

Mayris Rios

Artist Statement

I decided to take on the St. Mary's Project because I wanted to see what kind of interactive artistic experience I could create with my Computer Science and Art Making skills. The meshing of art and technology allows for new innovative, art-making experiences that otherwise would not be possible. Virtual Reality (VR) technology allowed me to develop a new kind of immersive experience that let viewers take a look into my mind. Within my simulation, I created images representing memories of my late father, Manuel Rios, and allow viewers to reenact my journey of grief and moving on. I wanted the piece to revolve around my father, as he was a significant supporting figure throughout my life. My goal is to address absence through image representation, express Puerto Rican beauty, and undergo the process of making through technology. These goals are achieved through clever use of the VR space and cultural implementation. I proposed a simulated environment of a Puerto Rican mountain range. In this mountain range, the viewer collects an assortment of objects, or mementos, that I have come to associate with my late father. Each memento collected releases a balloon. Once all mementos are collected, the viewer progresses to the top of the mountain range and receives a letter, also tied to a balloon, from my father's granddaughter (my niece). They release the balloon and then an airplane soars through the sky. This is to act as a send off to my father. Once my St. Mary's Proposal was approved, I began to work diligently.

For context, my father was a Puerto Rican Veteran who had a passion for aviation and was a father of six. Though effectively, he was a father of nine because he also raised my two nieces and nephew. He passed away summer of 2017 from glioblastoma, a lethal

form of brain cancer. This took a huge emotional toll on my family. We had to mentally adjust to having a key figure suddenly missing from our lives while at the same time deal with an overwhelming financial crisis. This piece acts as a grieving process for me as I continue to move towards the future. It focuses on reflection and taking positive steps forward.

My project began with me reflecting on objects, or images, that I have instinctively come to associate with my late father. I would write down these objects then think *why* I have developed attachments to these objects. Objects such as military boots, a black recliner, radios, coffee machine, airplanes, and my niece are examples of such images. When I looked deeper, I could begin to understand why these images came to me. Every morning, my father would loudly grind coffee while conversing with others in the kitchen. He would go into his office and play with literal dozens of his radios. While driving, I would point at an airplane in the sky and he would name it right off the bat. Sometimes, he would sit in his black recliner chair and watch old-fashioned shows such as Popeye, Gigantor, and The Three Stooges. He would get mad if I did not watch his corny shows with him. I also have many memories of me falling off his recliner. Everyday, he would polish the same military boots he had worn for over thirty years and wear them to work. Lastly, at home, my father would almost always spend time with my (at the time) three-year-old niece Everly Doyle. She loved him very much and was much more negatively affected by his passing than I was. The very last photo my father asked me to take was a picture of him and my niece standing together. She is the most critical object to my piece and for that reason she is implemented into the conclusion segment of my piece along with an airplane. For my VR project, I did not want to simply recreate my

father in a simulated virtual space. I wanted to recreate my father without showing him at all. I wanted to show just what I saw in my mind when I thought of him. In a way, my VR project is similar to that of a lucid dream. This *absence* of the figure was something I wanted to capture to show how memories of the deceased can be more abstract than we sometimes think. Each of these objects is woven into a single linear interactive narrative with an uplifting conclusion that allows me to move on. An artist that helped me understand and push this concept further is contemporary artist Bill Viola. He is a video-based artist who created an artwork based entirely on the absence of the figure. Viola's *Observance* is a performance piece in which individuals from across the globe stand in a line and continue to move forward one by one.⁷ The person at the front of the line begins to mourn intensely, their faces disgruntled. They are grieving at nothing in front of them, but viewers draw connection to (what was) the recent 9/11 attack at the World Trade center. While it may not be obvious that is what the individuals are mourning due to the lack of the literal references to 9/11, the work was successful in isolating the grief that resulted from the tragedy. My intentions are identical to that of Viola. I do not expect people to understand my grief, as my piece is not direct enough. However, it will become clear to the viewer that I am grieving, and that I intend to keep going.

I decided for my final version of my piece, based on feedback of the art faculty, that I would simulate a long curving bridge casted upon a green mountain range. The overall landscape was meant to help evoke the essence of Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico is known for its beautiful rainforests and mountain ranges. The sounds in the background are rain, ocean, and the croaks of Coquis. I wanted Puerto Rico to play a large role because my father was very proud about being a Puerto Rican. Family has always been

an important part of Puerto Rican culture, and by extension, my life. A lot of my life was spent visiting relatives for several weeks at a time in Puerto Rico. In our small island, we shared music as well as our homes. Every household in the neighborhood is one big family who would help each other at their time of need. My father was the epitome of that. He looked after our neighbors, his friends, his wife, and all his lovely daughters. He especially looked after my beautiful 4-year-old niece Everly. And whenever he could, he would visit back home to his brothers and sister to assist in any domestic difficulties. Whenever I struggled with school or work life, my father was by my side, ensuring that he's there for me and that everything would be okay. This familial approach that he held mirrored that of Puerto Rican compassion perfectly.

During his illness, he took many trips back to his home in San Juan in order to relax. According to him, many people do not see the beauty in Puerto Rico. When the average American thinks of Puerto Rico, they think of poverty. They think of thieves. They think of the horrific hurricanes crashing into the island, bringing misery to the people of Puerto Rico. Though mostly, they do not think of Puerto Rico at all. The lush green mountains, the soothing ocean waves, and the croaking Coqui frogs all encapsulated beauty. I wanted to showcase this beauty in my piece. But I also wanted the land to be appreciated. As such, the viewer is placed dead center a rainstorm at the start of journey. Much like the hurricanes that crashed into Puerto Rico, the viewer is blasted with intense weather. This is to reflect not only the initial poor reception of Puerto Rico, but also the grief I felt after my father's passing. However, after the journey is completed, the weather clears and a bright sunlight replaces the storm. This gives the viewer a

feeling of relief, allowing them to appreciate the calming environment surrounding them. That is how the beauty of Puerto Rico became such a critical issue in my piece.

The bridge the viewer traverses mimics that of a large flat tree trunk. Intense rain hampers their vision. The viewer continues along the bridge until they encounter four separate rooms, identified by light beacons emitting from them. These rooms are enclosed from their environment, with no harsh winds or sounds to be found. In each room is a single object that I have strongly associated with my father. Each Object also has a unique sound emitting from it that I have come to associate with my father. Lastly, each object lies on a black recliner, the chair my father used throughout his life. The viewer is provided virtual hands to grab each object presented to them. As soon as they do, a balloon attached to the recliner is released to the sky. The beacon attached to the object then vanishes. Once all four objects have been “collected”, the viewer is free to continue to the end of the bridge. They meet my niece, offering a letter attached to a balloon. As they release it, the weather clears and an airplane flies across the sky, signaling the end of the grieving process. The journey comes to an end as everything fades to white. I chose the symbolism of the balloon because once my father passed; my nieces wrote letters to my father and released them into the sky using balloons. She was very excited to deliver her letter, and it provided her with much emotional relief.

Technology played a large role in the development of my piece. I have always been fascinated by the potential that computer science and art had when used in combination. I felt that my connection with the two fields was more than just sharing a passion. The potential new, grand experiences created by the art-making brain and science brain together is limitless. One would say that creativity is what brings

innovation. We can see this happen in reality. It was through Steve Job's desire for the touch screen that the iPhone came into fruition. Meanwhile, Nintendo's philosophy was designing hardware around fun new ideas. The company liked the concept of physically moving their body to play sports they otherwise could not, so the Wii came into fruition. Even today, Elon Musk pushes the world forward with his *desire* for faster, smarter cars on the streets. And now, he has sent one into space. Innovation is all about bringing new ideas to the forefront, and by injecting my artistic creative mind into my technology-based work, I believe I can create a new, successful artistic experience whilst pushing the boundaries of how we use technology in our contemporary society.

Virtual reality specifically posed a lot of questions for me regarding what makes reality real. What does it mean to simulate something that no longer exists, or never existed in the first place? What kinds of feelings can be drawn from creating virtual objects based on real, physical objects? These are questions I thought about when making my work. Objects such as my father's military boots still exist, but they are also recreated digitally in a way that can be touched. Yes I could simply gather these objects and assemble them in one collection, but the fact that these duplicate objects I have created do *not* physically exist simply reflects the fact that my father is no longer part of this world. Another artist who has drawn similar conclusions is contemporary artist Sarah Rothberg. Rothberg is a digital artist who uses the virtual space for various installation works. Her most relevant work is Memory/Place: My House, a VR installation that honors the memory of the artist's late father.¹ The project simulates a house where participants traverse and collect mementos such as diaries and photographs. Collecting these photographs play real footage of Rothberg's childhood that was recorded by her father.² I

took her approach as inspiration for my own work and began inserting mementos of my own. However, while Rothberg's house is very much open to explore, I decided to lead my viewers on a linear path. This is because my installation is narrative focused, while Rothberg's installation focuses on exploration. Still, looking at her work reminded me to reflect on objects that contain fond memories to me.

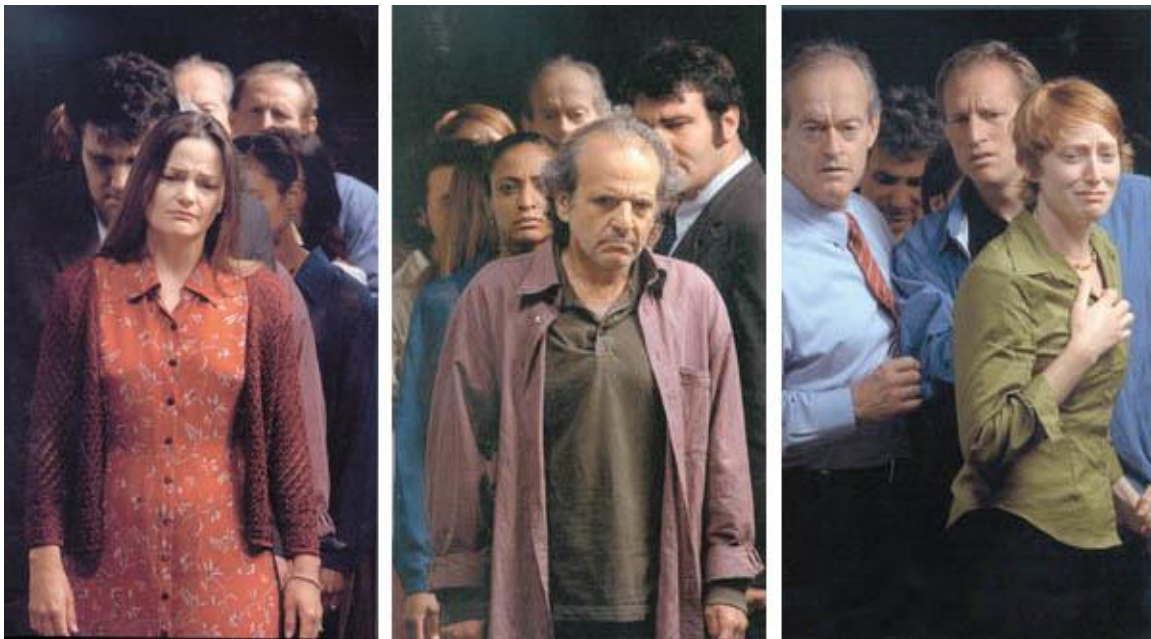
One philosophy of software development is that a project is never truly finished. Everything could use improvements, and as I reach the end of I semester I am continuing experiment with new ways of bringing the virtual space to life. This could not be done without the creative mind my father encouraged me to have.



Untitled, Mayris Rios, 2018, Virtual Reality



Untitled, Mayris Rios, 2018, Virtual Reality



Observance, Bill Viola, 2002, Live Performance



Memory/Place: My House, Sarah Rothberg, 2006, Virtual Reality



Memory/Place: My House, Sarah Rothberg, 2006, Virtual Reality

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