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Artist Statement and Research
SMP in Studio Art, 2014

Saclings and Other Life Forms

My decision to complete a St. Mary's Project in studio art grew out of my long history with art creation. Here at the end, I can see SMP as a journey where I started out somewhere stable and gradually broke out of my old habits, my old methods, and my small scale, flat works of art. For years, my art process has involved still life paintings and drawings, careful renderings of things in front of me. I enjoy that tightly-focused act of creation, but its literality is stifling, and my true interest lies in graphic cartoons and illustration, abstracted visuals tempered by individual human experience. I've developed a graphic style over the years, influenced by illustrators and painters I admire, comic artists I've encountered.

At the beginning of SMP, I was looking a lot at one of my favorite artists, the Austrian painter Egon Schiele (Fig. 1). His early 20th century paintings and sketches take human forms and twist them, emphasize their angles, block out shapes and put unexpected, vibrant colors in shadows. They are queasy portraits, grotesque -- but beautiful too, in the expressive linework Schiele creates. In my research I found contemporary artists who incorporate many of the same visual themes that attract me to Schiele's work, including the Iranian-American artist Kymia Nawabi (Fig. 2). Nawabi incorporates media ranging from crayon to glitter in her esoteric imagery, which includes human figures who lack heads or limbs, slumped together, merging with one another and the environment around them.

Over the course of the SMP "marathon", which was an assignment to create 20 works of art in a limited period of time, I worked in 2D media and created some paintings that included distorted figures inspired by Schiele's and Nawabi's art, but I also experimented with a complete departure from figural representation. For me, drawing cartoonish characters and scenes is something of a comfort zone, a hobby that I strongly enjoy. But it's also limiting, and my attempts to embrace complete non-literality, to experiment with texture and color rather than objects and people as subject matter, was incredibly freeing and refreshing. By utilizing full abstraction, painting becomes more personal and open -- any emotion I feel can be swiftly incorporated in a series of brush strokes and colorful shapes, without pause for contemplation of how I might represent myself. I can break down that symbolic filter and throw myself into immediate expression of my visual and emotional interests.

In one marathon painting (Fig. 3), I carefully washed and blending paint in certain areas while slathering it on thick in other areas, like the central yellow square that stands out in angular opposition to the smooth, sloping regions around it. I continued to play with texture in other paintings, like Figure 2, which is a sort of abstract landscape. In this painting I played with the contrast between pale/muted and vibrant colors. Many of the shapes and patterns I include come from nature, like the lichenous trees outside the studio and the strange shadows and patterns of rock formations. Even as I move away from literal depictions, nature and biology have a permanent influence on the art I create. My work with professor Sue Johnson, in her nature drawing class, has merged my biology and art interests into a passion for scientific illustration. I enjoy learning the life cycles of bacteria and various subphyla of fungi. Strange means by which life propagates are a recurring interest of mine and subsequent theme in the visuals I create.



Figure 1. (left) Egon Schiele, *Girl with Sunglasses*, 1910

Figure 2. (right) Kymia Nawabi, *And Next, Next...Next...*, acrylic, ink, and watercolor, 24x24", 2009



Figure 3. (top) Untitled, gouache, 2013
Figure 4. (bottom) Untitled, gouache, 2013

From the start of SMP, one of my chief goals was to move out of the 2D and experiment with giving my paintings a new dimensionality, using both sculpture and time based media. My first experience with projection was in professor Carrie Patterson's color theory class in 2013. I worked with fellow students Garrett Zopfi, Leah Moreno, Gigie Rivera, and Rachel McDonald to map out a grove of trees illuminable from the deck of Montgomery Hall, and together we projected a series of colorful patterns and forms onto the trees. The result was an enchanting nighttime environment where people could walk between the trees and play with the light and color being projected on the trees and their bodies. It was a fascinating interplay of uncontrollable, natural objects and the careful control of digital mapping, and I knew at once I wanted to do more with projection.

I had no experience with sculpture when I began my SMP, and so I immediately started researching for sculptural artists whose work I could relate to. Several years ago, I went to a Pittsburgh museum called the Mattress Factory and encountered a room entirely covered in mirrors, with polka dotted mannequins standing in the center, repeated infinitely in all directions. The room was a piece by the Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama, called "Infinity Dots", and I rediscovered her and her art in the course of my SMP research. Kusama moved from Japan to New York City in 1958, against her parents' wishes, and immediately rose to prominence in the burgeoning art scenes. Her work had a huge influence on Andy Warhol, Claes Oldenburg, and other pop art figures, before she returned to Japan in the 1970's and fell into obscurity back in the US.

Kusama's art features repeating imagery of loops, dots, and phalluses. In her *Infinity Mirror Room* (Fig. 5) she sews hundreds of fabric polka-dotted phalluses and completely fills the floor space, creating an overwhelming, all-immersive field of surreal anatomical forms. Kusama explains that her own art is driven by a hallucinatory compulsion innate in her since childhood, a mental illness that surrounded her with fearful visions of flowers, dots, and nets threatening to engulf her. (Zinnes, 1998) In the process of art-making, she confronts and creates the imagery that haunts her, identifying a "deep driving compulsion to realize in visible form the repetitive image inside of me." (Hoptman, 1998) This creative process allows for Kusama to obliterate her fears and herself.



Figure 5. Yayoi Kusama, *Infinity Mirror Room – Phalli's Field (or Floor Show)*, 1965

I value repetition in my own art, as a therapeutic act, but I'm interested in representing more than my own fears and insecurities: I'm representing my fascination with the world, my disorientation and stress, my life and my energy. One form of media I love that lends itself to repetition is the animated GIF. GIF, which stands for Graphics Interchange Format, is an image format which allows for compressed, endlessly repeating animations which are viewable on computers and the internet. Paolo Ceric, who makes computer generated graphics and animations, says that "if used right, GIFs can give some sort of a meditative feel to the animation". The nature of that endlessly repeating quality is indeed entrancing when created seamlessly, and the process of animating a GIF is meditative as well. The animation process is an energy sink, through which personal labor is transformed into a permanent moving visual. It is a process and a medium that has always fascinated me, and I knew I wanted to push myself further toward animation.

In the first semester of SMP, I began creating multiple GIF animations in which I accepted and even played up the compression effects and artifacted visuality of a GIF. Artifacted web imagery and net art have always been a pronounced influence on me, growing up with internet access, and I appreciate compression and glitching as unpredictable elements in digital art. In a parallel vein, I appreciate the imperfect quality of hand drawn, frame by frame animation.

As an artist who works digitally, my drawings nevertheless carry the unique movements of my hand.

I take additional inspiration from the British-born animator Julia Pott and her short cartoon “Belly”, who cites interest in generating an “eerie” tone in her animations. (Fulleylove, 2012) A driving force in my own art is insecurity and fear of misinterpretation -- I feel very vulnerable in the act of putting something so privately generated into a public space. As a result, I tend to veer away from storytelling or specific character-driven messages in the visuals I create.

While I was producing multiple GIF animations, I started to contemplate the effect of combined, simultaneous animations, and I put this into practice in *Stitches*, which I projected on a wall (Fig. 6). Here I was trying to build a more complex scene, combining an animated figure in the endlessly repetitive process of sewing with a hill-like flowing landscape of fabric sheath. The result was successful as it allowed me to create a larger, more surrounding scene, via projection, where I could bring hand drawn animations to a large scale physical setting.

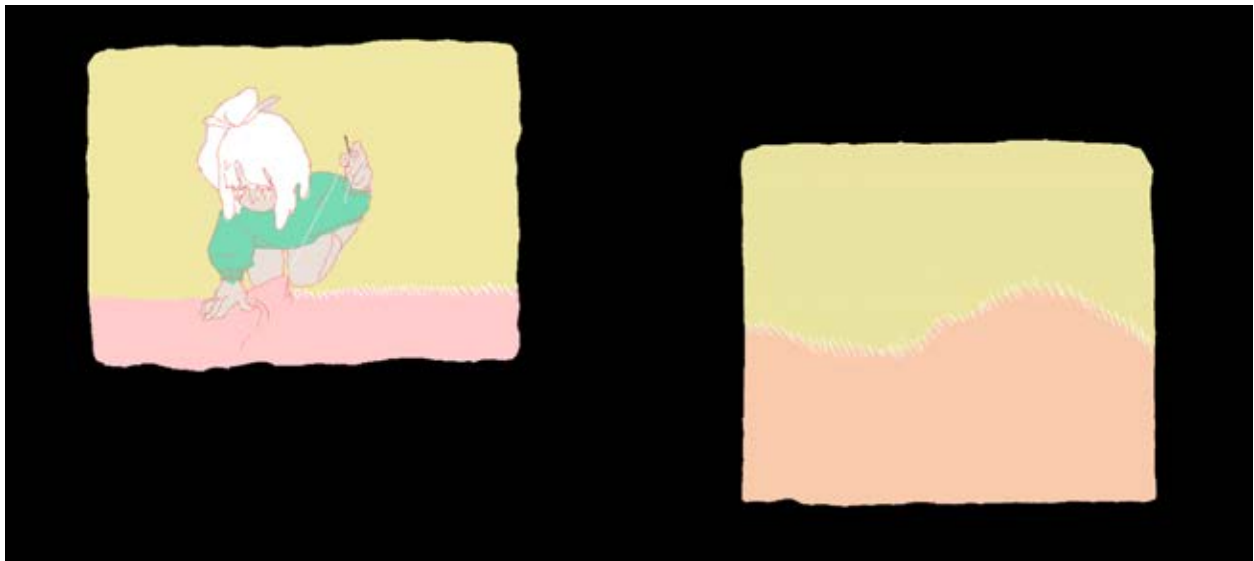


Figure 6. still from *Untitled (Stitches)*, 2014

As I continued in my SMP, I knew I wanted to bring in not only time based media, but sculpture as well. Many of my professors suggested I look into Tony Oursler, and I was delighted to see that many of my own cloudy thoughts and plans he had carried out to completion in his video sculptures. Oursler works by creating large scale (but recently small scale) objects made of fiberglass, cotton, or smoke, and projects carefully edited video onto them, with accompanying audio. By hybridizing footage of people speaking with 3D physical backdrops, he creates new creatures, lacking bodies or facial features, who deliver confused and anxious

ramblings to no one in particular. Oursler's early work consisted of dancing, disjointed puppet figures on videotape, filmed by then out-of-date cameras that "left ghost trails on the tape". Even in these early days Oursler was delighted by the readily apparent inclusion of technology in art: an exciting new medium but also flawed, glitched, and cumbersome. Video projection is now the central characteristic tenet of Tony Oursler's art. With it, he skirts between theatrical bedazzlement and the technologically obvious. "I'm not for total mystification," he says in an interview with Karen Wright. He appreciates projection as a physical link between viewers and his sculptures: "if they look at it they put their hand up and go, 'Oh yeah, it's some kind of projector.' And for a moment they're part of the work, and then it breaks down."

Oursler's prevailing interest in film snippets, as opposed to my own interest in 2D animation, was something that initially distanced me from his art. One bit of dialogue from a sculpture of his really gelled with me: "What's the difference between cartoons and the real thing?" "The projection". Even while Oursler's projections use recordings of real people, rather than drawn 2D animation, the ways in which he distorts the recordings, blows them up or shrinks them down, and gives them surreal speeches to repeat -- all of these alterations reduce his real people into dramatized cartoon characters. And as I've looked into Oursler's less iconic works, listened to recordings of his characters' diatribes, and read Oursler's own words, I see so many shared interests. His early projects were inspired by dissociative mental disorders and the alienation and confusion that comes with them. He loves to play with new technologies and subsequently uses them to comment on technology's shortcomings.

"Dust" (Fig. 7) is one of a few Oursler pieces in which his inclusion of filmed people is more subdued and broken up. It exists as a swirling, suspended ball of smoke (or a dust cloud) that rolls as if in a wind, letting slip bits of eyes and limbs as it flows. Oursler's video sculptures allow the viewer to get up close and indeed feel dwarfed or intimidated by their ghostly presence.



Figure 7. Tony Oursler, *Dust*, from *Thought Forms* series. Fiberglass with video projection, 2006

Inspired by Oursler, I created a 6 foot tall hollow structure and painted it white so it could act as a kind of 3D canvas for projected visuals. In the end this became *Hive*, my installation at the fall semester SMP show (Fig. 8). Loosely reminiscent of a wasp nest in shape, I essentially applied my painting style from earlier in the year to the sculpture I had created, and imbued it with colors and shapes that gave it vibrancy and life. I continued to work with more abstract imagery, non-literal shapes and colors rather than vulnerable or broken characters. A character is a subject -- I wanted to create more of an environmental space. People can walk in front of it, they can block part of the projector and have the moving images over their skin. In this way, the viewer can become the subject. The viewer can choose to be involved.

My projection, however, was stationary. Accompanying it was another short gif animation I created, *Wasp*, which is a colorful and somewhat abstracted visual of a fungal organism growing on a dead wasp's body, sporing, degenerating, and then regrowing repeatedly. This animation was somewhat more confusing and overwhelming, and the fact that it was projected on a flat wall adjacent to the stationary sculpture left the two elements feeling very disjointed. There was no relation happening. I knew from there that my new goal would be to create an art space in which multiple simultaneous visuals and animations could flow together and create a unified setting. Meanwhile, this new experiment with projection gave me a newfound interest in the technical limitations of projection. Walking up close to either projected image allowed you to

see the individual spots of light covering the surface of the sculpture or wall, like cells making up a bigger creature (Fig. 9). Something coldly scientific about this aspect of projection appeals to me, as it runs counter to the organic visuals I am creating, yet is inherent in them, as pixelated digital images.

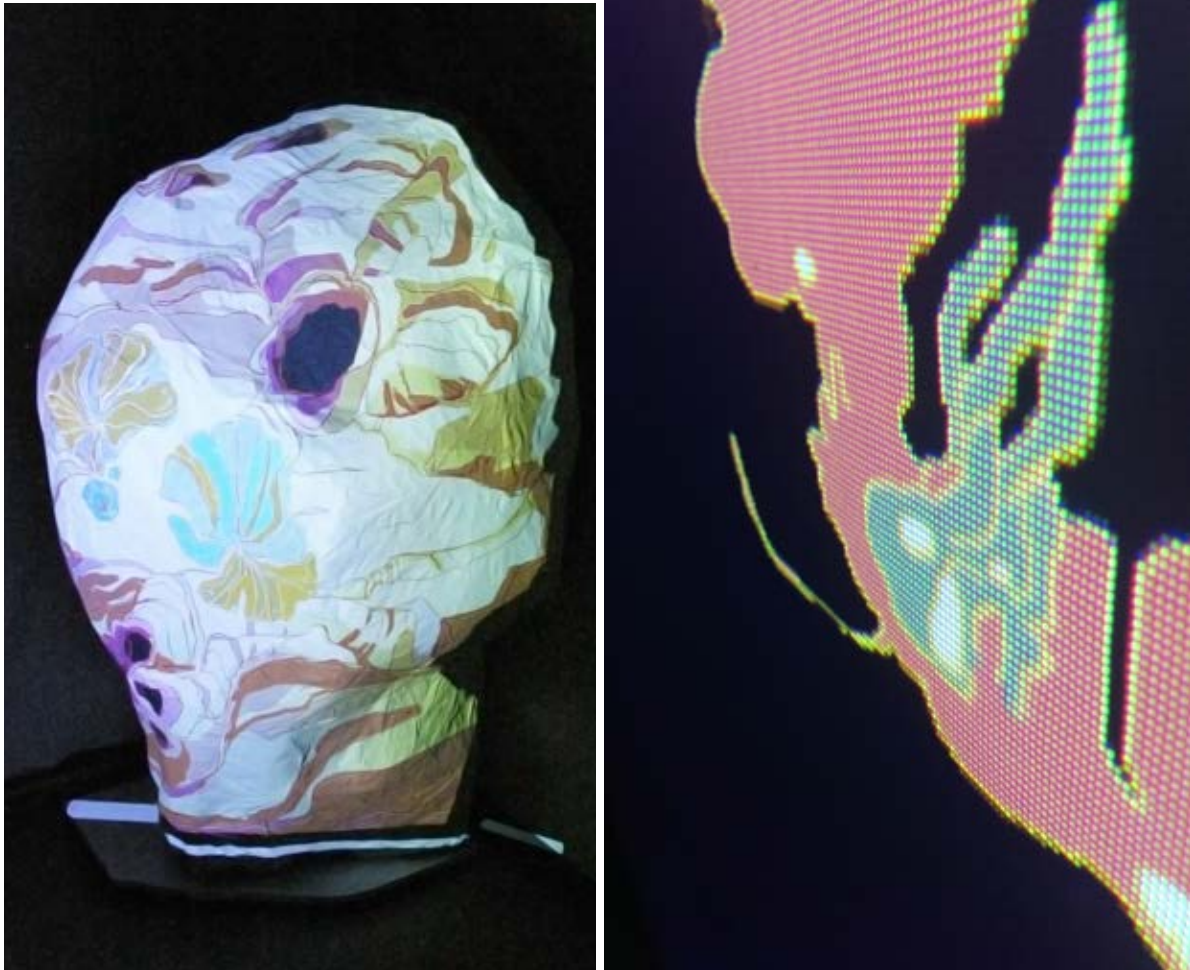


Figure 8. (left) *Hive*, paper mache and wire mesh, 2014.

Figure 9. (right) Detail from projection of *Wasp*, 2014.

Another paradox inherent in video sculpture is the transience of physical sculptural creations, like my lightweight paper mache object that was eventually broken down, and the permanent, perpetual digital imagery I created that was perfectly mapped to the no-longer existing object. This contrast between transience and longevity caused me to reflect on the visual theme I included in this exhibit, of growth and decay occurring in tandem on a dead wasp, something that can be continually reborn feeding off of something dead.

For my final SMP installation I knew I wanted to successfully create a sculpture video hybrid that would invade the gallery space and invite the viewer's inspection. My end product, *Saclings*, involved two video projections that lit up a suspended sculptural object (inspired by shapes seen in spider egg sacs) and other small wall protuberances and animated the space (Fig. 10). With the two projectors I was able to illuminate pockets in the sculpture that would otherwise be in shadow. I could light up these concave areas with smaller scenes and details, like wriggling grubs or specks of color traveling in and out of apparent (actually 2D) holes in the piece. I was able to completely transform the blank, formal white gallery space into a dramatic, organic space, lit by vaguely bioluminescent forms. Viewers couldn't see every detail of the piece without walking around it or stooping down / up, which encouraged more investigation of *Saclings* as both an art piece and a technological feat.

The fleshy pink of the piece is bodily, texturally evocative -- and I want it to be visceral, maybe uncomfortable. But it's also glowing, it's an object made of light in a dark place, and that lends my piece another sense of life. I wanted to find a space between the sculpture existing as a frame for the animations and the animations bringing movement and life to the sculptures, and in *Saclings* I started to find this space. My projector set-up allowed me to instantly and dramatically alter the environment and sculptures, and this powerful control over my own creation is entrancing. I am very encouraged to explore alterability via projection in my future artistic career. At 8 feet high, *Saclings* dwarfs any other art I've created, and I better understand what a critical role the element of scale plays in reimagining the atmosphere of a gallery space. But just as Tony Oursler played with projection and sculpture-mapping on a miniature scale, I know there many elements to explore beyond large-scale sculpture and basic projection, including sound installation and more complex interplay of imagery. Animation itself has the power to be profoundly transformative, so while I subdued the animated elements in *Saclings* I know there is much to explore in terms of higher-concept animation. Still, I want my art to be not a narrative story or event but an ongoing presence, suspended before the viewer, which moves and reforms itself like a living organism on display. As a living organism on display, I know the medium of video-sculpture is a place I can continue to project my own sensations, good and bad, clear and uncertain. And as I do so, I will continue to envelop the viewer in what I create, the uncanny techno-bio organisms imbued with my own sense of life.

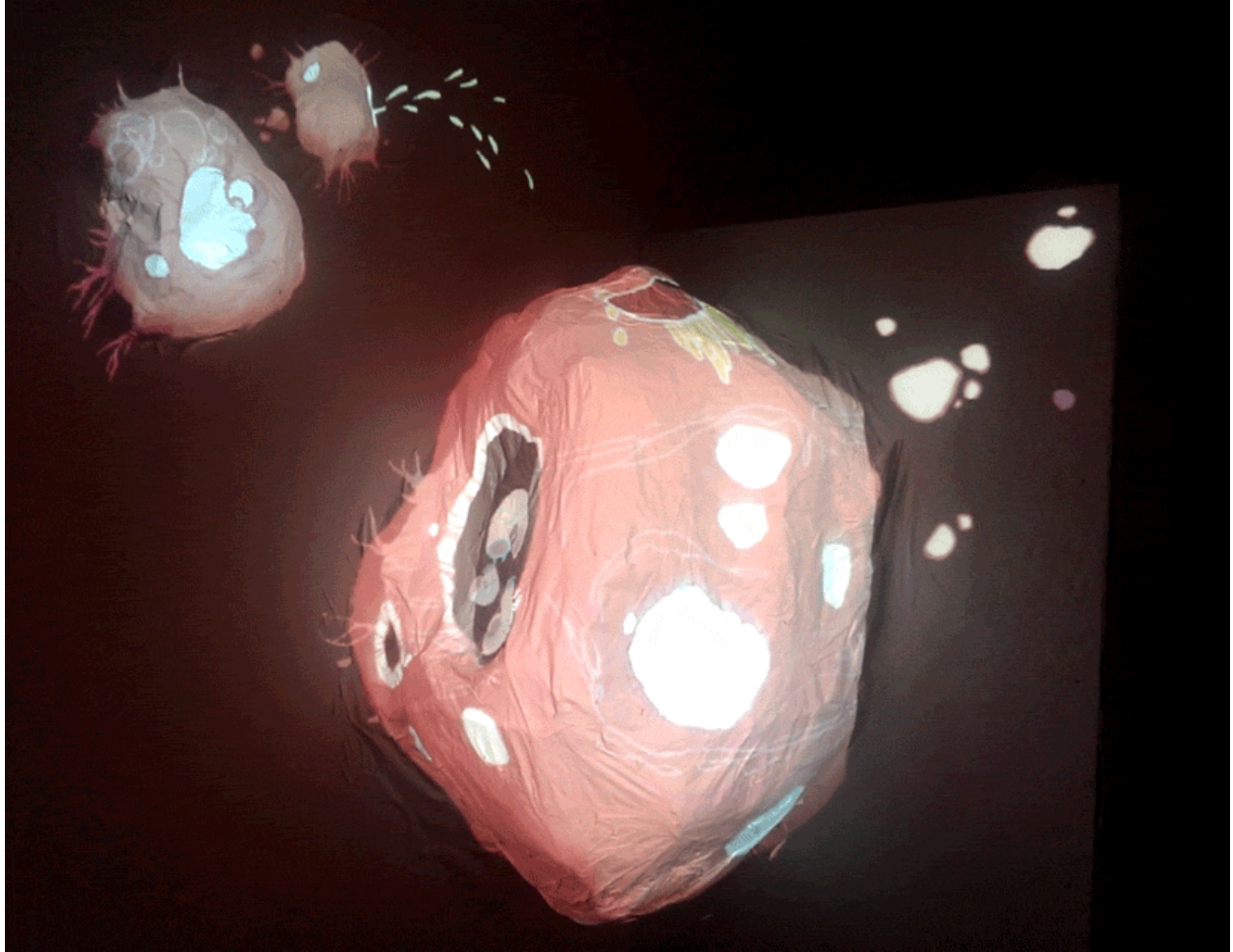


Figure 10. *Saclings*, 2014. Video projection, paper mache, plaster wire mesh. 8'x6'x5'.