

100,000 Sidekicks

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I. Introduction

This essay discusses the artworks presented in the MFA thesis exhibition *100,000 Sidekicks* including: the process and the construction of the work, the exhibition's arrangement and most importantly the work's content, intention and research. *100,000 Sidekicks* is an examination of my personal experience with multiple, individual voices or auditory hallucinations and their influence on my creative process. In *100,000 Sidekicks* I share my personal experiences with auditory hallucinations and frame auditory hallucinations as a subject of psychological diversity. The pieces presented in this exhibition showcase my continuous art-making process, as well as my exploration of memories, auditory hallucinations and the gaze in self-portraiture. The exhibition is a projection of three looped videos titled *Origins, Brain Space Spectrum, and Where I Am*, various visual artifacts including three paintings, three displayed scrolls and multiple sketchbooks (Plate I). The sketchbooks act as support for the larger pieces – videos, paintings and scrolls – and are analogous to the supportive role my auditory hallucinations play for me.

In this exhibition I have created an autobiographical collection of artworks that highlight my art-making process. I have also used documentation to create the videos and the visual artifacts. The videos are made up of 100,000 frames. The repetitive drawing of my self-portrait created the frames necessary to generate the animated videos. Therefore the 100,000 frames become the essential support or sidekicks to the final videos and are also the inspiration for the exhibition's title.

My self-portraits are dual-purpose: they represent me physically and symbolize my auditory hallucinations. My gaze – the multiple monochromatic self-portraits that look directly at the viewer in the videos – is a metaphor for multiple, individual voices (auditory hallucinations) speaking outwardly toward the audience. The image of my body is a symbol to reify my auditory hallucinations, to give physicality to an unseen condition. The auditory hallucinations inspire the images that are documented

through my concentrated drawing practice which can be seen in the sketchbooks and the drawings used as video frames.

With this body of work I am candidly discussing my experience with auditory hallucinations in a public forum for the first time. Through my honesty I am allowing myself to be simultaneously courageous and vulnerable. Although my personal understanding is not yet complete I have made this collection of art in an attempt to explore my experiences. With this essay I hope to clarify my experiences with auditory hallucinations and suggest new ways of understanding mental diversity.

II. Definition: Auditory Hallucinations

In 1994 the American Psychiatric Association released its fourth edition of *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* and defined a hallucination as “A sensory perception that has the compelling sense of reality of a true perception but occurs without external stimulation of the sensory organ. Hallucinations should be distinguished from illusions, in which an actual external stimulus is misperceived or misinterpreted...Transient hallucinatory experiences may occur in people without mental disorders (Scott pg. 54).” According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, “auditory hallucinations are only a potential symptom of mental illness — they must appear with other symptoms, persist for a specified length of time and impede day-to-day functioning in order to become part of a diagnosable syndrome, (Smith).”

For me, my auditory hallucinations are mostly subtle conversations, with the occasional outburst, and over time have become less of a distraction and have evolved into a positive and essential part of my life. What I hear is very distinct, usually voices (six that I can fully distinguish) speaking to or about me as well as the occasional sound, disassociated from any external source, such as a telephone

ringing, television/radio static, doors shutting, paper crumpling, etc. These six voices are my support. They are like family. The artwork in *100,000 Sidekicks* is inspired by my daily interactions with these auditory hallucinations.

When I use the phrase auditory hallucinations or voices in this essay I am speaking solely about my personal experiences. I am not advocating, at this point, for anyone beyond myself and I do not profess to be an authority on the culture, science or research surrounding mental health. *100,000 Sidekicks* is my first step to speaking about this marginalized experience with auditory hallucinations from a personal point of strength. In this exhibition I am framing auditory hallucinations as a subject of psychological diversity. This body of work in *100,000 Sidekicks* demonstrates my readiness to begin a positive conversation with the viewer about my experiences with auditory hallucinations.

III. Function of Sketchbooks

My art-making process always begins with a drawing. It is important for me to utilize this medium to explore every voice, to provide a forum to as many internal conversations as possible. Like all things in this exhibition the function of the sketchbooks is multilayered. Traditionally a sketchbook is a place to flush out ideas and to organize one's thoughts. It is the birthplace of an idea and the origin of a final work of art. The sketchbooks' placement inside the exhibition space emphasizes their importance. A small room at the gallery entrance leads into a larger main exhibition area (Plate I). The only artwork displayed in this entrance is the collection of sketchbooks. This space offers the viewer a chance to pause and absorb the large amount of visual information present in the exhibition. It also suggests that the sketchbooks come before any other art piece (paintings, videos, etc). The sketchbooks' role parallels the support my auditory hallucinations supply to my outward personality. Without my auditory hallucinations, I would feel empty. Without the sketches, my artwork would lack substance. Although

both (typically) remain unseen, they are essential for my health and artistic well-being. In relationship to the more finished pieces, the sketchbooks also function as multiple sidekicks.

The sketchbooks are documentation, records to archive and reuse. Each of the sketches, when refined, could have become a full exhibition or piece of art, but for either conceptual or aesthetic reasons remain as the daily undercurrents of other larger works. Unused sketches are archived and stowed away till another time when they may provide a useful inspiration for new artwork. Until then they offer insight into the sketches that have already achieved a successful zenith as larger artworks. Therefore, even when the sketches do not individually reach fruition as refined art pieces, they still provide an essential support for the ones that do. They are a record of my thought process, a road map to understanding my consciousness.

The sketchbooks also function as detailed evidence of my continuous auditory hallucinations and my struggle with self-acceptance. The obsessive drawing in the sketchbooks is a way for the inner voices to methodically express themselves. Within each sketchbook there are distinctive styles or motifs where the inner voices can communicate. Each drawing corresponds to a daily journal entry. With the large amount of conversations and interactions I have with my auditory hallucinations daily, I am compelled to catalog my ideas. Otherwise I believe the ideas would become lost and forgotten in obscurity. This is also part of my continuous self-examination. The journal writing and the daily sketching allow me to always have a detailed reference to the past when I have questions about the present or the future.

I have presented the sketchbooks in this exhibition to allow the audience a chance to explore and understand my art-making process. I believe without the wide diversity of sketches, the obsessive and honest nature of the videos might be overlooked or dismissed. By showing every aspect of my process I can better demonstrate, for the sake of this exhibition, the continuous influence that my

auditory hallucinations have on my work. These small drawings are the foundation and backbone of all my larger or more refined pieces.

IV. Description of Videos

A. *Origins*

After the viewer has paused and looked through the sketchbooks at their leisure, they can move into the larger open exhibition space to watch the videos. The projection on the far wall of the larger space directly confronts the viewer as he or she enters (Plate I). The videos are played continuously on a loop and run approximately ten minutes total. All of the videos suggest a subject matter that is exploring auditory hallucinations, a collection of voices as it relates to one person.

The first of three sequential videos, *Origins*, is created entirely from drawings within a sketchbook (Plate II) and reinforces the idea of the importance of the sketchbook. The videos are also made from repetitive drawing, but unlike the images in the sketchbooks, are not stationary. The videos are an ordered sequence of still images, that when played together, represent motion. I felt it necessary to animate these pieces in order to represent time passing. Living with auditory hallucinations is not a singular event, but continuous and evolving over time. Each sketchbook drawing is a static record of one thought. In contrast, the video is a record of the thought process.

In order to create motion in the videos, each drawing, which acts as a video frame, must be altered. Each change made to the frame must be documented. As each frame is documented and replayed in sequence, the frames become the moving images and create the illusion of time moving forward. Therefore, the individual drawings become only one part of a whole, one frame in an unbroken animation. As a result of this process, each sketchbook page used for *Origins* has been destroyed.

Previous drawings on the sketchbook pages were continually layered with new material or marks in order to create the next frame (Plate III and IV).

Origins opens with an image of a blank sketchbook page slowly filling with drawings of an archetypal townscape. As the video moves forward, the town progresses from morning (Plate III) to night, and as the day grows darker, a comet, representing birth, flies overhead. Silhouettes of antique doilies spin in the sky and twinkle like stars (Plate IV). Doilies are chosen here because they are a personal symbol of protection, comfort and symbolize members of an older generation, specifically a protective mother figure, who encouraged me in my development. In this protective and supportive sense they also represent my auditory hallucinations. Doilies represent both internal and external sources of support, they contain information and appear as thought and word bubbles.

As the doilies fade, the representation of the townscape eventually becomes so dark all that remains is a small square window (Plate V). Then, as if the viewer were peering into the window a figure emerges, curled into a ball (Plate VI). The figure rises with one great musical upheaval and then stands in silence. The music marks a shift in scenery and the viewer is no longer situated in external space but immersed in the internal experience. After a survey of her surroundings, the figure splits into multiple persons – the progeny of the original figure. The development of the voices is represented by the development of the figures. The figures are born without tragedy or trauma. They exist without suffering or ordeal. They come into existence and self-awareness gradually and peacefully.

As the narrative progresses one of the figures grabs at bits of conversation in the air, (represented by small word bubbles) and can hear voices grow louder and softer as she collects these thoughts (Plate VII). The video ends with the protagonist walking away followed by three doilies floating in the air behind her (Plate VIII). As the doilies follow the figure at the end of the video they shift in

meaning. The audio of several overlapping conversations plays while the figure walks off screen and represents how the dollies now symbolize the protective nature and presence of auditory hallucinations.

The audio at the beginning of this video represents the sounds one might hear when walking outside. It is the only time in the videos where external or representational sound is used. My intention in including the external sounds at the beginning of *Origins* is to situate the audience in an exterior space. The musical rise with the introduction of the first figure gives the viewers a point of entry into my experience with auditory hallucinations.

B. Brain Space Spectrum

The second video is titled *Brain Space Spectrum* and opens with a photograph of a blank canvas on an easel in a studio. I began this video with an image of the canvas situated in the studio to reinforce the importance of the art-making process. After a few seconds a painting of a figure appears on the canvas and walks across the panel. After a few more seconds the surrounding studio space is cropped and the viewer can only see the canvas image. The figure, whose image is based on my own body, paints and repaints so that the canvas repeatedly changes color. The original footage was rotoscoped on to the panel and repainted frame by frame. “Rotoscoping is a film process in which exposed footage is put on an animation stand and traced, (Geibel pg. 12).” Each traced image was then photographed and replayed in sequence to create the animated video.

Brain Space Spectrum represents personal evolution from birth (*Origins*) to the present (*Where I Am*). While the figure’s body in *Origins* is very small, the body in *Brain Space Spectrum* begins to get larger and occupies more of the video screen than in the first video (Plate X and XI). The gradual growth of the size of the figure represents my ongoing growth as a person and my process of self-acceptance.

Origins is about beginnings – birth, childhood, and adolescence. *Brain Space Spectrum* concerns the middle years, the start of adult life, and my personal coming of age.

The figure paints (Plates X, XI) and repaints the panel a different background color in a semi rainbow sequence; yellow, orange, red, purple, blue, green, black, gray and finally to white (Plates XII, XIII). The hues represent the six different voices (in no particular hierarchy) and the black, gray, white are my past, present and future. As the background is repainted, the bottom portion of the panel, approximately eight inches, remains mostly “un-repainted” throughout the various stages of repainting. It catches the drips and is a by-product of the painting process. This portion of the painting becomes a visual stratum of the previous layers of paint as well as a representation of a visual mind map of co-existing auditory hallucinations. The larger, repainted area of the painting exemplifies the process of making the artwork but also becomes indicative of recollection and memory. Like most memories, the larger, open area on the panel becomes partially covered, altered and eventually lost as time progresses.

After the figure is finished painting she turns and briefly looks toward the viewer as she walks off screen (Plate XII). This transition from the figure being a passively observed object by the viewer to a person ready to be actively engaged in a conversation with the audience highlights the fact that my identity incorporates the voices comfortably. The change from observed to contributor marks the period in my life when I recognized my different internal voices and came to embrace them as part of myself without fear or shame. When the figure looks outwardly it is a symbol of my readiness to begin a dialogue with the audience.

C. *Where I Am*

The third and final video is a self-portrait representing my most recent experiences with auditory hallucinations, (Plates XIV-XVI). *Where I Am* is a self-portrait of my present state of mind up to the spring of 2011. It portrays my present experiences but it should not to be taken as the last chapter of my journey. *Where I Am* is meant to be read in the context of when it was made and is only as current as till the time when I make a new interpretation. In *Where I Am*, the portrait has grown so large that the space is almost completely occupied by my face, head and shoulders. I am using this placement and scale change to represent my personal growth, which directly relates to the size representations in *Origins* and *Brain Space Spectrum*.

The portraits in this video represent my personal auditory hallucinations. Each color represents a different voice, similar to the color changes in *Brain Space Spectrum*. The audio is my own voice reading journal entries about my experience with auditory hallucinations. To avoid a direct retelling or re-creation of my experiences I have modified the recitation to be very quiet.

V. Visual Artifacts

The visual artifacts – the paintings and scrolls – are the physical evidence of my art-making process. The paintings are the continuous layering of physical material that represents the unbroken build up of memory and experience. As the paintings' imagery is continuously repainted their surface becomes nonrepresentational. However, because of this massive buildup of material the painting process and the evidence of the figure remain present in the final artifact. The viewer can still detect eyes, nose, mouth, body shape in the painting remnants; the presence of the portrait is still somewhat visible texturally (Plate XXII). This overloading of imagery and material adds to their visual and physical

mass causing them to feel burdensome, momentous and elevates them as a relic or historical object of importance.

The scrolls utilize another kind of painting, which alludes to a sense of involvedness and concentration in the process of creating them. While the paintings outwardly offer a seemingly incomplete amount of information by being so layered upon, the scrolls offer a frame-by-frame breakdown of the video making process (Plate XVII). The paintings are compacted frames. The scrolls are extracted frames. The scrolls on the wall are a sample of the step-by-step animating process used to make the video while the paintings are the end product of a similar process using a different medium. The intent with showing the breakdown is to allow the viewer a chance to better understand the intensive nature of the production. Since the video runs through the individual frames quickly to simulate fluid movement, the displayed scrolls give the viewer an area to pause and reflect. The portraits on the scrolls also suggest the oscillating nature of the self.

Showing only part of the scrolls and the paintings as a result of the video-making process allows the viewer a space to wonder about what isn't being shown. The viewer must connect the final product (video) to the by-products (scrolls and paintings) (Plate XX); they must imagine the art-making process, and the actual making of the work. By purposefully leaving some artifacts of the work in obscurity, the audience is invited become introspective and fill in the missing information with their own experiences.

VI. Self-Portraiture

In contemporary art, self-portraits have been used as a means of autobiography and self-exploration (West pg. 180). In this thesis exhibition I am utilizing this contemporary treatment of the self-portrait to methodically explore the nature of my psyche and to present auditory hallucinations as a subject of psychological diversity.

Since self-portraiture merges the sitter and the artist into one, the viewing of the work often feels very intimate, as if the audience is allowed a revealing look into the artist's private thoughts and permitted special insight into the artist's personality. It is similar to reading a private diary. In my thesis exhibition, each self-portrait color (red, yellow, blue, green, orange and purple) represents a different voice and is most evident in the videos *Brain Space Spectrum* and *Where I Am*. With my direct gaze I am inviting the viewer to see me as I am in my entirety. Using another model or voice would have allowed me the ability to hide behind an oblique concept. "As viewers, we bring certain expectations to the self-portrait. In offering the self as a subject, we assume that the artist has chosen to reveal intimate aspects of his or her physical and psychological being to us. From this perspective, the self-portrait serves as the artist's most direct avenue for the disclosure and assertion of identity, (Chadwick pg. 157)."

When my portrait regards the viewer there is a confidence in the gaze (Plate XV). I am controlling the audience's view by utilizing framing devices in the scrolls and *Where I Am*. By focusing so closely on the actual portrait, I am controlling "the gaze and the manner of viewing in the work in such a way as to indicate the multiple nature of the subject, (Meskimmon pg. 93)." I am using my self-portraits to portray my experiences with auditory hallucinations. My direct gaze symbolizes my self-acceptance and my readiness to begin a positive dialogue.

VII. Conclusion

In conclusion the exhibition *100,000 Sidekicks* is a collection of artworks that showcase my art-making process, self-portraiture and my personal experiences with auditory hallucinations. In *100,000 Sidekicks* I frame auditory hallucinations as a subject of psychological diversity. I have engaged a contemporary approach to self-portraiture by addressing my experiences with auditory hallucinations through contemporary media and methods such as animation, video and computer editing. The

individual voices of my auditory hallucinations are represented by the multiple individual self-portraits and the gaze is used to show my readiness to begin a dialogue. I understand myself better because of this process than I ever have before.

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Plates



- KEY**
- █ Scrolls
 - █ Video Projection
 - █ Signage Wall
 - █ Bench and Pedestal
 - █ Sketchbooks

Commons Gallery		
University of Hawai'i	Art Department	
show: Boz Schurr	date: April 4th - 8th, 2011	scale: 1/4"
designer: Boz Schurr		

Plate I: Gallery Design

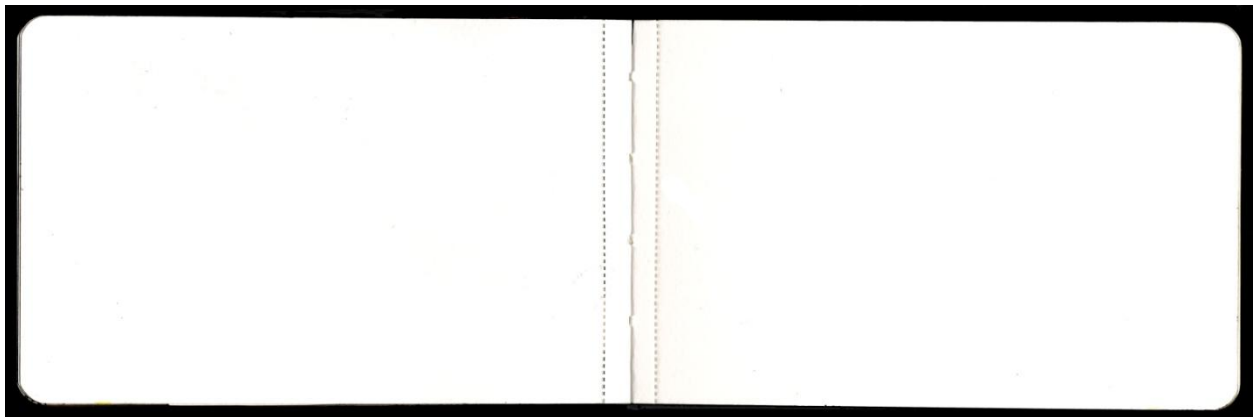


Plate II: Origins (Screen Shot)

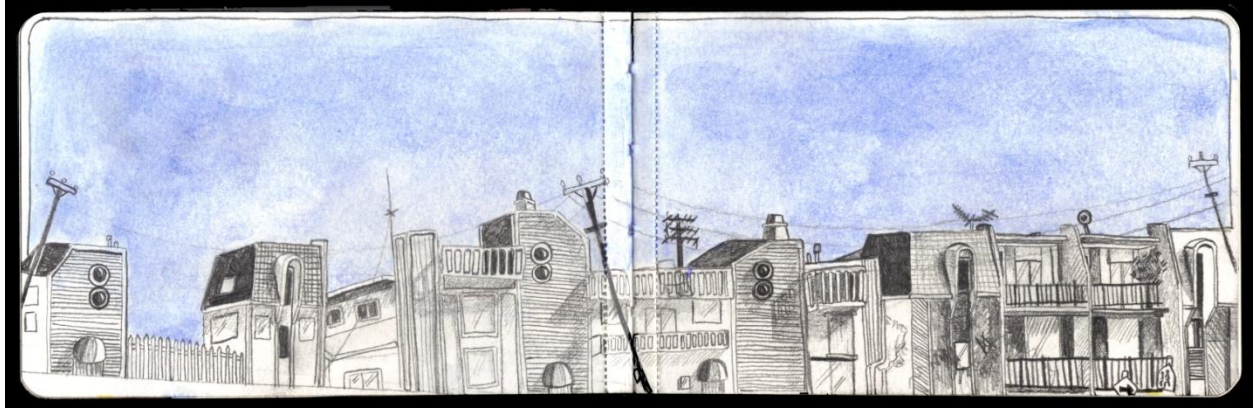


Plate III: Origins (Screen Shot)

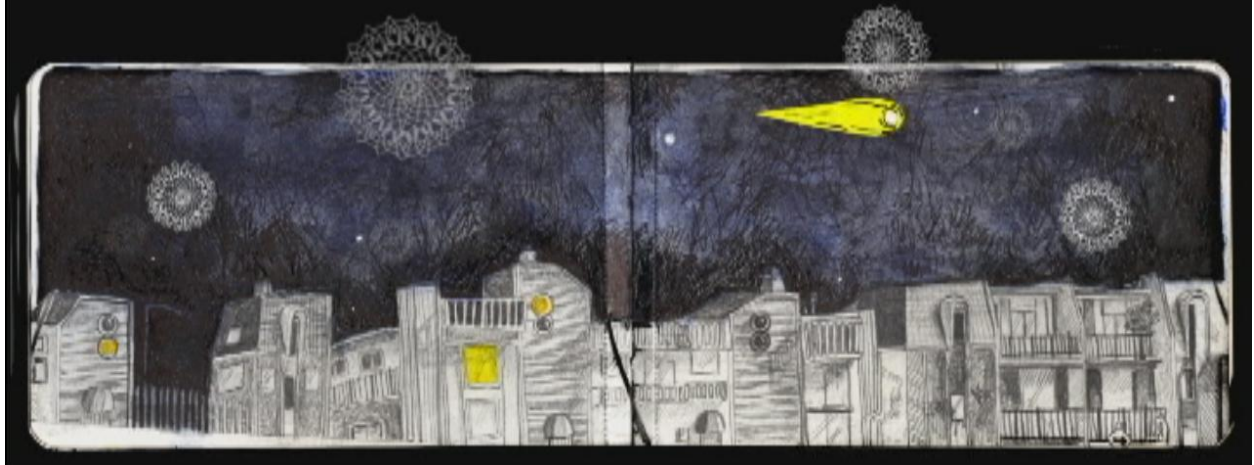


Plate IV: Origins (Screen Shot)

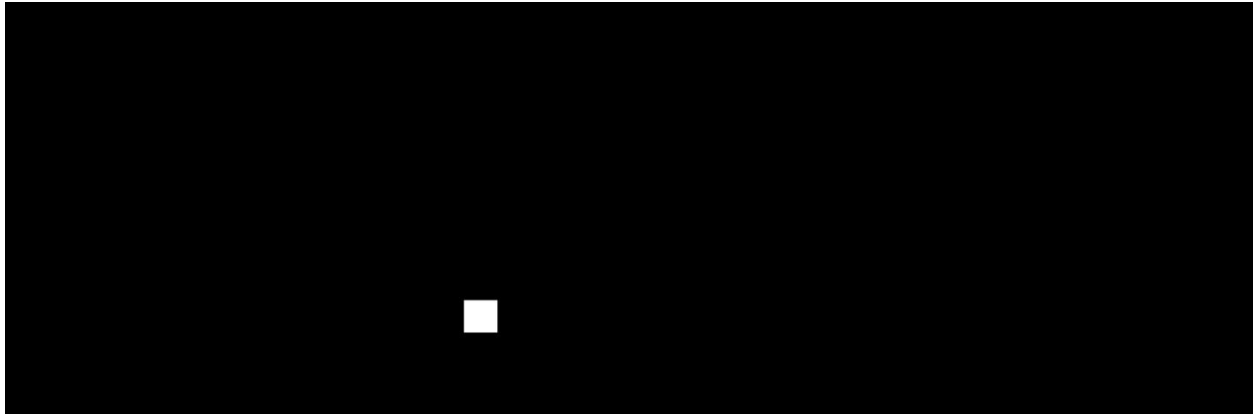


Plate V: Origins (Screen Shot)



Plate VI: Origins (Screen Shot)

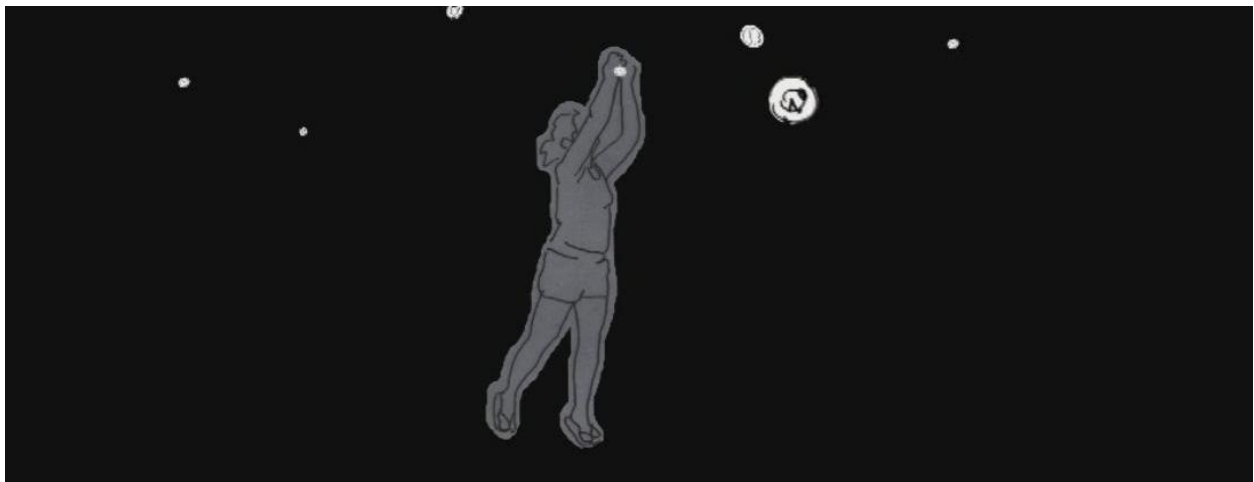


Plate VII: Origins (Screen Shot)

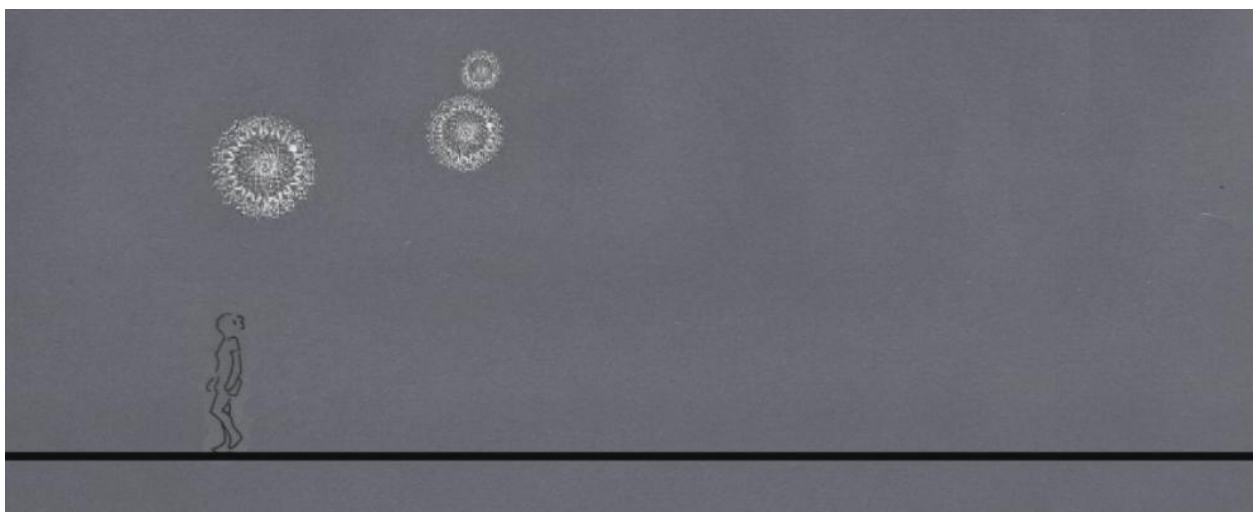


Plate VIII: Origins (Screen Shot)

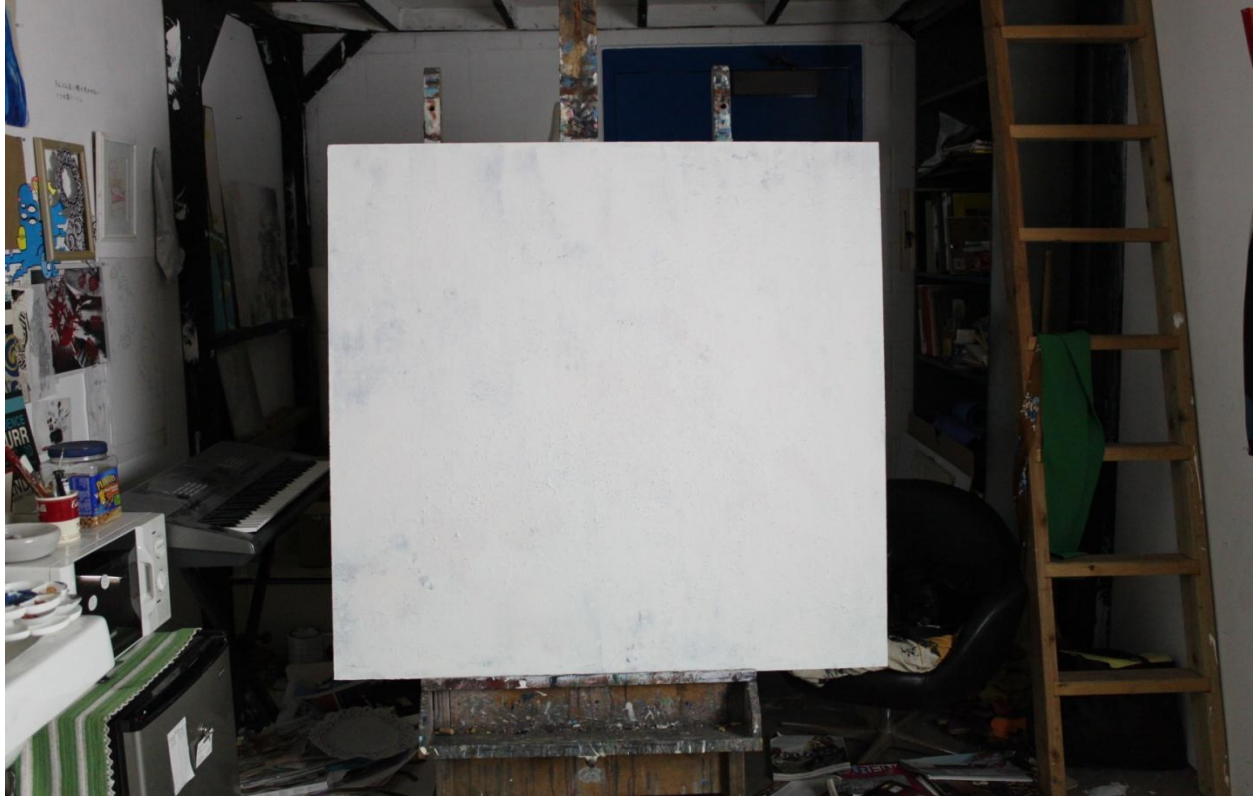


Plate IX: Brain Space Spectrum (Screen Shot)



Plate X: Brain Space Spectrum (Screen Shot)



Plate XI: Brain Space Spectrum (Screen Shot)

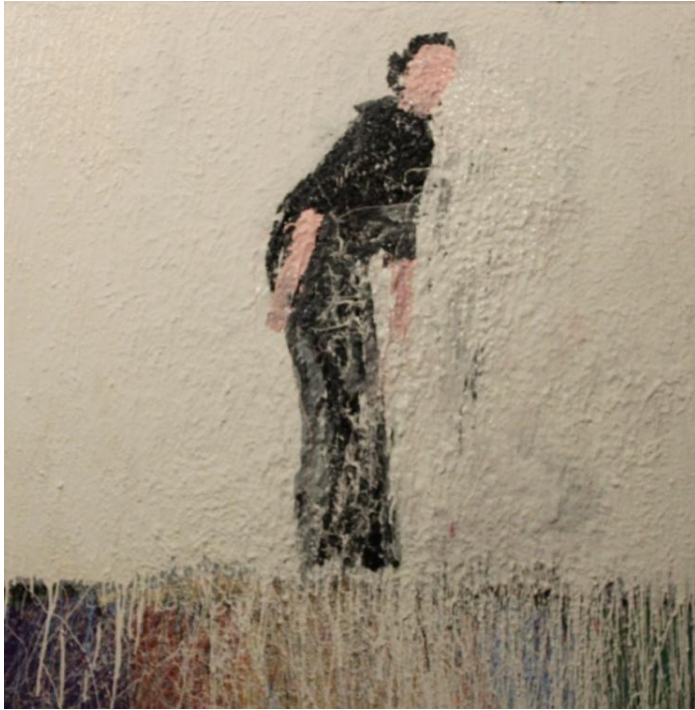


Plate XII: Brain Space Spectrum (Screen Shot)

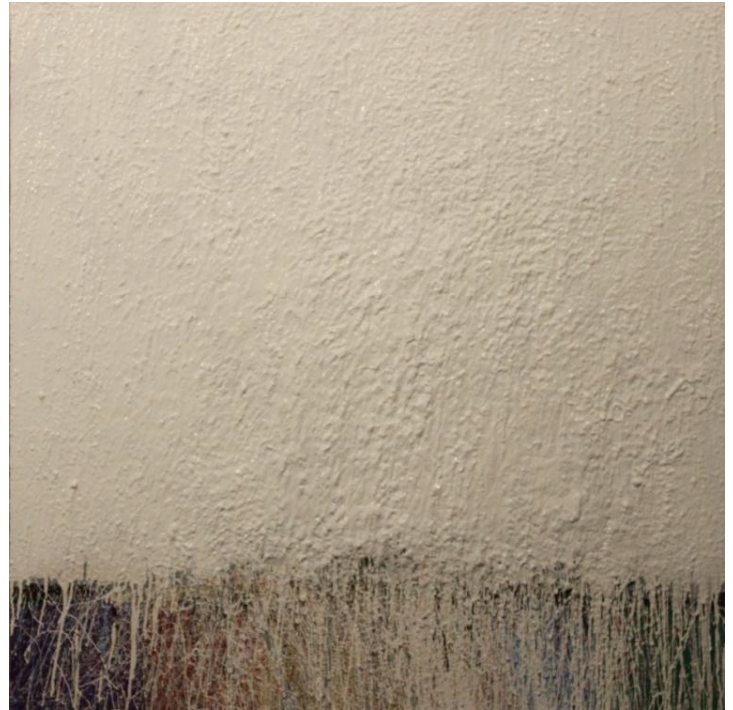


Plate XIII: Brain Space Spectrum (Screen Shot)



Plate XIV: Where I Am (Screen Shot)

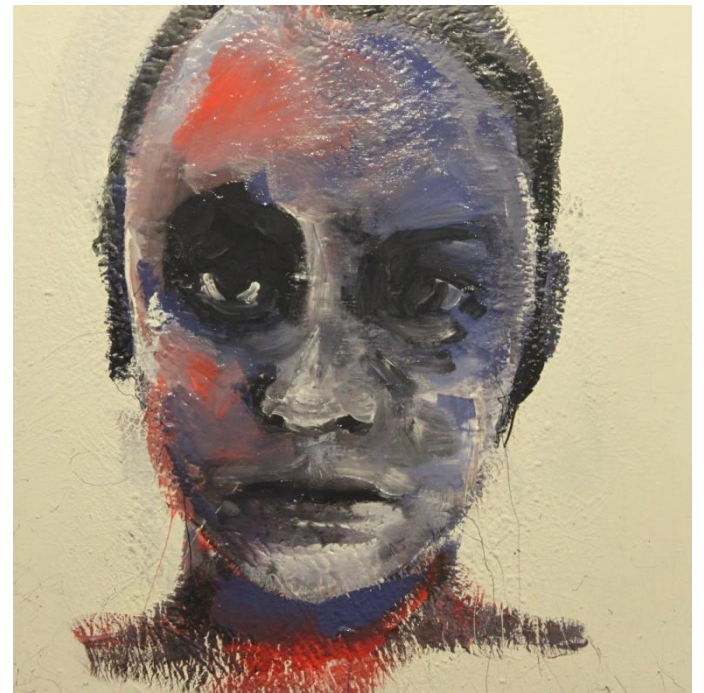


Plate XV: Where I Am (Screen Shot)



Plate XVI: Where I Am (Screen Shot)



Plate XVII: Installation View



Plate XVIII: Installation View



Plate XIX: Installation View



Plate XX: Installation View



Plate XXI: Installation View (Detail)



Plate XXII: Installation View (Detail)