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UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

Film From Elle Schwiderson

Watch Short Film Here: <https://youtu.be/0iMVhEgmDbM>

## INTRODUCTION

Like all things involving family, making this project was an amalgamation of emotion and passion and anger and melancholy and happiness and mostly my butthole-clenching existential dread. It culminated in a multi-media short film titled *\*Midwestern Last Name\* Family Reunion*. This last year, the Bill 'n Bessie Midwestern Last Name Family Reunion was an IMPACTFUL experience, to say the least. Since I came out as Gender Non-Conforming, it has been difficult to be in situations where I'm known by my dead-name, Lance. To be clear, I am NOT Lance. Lance died 3 years ago and Elle was born. This year at the reunion, I noticed dynamics that I never had before, like the dads standing around with beer in one hand, the other on their hip, discussing the specs of all the different campers at the campground, or the new snowmobile they got for the coming winter. I also noticed that these same men avoided me just as I avoided them. It is weird to feel adult men ignore you because they're scared of your queerness.

However, amidst all the misgendering and deadnaming, there were some really tender moments between my family and I. I've always fit in well with the girls and in the last couple years they have been especially accepting and made efforts to refer to me by my new name. I also found out one of my cousins was trans last year. I felt affirmation because I knew he of all people understood what I was going through.

The family reunion is a ritual, an annual weekend of celebration with iconic staples. They are:

Thursday: The Day of Arrival and Drinking

Friday: The Fish Fry, Cornhole Tournament, and Drinking

Saturday: The Family Luncheon, Dance, and Drinking

Sunday: The Hungover Drive Home

All of these events require participants to stand in a circle and make grueling small talk about the weather and the events of the last year. My favorite part has always been the Dance. I'm not someone who is known for my words, and the older I've gotten the more I realize that I can most accurately express myself through movement. The Dance is where I get to be myself during a weekend of being someone else. This year before the Dance, I was sitting with a few cousins and one of them said "What if there is a gas leak and we all blow up?" and my idea for this project was born.

## CONTEXT

\*Midwestern Last Name\* Family Reunion started out as a simple question, “What if my family reunion blew up?” but over the course of this IP term it expanded into a much larger project, taking the form of a stop-motion animated film and interdisciplinary installation. I was fascinated with the gas explosion, and upon reflection, I realized it was an extension of my existentialism, or my desire to find meaning in life despite how meaningless it can seem, a feeling that was heightened during the pandemic and several years without seeing my family. It is also related to my constant and pressing fear that a comet is coming to crash into Earth and destroy everything. This led me to make the first piece for this project (FIGURE 1), a watercolor, colored pencil exploration combining camping aesthetics with a comet falling from the sky.

The more I thought about the comet and how it represented my existential dread, I also started to see myself in it. I felt like my queerness was a comet that crashed into my family dynamic, savagely disrupting the heteronormative patriarchy. I became at odds with my family in a way I have never experienced, and part of that disruption has never been mended. My dad refuses to call me by the name I have chosen for myself and family members using the right pronouns is a rarity. Some of the family has gotten better over the last few years.

After discovering the meaning(s) of the comet I wanted to situate it within actual research, and I started with a very prominent existential thinker, Friedrich Nietzsche, and his work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883). This book features prophet Zarathustra going around the Christian world proclaiming that “GOD IS DEAD.” By saying this, Nietzsche radically rejected all modern traditions of the time; he uses Zarathustra as a way to make characters in the book, and by extension the Christians reading the work, confront a reality where their belief system has crumbled away and they need something new to believe in. When I realized I was trans, my life changed completely, the way I navigated the world collapsed beneath my feet and I had to find a new way to live; a new reason to go on despite how alone and confused I was. In this way, Nietzsche’s proclamation of “GOD IS DEAD” directly related to my experience of trans-ness and how I learned to navigate the world after my transition.



FIGURE 1, watercolor, colored pencil

My next step was to look further into Nietzsche's work leading me to George Seffler's Article, "The Existential vs. the Absurd: The Aesthetics of Nietzsche and Camus," which compare and contrasts Nietzsche and Albert Camus' (French philosopher) views on art. As described in the work, Nietzsche saw art as a temporary distraction from reality, a complete escapist disconnection from the real world. Camus similarly saw art as a rejection of the real world but presented his work as a rebellion against the clean-cut resolution that Nietzsche found in art, instead offering an absurd and unresolved aesthetic. Both philosophers saw art as separate from our material reality. My work is in conflict with both Nietzsche and Camus in this regard.

This project blends my material reality with several different media representations of myself and my family using the comet as a visual motif. I didn't seek to create an escapist world, I created a version of my life that stands as a testament to my trans experience and how my family is intertwined into that experience. This is exemplified most in what I call "The Bikini Pic" (FIGURE 2), a picture taken of me when I was 13 in my cousin's camper at the reunion. I did a lot of writing about this picture because it is a direct reflection of my gender as it relates to family. Here is an excerpt from that writing:

My legs are stiff, the line where my shorts meet my waist is built of rigid rectangles. My upper half is bent with spherical flamboyance. "One more and then we're done I promise," says Kate as the flash on her phone camera goes off. This was the moment I should have known. Gender is kind of like those men's AND1 basketball shorts, they fit me for a long time, but eventually the waistband got too tight and I had to find a new pair of shorts that fit better. I am not a boy and I am not a girl. I am Elle, the bright pink comet hurtling through space.

It felt important that this picture be included in my work so I created several recreations of the image (FIGURES 3&4) first making two paintings, and then layering those along with my puppet in a scene from my film.

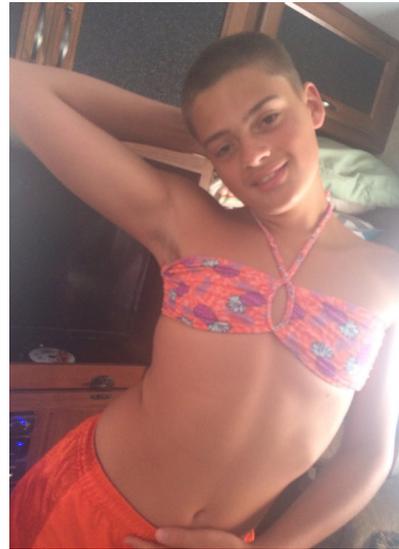


FIGURE 2 (Left), The Bikini Pic

FIGURE 3 (Bottom Left),  
Bikini Pic Painting 1, oil on canvas

FIGURE 4 (Bottom Right),  
Bikini Pic Painting 2, oil on canvas



## PROCESS

I started the project with an idea for the work but no medium in mind to work from. My art practice has developed from dipping my toes in many different media, from painting, to puppet making, to comics, to illustration, to music, to drag performance, to animation. Holding myself to one medium felt restrictive and flat. Initially, I did a lot of sketches with watercolor and colored pencil, and what emerged was a child-like whimsical aesthetic that tackled mature themes of gender and death (FIGURES 5&6). I saw this translating well to puppets so my next step was to dive into puppet-making. Using techniques I learned from Anna Mantzaris in a puppet workshop, I constructed wire frames, carved heads out of balsa wood, and covered the figures in medicinal wrap and felt to resemble myself and my parents (FIGURE 7). It was an emotional experience to literally build my parents; for *creation* to become *creator*. Through the process I felt companionship with fabricated figures of my loved ones.

With the puppets made my next step was to put them in context. I translated the puppet forms back into watercolor and colored pencil (FIGURE 8). The images floating in the background became the symbolism that much of the work following built upon.



FIGURE 5 (Left),  
watercolor, ink

FIGURE 6 (Above),  
watercolor, colored pencil



FIGURE 7 (Above),  
wire, glue, balsa wood, felt puppets

FIGURE 8 (Right),  
watercolor, colored pencil, ink



From here I wanted to start oil painting, taking inspiration from work like *Der Ausbruch des Vesuv im Dezember 1820*, (1826) by Johan Chistian Clausen Dahl (FIGURE 9). Specifically I looked at how he arranged the landscape in his composition, and how he represented the aftermath of a destructive event through his use of contrast and saturation. I posed my puppet in front of the painting I made in (FIGURE 10), and by positioning the puppet in this way, I was reminded of a stage-play setup, with a static background and figure in the foreground, this seemed to be the perfect way to stage an animation.



FIGURE 9, *Der Ausbruch des Vesuv im Dezember 1820*, (1826), oil on canvas, 128 x 172 cm

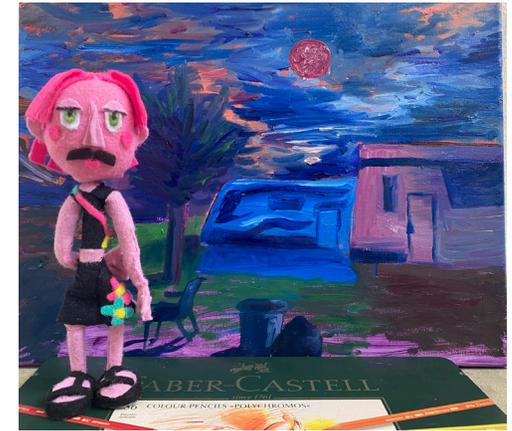


FIGURE 10, puppet in front of oil painting



FIGURE 11 (Above), FIGURE 12 (Below), oil on canvas, 24"x36"



With the time I had left in the fall semester, I decided to go into full-scale pre-production for the film. During this time I made 4 new paintings, this time at a larger size (24" x 36") to give more room for the puppets to pose in front of. Each painting was made for different scenes, one for daytime (FIGURE 11), one for nighttime (FIGURE 12), one for The Bikini Pic (FIGURE 4 on page 4), and one for the moment before the comet crashes (FIGURE 13). It was important to me that every painting had a unique color scheme and atmosphere. Now that the paintings were ready I had to start the script so I knew how many characters

there were going to be and what they were going to say/do.



FIGURE 13, oil on canvas, 24"x36"



FIGURE 14, poster for *Everything Everywhere All At Once* (2022)

dialogue I took inspiration from *A24's Everything Everywhere All At Once* (2022), (FIGURE 14) directed by Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert. The film has many intertwining plots that start simple and by the end have world-ending consequences. The scene in the film that most influenced the script was where the mother Evelyn (played by Michelle Yeoh) and the daughter Joy (played by Stephanie Tsu) have a heated argument in the laundromat parking lot, resulting in a moment of queer acceptance RARELY seen on screen. They express their existential feelings of anger and fear and happiness and most importantly, love. You can see this influence in the scene where I have an argument with my dad and the last scene where I find solace and comfort by talking to my mom.

When I finished my script, I shared what I had with my close friends and chosen family. They were so encouraging and expressed interest in being the voices of my characters. It made perfect sense for my chosen family to be my given family, intertwining my different definitions of family together within the work itself. I had several recording sessions with them, moving from scene to scene in chronological order, but I had to re-record some scenes several times because the quality of audio was not up to the caliber that I wanted.

The scripting began at the start of Winter term and took an entire month to finish. I had a lot of difficulty making conversations feel authentic while also not too long so that I could animate it in a timely manner. Conversations with my mom were the easiest to write while the opposite was true for my dad. I just kept thinking “What would I have actually said to him in that moment if I had the courage to say it?” Eventually, after several meetings with Ali Shapiro and many rewrites, I had an eight page script with eight scenes.

For much of the structure and

Due to the time crunch of trying to record, animate, and edit an eight page script in about 3 months, I just used my phone’s voice recorder and if I had more time I would have rented out higher quality audio equipment, although I think the audio in the final version is suitable.

Up to this point I felt a bit frustrated with the project. I had spent almost a month and a half working on the script and recording audio so I felt like I hadn’t made any concrete progress. I needed something tangible, and so I dove headfirst into animating. The first scene I filmed was with the puppets of myself, my parents, and my nephew in the car on the way to the reunion. I built a car and camper out of cardboard, just big enough that my puppets fit realistically into them. For the spoken voice lines I cut out different shapes of black felt that I would interchange between frames to give the illusion of moving mouths. Animating the puppets’ bodies inside the car proved to be difficult, since the felt mouths would fall off the faces and get lost in the bottom of the car and I’d have to spend time fishing them out. To add to the illusion of a moving car, I used small yellow rectangle pieces of felt as road lines (FIGURE 15). While I am proud of this scene, you can tell that my ability to animate the puppets improved exponentially as the animation went on, and the puppets here feel a bit stiff. I also wasn’t using the recorded voice lines to animate the mouths yet so I was “freehanding” the mouth movements and they don’t always line up with the audio once it was added in.



FIGURE 15, frame from my film, cardboard car and felt road lines

Since I was working chronologically, the next scene that I animated was of the puppets arriving at the campground and the thing to note is that I moved the hair of the Carrie puppet between frames to make it look like there was wind blowing to situate the work within a specific place and time. (FIGURE 16) The moving of the hair resonated so well with me and the other people I showed it to that I kept doing it for scenes that took place outside. This was also the first scene where I used audio to guide the mouth movements and you can immediately tell a difference.

I continued to inch my way through other scenes, all mostly dialogue focused. During the scene where I talk to Carrie and Mark (FIGURE 17), I had assistance from another Interarts student, Maddie Vassalo, who animated several frames of dialogue. After a while I started to feel trapped in the dialogue and stiff movements of the puppets, so to rediscover my passion for the work I moved on to the Bikini Pic sequence (FIGURE 18). Initially I envisioned this sequence as a performance that would have taken place in the Duderstadt Video Studio, but due to circumstances it didn't end up happening. I wanted my puppet's body to freely flow along with a soundtrack written, looped, and recorded by me, in front of the paintings I made of myself in the orange bikini. Animating this scene felt so rewarding. I communicate best through movement, and this was almost a minute of what I like to do best. I mentioned previously how I wanted my puppet to be a direct representation of me and this sequence is the pinnacle of that.



FIGURE 16 (Above), Arrival Scene, felt hair blowing in the wind



FIGURE 17 (Above), Scene with Mark and Carrie

FIGURE 18 (Left), The Bikini Pic Scene, layering of painting and puppet through performance



Around spring break, my great grandmother Elaine Smith, passed away at the age of 93. This was a devastating loss. She was one of the few people in my family who actively supported me in my queer endeavors. Her passing made me reflect further on death and how it related to my piece. I knew that I needed to press on, for her. This led me to the last scene, the talk with my mom before the comet crash. (FIGURE 19) I cried a lot during the animating process of this scene, thinking about my grandma's death and the eventual deaths of my family members and myself. Death is the ultimate existential unknown, and I know I will never say all I have to say before that happens, that's what this scene is about. I cut out blue tears of felt and would move them individually between frames to give the illusion of crying.

With the last scene done, the animation was wrapped, and I assembled it together in Premiere Pro, adding in music that I wrote and recorded, and sound effects done by me and others taken from freesound.org. This didn't take very long since I planned for most of the work to be done during production, only having to make the sound and visuals line up.



FIGURE 19, Talk with Mom Scene



FIGURE 20, animation setup

For the animation process I used Dragonframe (animation software) on my laptop that connected to my camera. I bought a set of clamp lights that I would position for ideal lighting. The setup itself was very DIY; at first I used my camera's tripod, but later I realized I could get much more cinematic angles by moving the camera up close to the set leading to a setup like the one above (FIGURE 20). I animated at 12 frames per second, and with a runtime of 11 minutes I ended up with around 7,920 individual images taken.

# EXHIBITION



FIGURE 21 (Top Left), Exhibition Space with paintings on the walls, TV playing animation, and podium with puppets

FIGURE 22 (Bottom Left), puppet display, the puppet of myself facing the screen playing the animation, embracing existential dread

FIGURE 23 (Above), two 24"x36" oil paintings displayed on the wall



FIGURE 24, The Bikini Pic wall, original Bikini Pic photo displayed next to Bikini Pic painting and felt props from the animation, including the infamous Hot Dog

When planning my exhibiton, I wanted to make sure it felt like more than a just a film screening. I received feedback from my classmates before the midterm review to include all the different types of media that were included in the animation, not just paintings. I eventually decided to present the work in a way that showed my creation process. There is a wall of paintings (FIGURE 23) which show some of the backgrounds in detail. The Bikini Pic painting is placed next to the original photo to emphasize the connect between me as a character in the film and me as a real person (FIGURE 24). I've also included felt objects from the film, including the Hot Dog, because they have so much charm and they are some of my favorite creations.

Even though I was unsure about many things, I knew that I was going to have the puppet display (FIGURE 22) very early on because they are what I am most proud of in this work. They exude personality, and by positioning them in this way I can physically bring the energy of the family reunion to the exhibition space. My puppet directly watches the animation (FIGURE 25), acknowledging that they share a space in the real world and basking in the existential dread that I (the artist) experience.

It feels so surreal to finally see this work exhibited. It has been my brain child for an entire year and I finally get to see the fruits of all my labor and I could not be more proud of myself.



FIGURE 25, Elle puppet watching *\*Midwestern Last Name\**  
*Family Reunion* and embracing existential dread

# CONCLUSION

Making *\*Midwestern Last Name\* Family Reunion* pushed me to my absolute limits as an artist. Never before I have devoted so much time and energy into putting together so many moving parts. From painting to puppets to performance to illustration and to music, I created almost everything myself from scratch. I had many moments of losing my passion for the work and found ways to keep moving despite my setbacks. I created a queer acceptance story for myself and for every other queer person who struggles with family and it feels powerful to be in charge of my own representation. I matter. Every queer person matters. Every trans person matters. This is the best work I have ever made, and I am so proud that I followed through. Now that all the hard work is done I get to move past Elle's Comet and the way it destroyed everything; I get to rebuild on a new, stronger foundation.



FIGURE 26, Bill 'N Bessie Midwestern Last Name Family Reunion, 2022