interaction through food
strings attached

elle leung

Integrative Project
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INTRODUCTION

As a child, I never liked eating. My ever-growing list allergies, sensitive stomach, and fundamental dislike of my parents' favorite foods made it so that associations between eating and pleasure never formed. A picky eater, I developed a list of "foods I didn't mind" rather than a list of "foods I liked."

When I did cook in high school, it was a combination of frozen foods, instant noodles, microwave meals, and other quick, easy foods. Going off to college, these were naturally the products I gravitated toward in grocery stores. They provided me with a sense of familiarity I had lost moving to a new state with no established family nor friends to support me. Rather than sustenance, these food products became vessels of memory for me. Canned lychees brought back memories of my mother peeling each individual berry to feed to me. Roti paratha packets reminded me of my housekeeper, who would cook it for me and my brother every afternoon.

Not only did they draw upon existing memories, but these food products allowed me to create new ones as well. A stranger offering me an old waffle while I was waiting in line for a conference panel started a conversation - he liked cutting in lines, and he was painfully bad at arcade games. A curious grocery trip with my friends led to trying jellyfish strips - apparently, you're supposed to desalt it before eating it.

Food products have always driven interactions. When we go to the grocery store, we encounter fellow shoppers; we speak with the cashiers. We may be shopping with other people. We may even be buying food for other people. We may chat with coworkers when we wait in line for the coffee machine or the vending machine. These interactions may seem mundane, but they deepen the bonds between us through the shared basic need of food.

Strings Attached is a series of animations that discuss the impact of food products on our interactions with each other and greater connection to society. The short, nonlinear format of the animations is a reworking of the format of commercials, which is the way we are most accustomed to seeing interactions over food products in media. By removing the economic incentive of this medium, I hope to bring credibility to these interactions so that the viewer can begin to see it as a cultural phenomenon. From the use of food products as a physical representation of an emotional bond to another person to routine interactions between regular customers and vendors, this project aims to touch upon a range of subtopics under food anthropology. By providing objective depictions of these interactions, this project challenges its viewers to reflect upon the role food products play in their interactions and lives.

CONTEXTUAL DISCUSSION

Psychology of Food

People select the food they consume for a variety of reasons, including morals, religion, nutrition, aesthetics, price, and taste. These rank differently for individuals, and even those reasons that are not purely physical can result in physical reactions (ex: someone who morally oppose consumption of animals may became nauseous at the idea or image of meat dishes.)

Consumption of food can trigger dopamines that create the feeling of pleasure. Many foods nowadays tap into these chemical reactions and can result in addiction-like symptoms - sugar, caffeine, etc.[1]

Food practices can be trained. In "Japanese Mothers and Obentos: The Lunch Box as Ideological State Apparatus," Anne Allison argues that Japanese bento lunches that mothers prepare for their children is regulated socially by the state and society. Unappealing bento lunches can imply that the mother is incompetent or doesn't love her child, resulting in social shaming. In schools, children are prompted to finish all of their bento. If they do not finish it, they are labeled as misbehaving and problem children. Teachers can employ social shaming to enforce these practices as well, such as holding back the class from break until everyone finishes their bento.[2]

Decorated Bento Boxes

[1] McGovern, Mike. "The Anthrology of Food." *University of Michigan.* 2019.
[2] Allison, Anne. "Japanese Mothers and Obentos: The Lunch Box as Ideological State Apparatus." *Anthropological Quarterly.* October 1 1991.

Trends in Food Culture

Globalism has simultaneously created food commonalities between different regions and shone a light on the vast range of food practices that are employed today. Instead of trying to define or characterize modern food culture as a whole, I've picked out certain trends that can be applied generally to research.

According to Russell Belk's "Sharing," sharing food creates stronger bonds between people by promoting a reciprocal relationship. Certain objects can be predisposed to sharing. For example, Asian tea pots tend to be on the larger side, while tea cups are fairly small. This encourages multiple diners to share the same pot of tea. Since the tea cups are small, they have to be refilled quite often, so one person will often refill the cups of their fellow diners as well as their own.[3]

Chinese-style Tea Pot and Cups

Control of access to food continue to be reflective of power dynamics, even on a smaller scale. Amy Paugh and Carolina Izquierdo's "Why is This a Battle Every Night?: Negotiating Food and Eating in American Dinnertime Interaction" frames the interactions over the family dinner table as a show of authority by parents over their children.[4]

Media About Interactions over Food

Some artists have used food to reaffirm relationships.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres used piles of candy as "portraits" of people close to him, including his partner, his close friend, and his father. Gonzales-Torres invites museum-goers to take pieces of candy from the pile. This gradually diminishing stack parallels the deteriorating health caused by AIDS.[5] The candies is a tribute to these individuals and characterizes Gonzalez-Torres's changing relationship with them.

*Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.),*
Felix Gonzalez-Torres (1991)

[3] Belk, Russell. "Sharing." Journal of Consumer Research, Volume 36, Issue 5. February 2010. Pg. 715–734.
[4] Paugh, Amy and Carolina Izquierdo. "Why is This a Battle Every Night?: Negotiating Food and Eating in American Dinnertime Interaction." *American Anthropological Association.* November 17 2009.
[5] Gonzalex-Torres, Felix. *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.).* 1991.

Teddy Ninh's animation LUCKY'S pairs visual abstractions of food to a voiceover describing his father's food truck. LUCKY'S looks into how "foreign" foods have been adapted and received, which is framed by Ninh's underlying examination of his relationship with his father.[6]

LUCKY'S,
Teddy Ninh (2018)
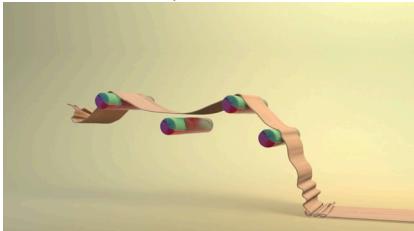
Both these pieces are based around the artist's own personal relationships, which give the piece emotional credibility. While I also want to give credibility to the relationships I depict, I plan to depict "other" relationships that are not my own, leading me to look to artists who have used food to inspire interactions between their patrons. These pieces redefine or even create new relationships.

Allan Wexler's Coffee Seeks its Own Level (1990) uses four linked cups of coffee to force the four diners to coordinate their efforts to drink coffee without spilling. This piece sets a common goal for the four diners. One person cannot succeed without the help of the others, creating bonds between the four diners that might otherwise be strangers.[7]

Coffee Seeks its Own Level,
Alex Wexler (1990)

Untitled (Free),
Rirkrit Tiravanija, 1992

Rirkrit Tiravanija's Untitled (Free) redefines the artist-viewer relationship by providing viewers with free food and inviting them to become a part of the piece by eating with fellow viewers. The food alleviates the formality of the museum space and turns the exhibition into a community area where conversation is encouraged.[8]

[6] Ninh, Teddy. *LUCKY'S.* 2018. https://vimeo.com/305625642
[7] Wexler, Allan. *Coffee Seeks its Own Level.* 1990.
[8] Tiravanija, Rirkrit. *Untitled (Free).* 1992.

Audiences are acutely aware of what constitutes accurate and inaccurate depictions of these interactions. Pepsi's "Kendall Jenner for PEPSI" (2017) featured Kendall Jenner stopping a protest and uniting both sides with a Pepsi. Viewers complained that by showing that a protest could be stopped by a single beverage, Pepsi made light of the issues that divide the two sides of a protest.[9] Folgers' "Brother & Sister" (2009) featured brother and sister characters drinking coffee togethers. Viewers saw the characters' interactions with each other as more similar to the behavior of a couple.[10] My project aims to have viewers apply the ideas depicted in my animation to their own lives. While completely unintentional on advertisers' part, this format was successful in challenging viewers to reflect upon their own experiences with similar food products and use those to judge the accuracy of the media. This sort of reflection is ultimately my goal in this project, and I have chosen to utilize a similarly short form, nonlinear animation format.

Live for Now,
Pepsi, 2017

Visual Design in Animation

One of my goals in to make my animations engaging in pure entertainment value.
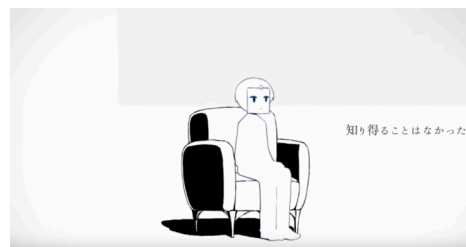

Delusion Girl,
Shizu, 2016

Shizu's music video for TOUYU's "Delusion Girl" balances quick motions and slower ones to emphasize certain movements and create a strong flow.[11]

Since each of my animations touch upon a different subtopic, I plan to emphasize their differences by creating a unique visual style for each of my animations that can communicate that specific mood or tone.

avogado6's music video for Nuyuri's "Inochi Bakkari" uses an almost childish illustration style and a mix of mostly monotone elements and a few bright accents to embody a hopeful character in a seemingly hopeless world.[12]

Inochi Bakkari,
avogado6, 2017

[9] Pepsi. *Live for Now.* 2017.
[10] Folgers. *Brother & Sister.* 2009.
[11] Shizu. *Delusion Girl.* 2016.
[12] avogado6. *Inochi Bakkari.* 2017.

TOHRU MiTSUHASHi's music video for HitoshizuxYama's "Kotonoha Yugi" combines traditional Japanese patterns and shapes with pop graphic text and colors to create a visual that looks both mythical and modern.[13]

Kotonoha Yugi,
HitoshizuxYama, 2015

Specific Food Experiences

Whenever I visited Hong Kong with my parents and brother, we would always buy water bottles from convenience stores. Tap water had to be boiled before it could be drunk, and reusable water bottles hadn't quite caught on yet. In Hong Kong, one brand dominated the convenience store shelves - Watsons. Its signature curved shape and bright green cap is imprinted in my mind. My brother and I were still at the age where we worried about cooties and drinking from the same cup - conveniently, the bottle's cap was large enough to be used as a makeshift cup, so we could share the same bottle. My parents were spared from mediating a lot of quarrels this way.

For me, those water bottles are therefore tied to the idea of family, especially within the context of my childhood. These water bottles remind me of a time and place where I was completely dependent on my parents. Having left the nest to go to college, I am no longer in that time and place. My parents no longer regulate what I eat or drink, but they certainly keep track of it whenever they call. They always taught me that my body was their gift to me, and to neglect my physical health was tantamount to mistreating them.

Watsons Water Bottles

[13] HitoshizuxYama. *Kotonoha Yugi.* 2015.

Milo Chocolate Powder

Milo, a chocolate brand, is sold in several forms, including instant chocolate powder, a canned drink, and a hot drink served on restaurant menus. In Hong Kong, I usually had it in restaurants already prepared, but in the states, I usually made it at home from the powder. Most foods in Hong Kong never carried over to the states, so these experiences were confined to their location.

Good Humor's strawberry shortcake ice cream bars were a childhood treat for me. They were common enough that almost anyone I bring it up to now knows what I'm talking about, yet they were (and are) surprisingly hard to find whenever the craving hits. They were rarely at grocery stores or vending machines. The most reliable source was ice cream carts and trucks. Whenever I saw an ice cream cart rolling around, often beside parks and in the downtown areas of cities, I would beg my parents to accompany me to the cart and ask if they had the strawberry shortcake bars.

Good Humor Strawberry Shortcake Bar

Extra Polar Ice Gum

Some food is more casual than others. Some packaged food contains its own smaller packages, allowing its buyers to further distribute its contents. The smaller packages are easier to share, and such sharing practices become a commonplace interaction between even casual acquaintances. Sharing of gum is promoted by the individual packets in a pack, which seem to suggest that sharing is more sanitary that it would have been if gum was lumped together in the same package. The packaging is therefore instrumental in creating a more casual experience.

Several automated food restaurants are in San Francisco, near where my parents live. I asked them to visit these restaurants and to video-chat me so I could share the experience. The first restaurant (Eater) was an automatic burger resturant, where a set of tubes and machinery cooked and assembled burgers in a conveyor-belt fashion. There were no human chefs/cooks in the restaurant, but my father was greeted by a human waiter and ordered through a human cashier.

The second restaurant (Cafe X) was a coffee shop where the coffee was assembled by a robot arm. There were one or two human workers whose job was to refill ingredients for the robot and to explain the ordering process to customers.

The third restaurant (eatsa) was the only restaurant that was (visibly) completely automatic. Orders were taken with touch screens and the food arrived through cubbies with customers' names. My father had some trouble ordering with the touch screen and asked a fellow customer for help (since there were no workers in sight).

Eater SF

Cafe X

eatsa

METHODOLOGY

I followed the standard procedure of creating storyboards, animatics, rough cuts, and then the final cuts for each of my animations. For some of my earlier animation, I created multiple animatics, one using rough sketches, one using drawings more indicative of the final style, and one colored with roughly the colors I planned to use in the final animation.

In the rest of this section, I'll use the development of my individual animations to guide my description of the development of my project as a whole.

> *"Strings Attached is an investigation into the connections between people created by mass-produced food products, such as juice boxes or packs of candy. Through a series of animated commercials about food products familiar to me, I will display different types of relationships products can create or foster."*

My initial proposal was linked much more closely to my own childhood experiences with food. As I intend to go to commercial production with motion graphics and animation after graduation, I wanted to create a project that had a heavy emphasis on objects and their context. My decision was greatly influenced by trends in marketing like lifestyle branding. Throughout my time at Stamps, I've been questioned about the ties between commercials and art. It seemed fitting that for my thesis, I would look at ways to better integrate the two. To do so, I looked into my own background with commercials, brands, and the products they sell.

As I brainstormed products, most of what came to mind was food, many of which I linked to my parents and to my childhood friends and classmates. Packaged food products were key in a lot of what I remember of my communication with my family and peers.

Many of the products I examined were closely tied to brands. I mainly identified the products from my childhood by their brand. My parents would always buy Demae instant noodles; any other brand of instant noodle would not trigger that association. My earliest animations in this series were about these products that were so closely tied to my childhood. They featured specific products, and branding was a large part of the conversation.

Water Bottles

My first animation about water bottles was centered around a product that was prominent in my childhood. While the narrative depicted was not exactly my own, it was heavily based on my own experiences.

Ice Cream

With my ice cream animation, I used my favorite ice cream as a child as the basis. However, I drew upon experiences that I witnessed but was never personally a part of. With this, I began to distance my project from my own experiences and focus on more universal experiences.

Gum

Sticky, gross gum connecting the mouths of everyone who is splitting one package of gum. The idea came unrelated to my thesis, and I initially hesitated to include it. It was tone-wise completely different from my first two animations, which were more reflective and narrative-based. This idea was more humorous and speculative.

As I pulled this idea into my project, I started to expand the frame of my project to include these different tones and perspectives. Since this was tied to a more general experience, I didn't have a specific brand of gum in mind for the animation. I tentatively assigned it to Trident gum, the one gum brand I was familiar with, but I started to rethink the role branding played in my project. In this animation, the use of branding was somewhat of an afterthought and irrelevant to the narrative.

Instant Chocolate

The instant chocolate product featured in this animation was initially Milo, but I decided to change it to Ovaltine since my water bottle animation already featured green as a dominant color (Ovaltine has an orange/red logo). I wanted to demonstrate range in visual style and color schemes. This decision was made fairly arbitrarily and purely visually motivated, and it essentially mitigated the importance of brand in my project. Brands became more of a visual cue for me to establish what products were rather than a thematic concept.

The visuals also became a large focus in my project. I had always been inspired by highly stylized animations which created their own unique visual language by appropriating previous movements. I had never been able to describe my animation style, since each of my animations were so different. I hoped that by pushing myself stylistically, I would be able to find my niche.

I went back and created style guides for each of my animations, pushing myself to make each one distinct. In considering visual styles, I looked at the featured packaged food, the interaction, and themes the animation revolved around.

Kaiten Sushi + Coffee

Feedback from my December review encouraged me to look at up-and-coming trends in the food industry. Someone on my review panel commented that many of my previous animations had triggered nostalgia since they felt that these interactions were fading away due to mechanization and automation like the use of robots in restaurants.

While I disagree with the idea that interaction is becoming less relevant in food nowadays, I agree that automation has changed the ways that interactions occur. I wanted to look at this shift with an animation about fully automated sushi restaurants.

Another loss of interaction seemed to be the result of the proliferation of self-service. I decided to focus another animation on the rise of home baristas, or people who chose to brew their own coffee at home rather than buying it from a chain.

Cereal

Another point raised at my December review was the screening format of these animations. My panel suggested that I show them all together rather than spacing them out, since the audience's interpretation could be influenced by the intermediary animations. As they were being screened together, it was tantamount that the animations seemed to fit together under one umbrella of food and interaction. My panel suggested that I vary the approach to the animations, making some animations more "obvious" about the message to balance out the subtler ones.

Looking at the list of my other animations, I wanted to create another fun speculative animation similar to the gum concept. I settled on an animation about food eating practices. I wanted to explore how people got so heated up and defensive about their own eating practices and the cultural implications of this.

Since the animations would be screened as one long showing, it was important for me to be able to establish the theme of all the animations early on so viewers could watch each of the shorts with that in mind. With guidance from my instructors, I decided to add a opening montage sequence in the beginning to introduced the theme of food and interaction as well as intertitles to help separate the short animations.

Finishing Touches

In the last month, I had three animations to finish - sushi, cereal, and chocolate. I intentionally worked on them in what I perceived to be easiest to hardest (sushi, then cereal, then chocolate). I intended to create the opening montage and intertitles after completing all the animations. After finishing the sushi and cereal animations, I had the last two weeks to finish the chocolate animation. I chose to cut the chocolate animation out and instead focus my time on creating the opening sequence, refining the sonic environment of the other animations, and adding more secondary animation. The finished project had six animations, connected by intertitles and introduced by an opening sequence.

CREATIVE WORK

Water Bottles

The water bottle animation is about the evolving relationship between a mother and her son as her son learns to provide for his own basic needs.
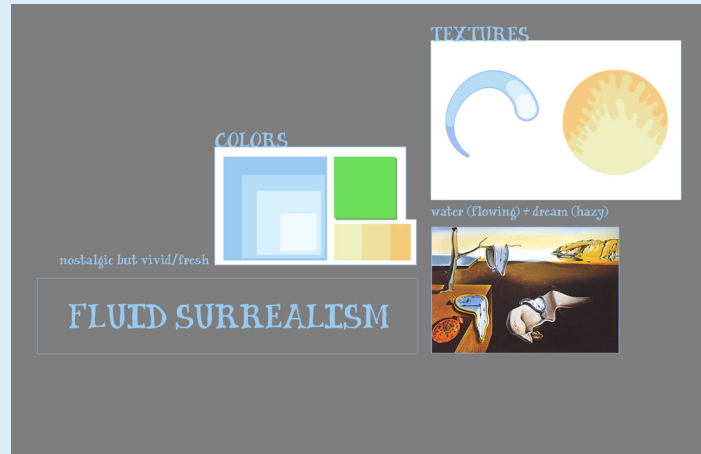
Style Guide

Story-board/ Animatic 1

Animatic 2

In Progress Shot

Rough Cut

Final

Screenshot 1 from Final

is to treat your parents well.

Screenshot 2 from Final

COLORS
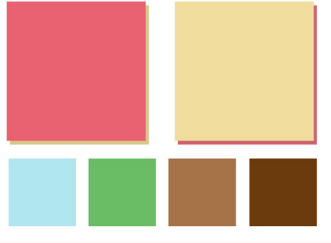
TEXTURES

picture book (childlike innocence)

WONDER

Style Guide

Ice Cream

The ice cream animation is about the familiarity and opportunities for interaction that arises from routine activities with our food sources.

Screenshot 1 from Final

Screenshot 2 from Final
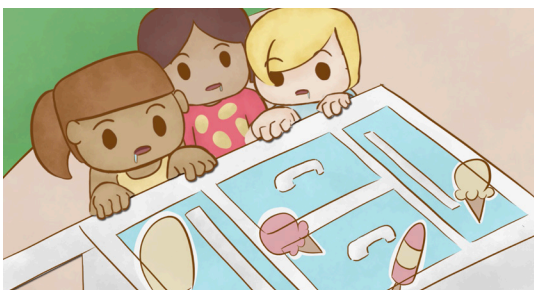
Screenshot 3 from Final
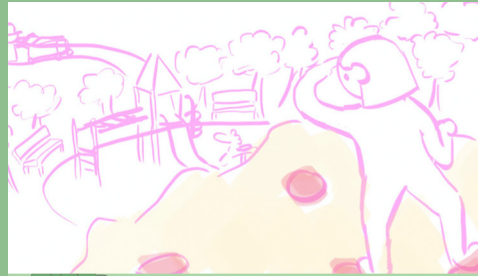
Storyboard/ Animatic 1
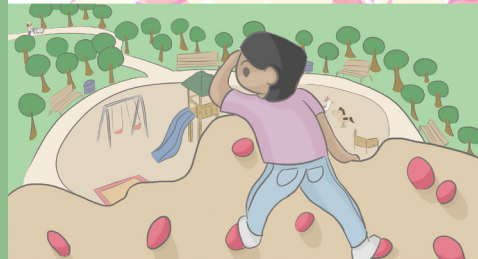
Animatic 2

Rough Cut

Final

Gum

The gum animation is based on the casualness of sharing some foods (i.e. gum).
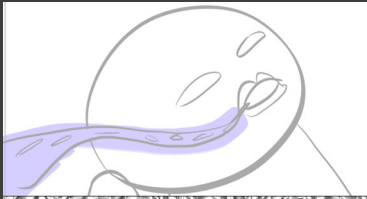
Storyboard /Animatic 1

Animatic 2

Rough Cut 1
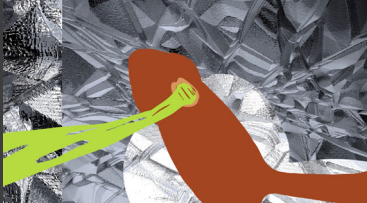
Rough Cut 2
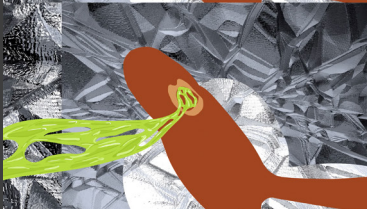
Final

Style Guide

Screenshot 1 from Final
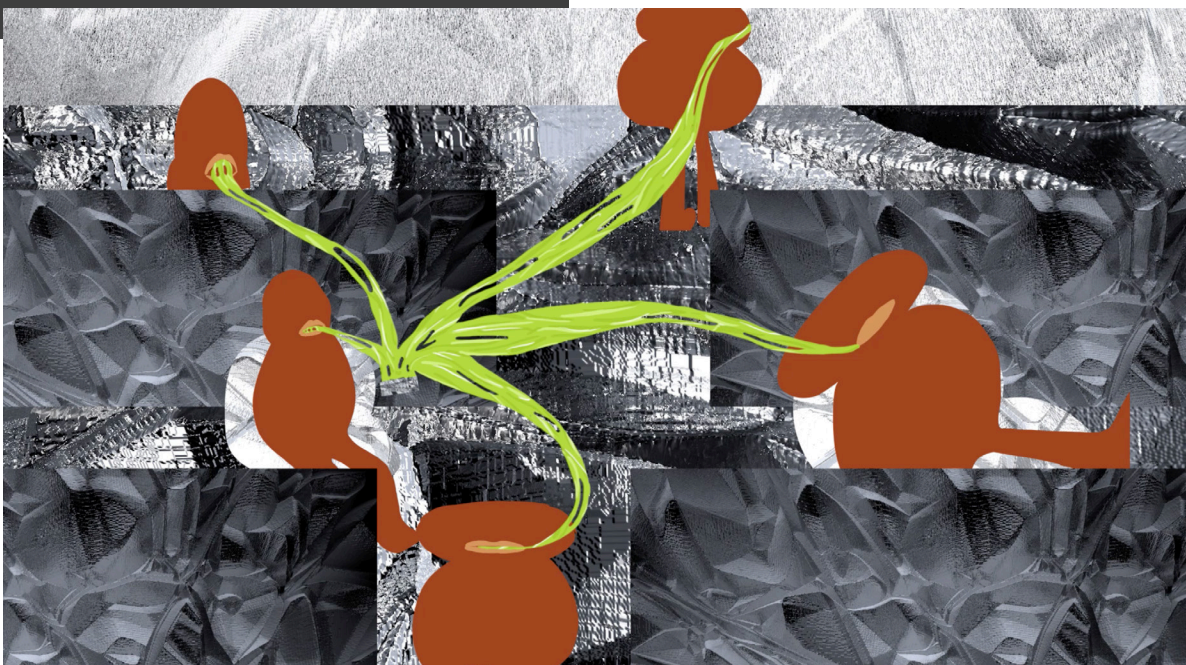
Screenshot 2 from Final

Style Guide

Instant Chocolate

The chocolate animation was about the globalization resulting in common food experiences around the world.

This animation was cut from the final due to the time required of 3D animation.
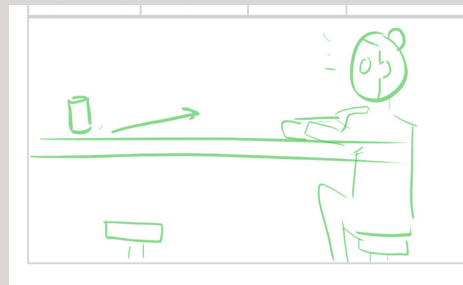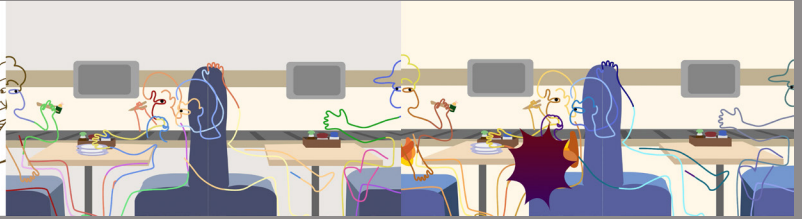

Storyboard

Animatic

Screenshot from Working Version
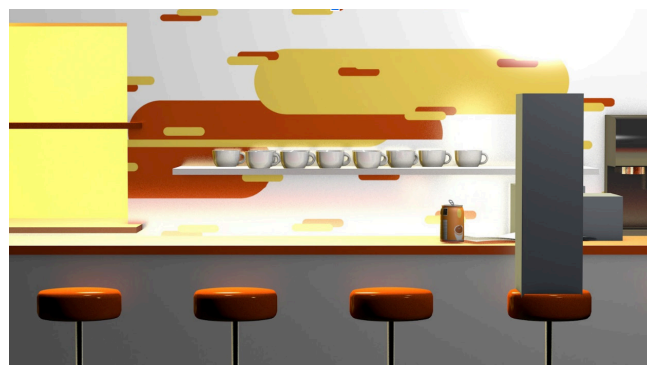
Diner Set (Cube as placeholder for character)

Kaiten Sushi

The sushi animation is based on the increasing relavance of relations between customers resulting from automated restaurant technology.
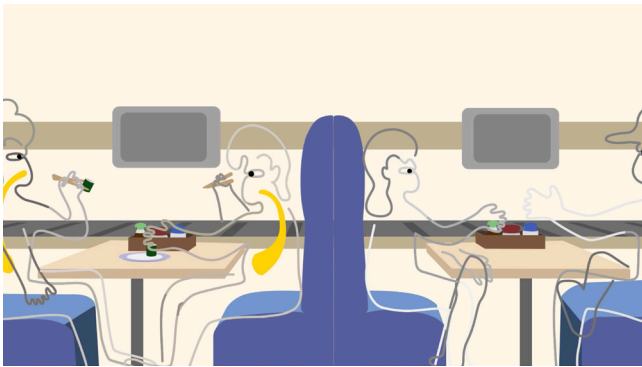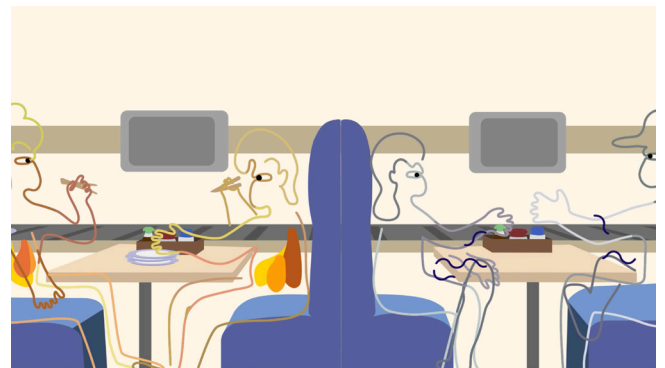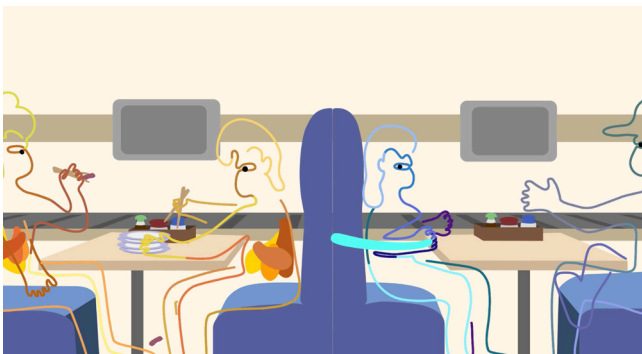

Storyboard/Animatic *Rough Cut* *Final*

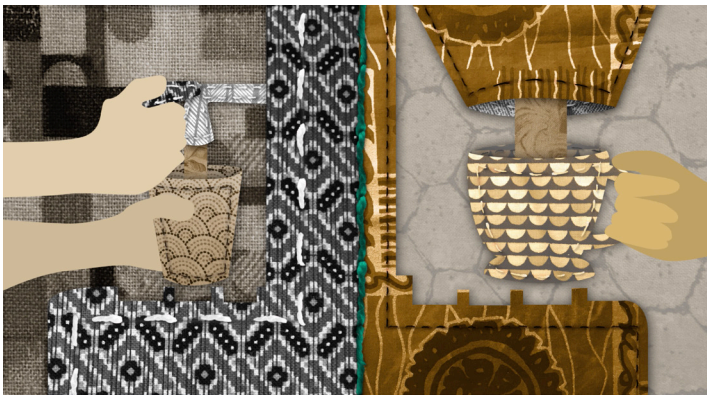*Screenshot 1 from Final*

Screenshot 2 from Final

Screenshot 3 from Final

Coffee

The coffee animation compares commercialized coffee-making and at-home coffee making and comments on how industry connects both activities.

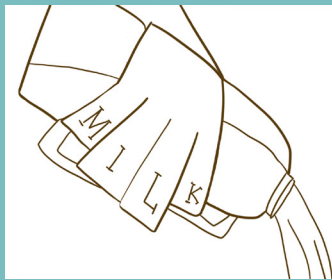Animatic   Rough Cut   Final
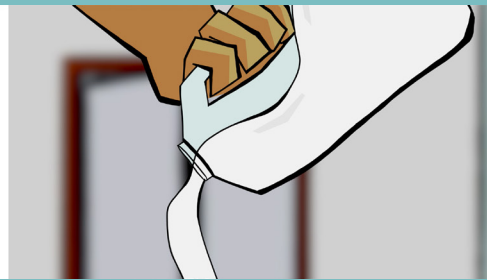

Screenshot 1 from Final

Screenshot 2 from Final

Cereal

The cereal animation is about the divisive nature of food eating practices (i.e. milk before cereal vs. cereal before milk) and the heated nature of these debates.

Animatic

Final

Screenshot 1 from Final

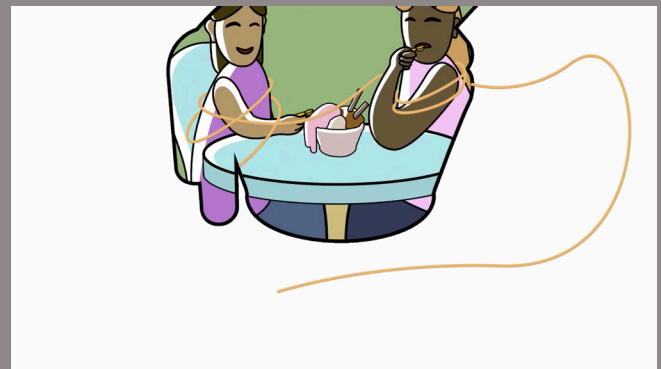*Screenshot 2 from Final*

Screenshot 3 from Final
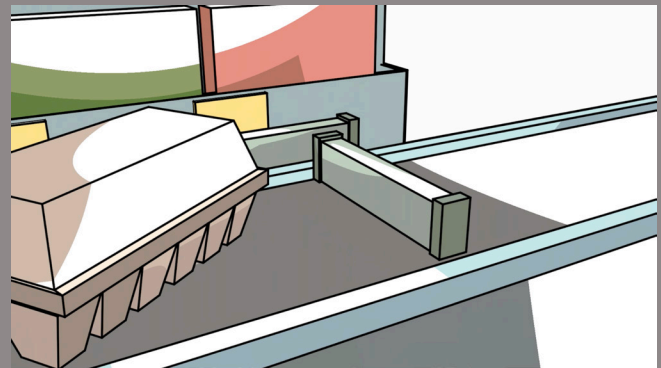
Screenshot 4 from Final

Title Sequence

The title sequence preludes all six final shorts. It was developed to draw the audience's attention to the interaction aspect in food.

Screenshot 1 from the Final

Screenshot 2 from the Final

Screenshot 3 from the Final

interaction through food
strings attached
elle leung

Screenshot 4 from the Final

CONCLUSION

I have always felt uncomfortable defining my own style. I enjoy flitting between different styles, but such a wishy-washy answer fails to help me characterize myself as an artist. The stylization of each of the animations has allowed me to explore different styles and find myself in each of them. The styles of these animations have drawn upon existing trends and movements, but I have taken them, combined them, and exaggerated them into something new. My style takes historical and traditional media and techniques and pushes them into a gaudy, striking extreme.

Strings Attached began as a highly personal project about my own childhood and connections to food and people. As it developed, it became a larger exploration of a cultural phenomenon. While this exploration is far from a thorough and complete analysis of how packaged food has impacted interactions within modern society, I hope that it helps viewers to reflect upon aspects of our culture that are commonly take for granted.

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Shizu. *Delusion Girl.* 2016.

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