

the tide pool room: a love story

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Abstract

the tide pool room: a love story uses durational film, an immersive hammock installation, and creative essays about swimming to create emotional crosscurrents between love, loss, friendship, water, and tide pools.

The film is 6 hours and 13 minutes long, which is the length of time between low tide and high tide on planet Earth. It is composed of long shots of coastal landscapes surrounding Sitka, Alaska, including underwater footage. The film uses local sounds of waves, barnacles, seabirds, and hydrophone recorded sounds interlaced with an experimental musical score composed and performed by Julie Zhu.

An immersive installation with ten tie-dyed hammocks, bean bags, and underwater mood lighting invites viewers to stay awhile. The film is projected as large as possible on a gallery wall. The film score plays over surround speakers. Two black fiberglass fountain sculptures create water sounds that interact with the sounds of the film. A large-scale tie dye painting is suspended over a wall.

The viewer is also invited to take a booklet of short essays. The first essay, *Six Ways of Cutting a Fish*, is a sequence of prose poems meditating on cutting a fish aboard a commercial fishing boat. The second section is a series of essays called *Swimming with my Friend*, which is a collection of memories examining the emotional parallels of swimming and loving a close friend.

The creative works bring together several disparate “sites of exchange,” places where two bodies overlap, exchange material and transform each other: The knife and the fish, the sea and the tide pool, and myself and my friend. By placing alongside each other these different narratives, the work seeks to explore several interlocking questions:

Keywords

Art; Film; Video; Durational Film; Tide pool; Ocean; Hydrofeminism; Ecofeminism; Fishing; Fish; Friendship; Relationships; Ecotone; Water; Expedition; Field Work; Installation Art; Immersive Art; Love; Site of Exchange; Sitka, Alaska, Sailing, Swimming, Enmeshment; Tides

What can cutting fish teach me about love? What can love teach me about cutting fish? What can I learn about love and loss by investigating sites of exchange in my own life? Can art help me to answer these questions in a way that other forms of research cannot?

This document explores the background that lead to this work, including my personal experiences fishing and swimming, the art and feminist theories that guided the project, and the methodologies that I used in my creative research. I analyze the art work through the lens of my research questions and discuss my findings about the nature of love, loss, and water.



INTRODUCTION

Fishing scene from the back deck of the F/V I Gotta, 2015

The fish and the knife: the initial question

It was the year 2015. I was standing alone on the back deck of a small salmon fishing vessel named *I Gotta*. Above me, four 40-foot aluminum poles extended from the body of the boat, dragging cables connected to lead cannon balls fifty meters below in the ocean. The cables pulled several shiny metal lures, which flashed as they moved through the black water, followed closely by large metal hooks.

It was getting late and it was a rare clear evening. The sun was turning orange. We were headed north, and large swells were coming up from the west, sent over the Pacific by a hurricane named Ignacio. To the west there was no land between us and Japan. To the east the mountains of Southeast Alaska rose out of the sea. A volcanic cone named L'ux, and Edzhkom, and Edgecombe, was topped with snow even in late summer.

My only companions on deck were six dead coho salmon, and a few dusky rockfish. My skipper Eric was in the wheelhouse, driving. Two days prior, Eric had stood with me in the cockpit and taught me how to clean salmon. Six cuts, six seconds. Even though he wanted me to clean the fish well, he also wanted me to do it quickly.

It was my job now to clean these fish and put them down into the fish hold. I pulled towards me a plastic hose that pumped seawater through the hull of the boat. I took a knife from its rubber holder. My gloves were nicked in several places and were soaked on the inside. I still hadn't learned how to avoid cutting my gloves.

Two days prior, Eric had demonstrated cleaning a fish. He had watched me and corrected me when I made a mistake. I was clumsy and slow. But Eric cleaned the fish with the speed and grace of muscle memory. When he was done, what was left was a beautiful product. An empty fish, clean of blood and bile. Two filets connected to a backbone. The organs had been thrown into the water.

Now I was on the back deck alone, unsupervised, rocking back and forth in the large, smooth swells from Ignacio, grappling with the fish. It took me many cuts to clean each one. I sawed the gills out, I tried to hold the slick bodies of the fish beneath my rubber gloves. I tried to make straight cuts along the bellies. I held the organs in my fists and pulled them out one by one. Stomach, liver. I scraped away the kidneys. A lot of time passed, and the sun traveled slowly along the horizon. I was struck by the way the organs fit next to each other. I was struck by

the colors: reds, black, white, orange, blue. I felt strange. I felt both sad and hungry. The beauty was overwhelming.

Ever since this moment on the back deck of the *I Gotta*, I have thought a lot about this feeling of cleaning a fish. I think what this moment evoked for me was the desire to grasp something that is elusive, shiny, and strong like a salmon. It felt a little bit like romantic love. It reminded me of moments when I wanted to hold onto someone tightly, especially when I felt afraid that they were fading away from me. It reminded me of the feeling of wanting to cut something beautiful into pieces and eat it. It reminded me of the ways that certain people in my life had loved me.

I worked seasonally as a commercial salmon deckhand for seven seasons, and I worked as a visual artist in the winter. My practice in art returned again and again to these confusing emotions that I encountered on fishing boats with knives and fish. I was interested in instances of physical exchanges between water, wild animals, and fishermen. I wanted to think more about the meaning of the mutual ingress of hunting and eating. Do human love and predatory instincts share pathways in our mind? Does the feeling of cutting a fish have something to do with love? Does love have something to do with cutting fish?

These questions seemed to be important in this historical era of worldwide fisheries decline, and they seemed to be best approached from the disciplines of art and poetry, where expansive and deep theoretical research can be collided with personal experiences. These questions about fish and love brought me, through the practice of visual art, towards other questions and different research methods, which I will introduce in the next section.



Film still from Swimming in the Huron River, 2020

The Huron River: towards multiple case studies

I want to talk a bit about how my initial questions about cutting fish and love lead me towards more questions about “sites of exchange.” This section describes a period of time when I swam in the Huron River, which was related to a piece of difficult news that I received from a friend.

After living in Southeast Alaska for several years, in the fall of 2020 I found myself living in Ann Arbor to attend this residential masters' program at U Michigan. I arrived after a difficult pandemic summer of indecision, fear, and isolation. I told my therapist at the time that I had a dream about Michigan. In my dream I told myself, "you need to imagine the winter to be something very familiar or something very strange."

My thoughts were in Alaska. One of my closest friends had texted me in October with terrible news. She said that she had recently survived a suicide attempt. She had texted me from the hospital in Anchorage from where she was recovering.

Part of my art making process during my first semester in school became by necessity the acknowledgement of the distance between me and the people I loved. Especially at the time, the people I loved seemed to be inseparably tied to the places where I had known them. My friend who had survived was especially indistinguishable from Alaska in my mind: She was the one who had brought me up there and connected me to that place, her home.

Through talking with my advisor at the time, Robert Platt, I decided to swim in the Huron River, a wide waterway that divides Ann Arbor. Motivated by a mixture of confusing grief for my living friend, a desire to escape my own pandemic-caused isolation, and interest in embodied artistic research, I tried to swim in the river every day. It became my art practice and my research.

These interfaces became subjects in my art practice: My body in the river; my love and sadness for my hurting friend; and the knife and the fish. It took me the course of the two years of the program to describe a research structure to contain them all: Each interface represents a "site of exchange" between two bodies. Each site of exchange is unique and contains an infinite landscape.

I wanted to examine what I could learn through holding closely an en-



The Huron River, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 2020



Documentation of swims in the Huron, 2020



Documentation of swims in the Huron, 2020



the tide pool room: a love story, installation view, 2022

meshment between two bodies, especially when the bodies are human bodies, bodies of water, or the bodies of wild animals.

Over the course of my final year in the program, I turned finally to a different kind of interface; the tide pools of Sitka, Alaska. This grand interface cycles daily and defines life in Southeast Alaska. My creative thesis work, entitled *the tide pool room: a love story*, is a six hour durational film depicting slow sequences of the transition and intermingling between shore and ocean. Barnacles, anemones, juvenile fish, crabs, stones and seawater become enmeshed with the land and the sea, and the viewer is invited via an immersive installation to meditate on this liminal space. My thesis work brings together creative research, expeditionary filmmaking, installation, creative writing, and sculpture to evoke a site of exchange in a gallery setting. The work is made in response to these questions that evolved through my work before and within the MFA program:

Through storytelling and visual art, what can I learn about the nature of love and loss within specific case studies— “sites of exchange” where two bodies mutually ingress each other? How can visual art be used to give me a stronger understanding of my own relationships with other bodies and therefore my place in the world during historic ecological transformation? Can art be a vehicle for exploring this question, can it bring us to a kind of understanding or thought inquiry that other forms of research cannot? And ultimately, does what I discover during this process reveal a hole in our collective understanding about the individuality of our relationships with wild places?



CONTEXTUAL DISCUSSION

Pink salmon in Indian River, Sitka, Alaska, 2017

Water is both a place and not a place

But the sea, though changed in a sinister way, will continue to exist; the threat is rather to life itself.

— Rachel Carson, *The Sea Around Us*

The oceans of the world are massive, diverse, and impossible to essentialize. Every year, Marshallese fishermen drive steel longline vessels out of Honolulu to bring in tuna that is shipped around the United States. In October, American hookah divers walk on the seafloor of narrow waterways in Alaska, picking up sea cucumbers for market in Asia. In February, exactly eight days after the full moon, Fijian women and children fish for sea worms with baskets and mosquito netting, and barbecue them to be eaten. In May, Tlingit families in Southeast Alaska take their skiffs to secret spots when the neap tides come, picking ab-



Scene from a sea cucumber dive boat, near Sitka, Alaska, 2017

lone and seaweed from exposed rocks. In southern Chile, cruise ship workers untie ships loaded with tourists headed towards the Strait of Magellan. Off of Cape Cod, Massachusetts, commercial cod trawlers make way for commuter ferries headed to Newark, New Jersey.

The oceans support the livelihoods of many human beings throughout history and today. Coastal communities eat fish, invertebrates, seaweed and other sources of food, and the ocean supports innumerable jobs and industries tied to ocean resources, recreation and exploration. The less industrialized a country is, the more likely it is that the coastal communities of that country depend on ocean harvests for both a primary source of protein and a way to make a living.¹ Of course, the oceans also support the livelihoods of many marine and coastal animals and plants.

Not only do oceans and fresh waterways provide many human communities with nutrition and employment, but fishing and other kinds of marine harvesting are intrinsically tied to traditional ways of life and community values. When a community has secure and autonomous access to subsistence fishing, the fishery is more likely to be sustainably managed and healthy.² When there are strong multigenerational ties between communities and places and populations of fish, it's more likely that the community has the historical knowledge, modern skills, and internal motivation needed in order to understand and protect a marine species. The harvesting of marine creatures is a primary way that multigenerational relationships are built between coastal communities and marine animals. In other words, fishing can help to secure both the ecological health of an ecosystem and can carry traditional values and community identities into the future.

Today, the oceans are undergoing a transformation. In fact they are

¹ Blanchard, Julia L et al. "Potential consequences of climate change for primary production and fish production in large marine ecosystems." *Philosophical transactions of the Royal Society of London. Series B, Biological sciences* vol. 367, 2012
² Blanchard

undergoing many transformations, driven steadily more and more by human-caused shifts in weather and atmospheric and oceanic chemistry.

The globe is covered primarily in ocean, a 3D ocean that reaches down into trenches and wraps around islands. Oceans reach water molecules up into the sky and change weather patterns. Weather systems reach down and move the ocean around and change it. The chemistry of oceans is being dramatically altered along with the climate. The acidity increases. Dissolved oxygen declines, creating hypoxic oceanic deserts where megafauna and megaflore can not survive.³ Some areas of the ocean become more stagnant, the mixing of deep water and shallow water is minimized and choked.⁴ In some areas the oceans are upwelling at a speed unseen in history as the wind races down from dry mountains over the water.⁵

The oceans include a huge diversity and a huge multitude of different ecosystems. As I researched the effects of climate change on the oceans and fisheries around the world, I found again and again that it was too broad of a question. The oceans are too large and too diverse to study as a whole: in some places, the warming temperatures caused by climate change caused fish to produce more offspring. In other places, warmer water made populations decline. In some places plankton are blooming more rapidly, and in some areas the plankton are becoming absent.⁶

We do know that the oceans are changing faster than ever before seen

3 Keeling, Ralph F., Arne Körtzinger, and Nicolas Gruber. "Ocean Deoxygenation in a Warming World." *Annual Review of Marine Science*. Vol. 2:199-229. 2010.

4 Martiny, Adam C. et al. "Marine phytoplankton resilience may moderate oligotrophic ecosystem responses and biogeochemical feedbacks to climate change." *Limnology and Oceanography*. Volume 67, Issue S1. 2022.

5 Navarrete, Sergio A., Barahona, Mario, Weidberg, Nicolas and Broitman, Bernardo R. "Climate change in the coastal ocean: shifts in pelagic productivity and regionally diverging dynamics of coastal ecosystems." *Proceedings of the Royal Society B*.2892021277220212772. 2022.

6 Plagányi, Éva. "Climate change impacts on fisheries." *SCIENCE*. Vol 363, Issue 6430. 2019.



Pink salmon in Indian River, Sitka, Alaska, 2017



Life on the underwater edge of an island, near Sitka, Alaska, 2016

in history.⁷ However it's not understood how, or what the effects will be. In order to understand the changes that are happening now in the ocean, it is important from a research perspective to closely study specific places. My work originates from the idea that visual art might be an appropriate mode of research to address this problem.

There is a physical duality of water that I think speaks well to the paradox of the importance of global trends and the impossibility of fully understanding anything on a global scale: Water is a global element; it is a galactic signifier of life and it is the universal solvent. Water permeates our planet, and by definition the molecules of water flow around in a large, completely connected cycle. The water molecules of Earth are interchangeable and the same. Water is characterized by its fluidity, the fact that it travels. But as we know, when we drink water, this water has existed for billions of years. The water in Michigan is connected to the water in Alaska. The water I drink today may be a cloud in the southern Indian Ocean next year.

However, water also designates a specific place. Human communities and natural ecosystems are defined by their relationship with water. Oceans, rivers, bays, lakes, and deserts hold the same bodies of water throughout history and beyond. In all kinds of research, I maintain that it is important and necessary to study a specific place (or interface) discreetly. The smaller a study site is, the more meaningful the research can be, and the larger a study site is, the more difficult it becomes to study it well.

In my artistic research I try to hold these two opposing truths: Coastal places and oceans are specific places that need to be studied discreetly. However all water permeates all other waters as well.

7 Hidalgo, Manuel et al. "Adaptation science' is needed to inform the sustainable management of the world's oceans in the face of climate change." *ICES Journal of Marine Science*, Volume 79, Issue 2. 2022.



The ecotone: sites of exchange

If we have arrived at this idea of the paradox of water: the idea that it is both a place and not a place, I think it is important to descend deeper into the nature of certain spaces characterized by water.

An *ecotone* is a place where two ecosystems overlap, such as a boundary between a forest and a clearing, or an estuary where a river enters

the sea.⁸ Ecologically, ecotones are characterized by an abundance of large leafy plants and an increase in biodiversity. Ecotones can also be characterized as an *ecocline*, which is a physical gradient of transition between ecosystems.

I found the scientific terminology of the ecotone to be helpful in think-

⁸ The Encyclopedia Britannica. "Ecotone." Accessed April 25, 2022.

ing about other kinds of relationships. For example, the ecotone could be conceptualized to describe a relationship between a fish and a knife, a friendship between two people, and the interface between a person and their environment. In each instance, there is a space between where boundaries are blurred. There is overlapping mutual penetration. An ecotone is a queer space, a collaborative transition place of intimacy, proximity, and love. My work uses the concept of the ecotone to imagine spending time in places that are characterized by the equal and intermingled presence of two bodies.

My questions led me to think about the nature of the knife and the fish, and to think about fishing as a way of researching love or attachment. The primary parallel I found was that the knife and the fish create an interface between two bodies, just like in an instance of human romantic love. The knife touches the fish, is choreographed by the fish, and transforms the fish. Through talking with my writing advisor and reading articles and books about water, I started thinking about the nature of interfaces: relationships, cuts, coasts. An interface is simply a place where two things encounter each other in a physical or a non-physical way. There is an intermingling, an exchange: A mutual ingress.

I began thinking of each of these interfaces that I was researching: The knife and the fish, and my relationship with my friend “Sonia,” and even the places where rivers or oceans touch land, as sites of exchange.

Each of these sites of exchange is an interface. Each site of exchange is a case study, a peculiar relationship with its own character and identity. Perhaps each site of exchange could be imagined also as a place, a place that is unique and worth a closer study. So I decided to make my art practice an investigation into specific places, and specific case studies of close interactions between two bodies.

Within this work, each site of exchange is discrete and is researched independently of the others. I sought rhizomatic connections rather than connections of metaphor. However, each site of exchange brings out a



Sitka Sound, 2018

lot of information and stories about the nature of water, the nature of loss, and the nature of love.

Primary sites of exchange addressed in this work:

The knife / the fish

Myself / my friend

The ocean / the coast (tide pools)



Water feminisms

In this section I will further explore existing critical theories and research about the nature of boundaries, permeability, and sites of exchange that informed the *tide pool room: a love story*, especially from a feminist perspective.

Ecofeminist ethics have long informed my art practice. However, in my

research during the last two years, I encountered evolutions and offshoots of ecofeminism that were more relevant for my practice today, and which also aligned more closely with contemporary social movements and language.

The term *ecofeminism* was coined by the French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* in 1974, in which she identifies the parallel ways that both nature and women are suppressed under a patriarchal society.⁹ Fundamentally, ecofeminism imagines a dismantling of oppressive hierarchies that function along analogous binaries: male/female, white/non-white, colonial/indigenous, and humanity/nature. Ecofeminists point to the way nature has been gendered as female in Western society, and how the gendering of nature has led to a paternal, extractive, and exploitative attitude towards nature in our culture.

A good example of this philosophy of ecofeminism is found in the book *Reinventing Eden* by Carolyn Merchant. Merchant traces the feminization of nature through Western culture from early days in Europe to the colonization of the Americas and into modern day Euro-American culture. She argues that Western culture has been guided by a desire to “reclaim Eden,” either through the subjectification of nature or through the environmentalist dream of dramatically reducing the human population. Merchant argues that we “need a new ethic that arises out of both the needs of nature and the needs of humanity. A new ethic of human partnership with nature— is needed, one in which nature is an active subject, not a passive object.”¹⁰

Sallie McFague in her book *The Body of God* takes the ecofeminist ethos further, proposing a theology that sees the body— and by extension, the physical world— as divine. She proposes a thought experiment: What if we were to think of the planet as the body of God? In

9 d'Eaubonne, Françoise. *Le féminisme ou la mort*. Paris: P. Horay, 1974. Print.

10 Merchant, Carolyn. *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2003. Print.

the same way we think of ourselves as “embodied spirits,” can we think about the natural world as the physical manifestation of the spirit of God? Furthermore, how might our perceptions shift if we were to identify as “enspirited bodies” rather than accepting the natural superiority of the (male, rational, disembodied) spirit? This book proposes a compelling metaphor to aid us in complicating our thinking about our own bodies, as well as the humanity/natural world dichotomy. McFague elaborates on a beautiful framework in which, through religious metaphor, we might be able to reexamine our relationships with our own gendered bodies, and reinvigorate both the natural world and our flesh forms with sacredness.¹¹

Ecofeminists advocate for a society in which all sentient and non-sentient beings are valued and “given a seat at the table” when it comes to policy decisions. Although ecofeminism today continues to be a term referred to by visual artists to situate themselves within a large archive of philosophies and art projects, today, it is more common to refer to *intersectional* feminism, which in many ways includes many of the same ideas and motivations as ecofeminism. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, intersectionality is a term that is used to describe broadly the way that different systems of oppression interact with and are exacerbated by each other.¹² In particular, intersectionalist thought maintains that it is harmful to not consider all the various intersections that a particular subject may inhabit, with an especially critical eye to the limitations of white feminism.

Audre Lorde’s *Sister Outsider* is an outstanding, classic, and enduring example of intersectional feminist scholarship. In particular I found the essay “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” to be helpful for my project. A primary motivation for my project is a recognition that there

11 McFague, Sallie. *The Body of God*. Fortress Press, 1993. Print.

12 Crenshaw, Kimberlé. “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.” *The University of Chicago Legal Forum*. vol. 140, 1989, pp.139-167. Web.

are interesting parallels between different versions of relational body rupture. The physical metaphors of splaying and penetration arise, as well as the emotional parallels of care, hunger and reciprocity. In particular the idea of the erotic as something magical and transformative advances my understanding of the collection of strange and conflicting emotions that are present at a butchering. Lorde says, “The erotic is the nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge.” This idea is something that I’ve felt while holding a fishing knife— the animal brain, designed by evolution, leads us sometimes in directions antithetical to contemporary society— towards the erotic, or the brutal. However, instead of reducing our capacity to reason, it can lead us towards new connections and concepts we may know instinctively but are not clearly defined in our daily lives.¹³

The human body is 60 to 90% water. In 2009, gender scholar Astrida Neimanis advocated for a conceptualization of the “hydrocommons,” the collective water that flows between all human bodies and other bodies and channels of water around us.¹⁴ In 2012, Neimanis coined the term *hydrofeminism* in her watershed essay “Hydrofeminism: Or, On Becoming a Body of Water.”¹⁵ In this work, Neimanis poetically describes the watery connections between our bodies and what we think of as the natural world— describing a truth that we inherently know on a geological and chemical scale. Neimanis pulls this geological/chemical truth into the gender-political sphere:

As watery, we experience ourselves less as isolated entities, and more as oceanic eddies: I am a singular, dynamic whorl dissolving in a complex, flu-

13 Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Berkeley, CA, Crossing Press, 1984.

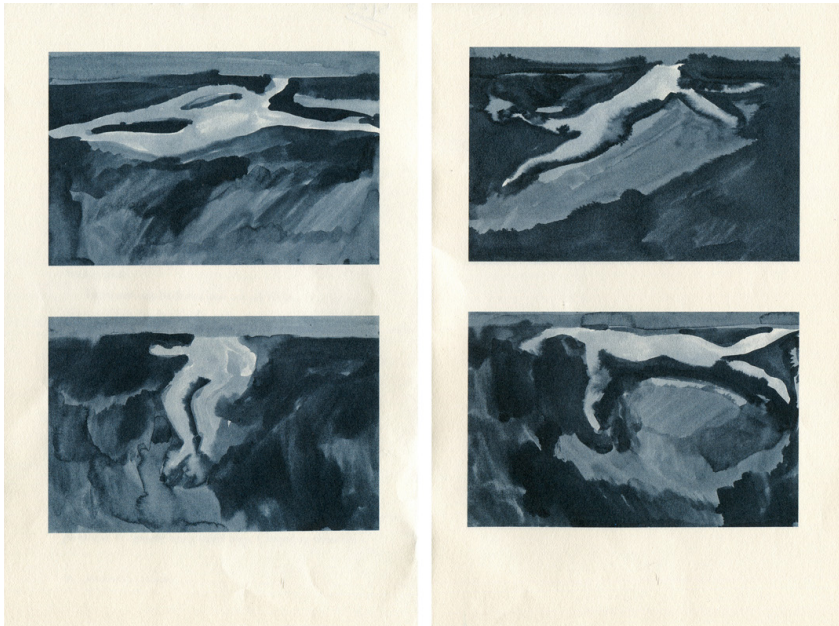
14 Neimanis, Astrida. “Bodies of Water, Human Rights and the Hydrocommons.” *TOPIA Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies*. 2009.

15 Neimanis, Astrida. “Hydrofeminism: Or, On Becoming a Body of Water.” in *Undutiful Daughters: Mobilizing Future Concepts, Bodies and Subjectivities in Feminist Thought and Practice*, eds. Henriette Gunkel, Chrysanthi Nigianni and Fanny Söderbäck. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

id circulation. The space between ourselves and our others is at once as distant as the primeval sea, yet also closer than our own skin—the traces of those same oceanic beginnings still cycling through us, pausing as this bodily thing we call “mine.” Water is between bodies, but of bodies, before us and beyond us, yet also very presently this body, too. Deictics falter. Our comfortable categories of thought begin to erode. Water entangles our bodies in relations of gift, debt, theft, complicity, differentiation, relation.

Neimanis encourages us to use this recognition of ourselves as water as a pathway towards empathy and identification with all of the natural world and especially natural waterways. I found the writings of Neimanis to be elegant elaborations on some of the fundamental ecofeminist ideas that all living and nonliving things are composed of the same matter. My work while in graduate school, and especially *the tide pool room: a love story*, draws on this understanding that although it is easy to imagine our bodies as disparate pillars, in reality we are permeable, temporary bodies that are constantly enmeshing with other forms of water and bodies.

Although there are many examples of contemporary and historical visual art works about water, feminism, and the gendered body, I want to identify a few projects that have been especially important to my research and practice over the last two years, and which helped lead to the process of developing *the tide pool room: a love story*.



Leanne Shapton, *Swimming Studies*, 2012

The pictures achieve something rarely articulated about the metaphysical state of swimming: The body, immersed, feels amplified, heavier and lighter at the same time. Weightless yet stronger.

— Leanne Shapton, *Swimming Studies*, 2012

In her collection of stories *Swimming Studies*, writer and visual artist Leanne Shapton considers the female body's relationship with water. Through memory excavation, sequential drawings, and meditations on the act of swimming, Shapton investigates a life as defined by the action of swimming. Immersion in pools, lakes, and the ocean are strung together to describe Shapton's childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. This work helped me to identify swimming as a mode of research into both the nature of water and the nature of the human body.¹⁶

¹⁶ Shapton, Leanne. *Swimming Studies*. BLUE RIDER PRESS. 2012. Print.



Charli Brissey, *Future Fish*, 2022

Charli Brissey and Elisandra Rosario perform in Brissey's one hour dance piece *Future Fish* in March 2022, using their bodies to describe the morphology and physical dynamics of waves, water, sea creatures, reproduction, joy and love. The work presents the boundary between ocean and land as a queer space, where bodies move between aquatic and terrestrial forms, evolve and hold multiple identities at the same time. Brissey imagines love across eons, between benthic zones, and transcending species and gender. The work relates to my research about boundaries and sites of exchange, as it creates a feminist space of transformation and relationality. The ocean, made of water, the universal solvent, represents a place that can deconstruct us into our most essential pieces.¹⁷

¹⁷ Brissey, Charli. *Future Fish*. Performance. 2022

Sister of ice and snow, I'm coming to you ... Sister of ocean and sand, I welcome you.



In the 6 minute film *Rise: From One Island To Another*, two Indigenous poets, Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner of the Marshall Islands and Aka Niviâna of Greenland, address each other in spoken poetry.

Jetnil-Kijiner and Niviâna come together at the melting ice caps of Greenland in order to share a moment of solidarity in the face of global climate change, and refer to each other as “sister of ice and snow” and “sister of ocean and sand.”¹⁸

In addressing each other, Jetnil-Kijiner and Aka Niviâna open up a “Feminist hydro-ontological imaginary” in order to demand solutions to sea level rise and other effects caused by human-driven climate change. Through imagining both the ice of Greenland and the seas of the Marshall Islands as part of the same “aquapelagic imaginary”, or a collective vision of the water spaces that unite us, the two poets underscore the importance of camaraderie and solidarity between women and island nations on the “front lines” of climate change. This work speaks to the importance of expanding the collective imagination of boundaries and connections, and the real-world potential of meditating on geographical commonalities.¹⁹ *the tide pool room: a love story* meditates on this kind of hydrofeminist, dissolved space by creating a portal to Southeast Alaskan tide pools in downtown Ann Arbor, Michigan. The water present in the work— both physically in fountain sculptures, and represented in ocean imagery— brings to life the aquapelagic imaginary of our times.



¹⁸ *Rise: From One Island To Another*, Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner and Aka Niviâna. Produced and distributed by 350.org. Film. 2012

¹⁹ Faris, Jaimey Hamilton. “SISTERS OF OCEAN AND ICE: On the Hydro-feminism of Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner and Aka Niviâna’s *Rise: From One Island to Another*” *Shima Journal*. 2019.

Film stills, *Rise: From One Island To Another*, Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner and Aka Niviâna, 2012



Film as a capsule of time

As my work progressed, it increasingly shed ideas and narratives until a simple overarching concept was left behind: time. The work became about creating and holding time to consider, and exist within, a particular site of exchange.

Throughout history, time has been a theme that artists have addressed in uncountable ways. From Marina Abramovich's endurance perfor-

mance masterpieces to Felix Gonzales-Torres' synchronized clocks, time is a source of continual fascination for artists.

I argue that film is one of the best ways for visual art to create time in viewers' lives. As a capsule of time that lasts minutes, hours, or longer, a film contains a set amount of time. By joining the multisensory elements of moving image, audio, and ideally a theatrical, immersive



Film still from *Trip Down Market Street Before the Fire* by the Miles Brothers, one of the most well known and longest actuality films, 8 minutes, 1906

viewing space, a film contains the viewer in a preconceived journey through time. Like other forms of time-based art like live performance, to leave the film part way through is to disrupt the viewing experience. In the past, artists have used this characteristic of film to investigate the meaning and the effects of time, and even use the passing of time as a narrative in itself.

In the 1890s film pioneers Auguste and Louis Lumière coined the term *actualities*, which describes a kind of short film that dominated early cinema. Lasting no longer than a few minutes, an actuality film depicts the unfolding of true events in real time, with no narrative or plot structure. More like a moving photograph than a traditional film, the camera is fixed to one spot, and the laws of time and reality are obeyed.²⁰ This idea of using moving images to capture an event in unedited time represents the ethos of my project, and the pursuit of using film to repli-

20 *Trip Down Market Street Before the Fire*. Dir. Miles Brothers. Film. 1906

cate an event that is happening concurrently to the film.

During his career, Andy Warhol made several durational films, including *Empire*, an 8 hour, 5 minute film made up of a single shot of the Empire State Building in New York. In 1964, Warhol nearly incited a riot when he first screened his durational film *Sleep* at the Cinema Theater in Los Angeles. The film consists of 5 hours, 20 minutes of footage of his lover John Giorno as he sleeps in half-time motion.²¹ Often interpreted as an endurance test for audience members, I wonder if the subject matter of this film suggests otherwise. Who cannot relate to the feeling of watching someone beloved sleep, with the hours of the night stretching ahead, yet feeling the dramatic loss of time? This film relates to *the tide pool room: a love story* because it uses the element of time in film to create a meditation about longing and love.



Film still, *Sleep*, Andy Warhol, 1964

21 Uhlin, Graig. "TV, Time, and the Films of Andy Warhol." *Cinema Journal*. University of Texas Press 49, Number 3, Spring 2010



Film Still, *Bergensbanen – minutt for minutt*, Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation, 2009

Peter Bo Rappmund’s 2009 film *Tectonics* carries the viewer along the border between the United States and Mexico, beginning at the Atlantic ocean and moving westward to the Pacific. The film is one hour long, and it uses entirely videos that are created by altering and animating digital photographs. The effect is a slow meditation on a boundary—a site of exchange—that is permeable and resonates outwards.²² This film is related to my project in that it travels along a boundary and creates time through film for viewers to contemplate the space.

This is a still from a Norwegian program called *Bergensbanen – minutt for minutt*, a film lasting 7 hours, following the train Bergen to Oslo along the Bergen Line. The film was broadcast onto Norwegian public television on November 27, 2009. 1,246,000 Norwegian viewers (20% of the population) were watching the event at least once during its screening time.²³

Although it is not uncommon in contemporary society to watch a soc-

22 *Tectonics*. Dir. Peter Bo Rappmund. Film. 2012

23 *Bergensbanen – minutt for minutt*, Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation. Television. 2009



Film Still, *Bergensbanen – minutt for minutt*, Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation, 2009

cer game or a Netflix show for many hours in a row, the phenomenon of Slow TV, first conceived of in Norway and later spread to other places, has captivated audiences and inspired a lively debate about extremely slow, long TV shows. Capturing mundane quotidian activities or events like knitting, cutting and stacking wood, or the travels of a train or a vessel, Slow TV follows a story “minute by minute” in real time. Scholar Dan Irving argues that narrativity is a state that is achieved in a film rather than something that inherently exists within it. Therefore, something like a Norwegian broadcast of a train journey can be infused with a narrative by the viewer. Films that have what Irving calls a “weak narrative,” such as Slow TV, can create an interpretive, experimental narrative experience that needs input from the viewers.²⁴

What I found to be particularly interesting about the Norwegian Slow TV broadcasts is the light they shine on these mundane events. The broadcasting of the train’s journey elevates the journey and posits the question of the value of looking at it. In our current era, even if we were

24 Irving, Dan. “Eighteen hours of salmon: On the narrativity of slow TV” *Frontiers of Narrative Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2017.



Film stills, Howard Hall, *Wild Window: Bejeweled Fishes*, 2018

to find ourselves on a real train in Norway going to the Arctic Circle, our attentions have been trained for a high-speed, dizzyingly transforming, constant feed. Slow TV challenges the viewer to meditate on these wonders that exist around us in our daily lives.

My research into meditative, time-capturing film led me to the work of Howard Hall, an American underwater cinematographer. Hall has made countless films about the ecology and fantastic images of the ocean,

using incredibly sensitive cameras, such as IMAX 3D cameras with 8K recording capabilities. In addition to IMAX films and nature documentaries, Hall has also created a series of “Wild Window” films, which are five hours each, and to my best understanding, are mainly used in commercial electronic stores. The videos play on the television screens for sale, and the extremely high definition footage of reefs and wildlife around the globe demonstrates the capabilities of the television. In effect they are extremely expensive and well crafted screensavers.²⁵

Like Slow TV, Hall’s beautiful screensavers do not require the full attention of the viewer. By definition they are made to occupy the background of a curated interior space. The viewer may turn their attention away and return. The only requirements of a screensaver is that the image be lovely and not dominating the space. For some reason, underwater scenes are the archetypal screensaver image.

In fine art realms, too, the filmmaker grapples with the elusive attention of the viewer. In a gallery setting, the viewer is on a wandering journey from art piece to art piece. Without a theater to physically trap the viewer, they are allowed to spend exactly as much time as they wish at each piece. For more durational, time-based work, this poses a problem: how to encourage a viewer to stay longer than they might typically?

For Pipilotti Rist, the answer to this question is in the construction of incredibly attractive, comfortable, immersive spaces. In *4th Floor to Mildness*, several beds greet the visitor, complete with pillows. The viewer takes off their shoes, crossing the boundary from walking—in motion—to reclining. Above the beds, a video of underwater reeds plays. The installation creates a space where the viewer feels encouraged to submerge themselves deeper into the physical gestures of the architecture.²⁶

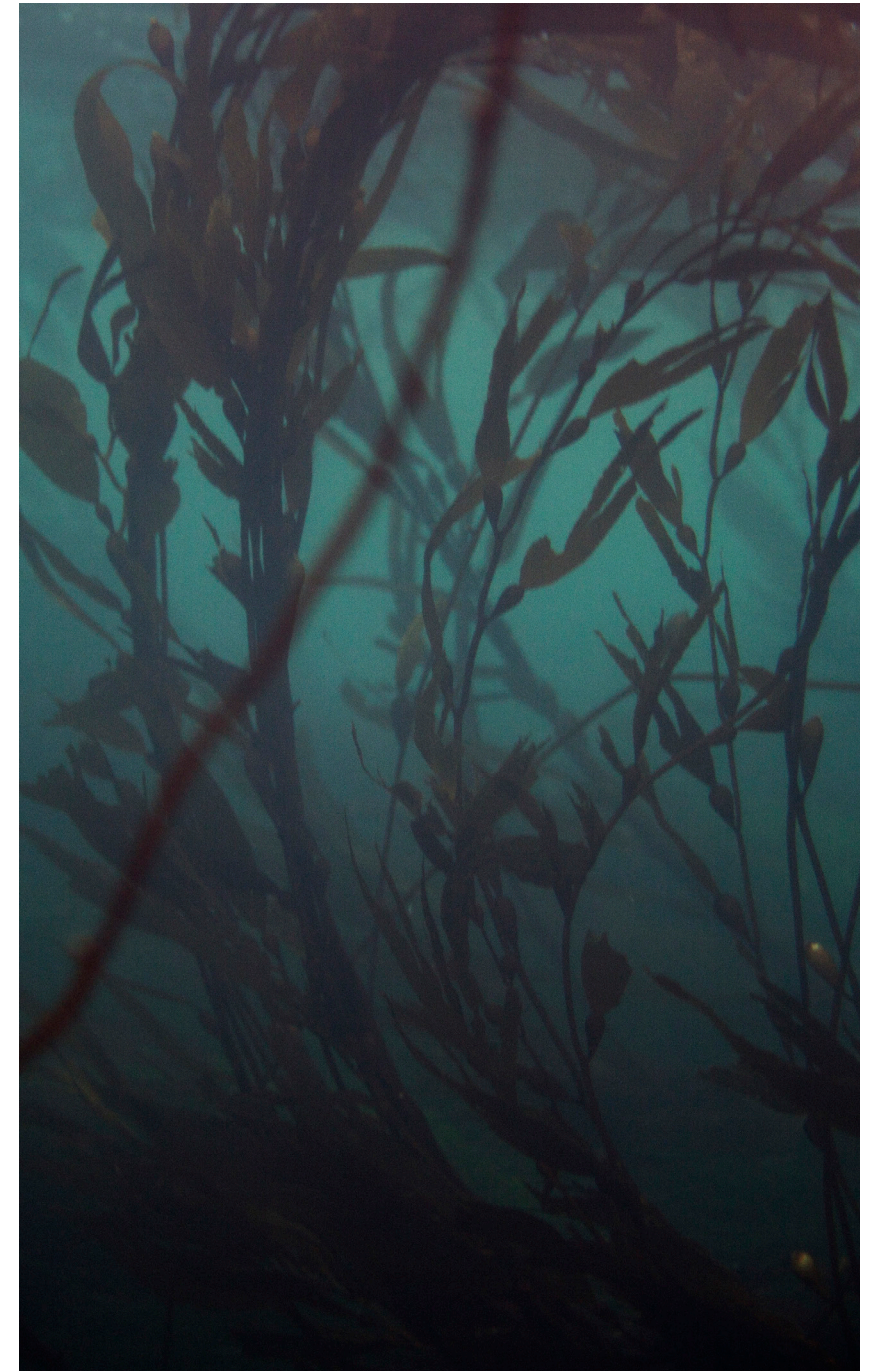
²⁵ *Wild Window: Bejeweled Fishes*. Dir. Howard Hall. Film. 2018

²⁶ Rist, Pipilotti. *4th Floor to Mildness*, 2018. Multimedia installation.



Pipilotti Rist, 4th Floor to Mildness, 2018

As my work brought me to questions of time, and how to create, hold, and communicate time, I used these works as influences and examples of the many questions and methods that might be brought into the conversation. In a way this interest in very long movies was highly personally self-motivated; I wanted to spend as much time as possible swimming in the ocean.



Kelp forests, Battery Island, Alaska, 2019



METHODOLOGY

Swimming

When I swim now, I step into the water as though absent mindedly touching a scar.

— Leanne Shapton, *Swimming Studies*, 2012

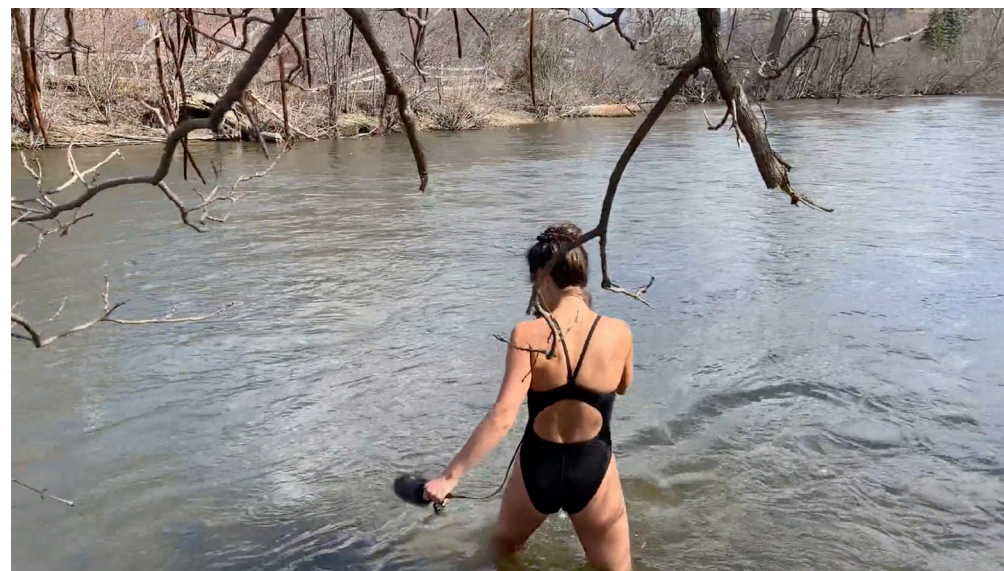
Swimming as a research methodology is the physical act of putting my body in the water repeatedly over a period of time. It is also the act of submerging myself metaphorically, in a place, in an idea, or in a person, by a repeated pattern of immersion and sensory exploration.

Swimming shocks the system. Swimming by necessity forefronts the experience of the body over that of the mind. Hydrofeminist scholars and artworks posit that the human body is a body of water. They

assert that the recognition of the wateriness of the human body will naturally build a stronger relation and camaraderie with other bodies of water, including friends, and including rivers and oceans. In my search for a clearer understanding of relationships between bodies, it was important to deal in the language of water. By literally swimming, the hydrofeminist truths of mutual dissolving and permeation were realized by me and examined in real time. Water passed through my limbs and into and out of my skin. Water knowledge entered my physical body and my imagination through osmosis: The languages of temperature, weight, color, smell, viscosity, etc. The body is a very sophisticated tool for receiving many levels of information at one time, and while swimming, I allowed my body to process and accumulate information at a distance from my mind.

I was moved to swim because I missed my friend who I had swam with so many times in Alaska; swimming helped me to feel more connected with her. Because I wanted to make art about longing and loss in graduate school, the swimming felt related to my processing of my friend's brush with suicide. I learned in my research that swimming in cold water is healing not only for the body but also for the mind; cold water swimming has been clinically proven to ease symptoms of depression. At the time, my entire art practice, including swimming, became a form of self-therapy. Swimming was partly a testament to my friend who loved cold water and took me swimming in Alaska. It was also an enormous source of interesting material for my art practice. When swimming as an artistic methodology, the surface of the skin becomes a sensory instrument, accumulating data.

In the fall of 2020, I would drive my CRV to one of several small river parks, including the Argo Park Canoe Livery, Gallup Park, and Bandemer Park, all in Ann Arbor. I usually had my swimsuit on already. I swam off of a dock, when possible, and I always preferred to walk slowly into the water. Sometimes I brought my digital camera into the water, and I always brought my polaroid camera. Each swim lasted for a short pe-



Ann Arbor, 2021

riod of time, less than ten minutes. I usually tried to swim in a circle. If there were lily pads or other water flora present, I tried to swim in them and touch them. After swimming, I took a polaroid photo of the location to document the swim, and I drove home for a hot shower. I wrote descriptions of swimming afterwards, and the more times I did it, the more detailed my writings became.

Excerpt of swimming notes, November 2021:

When the foot and leg touch the water, the skin changes color, darker, yellower, the feet touch the river bed, which is soft but rigid. Some river plants touch the ankles, the attention leaps from the feet to the water's surface, where it advances upwards with each step, activating the skin; the legs feel strong, two stakes dividing the river, each step both an affirmation and a release. It's an exercise

in anticipation, and repetition makes each swim more academic, like an observation. Establish distance from the dread, split the mind in two. The attention follows the line of the water up the body, the submerged body feels clear and empty, like a glass vessel, sculptural and clean. The hands must enter the water somehow, each like a small body in itself, with its own mind, perching on a shoulder, gathering itself, procrastinating.

The hands on the dock are a whitish yellow now, the arms and legs feel powerful as they pull the body out of the water. the body is erratic; you feel like you took an adrenaline shot to the heart, you are euphoric, laughing. The skin is hot, red, your experience of temperature is that you are warm, hot even. The blood pools at the surface, your motions are exaggerated. Your clothes and shoes feel superfluous, burdensome. The wind feels like knives, but your experience of it is removed. The skin is covered in fine goosebumps. The hair funnels the water to a perfect needlepoint at the end of the ponytail. As you towel off the water, your skin feels distant. suddenly the body is gendered again, exposed and vulnerable again, it shivers. You pick up your car keys off the dock and walk back into the parking lot, the bare feet do not feel the gravel.

When I first told my advisor Robert Platt that I was swimming, he told me to do it more often, and to document everything. As a research method, as a practice, I swam in the Huron River for a semester.

Later, I compiled the materials collected from swimming, including pho-

tographs, videos, memories, and recorded shifts of mood. I accumulated digital images, video, and audio of myself swimming and breathing, as well as recorded ambient sounds and images of the places where I swam. I also wrote, which in itself was also like swimming.

I wrote about swimming, but I was also writing about my friend, who I gave the pseudonym “Sonia.” Swimming was a way to visit Sonia.

Excerpt from my first writings about Sonia, 2021:

I think about lying in bed with Sonia, and her gaze from beneath the blankets pulled up to her ears. I think about the first photograph I saw of her dad, gaffing a salmon over the side of his boat. The fish, slightly blurred and in a painful, flexed U shape, partially obstructs Her dad’s face. I think about Sonia’s ceramic pitchers, seven or eight of them made in our pottery class, glazed in metallic copper colors as well as shades of blue. Their handles curve gracefully upwards like the wings of a bird. How can I describe or understand Sonia’s gaze? Is it possible? There is something about it that made me feel transported, into a place where the mind was simply organized. I felt that our emotions emanated directly from our lives, an internal reflection of our physical world, a simple act like light passing through colored glass.

Now I am isolated, safely tucked away in the halls of school again. I can think about Sonia and Sitka and the others with a cool, remote mind. Although it brings tears to my eyes to look at images of them, my emotions feel remote and quiet now. I

swim in the river between classes, and as I put dry clothes on, walk barefoot across the parking lot, I remember other parking lots I walked on. I remember changing my clothes in other public restrooms, and wishing to be far away from Alaska. Now I am here, among the gently reddening trees of Ann Arbor, I find myself at the water again and again, as if briefly visiting another life.



The fall swims at the Huron River seeded my first project in graduate school, an installation that I called *Swimming In Michigan*. A cast iron bathtub filled with lily pads and water invites the viewer to sit and consider it and touch the lily pads. A series of polaroids documenting my swims are nailed to the wall. A tiny screening room allows one or two people to lie on a padded blanket and look up at a film playing on the ceiling. The film is a simple collection of underwater footage from the Huron River and ambient sound from both underwater and above water.

During my critique, I also handed out a small booklet, or zine, with a short story about my friend Sonia. I described the text from the hospital in Anchorage that had inspired me to start writing about her. I described the elusive nature of my friend, even before I knew she had tried to kill herself. I started to think about our friendship and to dredge up memories.

My peers and advisors were kind during the critique: They noticed that the two works, *Swimming in Michigan* and the zine, were related somehow. In light of the zine, the installation became infused with grief. The installation asked for care and time and slowness. In light of the installation, the zine became full of distance and meditation. The works were separate, disjointed, however, and my MFA community tasked me with working out how they were related.



Swimming in Michigan, installation view, 2020



Swimming in Michigan, *installation view*, 2020



Swimming in Michigan, *installation view*, 2020



I think about lying in bed with Sonia, and her gaze from beneath the blanket pulled up to her ear. I think about the first photograph I saw of her dad, gaffing a salmon over the side of his boat. The fish, slightly blurred and in a painful, flexed U shape, partially obstructs Thomas' face. I think about Sonia's ceramic pitchers, seven or eight of them from our college throwing class, glazed in metallic copper as well as shades of blue. Their handles curve gracefully upwards like the wings of a bird. How can I describe or understand Sonia's gaze? Is it possible? There was something about it that made me feel transported into a place where the mind was simply organized. I felt that our emotions emanated directly from our lives, an internal reflection of our physical world, created in a simple act like light passing through colored glass.

This critique informed the way I approached my thesis project: In an important way, the thesis project is simply a continuation of these paths of inquiry that I began in the fall.

During my second semester, I planned my thesis project. I decided I wanted to return to Sitka, where “Sonia” would be visiting for the summer as well. I wanted to see my friends; I missed them. I also had an idea to make a “very long” film about the tide pools of Southeast Alaska. Like the lily pads in the Huron River, I felt that it was important to create the space and time to relax and consider them. To look at them for longer than I would normally be compelled to.

My swimming practice had deepened: I was swimming in Lake Michigan, the Pacific, and other lakes and swimming pools. I had a stronger understanding of the effect of cold and water on my body. I knew from swimming that repetition and commitment was important. I was writing more about Sonia. I made an art piece about cutting fish.

When I arrived to Alaska in the summer of 2021, I wanted to deepen my

swimming by visiting remote tide pool sites along the coast of Southeast Alaska and swimming in them. In order to do that, I needed to fix up my boat.



Lake Michigan, 2020



Sailing

I was amazed that what I needed to survive could be carried on my back. And, most surprising of all, that I could carry it.

— Cheryl Strayed, *Wild*, 2012

Technically, it's just sea— yet each wave is slightly different.

— Selma, an adventure from the edge of the world, Dir. Maciej Jablonski, 2022

Karin Amimoto Ingersoll writes about a seascape epistemology, reflecting on her identity as a Hawaiian who contains intergenerational knowledge centered in the sea, rather than the land.²⁷ Joshua Nash describes the aquapelago, a chain of ocean landscapes that each have a unique character and particular relation to the social world of an island or islands.²⁸ It is important to consider the ocean— including the marine sky— as made up of specific places with cultural and social importance and individual ecological and chemical character. In order to do this, like swimming, it is important to create repetition of experience and to spend time in the seascape. It is also important to travel in an unbroken path, and to create a circumstance that allows the artist to deeply experience the changes of the water, weather, and the sky.

Using a slow boat to travel builds time into a project. If the body is understood as a multisensory organ of data collection, the more time the body has to collect, the more material it can accumulate, and the more it can understand. Sailboats can sometimes be fast in ideal conditions, but overwhelmingly they are slow. Even in our modern world, sailboats are still built to be slow under power. Most sailboats over 25 feet or so today will have an engine and a propeller, however in the spirit of sailing, even the largest, most technologically advanced sailboats have a very small engine for their size. This is because sailboat designers and sailboat builders create boats with the spirit of sailing in mind. In a modern world of speed, efficiency, and instant solutions, the old sport of sailing endures because it provides interest beyond immediacy: Sailboats are dependent on the weather.

Especially in a landscape like Southeast Alaska, which is characterized by thin waterways passing between tall islands, winds are influenced by channels and they bend and are inconsistent. Tidal currents are strong. Waves build up quickly and slow a boat down. All of these

27 Ingersoll, Karin Amimoto. *Waves of Knowing: A Seascape Epistemology*. Duke University Press. 2016.

28 Nash, Joshua. Introduction: The Space of Aquapelago. *Shima Journal*. 2016.



The S/V Sirena, 2021



conditions together create a landscape where a sailboat simply cannot travel against the weather. A sailor has to pay close attention to regional weather reports and local weather signs. Often trips must be planned around a shift in tides and currents. Planning has to be detailed and oftentimes plans are delayed or upended. The art process, when tied to sailing as a mode of travel, is also necessarily tied to the state and rhythms of the ocean and the weather. This “collaboration” with sometimes unforgiving and capricious weather systems creates an art methodology that places the artist and the art in a state of dependence on the seascape. The heightened attention, which ranges from trip planning to staying safe, heightens the artist’s engagement with the natural systems. This creates by necessity a multifaceted body of knowledge and constant learning within the artist. The process of artistic research and creation is dictated by the conditions and the moods of the subject itself.

In a way sailing is similar to swimming in a natural body of water; the body and the vessel have a certain amount of autonomy and self direction; however, ultimately they are vulnerable to the place that they are immersed in. If we think about sailing from a hydrofeminist standpoint,

Cleaning off the bottom of the Sirena, 2021



Many hands make light work!



Swimming to an island with my camera gear in tow

we could say that the sailboat and the water and wind are engaged in a state of mutual ingress; the keel and the sails cut the water and the waves, and the wind and the waves propel and enter the boat. The sailor is completely vulnerable to the weather. If it is sunny out, she is sunburned and her eyes hurt. If it is rainy or wavy out, she is wet. If it is cold out, she is cold. Thomas Colvin, the designer of my sailboat the S/V Sirena, chose to never make a single vessel with a protected cockpit or wheelhouse, because he believed that it was important for the sailor to feel the wind on her body.

Sailing as a methodology for art making also creates a series of work projects that must be completed before the research begins. Between cleaning and checking the boat, attending to the neverending small maintenance jobs that a sailboat generates, provisioning and planning with crew, the boat requires that significant time and labor go into the boat before a trip is possible.

Additionally, sailing as a method of transportation limits the geographical space that the artist can visit. Unlike flying or motorboating, sailing creates a natural limit of distance created by the bounds of the boat and the skillset of the sailor. This limitation builds in a small geography, or localness, into the project or practice.

This part of the project began in summer 2021. In mid June I flew to Sitka, where I subletted a friend's house. I spent the first two weeks in Sitka working as a deckhand on a salmon troller with my skipper and friend Eric Jordan. We went offshore to fish for king salmon. I made very little money, but I got to see first hand the effects of a changing climate— the fish return was historically poor, and Eric cried on the last day out of frustration and grief.

I was also able to participate in other methods of fishing while I was in Sitka. I spear fished for black bass, which was a very interesting experience diving down below the thermocline, and diving for abalone and scallops. I also documented these experiences through photography,



Logistics of traveling to islands in search of tide pools

video and writing.

Back in town, I started to address my long film about tide pools— I wanted to film the intricate, biodiverse, colorful, tiny worlds that exist on the coast of Sitka and Southeast Alaska. Over the last few years I have been learning how to maintain and use a small sailboat, and so in order to access the tide pools I had to first fix up my sailboat. I spent two weeks rebuilding the electrical system, cleaning and painting the bottom of the hull, removing some defunct plumbing and cleaning the

sailboat. This part of my art practice is meditative and never ending. I enjoyed it because I could spend time learning about tangible cause-and-effect systems instead of working within the philosophical mindset of art research.

When the boat was up and running, I tackled the problem of underwater filming. For the last six years that I have been working with an underwater camera, I have held the camera by hand, which is fine for photography, but it's difficult to create high quality, cinematic video.

My dad, who came out to visit for a week and help with boat maintenance, helped me design and build an underwater system with an old tripod, by attaching bait-bags to the tripod to be filled with rocks underwater. It was a very unwieldy system but it worked, and solved the problem of carrying weights underwater. Each time I set up the tripod, I dove to the seafloor and collected some "local rocks." The rocks went into the bait bags and held the tripod down, and prevented it from being moved by waves and currents.

I met with a marine biologist Taylor White, who studies pinto abalones. Taylor shared with me some studies on tide pools that I still need to read, and she also directed me towards the social history of particular characters in Sitka who studied tide pools and other marine life in Sitka Sound.

I filmed a lot of footage over the course of the summer, going on short trips with my friends and family to nearby islands. I learned from a Taylor that there is a direct correlation between wave action and biodiversity in a tide pool, so the islands with the roughest water held the most exciting tide pools. The process included lots of swimming, carrying heavy bags of camera gear, and surrendering to the weather and the swell. I had to keep tabs on the tides and the weather systems. I enjoyed the immense effort that went into collecting these seemingly mundane videos of non-moving subjects. The boat maintenance, provisioning and trip planning, reading the weather and the tides, navi-



Tide pools in Sitka Sound



My camera and fins at a tide pool

gating, sailing, swimming, and staying warm: All of these different skill sets added up to several small SD cards filled with long shots of rocks and hermit crabs. Different concepts that I had learned from my time in the MFA program stuck with me: I thought about embodied research of swimming in the ocean, and I thought of the act of approaching tide pools from the ocean as an act of art itself. What I was learning from the tide pools seemed to be below or above human language. The film I want to make will ask the question, *What can we learn by staring at a tide pool for a very long time?* In some ways this summer I was embodying that question, but overwhelmingly too I was concerned with the technical task of collecting the film.



My friend Berett's first tattoo

Falling in love

Love is the one thing we're capable of perceiving that transcends dimensions of time and space. Maybe we should trust that, even if we can't understand it.

— Dr. Brand speaks to Cooper about love, *Interstellar*, dir. Christopher Nolan, 2014

The final artistic research methodology that I want to discuss here is the methodology of love. Through talking with my writing advisor and professor Jennifer Metsker, I came to realize that undertaking the act and experiencing the process of falling in love was critical to understanding a site of exchange. *Enmeshment* is a psychological term describing a relationship between two people that is defined by a blurring of boundaries and identities. An enmeshed pair may seem to experience each other's emotions.

In my research of sites of exchange, where two parties intermingle and transform each other, the human experience of falling in love and enmeshment seemed to be a critical site for my research. Like the interaction between a fishing knife and a fish's body, and the interactions between a sea and a tide pool, falling in love gives access to the emotional experience of mutual transformation and intermingling. To fall in love is to be transformed by another body, and to want to transform the body of another. Enmeshment occurs along every permeable interface, creating a place where identity is multilayered by other identities.

As Audre Lorde says in her essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," "The need for sharing deep feelings is a human need." Erotic attraction is a force that moves us towards others. Perhaps eroticism can be found in fishing; perhaps it can be found in a predator-prey relationship. Perhaps eroticism could be imagined in the waiting invertebrates in a dry tide pool, surviving before the sea returns. Eroticism is adaptive— we have evolved to crave the enmeshment with others. When Lorde says "The erotic cannot be felt secondhand," she is advocating for the resound welcoming of her black lesbian sexuality into a world that has previously shunned and punished it. However in the context of my work examining sites of exchange, this thought could call for an art practice that is deeply embodied. Without using all the senses by physically swimming in a river, it will be hard to know the river in a purely academic sense. Without sailing, it will be difficult to understand the relationship between the sailboat and the ocean. As human beings,

I think it is also important to use our body-gut-instruments to collect data in the waters of enmeshment. In an art practice concerned with sites of exchange and mutual transformation, cultivating the right circumstances for falling in love can be an important site of research.

In some ways, I feel that this document has things backwards; love was not really a research methodology that I chose in order to explore my research question. My research questions were guided by and created from love, they originated in love. And so the currents of love and desire were present before this research began and they will be present after the work has finished as well.

Cleaning a fish reminded me of love; and I did love the salmon as well, because they gave me an income, they were beautiful, and they had the allure of something that enters and leaves our lives quickly. Swimming was an analogy for love; the submersion into something again and again, and navigating within the bounds of something else. My love for my friend catalyzed my research into our friendship and colored this project; and I tried to understand the coast and the tide pools by devoting my time and energy to them. The thesis work is called *the tide pool room: a love story*, and it is actually more than one love story, left to the viewer to unravel. The two friends swimming together is the most clear love story. The second— is it between the sea and the rocky shore? Or is it between the camerawoman and the tide pool itself?



CREATIVE WORK

the tide pool room: a love story, installation view, March 2022
all photos in this section are by PD Rearick, unless otherwise noted

On March 25, 2022, the Stamps Gallery in downtown Ann Arbor held a gallery opening. The show was named *Close But Not Touching: The 2022 MFA Thesis Exhibition*. It was a bright and windy day, warm for March in Ann Arbor. Friends and family arrived from near and far. The MFA students themselves seemed slightly disheveled and tired, but happy.

The Stamps Gallery itself takes up the floor level of a large office

building. It faces one of the major streets in Ann Arbor, where one way traffic rushes north. The exterior of the building is modern and sleek. Stone tiled steps lead up glass doors with vinyl decals. One of the decals reveals the gallery hours: 11AM to 5PM, Tuesday to Saturday. Visitors come in the daylight hours, and the gallery is lit by natural light through floor to ceiling windows.

The show is currently up as I write this; it will remain up until May 2 when we will have to strike it. The MFA show is technologically ambitious and complicated. From robotic grass to experimental films played on radio transmitters, to elaborate screening rooms and breathing robotic sculptures, the show is elaborate, dense, loud, and exciting.

When a visitor explores the gallery, they experience the diverse and bold work of my cohort. I feel that acknowledging my cohort's work is important to give context to my work; however it will be impossible to do the work justice in this small space. I will briefly mention the work of the MFA candidates of 2022, though much more could be said about each installation. The practices and art works of my cohort challenged me to be technically ambitious, and to firmly ground my work in social and political currents around the world.

A viewer walks into the gallery. They approach a looming draped white paper sculpture built by MFA candidate Nick Azzaro. The piece is a towering school desk with the cut eye holes of KKK Klansmen hidden in the folds. Nick's work compares American education to systematic and historic racial oppression in the US. The viewer next enters a darkened screening room playing a documentary film by Razi Jafri, in which a young Yemeni man navigates the stresses, heartache, joy and successes of living as a refugee in South Korea. The viewer then can walk among the strange world brought into being by Georgia b. Smith with soft robotics, breathing silicone sculptures hung on welded metal sculptures. In the next area, the bright colors and festive music of Natalia Rocafuerte's dream-scapes of immigrant women lights up



the tide pool room: a love story, *installation view, March 2022*

the room, and the viewer becomes immersed in kaleidoscopic films installed on the walls over coconut bags. Beyond, Martha Daghlian's soft sculptures and video poetry act as portals to a different, romantic world. The viewer walks through the next area with art pieces by Kristina Sheufelt, where a mechanical wave pool and a mechanical meadow attempt to evoke the natural movements of waves and wind.

The furthest space from the entrance is my room: Around a corner, an area is darkened, blocked off from the rest of the gallery by black curtains running to the ceiling. At the entrance is a vinyl wall didactic that seems to be a poem:

the tide pool room: a love story

Ellie Schmidt

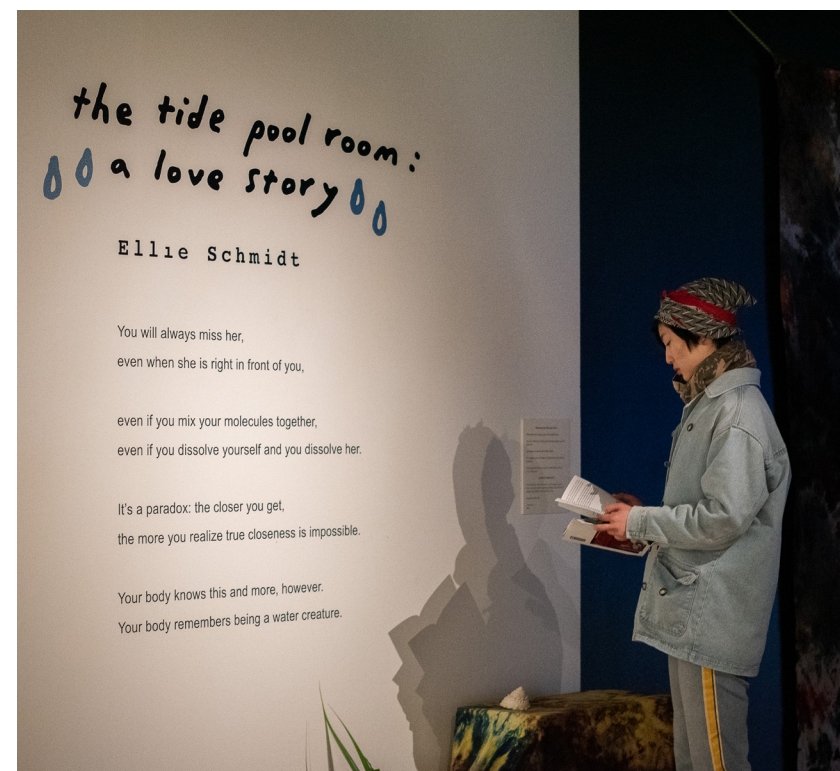
You will always miss her,
even when she is right in front of you,

even if you mix your molecules together,
even if you dissolve yourself and you dissolve her.

It's a paradox: the closer you get,
the more you realize true closeness is impossible.

Your body knows this and more, however.
Your body remembers being a water creature.

A small pedestal stands next to the didactic, draped in yellow tie dyed cloth, with a small stack of stapled booklets on top of it. An office-paper sized sign pinned to the wall encourages viewers to sit in the hammocks and also take a booklet. The viewer maybe takes a booklet,



the tide pool room: a love story, installation view, March 2022



the tide pool room: a love story, *installation view*, March 2022

maybe not. They peer around the corner into the darkness of the area in the back of the gallery. A large video is projected on the rear wall, almost floor to ceiling. Audio plays over two speakers. To the left, a large canvas is hung on the wall. The hammocks are hung from the ceiling and create a “forest” of draped fabric. Soft moving blue lights illuminate the dark areas of the room, evoking water reflections. Two fiberglass tide pools sit on the floor, with small fountains making the soft sounds of water. In the middle of the room, a large white shag rug and three memory foam bean bags invite the viewer to sit. The viewer has choices; they can sit in a hammock and sway gently, they can sit on a bean bag or sit on the floor. They can choose not to sit, and just walk around. They can leave right away. The installation invites the viewer to stay longer than they would during a gallery visit. In fact, I wanted people to overstay.

The installation is made up of several related parts which I mentioned, but I will describe each element in more detail below.

The film takes the viewer through different landscapes, holding each shot for several minutes:

Large tide pools with tall walls are seen at low tide, their sides covered in colorful green sea anemones, ochre sea stars, and other marine invertebrates. Sea water drips off the anemones and lands into the still water below. Tiny fish, no larger than a kidney bean, are seen resting in the water below, if you look closely, and you can see them move if you look long enough.

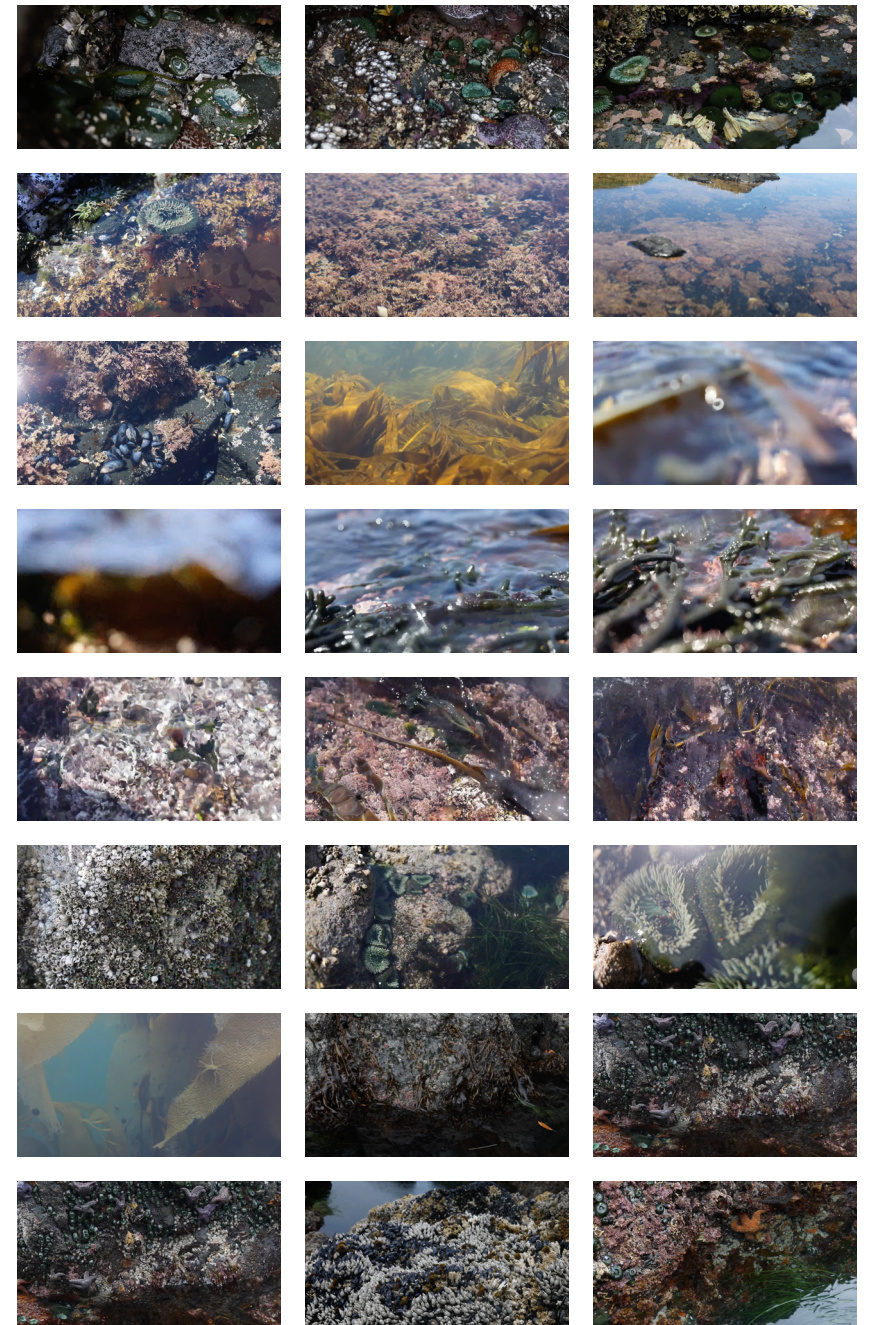
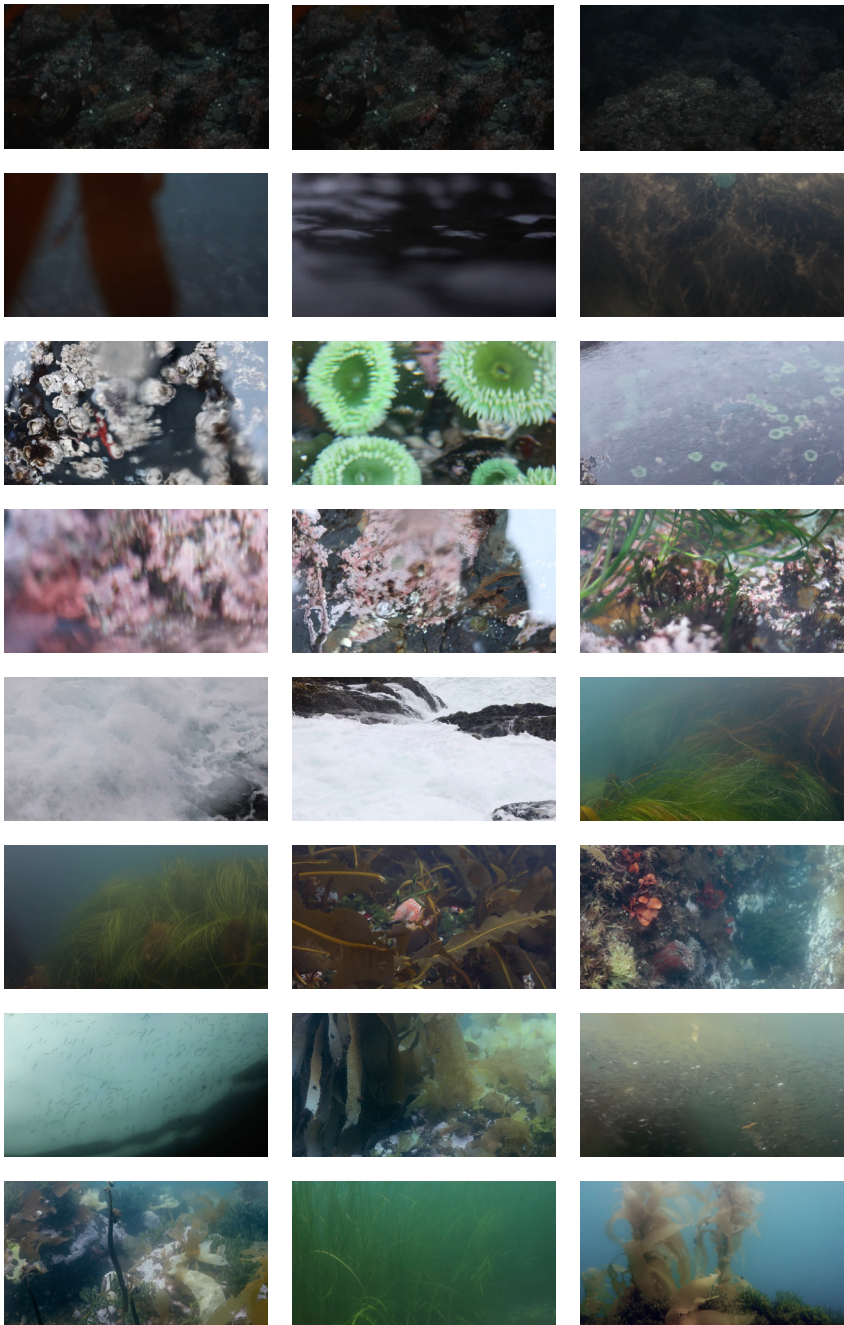
The screen is filled with gooseneck barnacles, strange creatures with an ivory beak and rubbery, long necks. The barnacles are exposed, and below, the swirling shapes of water entering the tide pools creates a soft sound. The gooseneck barnacles don’t move at all— maybe they flex a little bit. A tiny black insect flies around and lands among the barnacles, then takes off. Blue mussels are also scattered in the area, closed tight. After a few minutes of this frame, a strange sound starts



The hammocks

and interacts with the sound of rushing water. A droning buzz that rises and falls, a loud, rhythmic scratching. The score rises and falls.

Following pages: Stills from the tide pool film



The camera is underwater, a patch of green eelgrass hangs looped over. The grass is electric green, and flows gently back and forth in the current. A deep rumbling of underwater grinding plays. The camera is still, and holds the shot for several minutes. The viewer feels that this image is from a deep place. The musical score is absent.

A large school of small silver fish travels slowly before the camera, filling the frame. The fish swim independently, each moving forward in small bursts. The water is cloudy, a blue-brownish color. Strands of kelp move in the background. The camera is moving; handheld. The frame follows the fish as they swim left to right. A light, repetitive piano score plays, evoking the feeling of lightness and the shimmering of the fish.

A pool of pink coralline, in extreme close up. The threaded leaves of the coralline are seen clearly, they look like waving pink palm fronds. Hermit crabs, sized up to look enormous, walk slowly around. Strange shrimp-like creatures hinge like inchworms as they move up and down, maybe they are feeding in the shallow water. The pool is lit with bright sunlight. A loud, joyful score of carillon bells plays, emphasizing the feeling of the clarity of the water and the ripples as a soft wind blows over the surface of the pool.

I edited this film in the chronological order that I recorded the footage. Overwhelmingly, Julie's score is paired at random with the footage, creating a composition of chance. In some ways I think this was the only way I could have done it. The film was simply too large and overwhelming to edit clip by clip.

The music, like the chronology of my wanderings through the landscape, is haphazard and the method to the order is unknowable. However, like the process of sailing a small boat and snorkeling in the sea, discoveries are made and beautiful synchronicities appear. The combinations are unexpected and strange.

The film is 6 hours and 13 minutes long, which is the length of time

between low tide and high tide on planet Earth. The film is composed of long shots of tide pools and coastal landscapes near Sitka, Alaska, including underwater footage. The film uses local sounds of waves, barnacles, hydrophone recorded sounds and seabirds interlaced with an experimental classical musical score composed and performed by Julie Zhu. Julie's 6 hour 13 minute score includes improvised piano, carillon, and a musical instrument of Julie's invention in which she manipulates the sound of drawing on paper. I think of the film more as a loop than having a beginning and end, though it does move chronologically through time.

The installation is created for a dark room in a gallery. I made twenty tie-dye hammocks in collaboration with my mother, Nanci Lee. The hammocks may be installed specifically to a space. This space called for ten hammocks, installed with around six to ten feet between each one in all directions. The hammocks are made of different cloths, and therefore have different tactile feelings to them. They also stretch differently and so they must be hung up with care.

The hammocks are hung with climbing rope tied to the unistrut that holds the lighting grid. I used a combination of bowline knots, girth hitches, and "yoga hammock knots" to tie everything together. There is no hardware, just cloth and rope.

When the viewer enters the space, the hammocks appear like a forest, they are long and tall. They are all different colors, ranging from pink, green, to yellow ochre and blue. Each is hung slightly differently, and they hang at different heights depending on the stretch of the fabric. They are lit subtly with blue party lights. The party lights are a simple mechanical light that I ordered online. They rotate slowly and the light looks like a somewhat bad imitation of light reflecting off water. The lights are blue, and the blue color is very dark and saturated. When the viewer sits in a hammock, the watery party lights illuminate part of the hammock, and the lights can be seen through the fabric, so the viewer



the tide pool room: a love story, *installation view, March 2022*



untitled tie-dye painting, *made in collaboration with my mom*, installation view, March 2022



the tide pool room: a love story, installation view, March 2022
photograph by Katie Alexis

recognizes that their body is also illuminated by the lights.

Two fiberglass tide pool sculptures lie unobtrusively on the gallery floor, among the hanging hammocks. They are made out of cardboard, plywood, fiberglass, and many coats of black Flex Seal. They are extremely shiny. One is about three feet in diameter, and another is around six feet in diameter. They are both made up of sharp angles and flat surfaces, though mimicking the natural form of a tide pool created by igneous stones. They are both filled with a layer of water, and a small electric pump moves water on the surface, creating ripples and also a small watery sound, which seems to be amplified by the shapes of the pools. They are lit with dim spotlights and the blue party lighting.

A large canvas with tie dye patterns is hung on the wall. The canvas evokes the colors and visual languages of the tide pools.

Next to the wall didactic, a pedestal holds a few booklets. Picking one up, they are maybe 80 pages, printed on simple printer paper. The title *Two Stories* is printed on the front in a simple sans serif font, and the cover is a light blue color. Inside, the first story is called “Cutting a Fish in 6 Ways.” The first section begins:

1: The Knife

The tip of the knife catches on the rough scale, passes through a layer of very thin slime. It is a way to test the sharpness of the knife, does it slide off, or does it catch? There, it catches. The knife has been sharpened so many times that it lost its shape, it is a smaller triangle than before. The edges are rusted, the handle has a black blood stain that will never be cleaned away. But the knife is sharp, and that’s what matters most.

...

The prose poem continues, using detailed descriptions of the act of cutting fish from six perspectives, *The Knife*, *The Fish*, *The Eye*, *The Baitfish*, *Blood/Water* and *The Boat*. The poem uses language that prioritizes sensory effects and minimizes the subjectivity of the human presence. The effect is an observation of a simple act— cutting a fish— seen as an interaction of animate and inanimate forces, each revealing their own subjectivity and connection with the larger ecosystem. A knife becomes an actor, the water running through the veins in the fish becomes an actor. The piece draws upon hydrofeminist themes to contemplate and critique the seemingly simple act of cutting a fish, which connects to a complex intersection of ecological and political narratives.

The two sections are divided by a small painting of a ceramic pitcher. The second section is called “Swimming with my Friend,” and the stories are defined by month.

The first essay begins:

July

Sonia picks me up in her parents’ rusted green pickup truck. I climb into the tiny space in the back where I can crouch with my knees touching. In the passenger seat sits our friend Lauren, a classical composer on summer break from her doctorate in California. Lauren wears a single earring with a silver fish on it. She is elegant in a way that I associate with advanced degrees. Both Sonia and I have a few days off from fishing. Sonia loves to swim at the lake in the summer. On days like this, she drives around town like this, collecting friends.

The following essays are not chronological, they move back and forth between the seasons the way that my memories do. The stories are about one of my good friends, who I fictionalize as “Sonia.” The stories reflect on shared moments of swimming, in the ocean, rivers and lakes, but they also reflect on the experience of knowing my friend. Sonia is elusive, mysterious, and magnetic. She has been through a lot and this reflects in the people close to her, like her family.

The essays move between different moments, and a connective thread is the similarity of the seasons: summer memories merge with other summer memories. The final section touches on this strange experiences of repetitive memories through time:

This memory is one of my favorites because I feel like the internal gates of Sonia opened up to me, almost against her will, she was just exhausted and wanted to talk.

However I really know that this is not one memory, but several memories sedimented on top of one another. Sonia returns from fishing; we sit on a driftwood log and eat fried chicken. Sonia returns from fishing; she takes me to the lake to swim with lily pads. Sonia returns from fishing; I am fishing too, we meet at the bar at midnight, our wrists smelling like fish. Sonia returns from fishing; she takes a photo of my purple hair. Sonia returns from fishing; we trade clothes and go dancing at the cable house. Sonia returns from fishing; she asks me for a blue tattoo. Our romantic relationships grow and fade and return again. We are hired, employed, unemployed again. We move away and we move back. The impossible thing is to track how things have changed over

time, because the memory of this year reaches back through the past and pulls last year up and meshes with it. Sonia is the same as she has always been, and yet she is not the same at all, and it is only the flashes of how she used to be that allow me to realize it and remember.

Sonia’s suicide attempt is a cleft in the wheel, though. It breaks the hypnotic cycles of repetitive years and seasonal work. The way she is now— beautiful, confident, calm, loving, and far away... these seem to be characteristics in her that are defined by her survival. When I think of Sonia sitting at the kitchen table in my small attic apartment, I remember details that seem to penetrate through the years, her black wrist brace, the color of her hair, her illuminating gaze. However those things were all from before, and the brace, her hair, her gaze, they have all been remade. Instead of a wheel, I imagine the two banks of a river, facing each other, never touching, running flat in both directions, away from each other.



CONCLUSION

It is a cliché, but it is true, as I reach the end of my thesis work I find myself with more questions than answers. The methodologies I have started to experiment with, especially swimming, sailing, and falling in love as ways of developing new creative works are generative to me and I hope to keep pushing and inquiring into these concepts in the future. Also, the exciting theoretical worlds of hydrofeminsim, ecotone biology and durational films lead me towards new questions and new

projects. The knowledge that I have encountered and developed while working on this project is multifaceted and mercurial, it lies most comfortably in the shifting realm of interdisciplinary art.

So in my art practice, in examining an “ecotone,” I also find a relationship. I find a unique relationship between two bodies. By exploring each ecotone deeply, and by placing them alongside each other, I am conducting research that is both pivotally important but impossible to

complete. I am conjuring several emotional worlds and placing them in the same room to interact. Cutting fish may be comparable to love, but it is not the same. And staring at a tide pool for many hours might be comparable to love as well, but it is just a lens, or a new perspective. Equally, love might be used as a perspective to think about looking at a tide pool. I found that the different relationships cannot be collapsed into each other. The relationships between bodies are just as individual as the bodies that make up the relationships. The relationship itself is a new space, an ecotone where the interactions between two bodies creates something separate from each body and loops back around and transforms the bodies. It is a space of mutual ingress, collaborative transformation, and generative crosscurrents. The shifting tides between two bodies brings in new nutrients and ideas; the space between two bodies is more vibrant and dynamic than in a homogenous space. This individuality of the ecotone is something that stood out to me in this work.

Especially in the context of today in 2022, when locally and globally we are experiencing dramatic shifts in climate and ocean chemistry, the spaces between ourselves and a natural place will be critical to understand. It seems that an essential first step in this process will be to acknowledge the individuality of all relationships between individuals, whether the individual is a natural place, a single tide pool, a wild animal, or a human being. We know inherently that the story of romantic love between people is universal yet limitlessly unique. Love stories are always being told in new ways. However, I feel that in our search to understand the natural world in the age of climate change and wildlife depletion, we set out in search of a universal truth to explain the spaces between humans and the wild places. I suggest that we need a larger library of stories. The stories need to be specific, rather than global or universal. The stories also need to be open to a creation of new language around these kinds of relationships, or a resurrection of old language. Because in many ways I have found myself to be mute in

addressing my relationship with a tide pool. I cannot find the words. It is by bringing alongside a story of friendship with a friend who is complex, unique, and who ebbs and flows, that I am able to imagine a world in which my relationship with a tide pool is also a work in progress, and a lifelong pursuit. Though not the same, the two relationships bring me towards a place of deeper understanding about my relation to each.

This idea of the individuality of ecotones or relationships brings up a lot of interesting questions to me. I want to learn more about using love as a research methodology. Can love generate new knowledge, or manifest datasets? Could we use the emotions and the mind as instruments to collect information, just like the body during an embodied experience? Is it possible to collect knowledge or data from the emotional center of the mind? How can visual art unfold these questions in the face of dramatic ecological change? I know that many other artists and scholars and others have researched these questions, and I now earmark these for my future to read and explore.

The final conclusion that I want to touch on is about time. An idea that surfaced over and over again in my work is the consistent feeling that there is never enough time. Time is a precursor to all else; to observation, to affection, to understanding, to depiction, to collaboration. Time creates understanding, and with more time, the more modes of understanding and learning can be undertaken. Art, and especially time-based art like film and performance can serve as a capsule of time. Art can carve time in a world that is increasingly made up of slivers of chopped up time. This is where my research took me. To use art as a way to create time together. To invite others to “stay awhile” with one person, or one place. To slow down the fast paced, hyper stimulating world and focus, sit, and stay. This seems like the first step to understanding. What have I learned beyond that? It’s for another artwork, I don’t know yet.

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