

Animated Video Projection on Objects – a Studio Art Practice

Research paper written in support of my MFA thesis exhibition and
current art practice, in partial fulfillment of the Master of Fine Arts degree

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Abstract

This thesis support paper is the trajectory of my search to uncover what constitutes an aesthetic for my current practice and to unpack what I think the work is about. In this paper I trace the development of my process, identify primary aesthetic preferences, elucidate inspirations, and finally present several interpretations of the work.

I came into the MFA program with the intention of moving my practice in animation to an art form that was non-linear and free of a flat projection screen and story arc. Working with materials is important to me and I also wanted to find a way to integrate time-based media with material art forms.

What I discovered early in the MFA program is that making this shift in my practice involved understanding how object art generates meaning differently than the animated film does.

In the Thesis Exhibition I take ordinary household objects, disrupt them so they are unfamiliar then project animated video of other ordinary objects made strange onto them. The illogical objects and their juxtaposition generates a tension – a cognitive stretching – that gives rise to various readings of the work.

Perceptually engaged, I am immersed in a cognitive puzzle trying to make sense of the paradoxes I am experiencing and bring them to a resolution. It continues to astound me to what degree the household objects that I make strange can generate sensation, feeling, and meaning through the amalgam of their motion, gesture, and form, through the way in which they are situated in space and the way in which they relate to one another.

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Finally I want to express my deep gratitude for the loving support of family and friends, in particular Janet, Linda, Seymour, Hannah and Ori.

We know that they are... not living beings.
We know that they are projections... on a screen.
We know that they are... 'miracles' and tricks of technology,
that such beings don't really exist.
But at the same time:
We sense them as alive.
We sense them as moving.
We sense them as existing and even thinking.
– Sergei Eisenstein¹

1. Introduction

My work is inspired by my daily life. It reflects my struggle to balance my home life and religious practice with my artistic practice, and to harmonize existential questioning with reality as I perceive it. The domestic and familiar are rendered mysterious as I shape them into perceptual paradoxes which parallel my wrestling and are at the heart of my work.

A stuffed and painted navy-blue sweater is fixed to the wall and one arm gestures to the floor. Projected over the sweater and onto the wall-as-screen behind it is a magnified piece of toast. In the same darkened gallery one perceives other real world objects made strange. These too are either fixed to walls, free standing on the floor, or hang from above. Video imagery of abstracted common objects is projected onto these sculptural forms as well. The mood is intimate and quiet, the objects domestic yet uncanny.

I trace my aesthetic values to growing up with reproductions of cave art alongside paintings by the French artist Eduard Manet, one of the first Western painters to allow the material quality of the paint and the rough texture of the brush-strokes to appear. To this day, marks that suggest a form in space rather than optically describe it generate a strong resonance for me. My earliest photographic work was heavily influenced by that of American photographer Duane Michaels who produces narrative based photo-sequences that address feelings and ask philosophical questions. Moving my practice fifteen years ago from photo-sequences that told a story to hand-drawn animation that told a story seemed a logical step.

1. Sergei Eisenstein, qtd in *Leyda*, 1988:55 as qtd by Paul Wells in *Understanding Animation*, p 223.

I came into the MFA program with the intention of moving my practice in animation to an art form that was non-linear and free of a flat projection screen and story arc. Working with materials is important to me and I also wanted to find a way to integrate time-based media with material art forms.

What I discovered early in the MFA program is that making this shift in my practice involved understanding how object art generates meaning differently than the animated film does. This thesis support paper is the trajectory of my search to uncover what constitutes an aesthetic for my practice now and to unpack what I think the work is about. I define the word aesthetic as it is used by the 20th century philosopher Arthur Danto: “By aesthetics, I shall mean: the way things show themselves, together with the reasons for preferring one way of showing itself to another.” (136)

In this paper I will trace the development of my process, identify primary aesthetic preferences, elucidate inspirations, and finally present several interpretations of the work.

2. Defining animation

While animation is commonly categorized as a form of filmmaking, it is in fact a “mode of expression with its own unique aesthetic code and practices.” (Wells 58) Paul Wells, one of the foremost theoretical critics of animation defines it this way:

To animate, and the related words, animation, animated and animator all derive from the Latin verb, *animare*, which means ‘to give life to’, and within the context of the animated film, this largely means the artificial creation of the illusion of movement in inanimate lines and forms.²

Within the context of digital video, I consider animation the frame-by-frame editing of time-based imagery whether created from scratch, captured (as in stop-motion), or the manipulation of existing imagery. The verb “to narrate” has its roots in the Latin word

2. Although the definition serves historical animation processes well, in order to align it with contemporary technologies Wells augments it with the words of master Canadian animator Norman McClaren: “Animation is not the art of drawings that move, but rather the art of movements that are drawn. What happens between each frame is more important than what happens on each frame.” As qtd in Wells, p 10.

Even though digital video has meant the obsolescence of the physical frame as a unit of time, the paradigm of thinking of animated video in terms of frame-based imagery has proven indispensable to current practice.

narrare which means “to relate” or “to tell”, as in “to narrate a story.” I define it for the visual arts as “representing stories or events pictorially or sculpturally” (Webster’s), as well as referencing the way an experience or story is presented or told.

3. Slow down the animation

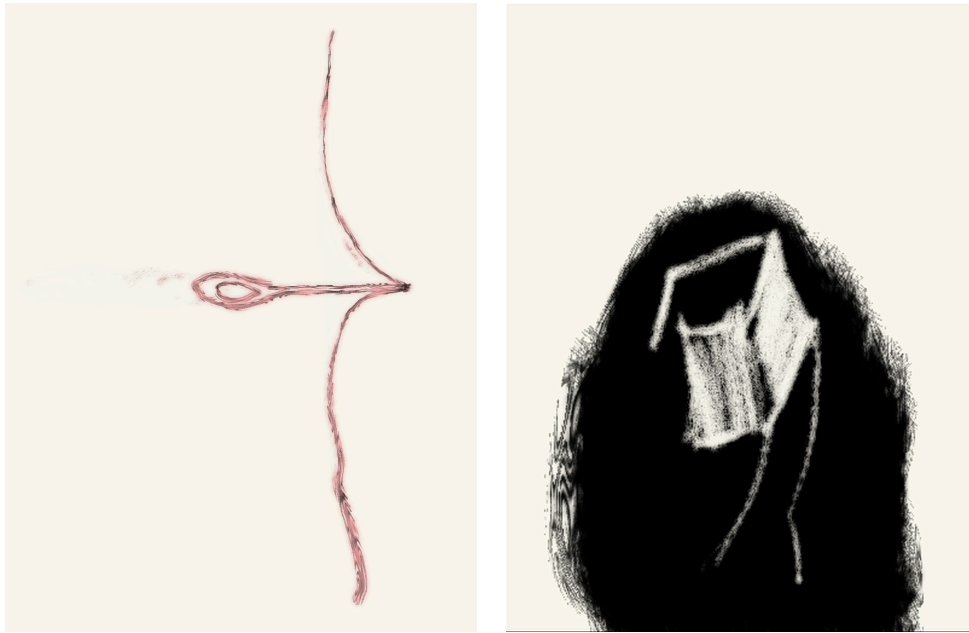
In the first term I hand drew several animations working intuitively rather than with a particular goal in mind. A key formal development resulted from a meeting with Professor Daniel Jolliffe in which he suggested slowing the movie rate so the viewer would be able to see what I saw on the frames – the lush textures, the gestural marks, and the sensuous forms. Slowing them down was a paradigm shift. It redirected the focus of the animation from trying to read it as story to perceiving visual images changing over time. Suddenly the very short, looping animations operated by way of the compelling nature of the images themselves to generate sensation and feeling. For example, the needle puncturing a resistant material and the chair doing a cartwheel generated for me a visceral feeling and a haptic sensation.

Mimicking realism was not my goal but I happened to begin the drawings with figurative (or representational) elements. Including figurative imagery introduced a recognizable subject by default. While I could have argued that the figures I chose to draw were in fact meant to be read as abstract forms and had no value as signifiers of something in the real world, but that would not have been true. I may have been choosing the figure elements intuitively rather than deliberately, but they were certainly not abstract to me.

4. Video projection on objects

In his video projection on sculpture, for example *I Can’t Hear You (Autochthonous)*, American artist Tony Oursler projects the video of faces onto two dummies, a male and female couple standing side-by-side. The accompanying soundtrack is the angry, antagonistic voice of the woman repeating phrases such as, “I can’t hear you!” The work is from Oursler’s 1995 *Autochthonous* series in which he focused on “violation as imagined by the female” (Brunner). I first discovered Oursler’s work early in the program and his strategies for projection onto sculpture were an inspiration to me even though he activates his objects with overt facial features and I wanted to work with more abstracted materials and forms.

Determined to get my new slowed-down animations off the big screen, I back projected them through framed mylar. Some of the projection area overlapped the frames and spilled on to the carpet and walls creating strong abstract patterns of moving light and colour. While the overall feeling of the installation was dramatic, the abstract patterns and animated figurative imagery seemed unrelated. Of the two, the animation held the most interest for me. It was both joyful and uncanny and I wondered how to speak about what I was seeing and experiencing.



Needle and Chair, 2012
Individual channel video projections. Dimensions variable, duration 1 sec,
continuous projection

5. Objects

During the term I also took two found objects – a bra and a vacuum cleaner – and coated them with projection screen paint. While I planned to project animation onto them, they seemed interesting as objects so I showed the vacuum cleaner hung vertically from a wall and the bra presented on a white table. One of the students (Chris Payne) commented that, “It’s not answering the question.” I asked him, “What’s the question the vacuum cleaner is asking?” and he replied, “What’s being sucked in?”

The bra then was asking: What am I holding up/supporting? What cultural role do I play? Do I generate desire and if so, for whom? I play a role in gender identity; should I?

Directing materials in response to pre-conceived questions, however, was less important to me at this stage than responding to and manipulating materials and objects in a more direct and intuitive way. I continued to think about how objects and animation could be made to operate together as one work.

6. Feelings and sensations

From January to March 2013, while I pondered the dilemma of animation on objects, I drew images of Nadezdha and Osip Mandelshtam. My Russian-Jewish heritage was long the source of my identification with the Silver Age of Russian poets and writers. Nadezdha Mandelshtam's story was particularly compelling to me – under siege in the Soviet Union she kept the banned poems of her husband Osip Mandelshtam in memory until they could be safely transcribed back to paper. My drawings, however, were not meant to be portraits of her or illustrations of her story. Instead I wanted to riff off feelings that the story generated for me.

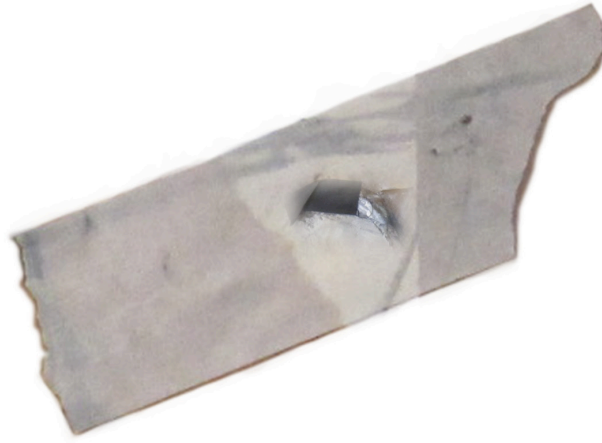
In keeping with her narrative I deliberately used low investment, found papers, glue, gesso, masking tape, black paint, and charcoal to create drawings that lifted off the picture plane (eg. *Vague (Wave)*). Since memory and its ephemeral nature was so much a part of the story, I wanted the works to feel more like brief thoughts than highly considered, polished works. And I wanted them to feel cobbled together under duress. Lines are made with the edges of torn paper, bits of scraps, strips of masking tape, paint applied with sticks, etc. which generate a sense of uncertainty and anxiety – the feelings that I wanted the work to evoke.



Vague (Wave), 2013
Charcoal, black paint, glue, gesso on mixed papers, 11 x 17in

While the story that inspired the work was deeply compelling, little of the narrative was apparent in the finished drawings and I wondered what relationship my original intent had to an interpretation of the work.

In mid-March I set up a camera in front of the easel where I was drawing and photographed various iterations of two Mandelshtam drawings. Editing the image sequences in Final Cut Pro I used transparencies generated by colour keys to create five short animations. *Bandaid* is ghostly in colour and tonal range. It has the feel of a familiar domestic object – a simple bandaid – but the blinking, black eye in the centre makes it illogical and haunting.



Bandaïd, 2013
Single channel video projection
Dimensions variable, duration 3 min 10 sec, continuous projection

I met with Professor Martin Golland at the end of the term to look at the Mandelshtam works and he pointed to Huma Bhabha's use of "unholy" or low materials in the service of resonant imagery. Bhabha creates her sculptures out of found construction materials and integrates rich mark making with the volumetric forms.

While there is an interesting parallel in our use of found materials, what I find most compelling in her work is the strangeness of the human-like forms and the way in which their decaying animism suggests some unfamiliar mythological tradition. I am thinking particularly of her work *Waiting for a Friend*. This sculpture is not simply a representation of some mysterious order of being though. Bhabha allows the found material to retain its original identity while layering a human-like presence on top. In this sense it is similar to the sculptures of contemporary Canadian artist Valérie Blass.

I first encountered the work of Blass in 2012³ and was immediately taken with her sculptures. Like Bhabha she begins with found materials and assembles them illogically in order to provoke unnerving sensations in the viewer.

3. Johnstone, Lesley, curator. *Valérie Blass*. Musée d'art contemporain de Montreal, Montréal, QC, 2012. Exhibition. April 2012.

Generating an impression of forms in space rather than representing them explicitly is important to me. For example, in *Bandaid* I found myself using the colour keys to select marks that hinted at a recognizable object. The South African animator and artist William Kentridge comments in the PBS interview “William Kentridge: Anything Is Possible”, that he works without a script or storyboard. He begins with the first image and builds from there. I work in a similarly intuitive way, but a key difference in our process and its relation to meaning may be in what Kentridge seeks in his mark making. “The drawings don’t start with ‘a beautiful mark’. It has to be a mark of something out there in the world. It doesn’t have to be an accurate drawing, but it has to stand for an observation, not something that is abstract, like an emotion.” I, on the other hand, allow marks that stand for a feeling or sensation. In a 2008 essay “Motion Made Visible” written for the animation community I write:

... [my] strongest animated sequences often consist of almost unrecognizable images. Strung together sequentially they reveal in motion a complexity of information – for example gesture, attitude, or emotion – that would be impossible to duplicate with consciously motivated, precisely drawn forms. It’s fascinating to see how far from a figurative image I can get and still have the animated frames communicate something fresh, something that wasn’t apparent while looking at the stills, something in which the viewer can find a wealth of resonance and meaning.

7. Paradox

Webster’s College Dictionary defines paradox as “a seemingly contradictory or absurd statement that expresses a possible truth.” (980) Ambiguity and paradox both play an important role in my work.

In a 2009 email exchange with a friend and art critic we discussed the idea that many drawn or painted images are visually ambiguous compared to continuous tone film images and he drew what I believe is a profound distinction:

... the main thing is that a painted or drawn portrait is constructed – [it is] a work of continuous interpretation, involving time.... Hence the painting involves you in an act of reconstruction...⁴

4. Personal correspondence.

This visual ambiguity applies not only to two dimensional work; I am reminded of Bhabha and Blass's assemblages and the way the transparent layers of *Bandaid* operated.

In his research neurobiologist R. Beau Lotto suggests that the brain evolved in order to make sense of the world by negotiating the illusions that we see (such as shadows) with their real world context and unifying them into a perception of reality. If Lotto's model is right, then perception is the act of reconciling ambiguities rather than receiving visual perceptions at face value. I wonder at the thought that art deeply engages these interpretive aspects of cognition.

In early January 2013 I animated two date pits using a very basic stop-motion technique. I returned to this footage in May. There were elements of narrative as one date pit appeared to take a dominant role, its action having a dramatic impact on the other date pit. I augmented the story by hand-animating a mouth and tail on to the pits. They now appeared as strange, snail-like creatures. And there was a perceptual paradox, a contradiction, that excited me: the bodies appeared solid and inflexible, uncharacteristic of a living thing. Yet the way they moved and their interactions suggested that they were alive and even had agency (*Date pits*). I define the word "agency" from its Latin origin *agent* which means "to act." (Webster's) And I define having agency in the case of my animation practice as lines, shapes, or forms appearing to act under their own volition. I projected the animation onto hand-made paper textured with gouges and troughs made with my fingers which activated the surface.



Date pits, 2013

Video projector, media player, USB key with digital file, handmade paper
13 x 16.5in, duration 2 min 23 sec, continuous projection

Belly originated with found “instapak”. When I squeezed it, this cushion of foam covered with a polyethylene skin inflated and deflated, reminding me of the way a belly expands and contracts during a breath or when someone with a waistline gains and loses weight. The captured video even had what suggested to my eye a bit of skirt where the plastic skin had gathered near the lower edge which gendered it as female. I projected the video onto a variety of grounds. Canvas painted in a range of blue-black tones generated the most dramatic lighting effect. I cut the canvas to a shape – and placed a matching mask on the video – which augmented the feeling of a waistline and belly. The unmistakable synthetic nature of the polyethylene film juxtaposed against its rhythmic, organic motion generated for me a paradox and a curious sense of wonder at an object that was at once mysterious and haunting yet invited empathy such that I could identify with it.



Belly, 2013

Video projector, media player, USB key with digital file, painted canvas
14 x 22in, duration 3 min 4 sec, continuous projection

Manifest followed soon after *Belly*. My sister had sent me a scan of a ship's manifest which diarized my grandmother's immigration from Austria to North America in January 1914. I had brought a pair of pantyhose to the studio to project onto and tossed them on the terrazzo floor. As I animated them by squeezing and twisting the fabric I thought about my grandmother, a young woman traveling alone on a ship full of men. She would have been wearing hose that looked similar to mine. And I wondered if she slept at night, if she had been afraid, if she had been safe as the ship slowly plied its way across the North Atlantic in the dead of winter.



Manifest, 2013

Video projector, media player, USB key with digital file, hand-made paper
22 x 24in, duration 4 min 3 sec, continuous projection

Hand-made, multi-toned and textured paper shaped into a domed, three-dimensional object provided the ground on which I projected the animation. As with *Belly*, the found object's material identity (pantyhose) was dramatically altered by its creaturely motion. In fact altering any of the elements – material, motion, ground, shape of the mask – significantly changed the meaning of the work.

Most of the objects I work with are domestic in nature. The way I manipulate them to bring out their sensual and sensuous aspect emerges from gendered assumptions which have shaped my thinking and experience. I interpret one aspect of *Belly* and *Manifest* to suggest the commodity aspect of flesh or body squeezed by social expectations. The waistline and suggestion of a skirt in *Belly*, and the use of pantyhose in *Manifest* belie a neutrally gendered reading of the work. And both works feel familiar to my experience as a woman. While they emerged as a result of the intuitive nature of the process, I perceive in these works as well as in Blass's a subverting and blurring of common gender associations.

Bhabha, Blass and I reference creaturely forms in our work, reconfiguring everyday objects and materials into strange and mysterious looking creatures. As Blass notes: “Every sculpture is a body and has an attitude ... I play with the capacity we have to see a face (or a body) in an abstraction.” (Schwabsky)

In *Belly* and *Manifest*, I deliberately avoided animating recognizable body forms in order to undermine assumptions about what it means to be alive. Instead I rely on the viewer’s capacity to read the motion of the objects as that of a body moving in either a dream-like state or under its own volition. By not privileging explicitly animalised forms, my objects resist conventional biological notions of “animal”; their motion and gestures operate openly to generate questions about what it means to be alive and to have agency.

Blass’s *Femme panier* is a jacket-wearing basket with fishnet stockings stretched tightly over mannequin legs. A turquoise ice pick in one hand and a spider claw substituting for the other, the figure’s aggression is self-evident. Yet her stance – with head tucked so deeply within the jacket that the viewer will never see it – speaks of vulnerability. This is one of the few fully resolved female figures in Blass’s oeuvre (Johnstone, 115) and it speaks of both power and insecurity. The sculpture is at once beautiful in its bright colours and textures, but frightening in its disturbing resolve to protect itself at all costs.



Valérie Blass
Femme panier, 2010

Blass's sculptures and my animations are constructed from found consumer goods – in Blass's case intermixed with highly crafted sculptural forms, in my case intermixed with highly crafted animated motion. In both our practices the whole is an assembly of unrelated but familiar feeling bits. Meaning is generated by a perceived association of the parts, the whole resolved into one unit. I find myself delighted, intrigued, repelled and absorbed by the way in which Blass's textures, colours, referential objects, and forms interact and *Coming near to hear you*, completed in my fourth term, generates a similar response for me.



Coming near to hear you, 2013
Video projector, media player, USB key with digital file, fleece, and canvas
Dimensions variable, duration 23 sec, continuous projection

The delightful colours and cartoon references in *Coming near to hear you* defy the uncanny presence of this irrational being. In the role of viewer I find myself hovering in that liminal space between “Ah ha! I know what that is” and “No it’s not! It’s something else entirely.” Each of the diverse materials and objects in the work stimulates a memory, a haptic experience, a moment of recognition, an attempt to decipher the assembly of parts which constantly collapses into a reading of the whole, which is the paradox.

8. “The uncanny”

Amelia Jones considers Blass’s works “uncanny” in the way they provoke discomfort and even fear. “Blass plays with our expectations regarding objects and suspends them in a relation of unease and potentially ‘uncanny’ provocation.” (Jones, 121) The 20th century psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud was one of the first to unpack the idea of “the uncanny” in a rigorous way. In his 1919 essay “The Uncanny” Freud brings together two opposing concepts signified by the German terms *heimlich* or “of the home”, and *unheimlich* or “foreign to the home.” For Freud “the uncanny” moment is brought about by a sudden confrontation of

opposing feelings: the familiar and the alien. Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori's 1970 paper "The Uncanny Valley" seems to me constructed on Freud's understanding of "the uncanny." Mori graphs the familiar against human likeness concluding that there is a zone – "the uncanny valley" – in which something unfamiliar yet exhibiting human likeness is perceived as too unnerving to bear.

"The uncanny" is a fitting descriptor for the way in which dream, nightmare and reality commingle in the domestic objects made strange in my work.

9. "... the public recognizes its own life in them"

In 1931 the 20th century literary and cultural critic Walter Benjamin drafted a short essay titled "Mickey Mouse" which he included in early versions of *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. While he deleted it from the final version of the book (Hansen 52), the essay contributes something of significance to the interpretation of both my art and that of Bhabha and Blass. Benjamin begins the essay by proposing that the cartoon mouse is a model for creating believable characters that do not depend on the human shape in order to be convincing. "Mickey Mouse proves that a creature can still survive even when it has thrown off all resemblance to a human being. He (Disney) disrupts the entire hierarchy of creatures that is supposed to culminate in mankind." (338)

Benjamin's view that Mickey Mouse disrupts the need to visualize fabricated anthropomorphic creatures as having human-like features indicates one argument for why I identify with these atypical, highly inventive creatures: "... the public recognizes its own life in them." (Benjamin 338) Even though he abandoned the first draft of his essay "Mickey Mouse" for political reasons (Hansen 52), the original fragments are still extant. I find Benjamin's intuitions, articulated in this text, visionary for our times and prove an intriguing entry point into Bhabha's, Blass's and my works discussed above. In our assumption that our artifacts will be read as spirited creatures, are Bhabha, Blass and I building on a century of character animation? Or rather on an age-old innate sense of superstition and/or mythology for which humans may be hardwired?

10. "chance, intuition, and will" are part of the process

In reference to Blass's work Barry Schwabsky notes:

... the various parts [are] brought together through some seemingly imponderable conjunction of chance, intuition, and will [rather] than through any immediately perceptible formal resolution. (415)

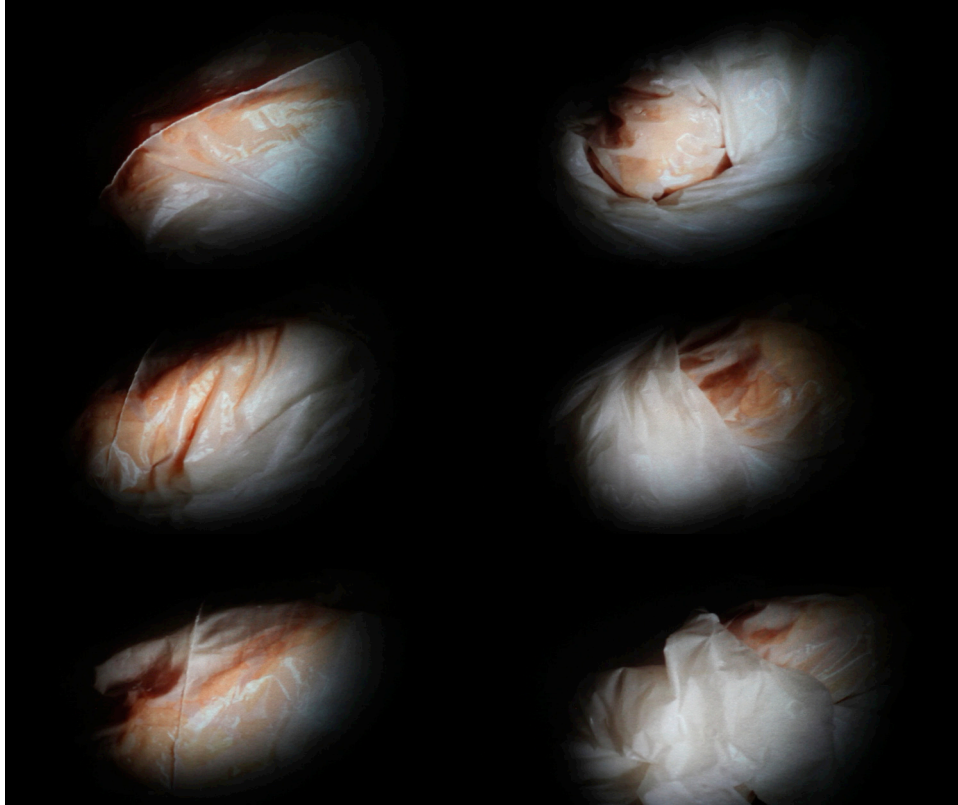
I want to take a moment to define intuition as I understand it because it plays an important role in my work. I first read 17th century philosopher Benedict Spinoza when I was a teenager and I carry today values that I can trace back to that early reading. I turned to his *Ethics* again in my fourth term of the MFA. I was using a camera lens to capture animated imagery rather than hand-drawing the images. Spinoza was a lens grinder to the great biologists and astronomers of his time and I wondered what impact a lens-based view of the world had on his insights. But his thoughts on intuition captivated me more than my initial line of inquiry.

Spinoza mentions intuition briefly in the *Ethics* in the section where he identifies three ways of knowing: i) empirical knowledge which is based on perception; ii) reason which is grounded in argument; and iii) intuitive knowledge which for him is that near instantaneous moment of knowing which results from a synthesis of empirical and rational knowledge (113). For Spinoza intuitive knowledge is the highest form of knowing because in that moment of synthesis a person brings to bear all that they have experienced, all that they have learned and all that they know rationally (112). Intuitive knowledge according to Spinoza is therefore unique to one's individual experience of the world.

In "Intentionality and Art Historical Methodology: A Case Study" contemporary art critic and historian Thierry de Duve presents a case for considering aesthetic intuition as a legitimate aspect of an artist's process. Analyzing the composition of Eduard Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, de Duve argues that Manet's unnatural presentation of space shifts the focus of the painting from the tableau to the viewer's awareness of their position in relation to the *mise-en-scène* before them, thereby including the viewer as a player in the artwork. Without any evidence to indicate intentionality behind Manet's choices (and according to de Duve there appears to be no such evidence) de Duve concludes that Manet designed his context shifting composition by way of aesthetic intuition.

Even though I am animating real world objects, there is an intuitive element to the way I morph the forms. For example, as I animated *Swaddling*, the frame-by-frame positioning of the object was more intuitive than deliberately directed.

Insight into the way intuition operates led to early interpretations of my work. While chance and will both play an important role in my process, understanding that intuition is not arbitrary gave me the confidence to make intuitive decisions knowing that they were informed by the unique expression of who I am. I began to interpret the work as it related to my experience. In *Swaddling* for example I recalled my instinct to tightly swaddle my infant daughter and wondered at the gendered, intuitive way I wrapped the fish waste that is the object in this work.



Swaddling, 2014

Video projector, media player, USB key with digital file, black foam-core

Dimensions variable, duration 1 min 55 sec, continuous projection

An example of morphing the object from position-image A (top left corner) to position-image B (lower right corner.) The columns are to be read top to bottom.

11. Personal history of the artist in relation to meaning

In a recent studio visit with Professor Penny Cousineau-Levine we discussed the difference between emotion and feeling and looked at “aboutness” (Danto) in relation to the personal history of the artist. The conversation prompted new areas to contemplate and research which in turn led to an important question about the relationship between the artist’s personal history and interpretations of the work.

In *Brain-based Learning* Eric Jensen distinguishes primary emotions (a temporary reaction to an object or event) from secondary emotions or feelings (a more sustained outlook on reality):

Emotions are generated from biologically automated pathways and are experienced by people universally across cultures. The six universal emotions are joy, fear, surprise, disgust, anger, and sadness. Feelings, on the other hand, are culturally and

environmentally developed responses to circumstances. Examples include worry, anticipation, frustration, cynicism, and optimism. (84)

Revisiting my work *Manifest* I asked myself what aspects of the work were generated by a particular emotion (fear) or feeling (general sense of the world being a dangerous place) I experienced at the time I constructed the work and whether or not that information was important to its interpretation. For example, I appreciated and found meaning in the work of contemporary Columbian artist Doris Salcedo even before I fully understood the artist's personal history and the political events which informed her experience.

It became clear that while my work is inspired by my experience, viewers can also find their experience reflected in it. I made a conscious decision not to narrowly direct the meaning of my work to personal history.

12. Metaphor – poetic ingredient

In the fifth term I turned my attention to critical writing on film animation and it suddenly became clear to me that many of the aesthetic strategies that Wells ascribes to experimental animation parallel those of my current work. Czech animator Jan Svankmajer once commented that:

Animation enables me to give magical powers to things. In my films, I move many objects, real objects. Suddenly, everyday contact with things which people are used to acquires a new dimension... (11)

Therein lies the paradox for the viewer: because it moves so convincingly, the often simple shape is at once a patch of ink or piece of foam and a complex being acting under its own volition.

One of animation's great strengths is its extraordinary capacity to compress complex ideas into a very compact form and it does this through the use of metaphor, a principal poetic ingredient of animation. By metaphor I mean x is as y . We know rationally that x and y are not the same, but x suggests y so profoundly that we pack x 's meaning into our conceptual experience and understanding of y . In *Belly*, for example, the rhythmic expanding and contracting motion is for me a metaphor for both breathing and repeating cycles of weight gain and loss. I interpret the work *A question or two* – in which a still image is projected onto a physical object and the wall-as-screen behind it – as reflecting my wrestling to balance the polarities of a complex relationship from daily life and I derive questions from it about the way in which boundaries shape relationships in the parent-child dynamic.

Metaphors are very malleable in animation because as the imagery morphs, the x as is y strategy for making meaning remains dynamic and in flux. The familiar can suddenly behave strangely, alter form into something alien, then revert once again to the commonplace and this strategy readily invokes a sense of “the uncanny.” (Wells) In describing her process Bhabha says, “You either heighten something or you suppress it.” (79) Her comment as applied to animation would pertain to focusing not only the formal elements but the way in which the images metamorphose over time and the timing of those transformations in service of the resolution of the work.

Many of Wells’s aesthetic strategies for experimental animation provided me with concepts and language to speak about my work. By the end of the fifth term when these concepts became apparent to me, I felt like I had found my way home.



A question or two, 2014

Video projector, media player, USB key with digital file, shirt, acrylic paint, metal clip
61 x 42 x 9in, duration 40 sec, continuously projected

13. Animated video projection on objects

Animal side of sleep is a current work in which animated white bedding is projected onto a black dress pinned upside down and stretched taut at four points to the wall. Several of the shapes on the dress are mirrored in the animation. As an object the dress both receives the projected light of the pillow and it filters that light altering how the projection is perceived (the black of the dress dramatically reducing the dynamic range of the tones). The two visual elements vie in a subject/object embrace. Is the video commenting on the physical object, or is the physical object commenting on the video?

The way the dress is stretched out and hanging reminds me of a side of beef. Close inspection of the animation reveals a simple domestic object – a common pillow – which is behaving as though it is some kind of absurd creature. In a moment of shyness or fear, it suddenly tucks in tight within itself. Regaining a braver stance, it pokes out its “head” and sniffs at our presence perhaps trying to determine if we are friend or foe. The dress – simple and black and stretched out like a carcass – juxtaposed against the white pillow’s illogical behaviour reminds me of the paradoxes of dreams from which I try to derive meaning.

In a recent studio visit, Canadian painter Dil Hildebrand mentioned that the wall can be perceived as a place of the imagination and the floor as a place of reality. I found the metaphor compelling and made several works that reference it. While the dress is fixed to the wall, it hangs downward gesturing to the floor. The deliberate positioning symbolizes for me the struggle to make real world meaning of something that issues from my imagination.

Another reading could be found in spiritual references to sleep and death. “And sleep is a small death,” wrote Russian author Leo Tolstoy⁵ in 1903.

While there are several routes into the work’s interpretation, the animation was inspired by a moment of daily life. Waking one morning I noticed that my pillow seemed to have had a very hard night and I wondered at how the struggles of daytime unwittingly make their presence felt in the paradoxes that are my dreams.

5. As qtd in Leo Tolstoy, *Path of Life*, p.275.



Animal side of sleep, 2014
Video projector, media player, USB key with digital file, dress
48 x 50 x 4in, duration 2min 12sec, continuous projection

14. Conclusion

Over the two years of the MFA program I shifted my practice from short animated narrative film to animated video projection on objects and this thesis support paper recounts that evolution.

It was interesting to discover that what inspires my work has not really changed since I began making art. Narrative, time-based imagery first appeared in my early photo-sequences and continues in my current practice. Elements of drawing can still be seen in the marks and textures of painted objects, the cut shapes of the video masks, and the reduced palette.

Domestic objects, paradox, and “the uncanny” appear even in my earliest work and reflect my wrestling with memory, spiritual questions, social expectations, and the realities of daily life.

Today I take ordinary household objects, disrupt them so they are unfamiliar then project animated video of other ordinary objects made strange onto them. The illogical objects and their juxtaposition generates a tension – a cognitive stretching – that gives rise to various readings of the work. Perceptually engaged, I am immersed in a cognitive puzzle trying to make sense of the paradoxes I am experiencing and bring them to a resolution. It continues to astound me to what degree the household objects that I make strange can generate sensation, feeling, and meaning through the amalgam of their motion, gesture, and form, through the way in which they are situated in space and the way in which they relate to one another.

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Artist statement to accompany Thesis Exhibition

August 2014

Sometimes my family sits in the living room and nothing much happens. Perhaps a fly buzzes by. Or the clock simply ticks the time away. "Remember when you took me to the ballgame? And the big lights came on with a hiss? And I wondered who was looking at me?"

Picture a Family gives material form to my idea of a family passing time together sharing memories. In addition, the work questions how family may be literally and conceptually pictured.

The work is presented as an installation with sculptural and video elements. Three stuffed and posed articles of clothing sit in close proximity on a sofa.

A piece of primed canvas is draped over the sofa and one side of a piece of wood moulding is projected running horizontally along the bottom edge of it. This wood edge compositionally and conceptually frames the base of the sculptural unit and together with the canvas makes reference to a painting and its frame.

An ambiguous matrix with dark cavities is projected onto this sculptural unit and compositionally unifies it. Video of various scenes, for example, a hazy sky or rain and sleet driving against a windowpane, play over top and onto the wall-as-screen behind. Various diegetic sounds, for example, children playing and a clock ticking, augment the representational context of the video and play throughout the nine minute loop.

My practice previous to the MFA centered on animation. Over the two years of the program I developed a number of strategies drawn from character animation (for example, timing) to give inanimate household objects the appearance of moving under their own volition – of having agency. The common domestic objects moving in a creaturely way provoked a sense of “the uncanny.” These animations were then projected onto sculptural objects made from discarded clothing and variously textured and coloured fabrics. I experimented with spatial presentation as well – they were hung on walls, from ceilings, and in the corners of rooms, as well as presented as stand-alone objects.

In this final thesis work I bring the results of that research to bear on a more complex artwork of longer duration and larger physical size. I am also using sound in a more elaborate way than in previous semesters.

In addition, the new work has a somewhat different conceptual approach. Rather than focusing on objects made creaturely, this piece gives material form to my idea of family and the complex nature of the relationships that underpin that unit.

In spite of the differences, there is an underlying sense of paradox in my work expressed through the juxtaposition of harmonious and discordant elements, the domestic versus the unpredictable and uncontrolled – in effect the wild. This can be perceived in my earlier work in the creaturely motion exhibited by domestic objects, and in the current work as the dark, mysterious elements that generate a sense of unease in this domestic setting.

In addition to being an artist, I am also a spouse and a parent and one of the inspirations for the work is my personal experience of family.

I begin any work by defamiliarizing ordinary objects in order to make them strange. I strip out their functionality by deforming, painting, and/or animating them. This allows me to play – engage freely – with their remaining materiality and collide the remnants of their original object identifications to generate sensation and feelings as well as rational associations.

This particular work began with collecting articles of cast-off clothing, stuffing them, and coating them with white paint which reflects projected light well. Selecting three forms familiar to my idea of family, I posed them on a real-world sofa and gave them human gestures. The figure that might appear to some as more “female” is made taller and more assertive than the “male”. The gender of the “child” is made deliberately ambiguous. While these choices blur common gender associations that my generation grew up with, they are informed by my lived experience. This sculptural unit was then placed several feet in front of a wall.

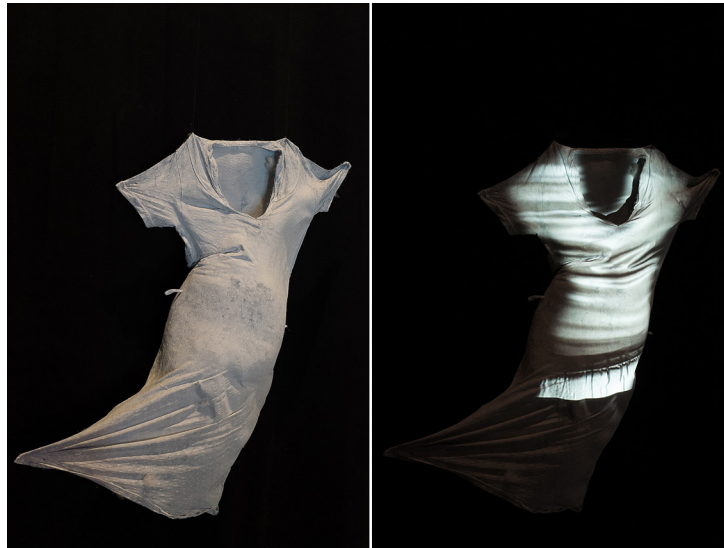
Animated video of a matrix with dark cavities was then projected onto them. It introduced a discordant note to the otherwise intimate family setting. The two feet of space between the sculptural unit and the wall allowed for a strong cast shadow to fall behind and above the forms which augmented the sense of this being an interior space. The sound of a ticking clock created a sense of interior time passing.

The production of seven discrete video scenes followed. They are somewhat abstract and the timing of the fades generated for me a sense of shared memories. The preparation of a soundtrack followed with diegetic sounds such as children playing outdoors and the buzz of crickets; these augmented an exterior sense of space as well as the sense of time passing.

A family sits together on a sofa. The ticking of a clock and scenes passing overhead suggest to me that they are close, sharing memories and passing time together. But there are also dark cavities that leisurely drill through solid form, undermining the solid substance that otherwise shapes this family.

The title of the work is *Picture a Family*. It presents my idea of a family given material form. In conjunction with the draped canvas, picture frame and title, the work questions what a literal picture of a family can be as well as invites the viewer to examine their mental picture of a family.

Documentation of Thesis Exhibition



Breathing dress

Installation view, on/off. Animation/sculpture hybrid, 2014

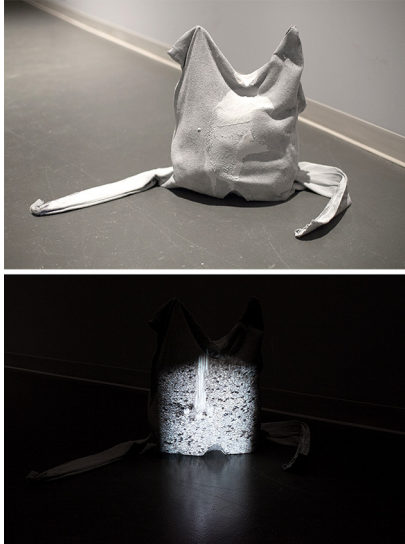
Video projection on stuffed and painted dress,
installation dimensions H 70 x W 39 x D 72 in



Pantyhose on a chair

Installation view, on/off. Animation/sculpture hybrid, 2014

Video projection on painted chair seat and black pantyhose,
installation dimensions H 17 x W 16 x D 47 in



Splash

Installation view, video on/off.

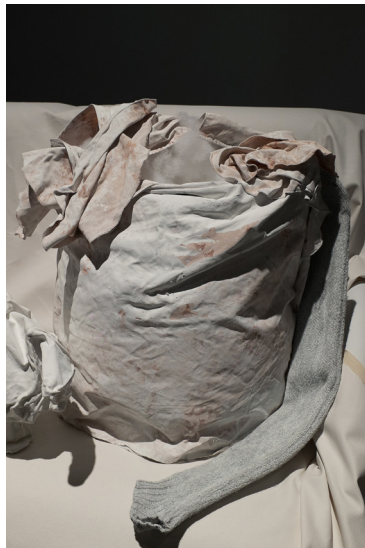
Animation/sculpture hybrid, 2014

Video projection on painted and stuffed clothing,
installation dimensions H 24 x W 39 x D 73 in



Picture a family

Installation view, video on/off. Animation/sculpture hybrid, 2014
Video projection on painted sofa and stuffed clothing,
installation dimensions H 96 x W 180 x D 211 in (variable)



Picture a family

Installation view, video on/off. Animation/sculpture hybrid, 2014
Video projection on painted sofa and stuffed clothing,
installation dimensions H 96 x W 180 x D 211 in (variable)



Picture a family

Installation view, video on/off. Animation/sculpture hybrid, 2014

Video projection on painted sofa and stuffed clothing,
installation dimensions H 96 x W 180 x D 211 in (variable)



Breathing dress
Installation view, detail. Animation/sculpture hybrid, 2014
Video projection on stuffed and painted dress,
installation dimensions H 70 x W 39 x D 72 in



Pantyhose on a chair

Installation view, detail. Animation/sculpture hybrid, 2014

Video projection on chair seat and black pantyhose,
installation dimensions H 17 x W 16 x D 47 in



Splash

Installation view, detail.

Animation/sculpture hybrid, 2014

Video projection on painted and stuffed clothing,
installation dimensions H 24 x W 39 x D 73 in



Picture a family

Installation view. Animation/sculpture hybrid, 2014

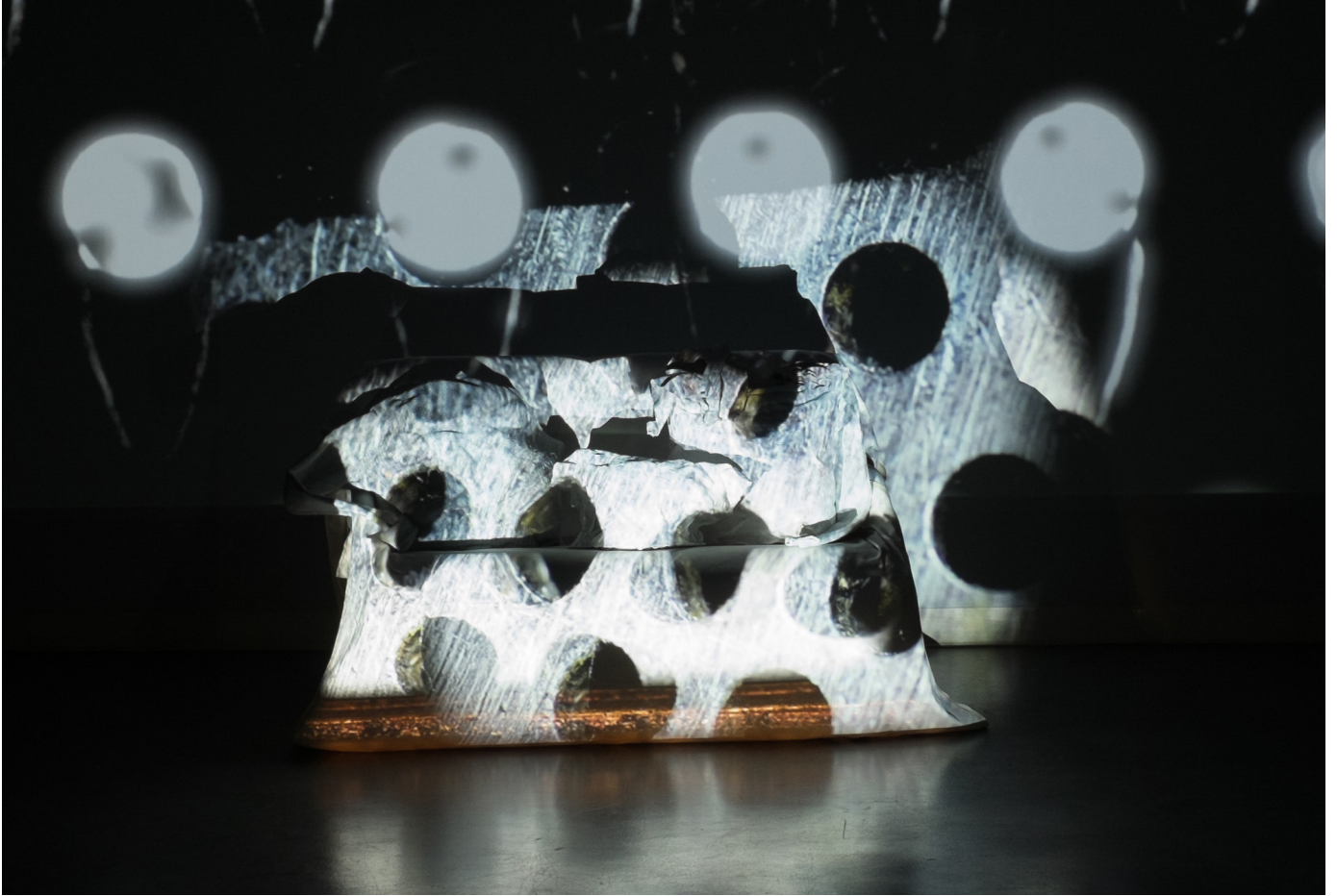
Video projection on painted sofa and stuffed clothing,
installation dimensions H 96 x W 180 x D 211 in (variable)



Picture a family

Installation view. Animation/sculpture hybrid, 2014

Video projection on painted sofa and stuffed clothing,
installation dimensions H 96 x W 180 x D 211 in (variable)

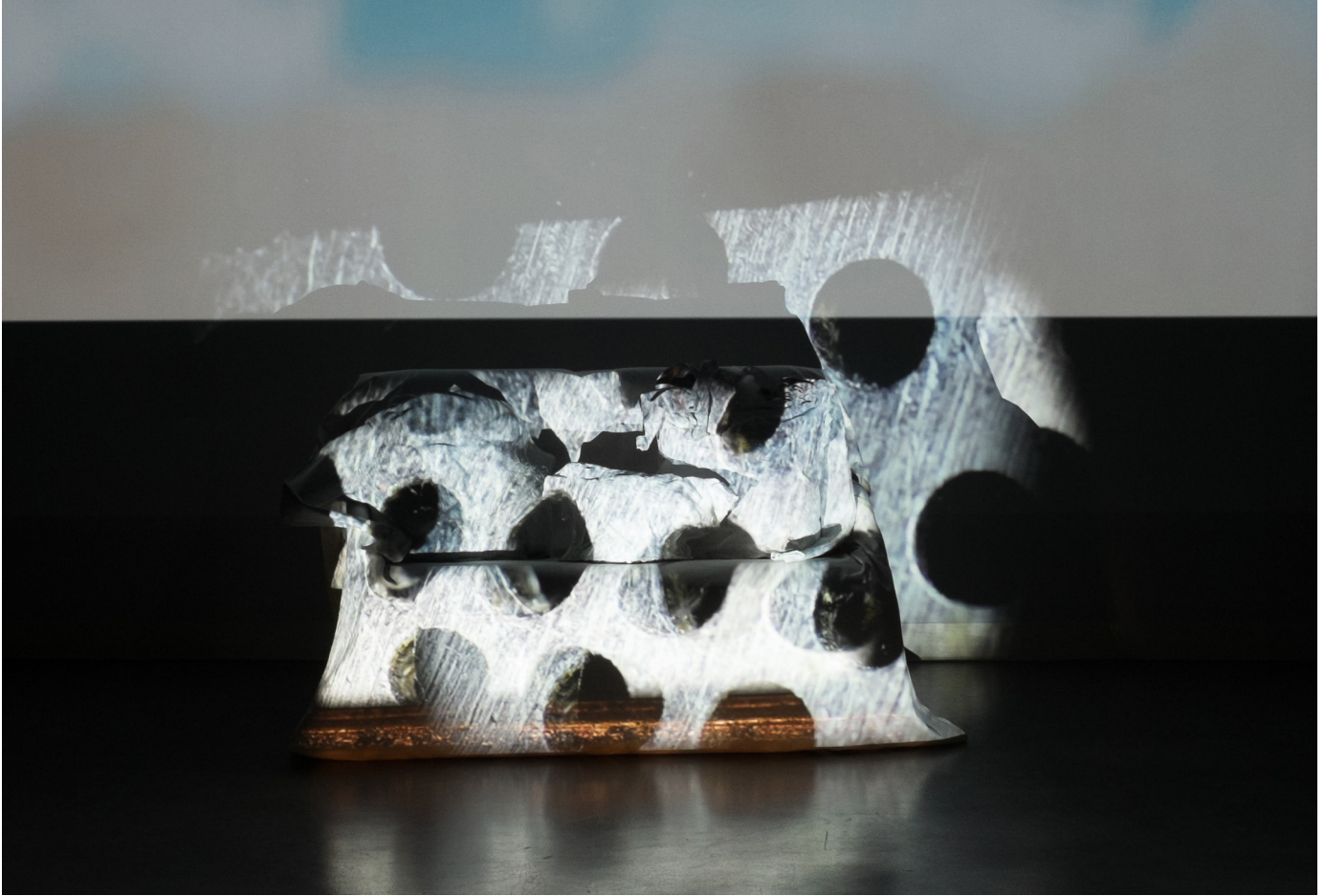


Picture a family

Installation view. Animation/sculpture hybrid, 2014

Video projection on painted sofa and stuffed clothing,

installation dimensions H 96 x W 180 x D 211 in (variable)



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Video projection on painted sofa and stuffed clothing,
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