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A New Life for an Accidental Girl; A New Future for a Dying  
World

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

in

Visual Arts

by

Grace Mae Huddleston

Committee in charge:

Professor Ricardo Dominguez, Chair  
Professor Amy Adler, Co-Chair  
Professor Anya Gallaccio  
Professor Anna Joy Springer

2019



The Thesis of Grace Mae Huddleston is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Co-Chair

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Chair

University of California San Diego

2019

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

About one year ago I was putting vegetable scraps in the compost bin at school. As I stirred the new scraps in with the old soil and worms a small brown mouse wriggled to the surface of the dirt and scampered out of the bin. That little guy definitely startled me and the shock of seeing him even made me sweat a little. I will never know his story or see him again but that funny little experience stays with me. He took me out of my daily rhythm and made me think about the compost pile in a new way - as something truly alive.

I am borrowing from Donna Haraway by talking about compost in my acknowledgments - I do so because I want to start by thanking the countless living things that move through my life and inspire my work. These may be human or otherwise but either way - I am lucky to have so many beings to thank, more than I can even begin list right here.

There are many great folks who have been supporting my work and teaching me for years. Without them this paper and the work it discusses would not be possible. My generous committee has spent hours of their time putting up with my scatterbrained ways to help empower my art practice and guide my research. Thank you! It has been an honor to learn from you all.

My time at UC San Diego has also been enriched by my wonderfully challenging and supportive peers from many disciplines. Not only are they my fellow artists and colleagues - they are also my friends. Thank you all for your tough questions, kind words, and many laughs.

Though these three years as a graduate student have simultaneously felt like an instant and an eternity - there is most certainly the time before I decided to pursue this degree. Many professors, mentors, collaborators, and dear-old friends deserve acknowledgement for the energy and love they put into supporting me as an artist, human, and friend. Thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

I am one of the few lucky people to be blessed with a small collection of loving family members that have never said one judgmental thing about my decision to become an artist. To all

my parents, family, both biological and found, and amazing partner - you supported me without a doubt and I deeply thank you for everything.

There are parts of the exhibition that would have been possible without some generous folks' time, dedication, care, and creative spirit. The show literally could not have been finished without you all. You know who you are! I acknowledge and appreciate everything you've done.

To you dear reader, dear viewer of my art, and reader of my creative writing - thank you for taking the time to get to know my Dirty World. I hope my work inspires you to notice the life around you in a deeper. Please take a moment to thank a charismatic life form before you end your day.



## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

A New Life for An Accidental Girl;

A New Future for A Dying World

by

Grace Mae Huddleston

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California, San Diego, 2019

Professor Ricardo Dominguez, Chair  
Professor Amy Adler, Co-Chair

This thesis paper explains the work in the exhibition titled *Accidental Girl Dirty World* as well as the research and process behind it. The exhibition is an immersive installation of drawings, sound, and writing that work together to tell the story of a fictional teen girl's experiences in an underworld of life that has mutated to deal with human waste. This paper discusses in detail the art practice of its author, Grace Mae Huddleston, specifically focusing on her large scale drawings, fledgling creative writing practice, and installation concepts. This paper dives into topics including science fiction, fantasy, and word-picture codes and elaborates on how

key artists and scholars in those fields influence the artworks in *Accidental Girl Dirty World*. In the conclusion Huddleston explores potential paths for future development of her protagonist character and the imagined world she inhabits.

## INTRODUCTION

“Gaia is intruding, threatening the ways of life as usual”

Donna Haraway, 2019<sup>1</sup>

I have a little something to say about dead whales. . .

A great and ancient whale dies and slowly falls to the floor of the ocean. This resting place is one of extreme temperatures. Here the whale’s partially decomposed body hosts waves of organisms; some of which are only known to live in these conditions. A large whale’s body can sustain a unique ecosystem of scavengers and bacteria for up to 75 years. Curious crabs, monstrous eely fish, and so many bacteria that a “fur” is formed on the skeleton are among the alien-esque creatures that live, feast, reproduce, and die. They give the dead whale new life. The whale dies, it falls, and the different stages of its decomposition are the foundation for a myriad of ecosystems. The whale decomposes in stages and its body becomes fragmented to give life to others.

Fragmentation as a means of creation is present all throughout my work. This process exists in the so-called natural world as well, in the form of decomposition. The profound and tragic beauty of a whale fall is a massive decomposition narrative that has come to be a great source of inspiration for my conception of the state of the Earth. Literally in terms of the planet we live on, and metaphorically in terms of the way I create my underworld.

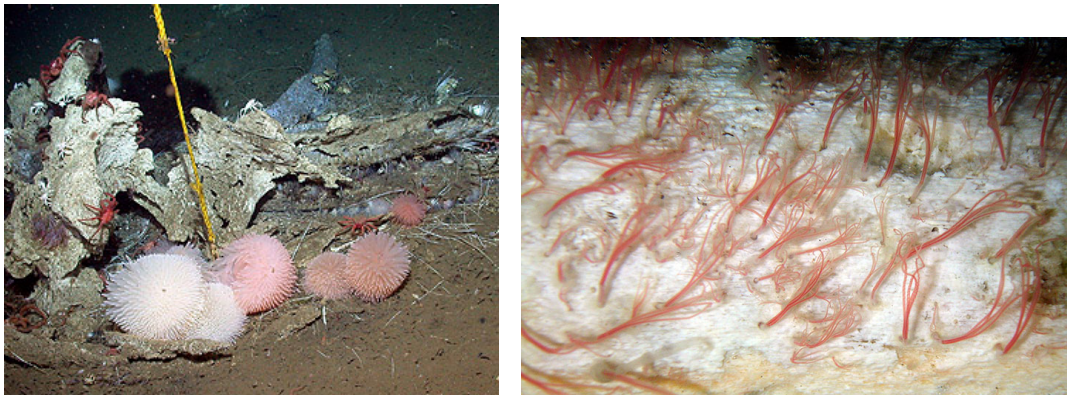


Figure 1. Photographic examples of the whale fall ecosystem <sup>2, 3</sup>

Our planet is dying. Or rather it's approaching the ending of its life as it once was. Soon we humans may kill ourselves. Already human activity such as industrialization, deforestation, mass production, and an out-of-whack waste management systems have resulted in the permanent loss of countless species. That is not news though, and these facts leave many people easily overwhelmed, defeated, and hopeless. My project is multilayered, but an alternative kind of hope for the future is its unifying force. This hope emphasizes the small and secretive beings that lurk in the cracks, it shows potential for life after human death. Life will go on.

My project looks through a sci-fi lens and shows what that future-life will look like. A hidden subterranean pocket of pollution-driven evolution forms the stage for my fledgling narrative. This place is home to mutated creatures that have adapted to thrive in an otherwise toxic environment. These creatures represent hope.

In my created world human life is unwittingly on the brink of death. This feels dark and hopeless but small critters, forgotten or never known, are emerging from the dying bits of the era of the human. These creatures are flourishing and evolving inside the poisoned husk of earth's body. This body is fertile soil for these new beings. The "sky" of this interstitial world is more of a roof. One made of Earth's crust. One rendered too porous and fragile by our toxic ways. The roof

of the underworld is becoming saturated with destruction and waste. These drip down and fertilize the newly evolved life flourishing in the interstitial space. This place is a hole in Earth's body, a weak spot ready to cave in (or explode out) at any time. My underworld represents a hidden womb of transition, a place where recognizable plants and animals are manifested in unrecognizable ways. This world is of the epoch of the whale fall.

### Who's to Blame for the Saturation of Destruction?

In the beginning of my story there was a Dirty World populated by humans and their mounds of waste, waves of destruction, and cycles of subjugation. That is how the human species looks when generalized. When we zoom in to view this group's individuals; subtleties emerge, colors come out of the black and white, and humans can be seen as something more than mere willing destroyers. These subtleties don't erase the garbage though. This is not to charge every individual with equal levels of guilt for the permanent negative transformation of this planet we all call home. It's a sticky situation . . . Many names have been invented to describe this point of no return. These terms are all meant to, in some way, acknowledge that humans have left a permanent mark on the Earth. Some call this era the Anthropocene, which is the most widely accepted term. Others, like Jason Moore with his "Capitalocene" and Donna Haraway with her "Chthlucene" have taken up new words to get at the specifics of this epoch.<sup>4, 5</sup>

Haraway urges us, In *Making Kin*, to form connections with our non-human earth-mates - to unite and adjust our way, and perception, of life in order to save our planet.<sup>6</sup> This is not a means to go back to a cleaner time though. She calls this process "making kin" and argues that making space for unexpected connections is a means of progressing towards a more considerate way of life. The term "Anthropocene" often is used to suggest that all life on earth will eventually end; while "Chthlucene" imagines a world ripe with life in symbiotic equilibrium. My work shows a place that is in between these. My created world is at once a place of tragedy and hope. Through the fantastical I can engage with a real hope for the future. It's very anthropocentric of

me to create a teen girl character and use her perspective to reveal the layers of my woven world. Yet this girl has kinship experiences with unexpected living beings and her perspective allows the symbiotic ecosystems of the world to shine brightly. In this way I dance between scenes anthro and chthulu and explore another alternative.

In order to feel hope, even in our world where so few people are ready, or able, to change their ways, we have to reevaluate what holds positive potential. For me, this means redefining what kinds of life would need to go on in order for me to feel hope for the future. The pocket of pollution is also a pocket of potential. In my imagined world, humans will die off quite soon. This is antithetical to both traditional ideas of hope and to canonized tales of apocalypse. Many apocalyptic narratives, think *Mad Max*, focus on the elimination of all life except humans. Humans are left to fend for themselves in a barren landscape.<sup>7</sup> More recent apocalyptic tales, like Margaret Atwood's *Maddaddam* trilogy, have added subtlety to the genre by considering the perspective of some non-human animals.<sup>8</sup> Still though, the focus is placed on humans navigating a decimated world. In apocalyptic tales both canonical and modern there typically are only small details that suggest that the world will be reborn. A single seed sprouts in *Wall-E* and a triumphant end of greenery and human life is foreshadowed.<sup>9</sup> My story is of a different sort. I have a strong hope for future life, but the same can't be said for my perception of the future of humans. This is not to say that my opinion of my fellow humans is that we are a literal trash creature all worth a violent and complete end. This is to say however, that I am not convinced that a totality of non-human and human life can both survive our epoch of destruction. The potential pocket of pollution in my narrative is primarily inhabited by small creatures, which I call charismatic microfauna, that have mutated to thrive in our concentrated waste. Their appearance and characteristics are bright, curious, and deceptive. Humanity does hold some hope in my narrative too; in the form of my teenage girl character who I call "Accidental Girl".

Much like *Alice in Wonderland* Accidental Girl enters the underground world via a hole in the ground. She literally slips into an underworld and in this way my work engages with the theme of death in ways that expand beyond the factual limitations of climate change. The existence of

Accidental Girl in the underworld implies the potential for humanity in the transformed future world, but this potential can only be activated if symbiosis, in the form of radically altered human-to-natural world power structures, is reached. I'm careful not to say Accidental Girl is specifically "living" in the underworld though. After all, she is only represented in shadows and a series of poetic diary entries. I want to skate along the divide between a total human extinction and a happy story of salvation and new life for all animals, human or otherwise. Accidental Girl suggests successful symbiosis and the potential for survival in death but her story is a confusing and muddled one. Part coming of age tale and part afterlife myth. Through Accidental Girl's eyes we see the world unfold.

For the past two years I have been working primarily in drawing, with some textiles woven in, to represent this world. I mostly use a large format and exclusively draw on paper. The materials I have been using are all along the spectrum of high to low brow but a hallucinogenic color palette, use of a layered and unsteady composition, and blend of delicate and aggressive unifies the works. In the drawings hung on the wall in my thesis show there is no mention of a teen girl and in fact any images of the human form are distorted or camouflaged. The colors, materials, textures, and visual style of the works strongly evoke a sense of young (or naive) and femme though. That being said, the idea of an explicit and singular girl character is obvious in these drawings. There is a certain push and pull in that that I do like and the elusive compositions of my works show that I am not afraid of mystery. As the world developed in my mind though, characters made themselves known and began to interact. With sci-fi, fantasy, and comics as long-time influencers; engaging with storytelling in a direct way is a logical yet scary step. Giving my teen girl a voice, in the form of written wall pieces and a diaristic chapbook, has opened up new areas of the world for exploration.



Figure 2. Left to Right: *First Poem*, 2019 and *Whale Song Death Bed*, 2019

### I Haven't Seen You Around Here Before. . .

The story of *Accidental Girl*, and my commitment to narrative in general, is all fairly new. I'm excited by the ways my created world has taken on a life of its own. It demands to be told across different media and writing is one of them. This isn't what I originally planned; the misbehavior of a project is both frustrating and generative. When this project was first taking shape I thought narrative would confuse, over-simplify, and hinder the effect of my drawings. Somehow or other though, storytelling is pulling me in. I am a newcomer to this land and have been recently learning one of its regional dialects - creative writing. Learning a new language is tough. Creative writing has also complicated my process, causing me to redefine my work. Learning this new way of creating has also begun to carve future paths for my work. The iteration of my drawing, writing, and world building project shown in the thesis exhibition charts where the



work is right now, it's a snap shot. In it, words and drawings fit together to form a code that viewers can use to begin to explore my created world and its narrative.

I hope reading the following paper will tell you a bit about where my work is coming from to illuminate where it is going. It is made up of several sections that zoom in and out of my project, examining how it was made and what influenced me. I'll talk about drawing, material, worldbuilding, and storytelling. Key players, both historical and contemporary, will come in and out as they offer insight.

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It's SLIME Time!



Figure 3. *Slug Sex*, excerpt from sketch book, 2019

## The Monster that Came from a Snail's Foot: Slime as Matrix and Metaphor

In the world of my drawings; slime functions as primordial soup, as post-mordial matrix, as amniotic fluid, and more literally as secretions from they charismatic microfauna that populate my world.. Slime also includes the compressed and liquefied human-made waste that saturates Earth's crust. Slime surrounds everything in my world as a symbol and matrix for transformation. It's not good or bad, slime is amoral, its means are bodily and its ends are both formative and destructive.

Slime is a character in my world - or maybe character isn't the exact right word - but it's an allegorical tool and formal device. It represents things mixing together and things transforming one another. It's a definitive element of The Dirty World.

Compositionally speaking, the drawings are made of components that slip and slide together so that there is a transitional, rather than traditional, horizon line that disorients the viewer within the representational space. This slippery, slimey disorientation comes from, and is inspired by, the oversaturation of Earth's crust with pollution. In the version of our world that my drawings represent; garbage is compressed and partially liquefied under its own weight, plastic is broken into exponentially smaller pieces, and this mixture seeps down through Earth's crust. It flows into the, heretofore unknown, space between the layers that make up our planet. The properties of this space are part human - part intra-mordial soup. This space is akin to the lakes of water that can form within the ocean. The water in these deep ocean lakes is five times as salty as the water around them. Like attracts like, and a mystery of science is formed to lurk in the depths of the ocean. In my created world; slime attracts slime and a subterranean pocket of acid colored garbage is formed, and becomes a home for the charismatic microfauna that mutated in this, our waste's microbiome.

The Dirty World expands along with our increasing waste production, sliming further into the cracks of the Earth. Until recently no humans have seen this interstitial place. It lurked just beneath the surface until a crack became a hole through which Accidental Girl slipped.

*"It was in that place that I found a hole with a wack-o iridescent ooze bubbling out from around its edges. It changed colors slowly as it bubbled. A sherbert key lime strawberry lemonade then a hot violet day glo flame red red red so red it tricks me to see pink then a grass a dried grass a wet grass and a newly grown baby grass and then secret sky mercury and then pacific on a hot day and then ink ink ink dark. The colors hypnotized my eyes.*

*Did someone leave that hole and its trip slime here on purpose? Or am I the first person to know of its existence?"*

---

Figure 4. An excerpt from *Dirty World Accidental Girl (diary edition)*, 2019

In the excerpt above a hypnotic slime mold squelches out of the hole to the Dirty World, serving as the catalyst to jump start Accidental Girl's trip in the underworld.

The slimey, wet, dirty, trash place that is the Dirty World is a matrix of transition. When the membranes of a world are permeable, all kinds of junk can pass in and out; connecting lifeforms in an inadvertent web. Leopard slugs, a motif in my drawings, are just one of the charismatic microfauna that rule the Dirty World, but the sight of their fantastic mating ritual invites Accidental Girl to redefine her perceptions of reality and sensuality. As if by magic, each leopard slug slips a wriggling penis out from behind one of their eyes. It grows to be even longer than their own bodies and pulses blue as it spirals around that of its mate. Together, the entwined penises take the shape of a rippling globe. Within this globe both slugs release sperm, transmitted for the fertilization of the other. The permeable membrane of the slugs' slime allows for this

seemingly alien impregnation to take place. Permeability facilitates propagation and sometimes it is the path for restructuration.

Human waste is undeniably restructuring Earth's ecologies. I've taken a twisted yet hopeful approach to this restructurization process through my world building. Earth's crust may reach a point of oversaturation that causes it to crumble apart, to disintegrate entirely. This would render the "sub" prefix inappropriate and the Dirty World would be just plain terranean. Many living things, including humans, will die if this happens, but life, of a new kind, will go on. The charismatic megafauna and other naturally permeable creatures will evolve and live on, without even knowing they are doing so.

The slime of living things is the inside becoming the outside. A trail for a gastropod, a web for an arachnid, a cave nest for a swiftlet. Such literal bodily extensions are not an option for Accidental Girl, yet she is a foil for Earth, changing from the inside out and from the outside in as she explores the Dirty World. She is coming of age along with a changing planet; influenced by the world around her.

Accidental Girl slips through a hole in the skin of Earth like an inverse birth. She doesn't fall down to the bottom with a splat but floats as if supported by amniotic fluid. When she lands gently on the Dirty World's ground she explores it on foot. This is represented in *The Last Resort*.



Figure 5. *The Last Resort*, 2018



Figure 6. A photograph I took of a decimated fish on boney sand at the Salton Sea State Park, 2018

## *The Last Resort* is a Slimy Place

Since the drawings in this series do not have a traditional narrative structure various components from the Dirty World can be found dancing around in the compositions of each piece. Be they represented through images, text, or both; the nature of the subterranean world is the main theme of the story I seek to represent through my drawings. For example, in the drawing titled *The Last Resort*, the inky black swirl filled with bluish plankton is the slime: the amniotic fluid that supports Accidental Girl through her inverse birth. In *The Last Resort* this liquid blackness lies beneath and is topped with staticy blue striations that wiggle all the way over to the top left corner of the piece. Accidental Girl's boot clad feet stick out from the wiggling blue as if it, and the ink blackness, are part of her body. Up from the feet extends a silhouette of her body filled with an abstracted representation of a mountainous desert landscape. This shadow has a lime green and fluorescent yellow shadow which in turn casts a hot pink shadow of its own. These bodily projections are fluid and vibrant like the surface of a giant gaseous planet. With them begins the craggy top of the drawing. This edge and the purple fish-like figurations below it were influenced by my experiences on the shore of the Salton Sea, that's where the name *The Last Resort* comes from too.

This craggy edge, unlike the squared off ones of the rest of piece, shows that the drawing and the represented world have potential for growth and connection with other parts of the Dirty World. In the context of my thesis exhibition; craggy edges of my drawings read like the mixture of the real world of the audience and the Dirty World inside the art.

## Slime and its Sexual Suggestions in the Dirty World

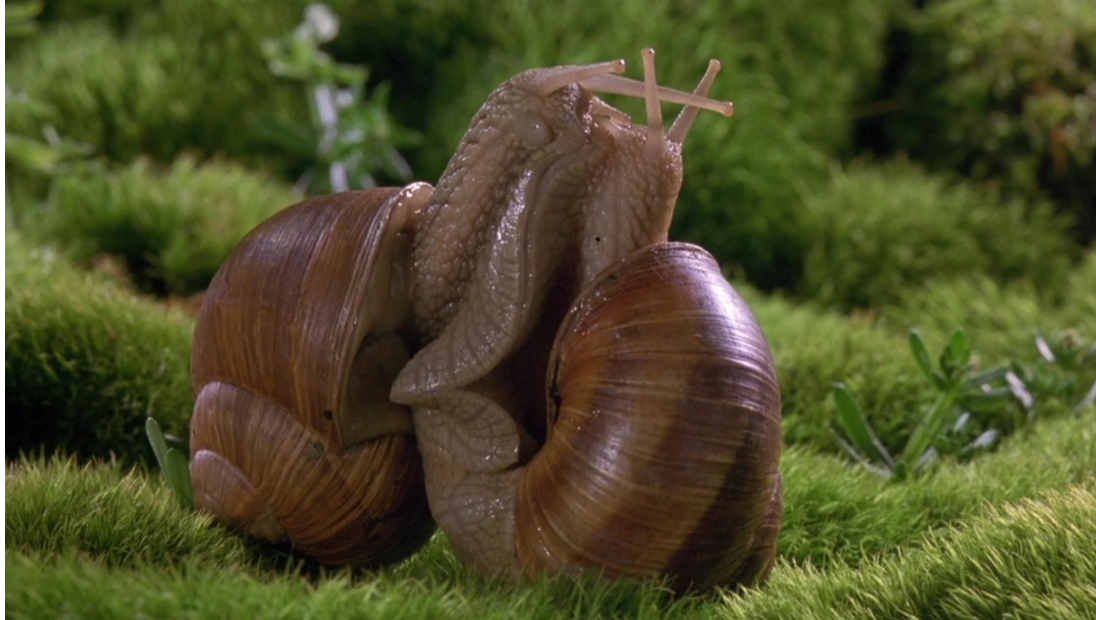


Figure 7. The beginnings of snail sex. From *Microcosmos*, Documentary, 1996<sup>10</sup>

There are no overt references to human sexuality in *Dirty World Accidental Girl* (*diary edition*) or in the drawings shown in the thesis show. This is in stark contrast to the work of experimental author and sex positive feminist Kathy Acker. Despite (or maybe because of) this, her book *Blood and Guts in High School* (1978) has a strong influence on my writing process.<sup>11</sup> Acker uses language and drawing in ways that explicitly engage with sex and sexuality. In her bizarre and highly controversial novel *Blood and Guts in High School* a ten year old girl tells the wild tale of her adolescence. Acker collages prose, poetry, drawings, and diagrams together to tell the rollercoaster story of Janey, her child protagonist. Sex is a key player in the book, and it expands beyond the physical act and becomes a poltergeist-type spirit that haunts the plot, and Janey, in ways that are both benevolent and malevolent. Though this wildly experimental book has recently become a powerful influence on my own work; the details of sex acts between



humans are not fundamental to the development of the Dirty World or Accidental Girl's character. However, the details of sex acts between arthropods, leopard slugs to be specific, are. I am more interested in their curious hermaphroditic mating ritual of permeable membranes, glowing colors, and implicit consent than those of humans. I'd rather leopard slugs be the sex symbol that influences my teen girl character because, in a bizarrely utopian way, they represent the kind of sex I'd like to become the norm for humans. Slugs are most often seen as pests worthy of a good salting, but in my Dirty World they are awe inspiring beings of fascination and sensuality. When Accidental Girl watches their slimy courtship and sex ritual she is struck with the feeling of being slip in two. There's her old self, who existed before all her experiences of the Dirty World, and her current self, one mesmerized by (and a little afraid of) the possibilities for the future. . .

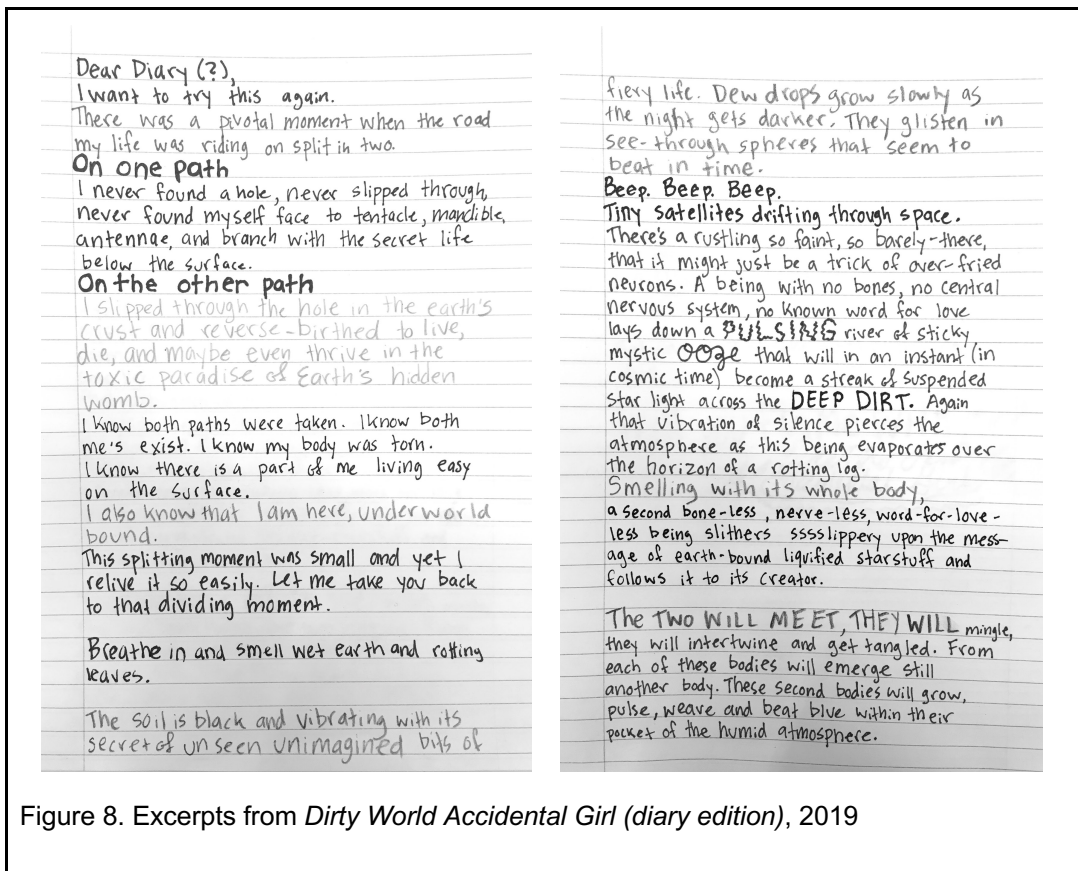
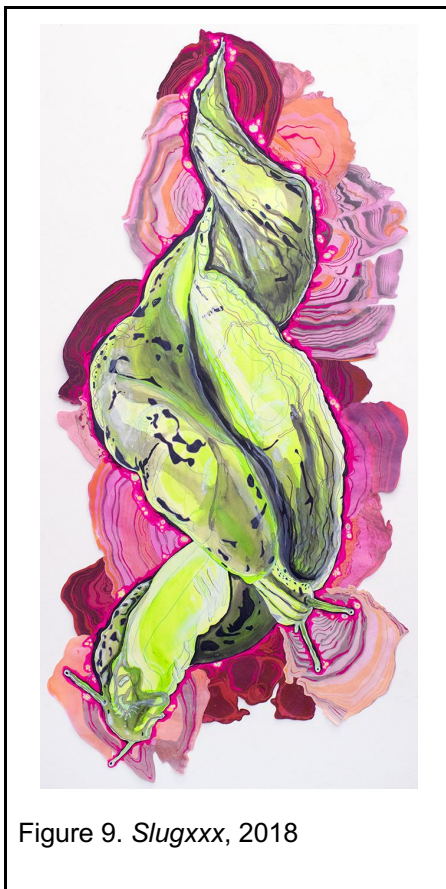
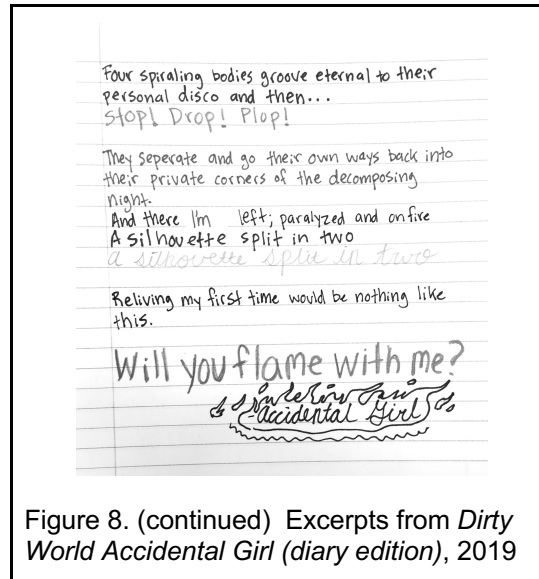


Figure 8. Excerpts from *Dirty World Accidental Girl (diary edition)*, 2019



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INTRODUCING. . . ACCIDENTAL GIRL!



Figure 10. *A New Life, a New Future* (excerpt from sketch book), 2019

## Who is She? How is She Known?

Accidental Girl is the protagonist of my project. She can be seen dancing, creeping, and sliding in and out of many of the drawings. Inside the underworld her shadow is projected by the light of the moon and the glowing creatures that surround her. This is translated into the wall-drawings through repeating and fractured shadows, silhouettes, and skeletons. In this way, the viewers see her body. With *Dirty World Accidental Girl (diary edition)* the audience is given a sense of her personality, her voice, and her experiences.

In the drawings there are some colors that suggest that she has the identity of "Girl" and others that give her a bit of edge. The written piece proves these inferences to be true. Hot pink, flaming violet, acidic orange, sour green, sun yellow, blues both sky and aqua, glitter, and chunky yarn textures are the typical teen girl fanfare. This stereotype is given a quintessential pop-punk, mall goth, every alt girl edge when contrasted with moody purples, bruised magentas, marbled greys, ink blacks, and mercurial metallics. Swirling cursive and spindly line drawings mix femme with aggression when paired with hard-pressed crayon texture, smudged charcoal, and sharp edged silhouettes. In the creative writing woeful words tumble poetically alongside snarky quips, angsty ramblings, and fervently fearful descriptions to round out Accidental Girl's personality. By shifting between abstracted visual imagery and descriptive literary narration I allow her persona to dance in and out of focus.

Scott McCloud, an influential comics artist and writer, uses a pyramid of representational styles to illustrate the spectrum of understanding that is formed between abstraction and representation by pictures and words.

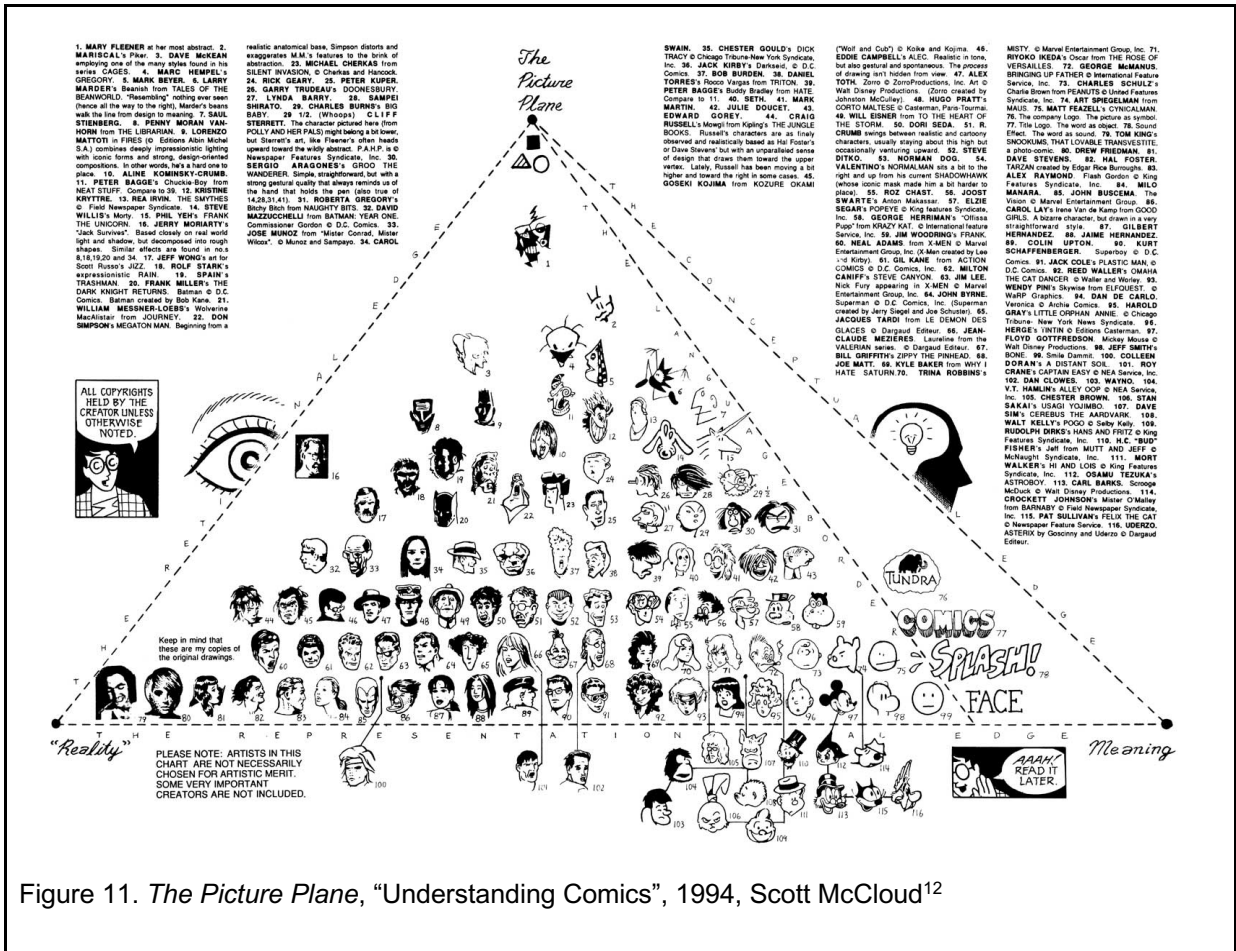


Figure 11. *The Picture Plane*, "Understanding Comics", 1994, Scott McCloud<sup>12</sup>

This pyramid illustrates how realism, abstraction, and iconography all carry unique storytelling capabilities. Through *Dirty World Accidental Girl (diary edition)* I tell the story of a specific character and her individualized experience of my created world. In this way, I give my audience a reality to ground their understanding my drawn works. The wall-hung drawings represent the look and feel of the world and only suggest the presence of a girl's body. Using these two modes of artmaking allows me to skitter along the spectrum that stretches between representation and abstraction. By doing so I craft a specific, yet open ended, experience for my audience.

I use a specific color palette in my drawings to intentionally tap into mainstream western aesthetic expectations of femme identifying individuals so that "girly" or "femme" quickly comes to mind for the viewer. In this way the colors act as signals for identit. The textures represent sense

of movement and the viewer can use this to infer an emotional state. Gritty, sharp, delicate, brooding, sensual, fantastical, punkish . . . these give nuance to the stereotype of femme without illustrating the single, specific, person that is shown in the creative writing. I do this because the Dirty World is expansive and Accidental Girl's experiences are one part of the world. I want to leave room for other narratives to grow and so the drawings are less specific to one person's take on reality. If the viewer only looks at the bold and colorful drawings they will see figurative and color-driven representations that say "girl". They get a more nuanced image of this specific girl by exploring the writing and investigating its relationship to the wall drawings.

The name Accidental Girl alludes to way she stumbled into the Dirty World and relates to the certain kind of klutzy teenage body that I once inhabited. She is messy and clumsy and didn't come to the underworld on purpose. This semi autobiographical character is a girl growing up, a girl in transition. Like the Dirty World, Accidental Girl is transforming from the inside out. Or is it from the outside in?

### Coming of Age in an Underworld

Although her moniker is "Accidental Girl", her age as a girl, more specifically, a teenager is no accident. It is unfortunate that older women are so often excluded from western stories. When they aren't left out they are pigeon-holed as evil at worst, or unsexual and lackluster at best. On the other hand; young women characters are sexualized, idealized, or depicted as weak, ignorant, one-sided beings. It goes without saying that there are countless stories about women that completely go against these tropes but still, the territory of "teen girl" remains defined, saturated, and laced with explosives. Influenced by the LA-based punk fairy tales that make up Francesca Lia Block's *Weetzie Bat* series (1989), I am leaning into and pushing against the fairy/nymph/princess tropes that ubiquitously populate the field at the intersection of fantastical and feminine.<sup>13</sup> In her *Weetzie Bat* stories, Block gives old tales and tropes new life through her

use of modern setting, unique lyrical prose, and relatably broken characters. That is what I seek to do with my work; give old stories new lives and relevant messages. In *Accidental Girl Dirty World (diary edition)* my protagonist even writes about the mythical character Persephone. She explores how the two of them are similar and yet also quite different. This segment is at the beginning of the book and is part of *Accidental Girl's* self-introduction. Unlike Persephone, *Accidental Girl* is depicted as a character with autonomy, she tells her own story, and there are no male characters that dominate her life, love or otherwise. I loop the coming of age literary trope in with an underlying feminist tone and have the two commingle in a fantastical and sensual climate fiction landscape to create a multifaceted narrative field.

Not only is my pink-loving teenage protagonist coming of age as she is reborn in the liquid trash underworld, but the Earth itself is in a place of transition as its crust is saturated with human waste. Garbage, plastic pieces swirling in ocean cyclones, toxic lake foam, buried but not forgotten nuclear waste material, and the aftermaths of iridescent ink blot oil spills have a potent planetary effect of the Earth's body.<sup>14</sup> I use *The Dirty World* to reflect this in my work. Just like *Accidental Girl*, the Earth is transforming from the inside out. This theme of transformation, and the feelings of upheaval that shadow it, can be sensed in the illogical compositions of the drawings, hard-to-gaze-at contrasting color vibrations, and the dance of my mutated flora and fauna subject matter. Some drawings have edges that look nibbled off, as if to suggest that, like the spider weaver out of the blankets of Navajo lore, my charismatic microfauna can escape from their realm and move into our own.<sup>15</sup> Through reading we can share, *Accidental Girl's* experiences. Through looking, we can see the world she lives in and watch as it becomes a foil for our own world and threatens to slip out of its boundaries.

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BUILDING THE DIRTY WORLD



Figure 12. *Spiderweb Memories*, 2017



Through my story of Accidental Girl and the Dirty World I erode a potentially toxic womb just under Earth's crust. Tiny critters are nourished by the garbage of the human world and slink into the womb to adapt to their new home. A young human girl pops through a hole in her reality and teams together with the charismatic microfauna as both parties come into different kinds of life in the heart of a poisoned Earth.

## How the World Developed

"Whole rotten world come down now and let me spread my legs!"

Kathy Acker and The Mekons, 1996<sup>16</sup>

When I started the world building process I envisioned a planet-wide apocalypse almost completely devoid of humans and human structures. In this state, there were animals, mostly slugs, snails, and spiders, all in various states of evolution. They were slithering among mutated plants and trees which possessed uncannily humanoid features. These plants and animals were brightly colored as a result of the toxic materials they were consuming. Any presence of humans was only suggested in the form of shadows and skeletons and there were no specific people or characters. There was no Accidental Girl. Then I compressed this world into a pocket hidden just below the Earth's crust. The time became "present day". This shift in time and place increased the sense of urgency and deepened works connection with fantasy and myth. What was once a transformed world set in the distant future became an underworld hidden below our present-day planet. The roof of this subterranean place is the soaked and fragile crust of the Earth. The inhabitants of this seemingly-toxic womb of the Earth are the same evolved flora and fauna I mentioned earlier, but they live secret lives that run parallel to those of the alive, if threatened, organisms of our present-day earth.

This imagined place is a hyper-concentrated conglomerate of human pollution and as such appears to be an unsustainable habitat for any human life. Yet, my protagonist, Accidental Girl, has found herself there. The term “underworld” is used to purposefully connect my created world to the afterlife. My character may die, is maybe already dead, or may mutate to thrive amongst the toxicity. Slippage, permeability, and transformation orbit my narrative and my world of mutation is meant to reflect these themes.

The thesis exhibition is a freeze-frame of the world’s development. In it there are wall-hung drawings that show the built world and written works that give footholds for the viewer and insight into the character’s experiences. This world unfolds as Accidental Girl explores it. Her thoughts and experiences are represented in *Dirty World Accidental Girl (diary edition)*, which is a zine-form collection of pieces of writing and drawings that resemble, and sometimes read like, a teenager’s diary. My writing and drawings engage with senses beyond sight. There are lots of references to sounds and sensations in the writing, and the topsy-turvy compositions of my large-scale drawings impart a sense of movement that is almost bodily. I worked with vocalist Lauren Jones and sound-artist John Dombroski, through a collaborative and improvisational process, to create a soundscape for the exhibition.<sup>17</sup> This soundscape was made using pieces of writing from *Dirty World Accidental Girl (diary edition)* which were read, sung, and abstracted by Jones. Her soprano voice and acting background, combined with her appreciation of alternative music and interest in play, made her a great fit to play a curious character like Accidental Girl. Dombroski sung, improvised electronic music, and used multiple recording devices to give the track a rich and textured feel. His music practice typically uses samples and is influenced by site. For this piece, his site was my built world and my drawings and writings were a score that guided the composition. Jones and Dombroski created a musical piece that adds an extra-sensory layer to my built world. Drawing generates writing, writing generates drawing, and the two generate new sensory experiences, these are the ecological guides for my worldbuilding process.

## The Timely Sediment of Fantasy and Science Fiction

My inspiration for an interstitial subterranean place with a roof made of trash-saturated Earth crust comes from everywhere, but maybe that answer is too easy? There are endless stories about caves, underworlds, in between places, and what, if anything, happens when we die. The same can be said about stories that warn about the effects we humans have on our planet. These stories were written and set in times all along the spectrum from ancient to modern. They can feature alien, animal, or human protagonists. The endings can be satisfying, tragic, humorous, or may indeed never come. These stories are all cousins and, as such, their modern relatives are inevitably wrought with clichés wielded, by accident or by intent, to carry along their authors' message. The kind of story I seek to tell is set in a world with so many cousins and this makes it difficult to pinpoint an exact and singular source of inspiration. That being said - I am predominantly drawn to the stories that wade intentionally in the silt of traditions, tropes, and clichés. Their creators may subvert by way of alternative protagonists, or they may utilize tradition to reveal something about the state of the author's world.

Francesca Lia Block's *Dangerous Angels* (2010) is a collection of short stories and novellas, set in the *Weetzie Bat* world, that are ripe with fairy tale tradition and fantasy logic.<sup>18</sup> Her protagonists are usually young girls, but they share stories with a motley crew of people young and old, wealthy and poor, contented and depressed and they all hail from Shangri-L.A., Block's version of a 1980's LA. There's LGBTQ characters, characters of color, punks, hipsters, poets, and lots of fast talking femmes. They are nymphs, wizards, witches, geenies, mabs, forest spirits, shamans and also just plain humans, some of whom seem completely mad. Each story in this collection focuses on a different character of her related cast and, in this way, she creates a world and the rules of her storytelling suggests that the characters' lives may never truly end. On the one hand Block's stories are bite-sized and self-contained; on the other they all exist in the same unending universe. Even if someone dies she may make use of their ghost to revive their memory

without eliminating the effects of their death. She combines tradition and magic with hipness and brooding mystery and gives old stories new life while making the so-called alternative lives of her varied characters accessible. Their experiences are strange but their feelings are oh-so relatable.

This is what I seek to do by hosting story cousins in the home of my drawings and writing. I engage with these stories as I talk about old issues that masquerade as new ones. Since there has been life, there has been growing up, and that growing up has had a profound impact on that life. In turn, that life has been making waste and causing death since it took shape and slithered out of the cosmic ooze. The waste of humans began, only so very recently in cosmic time, to profoundly impact the Earth's life. If Earth is an ancient teenager she will surely grow to have a very fucked up adulthood. And so, my project taps into old life through the representation of new ways of growing up, new destruction, new waste, new biology, and very old themes.

Old tales and fairy tales invite me to play with magic and logic. They remind me that ancient tales can be combined with fresh ingredients to make an interesting soup. In this way, the ideas of those who came before can be expanded. It's important to tell stories like this because constantly paving over that which came before, which is often considered obsolete, is violent and doesn't leave room for considerate change or growth. Haraway speaks of what she calls "the children of compost" to talk about things (living things, story things) that grow out of that which is old, and often discarded.<sup>19</sup> She says that these new beings might not be perfect or beautiful, but that they have new kinds of souls. The thoughtless waste of the old and production of the new is contributing to the destruction of our planet -- this is why I don't want to tell stories in completely brand-new ways.

The fantasy genre is often associated with the old. Ancient things hold many stories and seem magical. Wizards learn spells and rituals and often come from long lines of tradition. Gandalf from *The Lord of the Rings* saga seems to have been alive forever. In contrast, the science fiction genre is often associated with the new, the futuristic, the thing that will be possible when science advances enough. Of course there are countless artists in the genre that deal with the present, and even the past. Examples include Octavia Butler's *Kindred* or even George

Lucas' *Starwars* saga (which is let "long ago").<sup>20</sup> Though I have read stories from both genres that don't fall into the time-based expectations of their readers, I do enjoy using fantasy and science fiction to play with the old and the new to make a compost to fertilize a new(ish) story.

The somewhat controversial genre of science fiction was described by Ursula K. Leguin as a genre rooted in the present, fertilized by what it might mean for the future.<sup>21</sup> Haraway posits that science fiction *is* a theoretical practice and not *about* theory. There is a tangible current of anxiety running through the science fiction books that influence me. This feeling can certainly be accounted by a focus on the worrisome facts of the present.

Ursula K. Leguin's *The Word for World is Forest* is an example of such a book.<sup>22</sup> It's about men traveling to another planet and meeting aliens. It is also about colonialism and the profound influence one group can have on another. The book uses dialog, dramatic description, and dreamworld-to-real-world experiences to paint a severe picture of how interpersonal dramas and cultural miscommunications can have society-wide impacts. Leguin also has fun with her world building though, playing with gender stereotypes and laws of biology along the way. The umbrella term for anything that is not entirely rooted in real-life reality is called speculative fiction, sci-fi is a part of this, and this genre's lax rules of reality allow authors like me and Leguin to create worlds that draw attention to real world issues through the fantastical lens. Like the writing of the science and speculative fiction authors that influence me; the story I tell and the world I represent through my visual and written work is rooted in my anxieties about the Earth and her inhabitants. Science fiction is not for everyone, but neither are a litany of rout facts and sad statistics. This storytelling methodology allows me to speak to the issues that instil fear in me while having fun and creating exciting experiences for my viewers. It empowers me to engage in my bizzare brand of hope and share it with my viewers, not to ignore the present, but to see it in a different light.

Another figure that influenced my world building is Jeff Vandermeer, author of the *Southern Reach Trilogy* (2014).<sup>23</sup> In his books Vandermeer created an expanding ecology of rapidly mutating chimeras which were, quite possibly, introduced to a fictional region in Southern

Florida by supernatural extraterrestrials. He mixes the madness of bureaucracy, the fogginess of memory, and sublime beauty together to form a micro-world that mirrors real-world anxieties that are both mundane and awesome. In this trilogy an all-woman group of unnamed explores are sent into Area X, a literal bubble of mixed-up life. This life seems out to get them, or maybe it's their minds that are attacking them, and one by one the characters are eaten, absorbed, or profoundly transformed by Area X. The trilogy progresses to focus on one woman, who comes to name herself Ghost Bird. Sometimes she has her original body, other times she confronts another version of herself. I found this act of having an unreliable character name themselves, confront their internal and external landscapes, and battle with their reality to be quite influential. That being said, it was Vandermeer's vivid description of Area X and its intraworldly inhabitants that empowered me to go outside my traditionally representational tendencies.

Ursula K. Le Guin, Jeff Vandermeer, and Francesca Lia Block are authors that, for the most part, present their works in the normative book format and follow commonly accepted rules regarding plot, structure, and even characterization. By this I mean, they are novelists and story writers in the traditional sense. I don't mean that their ideas are traditional though, but I do point out that the style and presentation of their work follows the commonly accepted guidelines of literature as a means to introduce some other influential folks; those who don't. These artists are often labeled as "non-traditional", "experimental", or dare I say "alternative". . . and their work empowers me to take risks with my project.

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## WRITING ABOUT WRITING

### Supercool Code Breakers

Books that use words and pictures to tell stories in unconventional ways show me new possibilities for giving stories life. There are novels for grown-ups that have no pictures, there are mainstream comics that are lacking in the storytelling department, there are children's books, zines, comix, and graphic novels. For the most part, these categories are fairly set in their ways and the powers that be can get pretty picky about the requirements for entry into each of them. I've read and enjoyed works from all across the spectrum of book and, although I'm generally not a labels person, I can see how they are helpful in a lot of situations. That being said, the book-based artists that have a big impact on my work needle not-so-gently at the edges of the categories of "book" and the subsequent impact that these categories have on the writing they contain. Etel Adnan uses drawn imagery mixed with poetic prose in her book *The Arab Apocalypse* (1989) to address global issues while challenging the limitations of word and picture.<sup>24</sup> *Blood and Guts in High School* (1978), by Kathy Acker, is a wild experience of reading and looking that, forty years later, still defies genre expectations and form constraints.

*The Arab Apocalypse* is a book of poetry that reveals the extreme of what written language is capable of. In it Etel Adnan uses vivid poetic prose that has blank spaces in the middle of certain phrases. These blanks are filled with rough-hewn iconographic drawings. Her subject matter is war and violence and the details in her writing show that she isn't holding back. And yet there are the blanks. Maybe these are blanks in an otherwise vivid memory, or maybe the drawings step in when words fall short. This highly experimental style is given accessibility when close attention is paid to the very beginning of the book. Despite, or perhaps in service to, the book's experimental style - Adnan's unconventional plot starts off in a conventional way. This is because the first poem gives its readers setting, stakes, and characterization. We are

introduced to the character of the sun and the many forms it can take on. Words like “Egyptian” , “Arab”, and “haunted” reiterate the setting and stakes that the book’s title suggests. By setting all these up from the get-go Adnan frees herself up to challenge the possibilities of language and image. The reader is given anchor points to guide their reading journey.

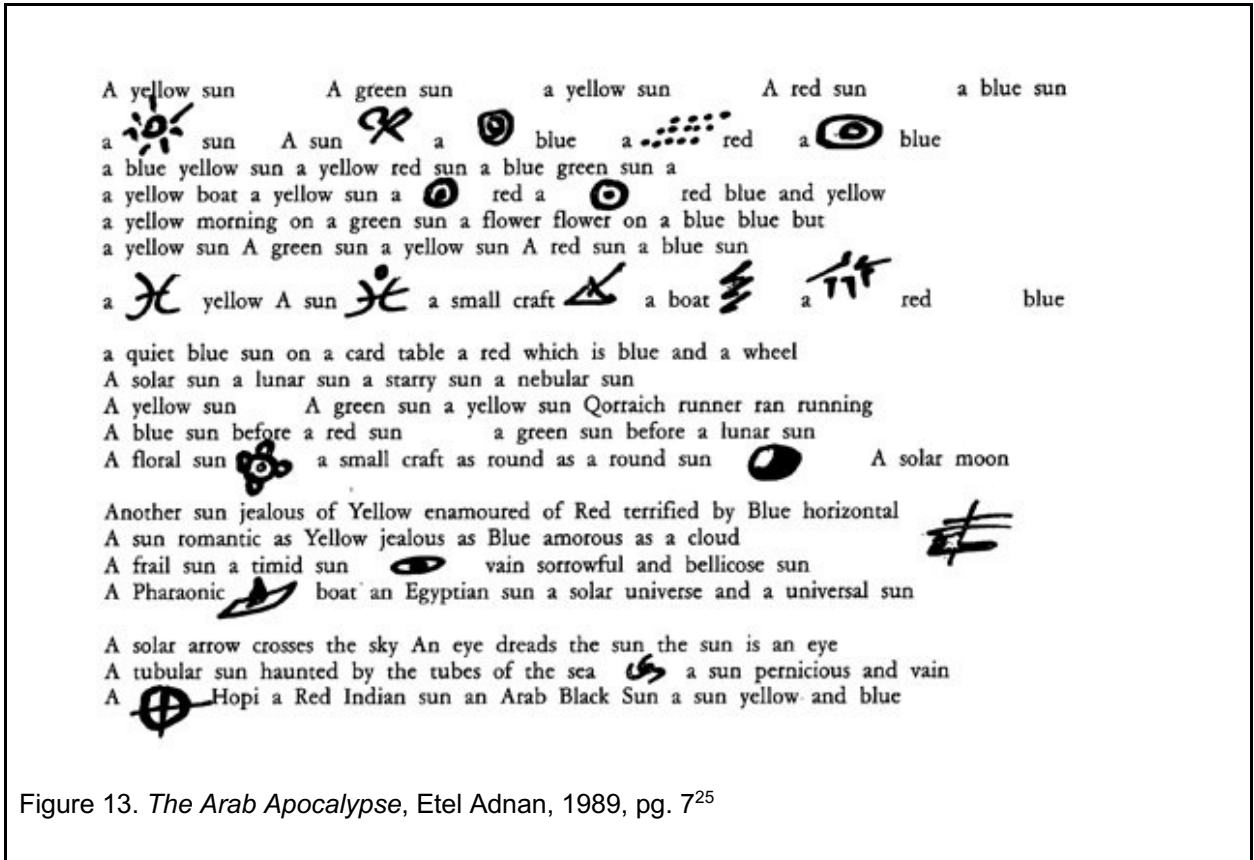
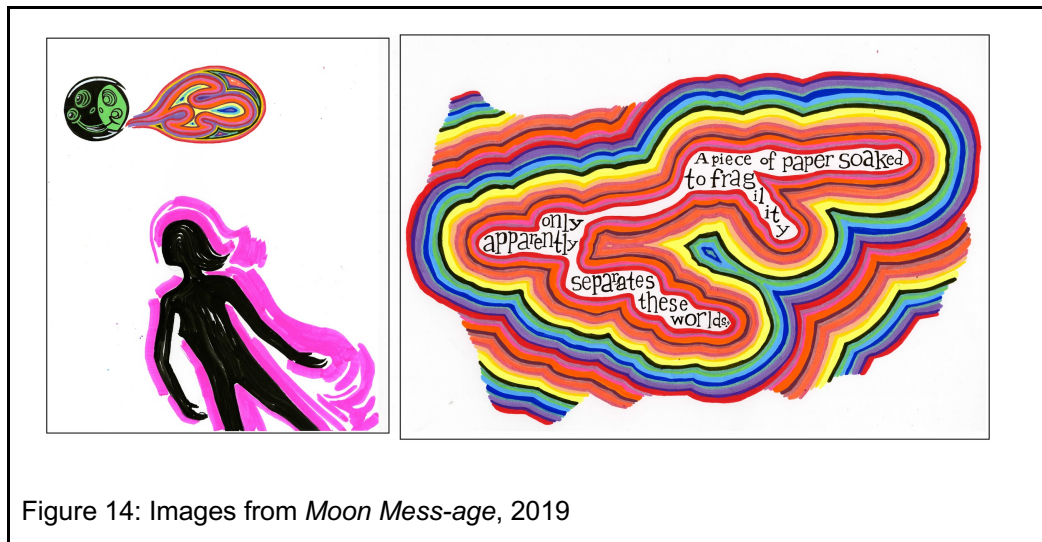


Figure 13. *The Arab Apocalypse*, Etel Adnan, 1989, pg. 7<sup>25</sup>



*Blood and Guts in High School* looks, at first glance, like a normal novel. There are parts that resemble a screenplay, and there are sexually explicit drawings and wild diagrams that punctuate the novel occasionally, but the book mostly follows the format of uninterrupted words, in lines, on pages. In this way it is unlike *The Arab Apocalypse*. Despite this, *Blood and Guts* has a story that is arguably much less logical than that of Adnan's book. This is made possible because, starting on page one, Acker gives the reader one major foothold: Janey. Everything about Janey requires a good deal of mental and ethical gymnastics to go along with though. Janey is in a sexual relationship with her Father, Janey craves sex, Janey wants freedom, Janey is abused, Janey is a tween girl, Janey dies but then her story (and the book) continues. Kathy Acker uses prose, illustrations, diagrams, and even poetic Arabic lessons to tell the wild story of Janey. The language in *Blood and Guts in High School* is direct, explicit, and doesn't beat around the bush. This, combined with the through-line of an impossible girl-character, captured my attention and gave weight to the wildly experimental parts of the novel. Although Janey's character and story are far from believable, Acker's strong language and wild-n-free style strapped me in for a quick and dirty ride. This book empowered me to take my own creative writing risks of using an unreliable narrator and mysterious prose.



## How my Drawing and Writing Work Together Now

My thesis exhibition features two bound books. *Moon Mess-Age*, my first book, uses just one illuminated poem and one theatrical drawing. A transparent drawing is printed on the first page to show the characters, and the following page uses a psychedelic speech bubble to show the code that represents the Moon's voice. The poem that follows describes the Moon's nature and illuminates their personality. Although I never say who is talking, I coded in clues for the reader to find out on their own.

*Dirty World Accidental Girl (diary edition)* is the second book featured in my thesis show. It's a collection of writings and drawings from the point of view of Accidental Girl. I started the writing by trying to shroud the plot in mystery because I thought this would make for a more interesting reading experience. Maybe that's baggage left over from my visual arts education which encouraged me to hold my idea cards close, or maybe it stems from my newness to the art form of writing. Either way, I offered the reader no set stakes, no footholds, and no clear through lines. Generous mentors have urged me to guide my readers by embedding a support system within the writing. Close reads of the work of Adnan and Acker showed this staging methodology to be the strategy that opens up space for elaborate experimentation. And so, I revised *Dirty World Accidental Girl (diary edition)*. I set up the location and introduce the character in the beginning with the first diary entry. Here we learn that Accidental Girl is self conscious, in an underworld, has mental health issues, and craves to become completely magical. In the next entry she addresses the reader and says "Something's giving way just under your feet and I think you should know". In this way the reader gets a hint about the stakes of the world I have built. As the entries progress Accidental Girl describes herself, and the underworld in detail. After that each new entry sets a rule for the world.

The creative writing sets up parameters for my created world, gives it boundaries and a sense of (under)grounding that the drawings alone don't provide. The drawings are a place for exploration and representation and the rules set up by the writing create a territory that I can explore with the ways I create the drawings. Then the drawings are folded back into the writing. For example, my drawing titled *The Last Resort* became the reference for the place that *Accidental Girl* describes in the 4th diary entry.

"I am here in this underworld. I am underearth, underwater, and my boot clad feet stick up out of the surface. The water is my skirt. From my feet emanates another me. This other me has a shadow. This shadow has a shadow".

"Currents form in the darkness and once-tiny plankton grow huge and surf the waves down to the poisoned seashore."

That figure, its shadows, the plankton, and the dead fish can all be clearly seen mingling around inside *The Last Resort* drawing (see Figure 5). Here is another example of this drawing-writing relationship:

"Looping across the ink went something clearly cosmic. It was on hot fire. Pulsing fluorescence edged in flat light and coursing acid. The being had two eyes that somehow caught my own two eyes as its rollercoaster body ribboned across the blackness. Its skin was glowing like the lava and magma that should've been roaring just below my sprawled out body".



Figure 15. *Cosmic Snake*, 2018

This segment comes from a diary entry that appears towards the end of *Dirty World Accidental Girl (diary edition)* and I used the *Cosmic Snake* drawing as a writing guide. I wove a description of this snake into Accidental Girl's story about seeing a skeleton. In this way I give life to the drawing and a grounding for the writing.

When paired together on the same page, as they are in this paper, the drawings seems like an illustration of the text. In the exhibition however, the drawings look like the star of the show, they are lit up and impossible to ignore. In the large black-box room the books are dwarfed and this is because I view them as intimate objects. Presented on the little shelf on the wall opposite the drawings a pink light them illuminates them and lends a theatrical and slightly fantastical feel. A viewer can pick up the books and thumb through or closely read during the exhibition; or they can focus on the drawings and the soundscape and take a book home to read

later. This setup places the writing and drawings in the same world but not in the same artwork. They exist in the same room but a viewer's experience with them is different. The two work together like components of a scavenger hunt or a build-your-own-adventure game. I set up a framework, some stakes, and establish the aesthetics and sensations of the world. I give options for how to engage with it and include guidelines, but I don't give a step-by-step guide. This is because I want viewers to explore my created world.

### How I See the Writing and Drawing Working Together in the Future

I want *Dirty World Accidental Girl (diary edition)* to enter into a generative feedback loop with the development of my created world. This relationship will inform future drawn works and expand the visual representation of the world Accidental Girl sees. Then I will develop the writing further, create more diary entries, and expand the minor characters of Grinning Moon, Moon's Messenger, and Blood Orange Bat. I will continue my practice of wall works and creative writing but my next big project will be another book. I'd like to make a book that tells a story and represents the Dirty World in one intimate piece. The trick is keeping the drawings from reading like illustrations of the text. Etel Adnan shows the unique capabilities of both mediums but *Gaylord Phoenix* by Edie Fake is more applicable to my future work.<sup>26</sup> This is because the drawn parts of Fake's work depict full scenes and characters as opposed to the icons of Adnan's work. *Gaylord Phoenix* is a graphic novel that deploys visually coded language and stylized drawings to tell a story of trauma and transformation. The drawings utilize the whole page and, even though there are no speech bubbles, Fake gives the reader a sense of which characters are speaking and when.

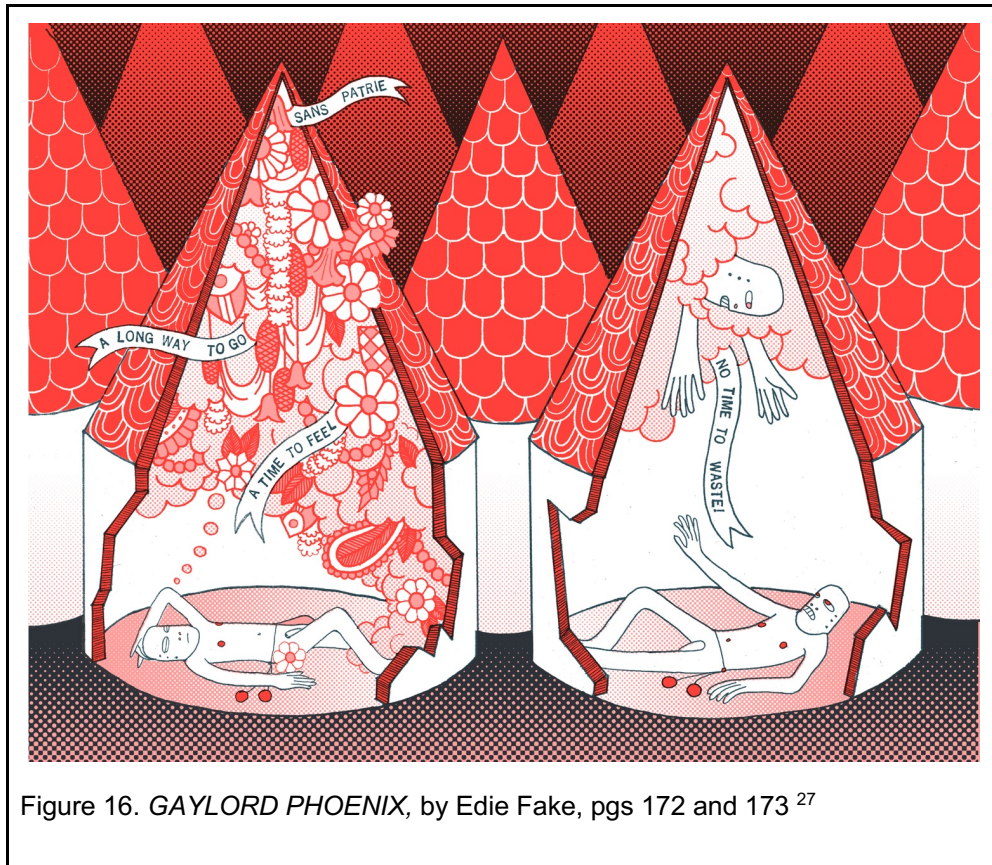


Figure 16. *GAYLORD PHOENIX*, by Edie Fake, pgs 172 and 173 <sup>27</sup>

Fake's code is not so evident when taken out of context, but the entire book is set up in a way that guides the reader to understand the code. The following figure is a transcription of the text that can be seen in the first few pages of *Gaylord Phoenix*. To make this transcription I used fonts and colors that closely correspond with those used by Fake. When strung together in a line, even without the images, there is a sense that different voices are speaking. That being said, the viewer needs the images to see the setting and characters. Together the coded text and stylized images work together to tell the story. It's this kind of symbiotic relationship between words and drawings that I want to strive towards with future works.

# **GAYLORD PHOENIX**

FOR ALL THE GAY

exploring the secret grotto

**POISED IN SHADOW**

**CRYSTAL CLAW**

**DEEP IN THE NIGHT**

HELLP

I WILL HELP MYSELF

**THE GAYLORD PHOENIX WILL FLY THRU THE UPPER GLOOM CLOUDS**

lust

LUST

OH, GOD

I HAVE CRYSTAL BLOODLUST

**AN AWFUL TRANSFORM**

is possesed by the claw

**BLOOD DROPS**

QUICKLY BELOW!

Figure 17. Transcription of *Gaylord Phoenix*, pgs. 3-37

## Conclusion: This is Not the End

In the beginning the Dirty World had no name. It started with one drawing on shitty paper and grew from there. It became an apocalyptic world with hints of a girl lurking in the shadows. I thought it was boundless, I thought boundaries would limit it. I made more hallucinogenic large-scale drawings and thought about mutated life and mixed up ecologies. Then I moved the whole thing underground, where it became the underworld. This world pulses under your feet right now, our garbage fertilizes it and one day it will burst out and overtake our life on the surface. The lurking mysterious shadow-hint-of-girl developed into a specific character with the name Accidental Girl. She became autonomous and I channeled her experiences into a zine of creative writing and drawing. This zine gives a map to guide the audience's exploration of the Dirty World. Ecology, science fiction, fairy tales, and works that mix words and pictures are my co-pilots and I am stoked to see what my world will develop into next.



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