

Waiting to Depart

Ronald Conn: Integrative Project 2015

In my thesis project, I explore the relationship between my imagination and memory. I employ digital collage work, built with photos of real-world textures, and hand drawn settings, to give form to my imagination; while simultaneously referencing meaningful parts of my past. The surreal nature of this work is a representation of a place, existing partly in my memory, and partly in my imagination. I describe places where formative moments of my life occurred. Each location was a place of deep introspection for me. However, at the same time, each space was also the site of external, and social experiences. This contrast of internal, and external experiences is at the core of each piece. As such, the series as a whole becomes part self-portrait part exploration of myself.

The work references aspects of Surrealism, and Futurism in their essence; in that they depart from literal interpretations of spaces, and break apart their perceptual relationships. Forms are broken into geometric shapes, planes are distorted, and the relationships between objects are re-imagined. The sweeping forms and naturally vivid colors are inspired by futurism, as described by Umberto Boccioni in technical manifesto of futurist sculpture (April 1912):

Sculpture should give life to objects by rendering their extension into space palpable, systematic, and plastic, because no one can deny any longer that one object continues at the point another begins, and that everything surrounding our body (bottle, automobile, house, tree, street) intersects it and divides it into sections by forming an arabesque of curves and straight lines.

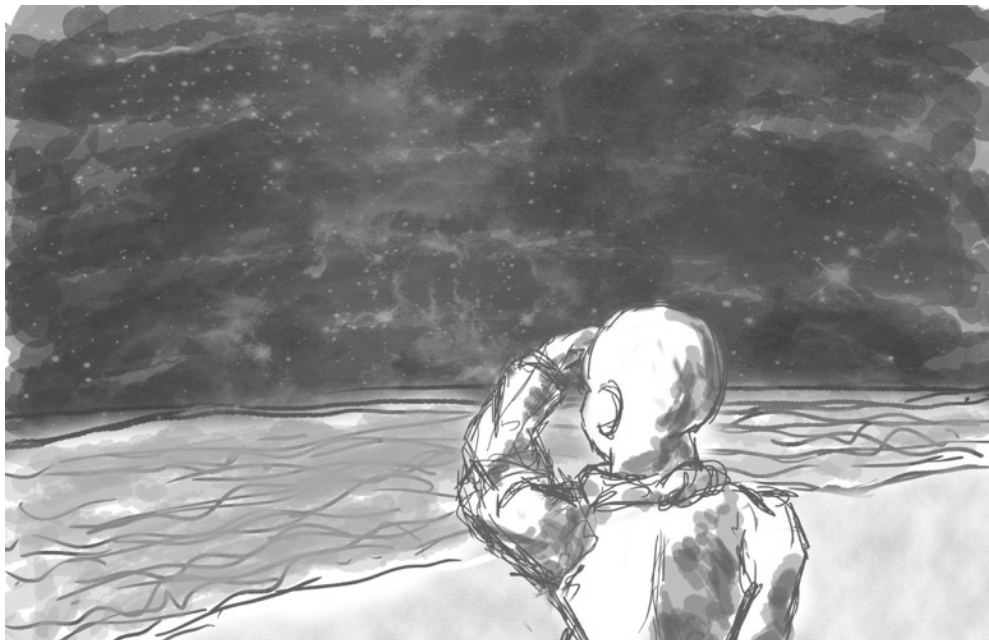
The works of Boccioni and others like him attempted to capture motion and energy. Rather than record the position of objects as static, they envision the motions and the very forces that drive existence. The work accomplishes this by extending forms beyond their boundaries and breaking apart their structure. Rather than record a moment in time, in a particular place; the work attempts to capture the essence of a space: the emotions, the movement, and the energy.

By extension, this mode of thinking is also systematically speaking to the "psychological space" of the artist. They are giving form to their perception of figures, and spaces. Even though the term was not coined until many decades after the futurist

movement. I find the motives of Futurist work to resonate with this field of psychology, and with my own work. The term “psychological space” was coined in the early 1970’s. Psychologist John Welwood describes this field in *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, (1977, Vol. 9, No. 2) by stating:

For us, space cannot be reduced to geometric relations, relations which we establish as if, reduced to the simple role of curious spectators or scientists, as if we were outside space. We live and act in space, and our personal lives, as well as the social life of humanity, unfolds in space. Life spreads out in space without having a geometric extension in the proper sense of the word. We have need of expansion, of perspective, in order to live. Space is as indispensable as time to the development of life (p. 400).

Welwood called this new interpretation “Lived space.”. It presented a new way to consider our own consciousness. Rather than being merely an observer, our thoughts live and change the space around us. Psychological space is a description of how thoughts are shaped, and imprinted onto the spaces we live in: by this measure, rather than merely observing, our thoughts actually change the space around us. This notion of “lived space” can overlap with classical interpretations of space, but extend beyond it as well. They are not tangible, or objectively measurable. They are experienced, and in the minds of psychologists like John Welwood, no less real than the places we experience with our senses.

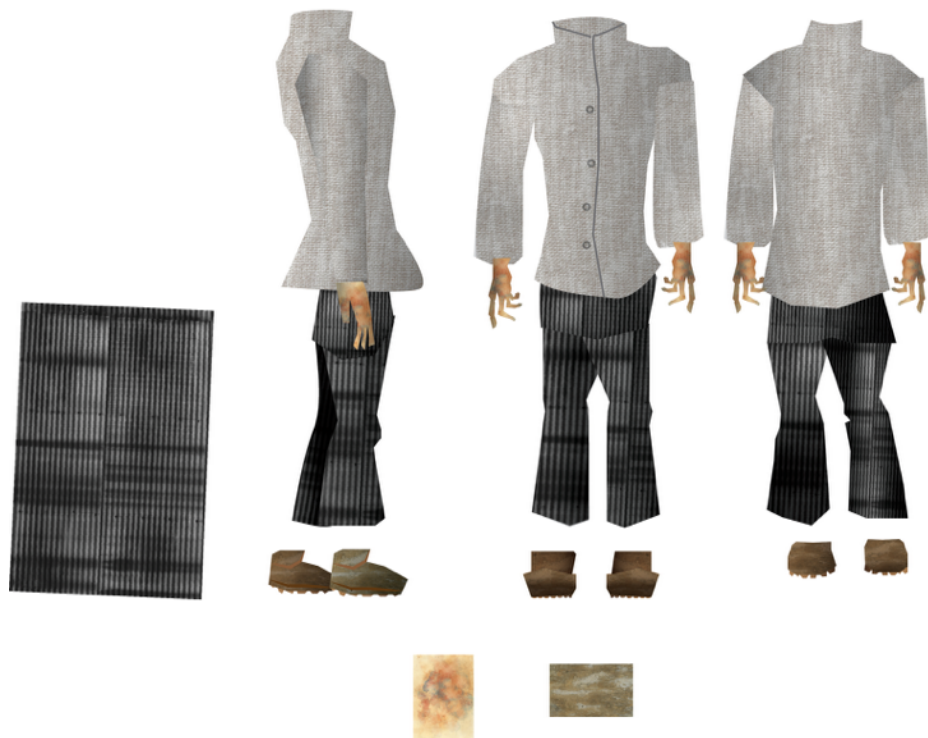




Storyboards from the film

The process of creating these images began with my intention to create an animated film. The original narrative involved ideas of cultural identity, and interpersonal memories in its early stages. I sought to envision a grand science fiction piece, about a future space farer rediscovering the lost history of humanity. Over the course of the semester the work began to reference my personal life more strongly. Once I had chosen a more personal narrative I began to wrestle with the aesthetics of the film. I wanted to focus on my strengths as animator, which I identify as raw line work, and narrative.

The collage method utilizing photography of found textures developed from a need to accurately depict real life, whilst also appearing fantastical. It was also a strategy to maximize efficiency as I identified color and texturing to be my weakest skill, and therefore the most time consuming. The collage style also creates a feeling of familiarity, juxtaposed against the fantastical. As a device, the choices of textures, was meant to reflect the internal state of the character, as if his very thoughts were painted onto the settings around him.



sample of character art with reference textures

After a great deal of consideration I realized that the film I envisioned was beyond my abilities, and time constraints. Additionally the production schedule I envisioned left no time for experimentation. This ran against one of the core principles of the integrative project, the idea of exploring and growing as an artist. When this conclusion became unavoidable, the consequences forced a change in concept.

Happily, I realized that static images could tell strong stories as well, without the need for animation or high quality production. It also allowed more space to deeply explore the themes that most interested me without the major limitations of a rigorous production schedule. Most importantly it allowed my work to become iterative and fluid, as opposed to rigorous and scheduled.

I allowed intuition to guide this decision initially, and began to write about moments of significance from my past. It quickly became apparent that the locations of these events were more important than any single moment that happened in them. I defined myself around key experiences that occurred in certain places. As I began to solidify what about these spaces was important, I created artwork that tried to represent those ideas. I most often would find myself responding to a single sentence or insight

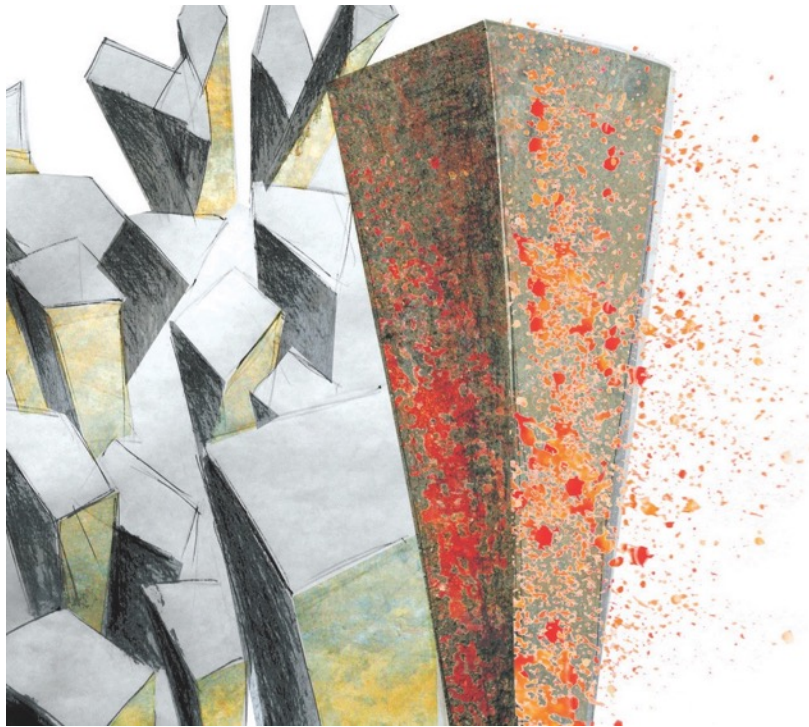
from my writings. These artworks, in turn, would inspire additional writing. The cycle became very integral to the overall themes of the work. I came to understand that the way in which I remember my past, and the emotions attached to those memories is in constant flux. Psychological research reveals that we constantly decontextualize the past, in light of new information. In other words, our imagination is actually a core component of our memory; it fills in the blanks, and interprets our emotions.

My continual process of creation, review, and collage can be understood as an extension of the contrast between physical realities, and our perceptions of them. I "paint" the spaces I occupy with my emotions, and construct representations of memories. My experiences of places are charged with memory, and my imagination. My early experimentations created large volumes of artwork. I created paintings, collages, photography, and illustrations that tried to capture the emotions and experiences I was writing about. However, the very spontaneity of the art generation process resulted in incoherent work. My original intentions had been to assemble the various works into representations of each space. The resulting collage experiments were difficult to discern by others, even when prompted with the writings.



A collection of paintings and photos I collaged for one space

I realized that after a certain amount of generation, and iteration, what I required was refinement. Reduction, and simplification were the last pieces of the puzzle. I had to make sense of the collections of emotions, and images I had created. This phase reflected an internal process as well. Our minds commit a simpler version of history in our memories, in order to make space for new experiences. I cannot remember every second of my life in great detail. Rather I have a concentrated collection of the most significant moments. In this fashion my work too, had to be brought to focus on a very concentrated idea for each piece, upon which the forms are were then structured.



An attempt to simplify the work, through reduction

The writings too had to be polished into something clearer. My collections of insights were difficult to grasp holistically. They were even more difficult to present. As with other aspects of my work, the final iterations drew upon my attempts to make a film. Audio was a large concern for me at the time. I knew it was key to a strong film, but it was something I lacked depth in as a skill. While I had been collecting textures, I was also collecting sounds. I realized it would be better to utilize organic soundscapes rather than attempt to build my own.

Combining these found sounds with recordings of the most impactful insights from my writings created a new element to the work. Each piece was experienced

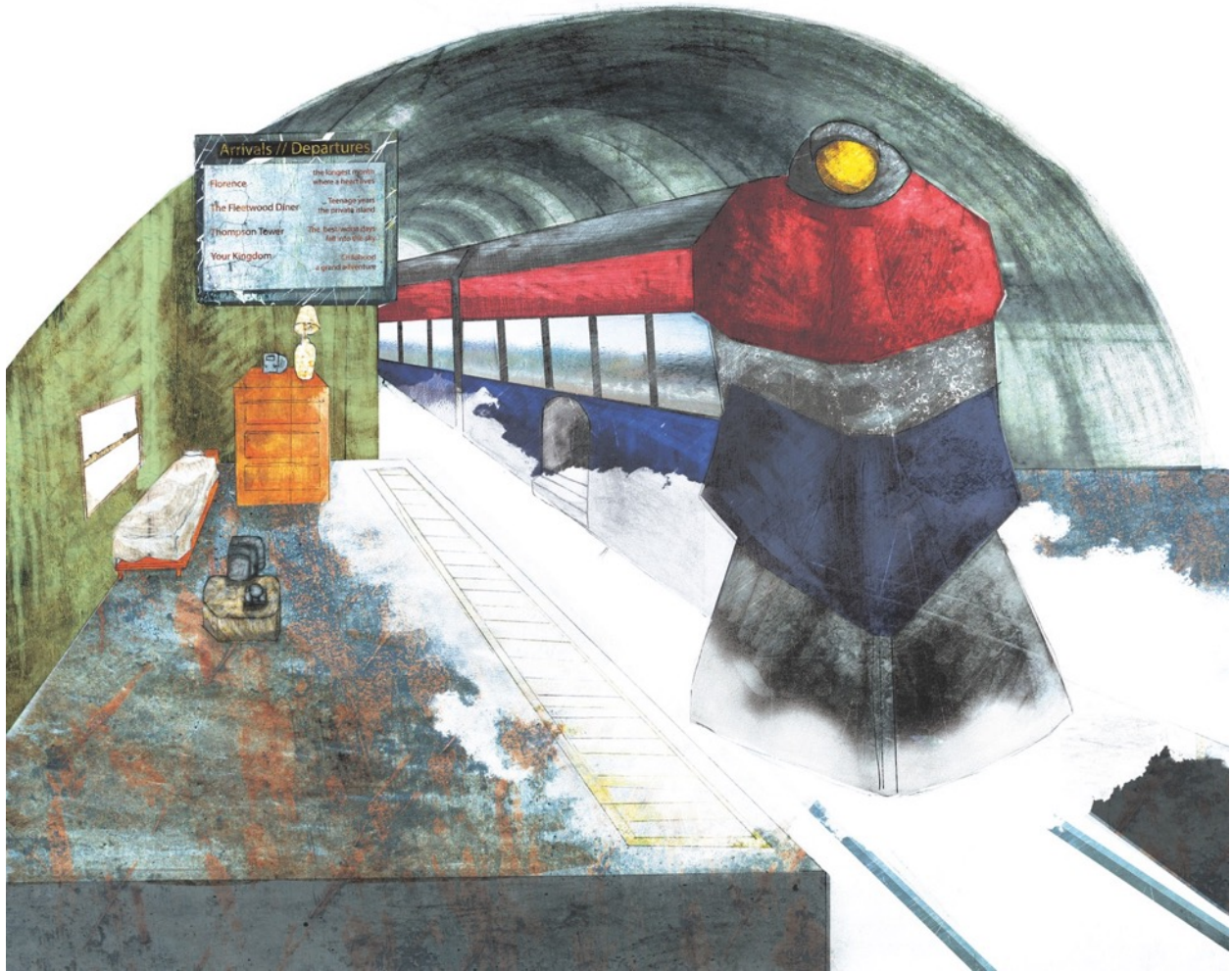
differently with the inclusion of sound. It allowed for stronger immersion into the collage pieces, and gave context to the imagery.



Childhood park piece



Thompson parking structure



My bedroom as a child, and the central thematic setting for the journey through my past



The Fleetwood Diner, a place I go to often



An apartment in Florence I lived in

The final installation was distilled into five large format collages, each representative of a significant space from my life. Together they formed an exploration of myself, that others could experience. "Waiting to Depart" became an immersive journey for others to experience how I imagine define the story of myself. At the center is an imagined train station, imagined as a way to explore my own mind. It became central to audio component as well. Viewers are prompted to embark on a journey in any fashion they choose. The final installation consisted of large prints arranged horizontally on the wall, with an interactive application to experience the sounds. Though the designed audio application had the unintended side effect of distracting from the printed pieces, further iterations of the work could be designed to be more inclusive.



Main Screen of the Interactive Audio Application, based off the "train station" motif



The Gallery Installation

I feel that the work combines the best of my abilities, into something new for myself. It is a form of storytelling that is intimate, and vulnerable. I learned a great deal about how to share emotions with others. The ideas, and inspirations for my own artistic practice were successfully transmitted to others. It has given me great insight into my own process, and reminded me what is most important about my work. When I set out on the project I envisioned a grand fictional tale. One that would show off my great skill, and my genius. As the year went on, the work became more about others. The central theme was to be understood, and to connect with others through story. That to me is the true calling of my work.





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