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Foster, Harrison

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Light / Interactivity / Design / Community

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Theatre and Dance (Design)

by

Harrison Foster

Committee in Charge:

Professor Christopher Kuhl, Chair

Professor Robert Brill

Professor Victoria Petrovich

Professor Michael Trigilio

2022

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University of California San Diego

2022

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DEDICATION

For my friends and family. It's been a very long journey and since beginning, I've become a better artist and person. Couldn't have done it without all of you.

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Thank you endlessly

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Light / Interactivity / Design / Community

By

Harrison Foster

Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Design)

University of California San Diego, 2022

Professor Christopher Kuhl, Chair

A continually evolving practice, change and self evaluation have been the consistent factors. The following thesis is an exploration of my practice as an artist from the last few years. My definition of what this means has gone through revision after revision, until the act of revision has become the process.

Covid-19 disrupted and changed the course of my graduate study. Being an artist among a community of artists, everyone had to ask themselves how to reimagine their chosen artistic medium and apply it to the pandemic landscape. I came to UCSD to learn and expand lighting design as my primary medium. Advancing through my graduate studies many things changed, not only due to the pandemic but also in how I moved through the world. My practice evolved from making art to making art with intent. The why became the most important question, along with an expansion of tools in the realm of digital media to ask those questions.

One of my first forays into a new medium is a project called *OVERVIEW*. Having pivoted to online learning in Spring of 2020, there were two classes (Kinetic Art and Installations) that gave me an opportunity to explore ideas. Both courses allowed me to examine space and the act of looking. It was here that *OVERVIEW* took form. I wanted to find new ways of seeing our surroundings since everyone was frozen inside and on screens. What came to mind was the furthest physical place from the physical state that we were in; the cosmos.

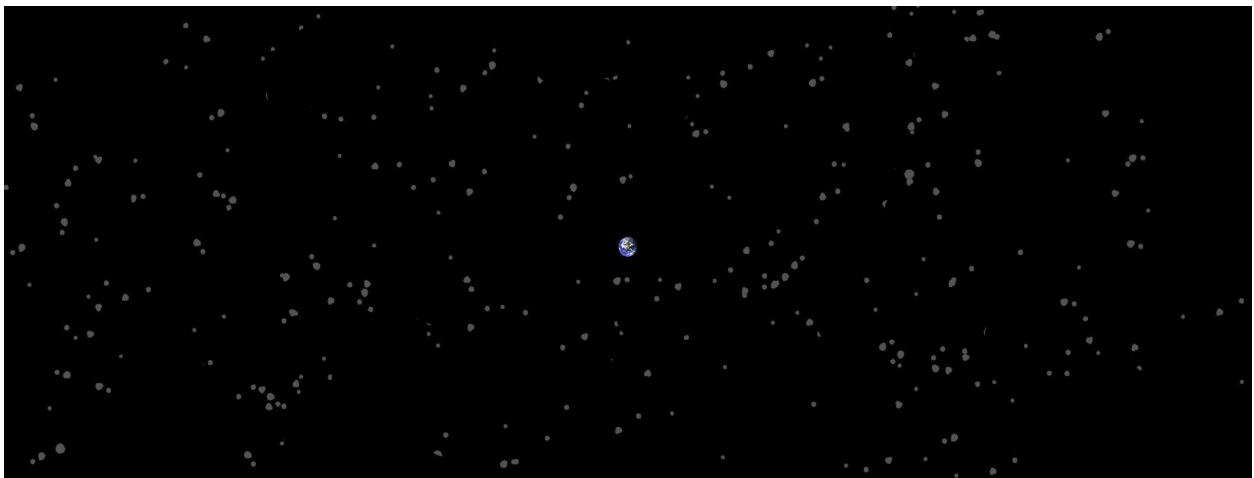


Figure 1: *OVERVIEW* Concept Photo 1

There is an experience that astronauts and cosmonauts have collectively shared about their time in orbit that has come to be referred to as the Overview Effect. Essentially, an astronaut in orbit around

the Earth develops a strong emotional bond to our planet simply by looking down at it. Many say they started to think in terms of Us - as in one species together. Without national borders, without territorial disputes, or walls. They saw us as one people and the Earth as all that we have.

What if it was possible to bring this experience to everyone on Earth? In essence, the project is a virtual reality experience. The viewer is given a VR headset and breathing apparatus and then submerged in water. From here, they experience weightlessness and a sense of floating in a space, while seeing images of stars around them. Slowly, our planet becomes more and more visible and prominent until it is one of the most visible things in the viewer's field of vision. Hoping to replicate the Overview Effect, the viewer would leave with that same sense of love and unity for the Earth as described by the individuals who have been outside our atmosphere.

In terms of embodied work, projects like OVERVIEW heavily influenced many projects moving forward. It highlighted the key aspect of collaboration and community engagement. After further developing the concept for OVERVIEW, the need to work with others to create came to a forefront. This came in many forms, such as dance, theatre, and installation work.



Figure 2: *What Does a Landscape Say?* Photo 1



Figure 3: *What Does a Landscape Say?* Photo 2



Figure 4: *What Does a Landscape Say?* Photo 3

I've been working with Melissa Cisneros and Elizabeth Barrett to develop a piece of design and choreography premised on the Tijuana Estuary which straddles the border between San Diego and Tijuana. The piece is titled "What Does a Landscape Say?" and explores space and the direct

relationship between estuary's history and constant surveillance by the United States border patrol and others. We are looking into what is watched and what is actively ignored. With helicopters, four wheelers, and foot soldiers, the border patrol is constantly looking at the estuary for people crossing illegally. While this is happening the estuary itself is heavily polluted to the point that the original inhabitants (plants and animals) suffer. History of the state park is seeped in change and abuse. Having originated as native Kumeyaay land, it was sliced in half when the border between Mexico and the United States was set. This divide became a defining factor in the United States today. Our project focused on connecting with the location and observing the border, border patrol, and plants and animals throughout every season. We documented our trips extensively and plan to put this into it's final form through a gallery to ask the question; What Does a Landscape Say?

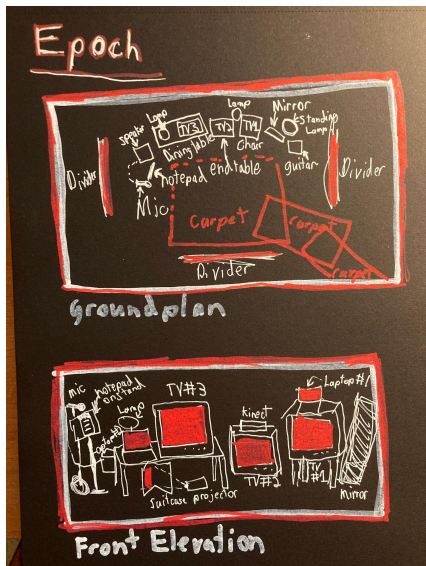


Figure 5: Epoch Concept Photo 1



Figure 6: Epoch Concept Photo 2

Another piece I've made was an installation titled Epoch. Myself and co-creator Stewart Blackwood built an environment composed of TVs and webcams arranged in a semi circle and an environment around in the form of a room. With the feelings of a room someone wandered into it

brought feelings of wistfulness and joy at first for the viewer. They would work with their own image being captured, distorted, and displayed back to them through retro TVs. Many started to feel an eerie sense of surveillance and discovery the longer they were in the room. In their act of viewing, a separating relationship grew as the TVs began to take on a persona. Each image was being taken from the viewer and they saw a version of themselves causing a moment in which they were both performer and observer. . My style had grown into a practice of sustained watching which had translated directly into Epoch. This method of viewing and defining a relationship to space had laid groundwork for an evolution in my theatre work as well.



Figure 7: *Sotoba Komachi* Production Photo 1

In the show *Sotoba Komachi* (Mishima, 1956), the scenic designer Nicholas Ponting envisioned a tree created from debris used cigarettes and old makeup materials to exemplify aging beauty and a circle of time and life. I explored giving the tree kinetic motion by lighting each individual branch and the trunk from within. This breathe of life made the tree a character of light embodied. It

would expand and contract, age and grow, develop and forsake with the characters on stage. Through collaboration with the sound designer, the tree could react to the breath of the actors, or a drum beat of a song.

My contribution to this project was creating something that could live and change. It was my way of using the medium of theater to speak to an audience through light to tell a story. Most notable was the invitation to observe the tree. A viewer could look and respond to the tree as it undulated and froze at specific moments. In this way, light is given a direct voice to the audience.

Everything mentioned has revolved around space and observation. In my practice this has been a product of evolution but the act of self assessment has been constant. Asking the question of what matters to me is part of a larger plan to sustain my passion for the arts. What had relevance and importance to me five years ago is different than now and will continue to develop and grow in the next five.

Questions to ask about art/my practice as often as possible:

- 1.) What does the word community mean right now
- 2.) How am I involved in the community and the community with me
- 3.) Have I learned from my recent experiences if different ways
- 4.) Are there any parts of my practice that are destructive to myself or anyone else
- 5.) Is the work fulfilling artistically

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Mishima, Yukio. *Sotoba Komachi*. 1956