these spaces in childhood.

Interviewee 1: I don't really remember.

Interviewee 2: Hmm.

Interviewee 3: To be honest I don't remember.

Interviewee 1: Certainly not with any like, you know, detail. I don't know.

Interviewee 4: If I think about it ...

Interviewee 5: I mean ...

Interviewee 6: In so much as I can remember ...

Interviewee 4: There are flashbulb memories that, that I always have ready access to.

Interviewee 6: Just like little things of, like ... idle wonder ... daydreaming for a kid is just being a kid.

Parent's voice: Can you roar?

Child's voice: Roar! Roar! ... Dad come at my farm market dad? He at farm market daddy?

*Figure 32. Note.* Partial transcript and screenshot from an audio-visualization of a will-o-the-wisp animated by the audio from Visiting Narrators.



My art is inextricably linked with the conversations between myself and those in my community. Conversation helps me understand where I am and where I want to be. By hearing the way the conversation shifts and how different people approach it and the different thoughts they offer on it I am able to triangulate where I am. Through conversation I understand what I'm making and what I want to make. I am after all, at least in part, a curated collage of the voices in my community and through that curation I co-construct the meanings and values of the things I create. In interviewing and editing I am engaging in a more conscious version of that process. This audio composition acts as an invitation and guide to reflect on the memories we have of the spaces we go to daydream and the voices in our worlds. As a kid daydreaming in a pocket dimension, there were often voices around and overhead. Under a table or behind a couch, when the adults had finished their meals and chatted amongst themselves, I would swim in a substrate of selective attention and the audio of their voices was a background to that world. Just as these people's voices are the audio in my world now, the sounds of them reminiscing filled the exhibition room.



*Figure 33. My Son Touches Sunlight.*

The final audio composition was played on a single stereo speaker in the exhibition room, between the other two thesis works. The volume was intended to be just loud enough in the echoey room to fill the space with murmurs but not enough to be a droning voice that drowned out inner monologues. Responses to the final composition varied most in how people experienced it. For some that heard the audio in the thesis exhibition the voices were just a part of the discussion amongst other voices that filled the room. Several others stood next to the speaker for quite some time and later shared that the voices offered a compelling and salient inroad to understanding the other works. A small few reported that it was distracting and left too little room for their own memories or that they wished they could have listened in solitude instead, like the voices talked about. When playing the work set to the will-o'-the-wisp visualization, many enjoyed seeing the life of the wisp flicker as the voices talked while some instinctively closed their eyes to focus. As much as I wanted to have the audio play in the room with the sculptures, it seemed that no one benefited from listening to it among others and I was reminded how much viewer agency matters in such a situation.



Figure 34. Note. Screenshot of the editing processes of *Visiting Narrators*.

## Conclusion

In my thesis work I have reconstructed and recontextualized spaces of daydreaming from my childhood into sculptures that I can sit with as an adult. I created these works as a way to reconnect with the kid who occupied those spaces and the imaginative play that he engaged in. These spaces of daydreaming are ones of myth, magic, and mystery and to be daydreaming here is to be imagining without being burdened by judgment, time, purpose, or evaluation.

The efforts to reconnect with my inner child were acts of surfacing, bringing forward, and collaboration. In completing these works I have created a more robust sense of self and gained a heightened awareness of the relationships that I have with the spaces I currently occupy today and the spaces that I would benefit from constructing in the future.

Among the viewers of my thesis works, I was thrilled with how much time people gave the works and how much the work seemed to spark their curiosity. Many shared their own memories of spaces they went to daydream in their childhood. Some viewers shared deep gratitude for inviting the reconnection with those memories and the reflection it offered.



## Future Direction

I believe that an active imagination is a critical part of what it means to live a fulfilling life and both daydreaming and connecting to our inner selves can be important components in putting our imagination to use. I will be incorporating these concepts into my continued artmaking and therapy efforts.

I hope to investigate and create new spaces of daydreaming and new ways to explore what else can be done with projection. Both have opportunities that may uniquely benefit from the work and format that I have setup here. I am particularly interested in how I can continue to use projection to push the sense of otherworldly social-presence through collaborative interactivity with the shadow figure and broader real-world/virtual-world crossover.

I also hope to create new collaborative works with my inner selves and continue to learn more formally about psychological development and therapeutic practices. Along with that I hope to collaborate with scientists and scholars on both new works to explore and new opportunities to educate on these topics.

# Acknowledgments

I'd like to end this presentation on my work with some deep thanks and gratitude:

First, thank you to my family. I can't fully express how grateful I am for you and how much support I have felt from you throughout this entire journey. Julia, you have provided me with so much love and space to create, to play, and of course, to talk. You are brilliant and caring and have been a compassionate partner throughout this entire process. Thank you for all your many insights during car rides and kitchen conversations. You have provided me with so much insight and love and without you this work would not have been possible.

Thank you as well to my grad cohort, classmates, and instructors who have helped me more times than I can count. I have learned so much from you all and have grown as an artist and thinker through our many conversations and endeavors. You continue to inspire me and I am so grateful to you all for inviting me into your worlds and for creating an incredible community of which I am proud to be a part.

I would also like to thank my committee chair, Zach Duer, and my committee members, Annie Ronan, Meaghan Dee, and Sam Blanchard for your guidance and support. Your wisdom and challenges made both my work and my reflections more resonant and meaningful.

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