

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis:

DO YOU KNOW WHERE YOU ARE?

Clayton Dunklin, Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art, 2019

Thesis Directed By:

Associate Professor Justin Strom, Department of Art

Do You Know Where You Are? is an exhibition comprised of video installations, sculptural objects, and images. The following is an explanation of the theory and inspiration behind the work as well as descriptions of the pieces and text scripts from the videos. The exhibition itself is set up as a space of color, movement, and sound, that elicits a feeling of disorientation. The viewer navigates a cerebral interior that repositions my personal experience with medical imaging and contemporary image theory as a fragmented science fiction narrative.

DO YOU KNOW WHERE YOU ARE?

by

Clayton Dunklin

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Chapter 1: A Guide to Disappearing and Resurrecting

In my work, I exploit my personal experiences, my medical history, and my body's limitations as the conceptual center of my projects. Their forms, therefore, become episodic and narrative in a nonlinear fashion as a means to highlight the body as primary subject matter in an autobiographical context. My current body of work creates a loose and fragmented science fiction narrative out of my own experience with medical imaging. The videos in the series discuss things like the disappearance and resurrection of the body when read as an image as well as the reading of medical images causing pixelated objects to manifest themselves in the body. These works deal with memory recall surrounding a traumatic personal medical experience and simultaneously grapple with trying to piece together a personal narrative where memory may be lacking.

This narrative approach signals that time is not a linear idea but rather something stacked, layered, or fragmented. Stacking and layering also reflects our interaction with technology through various screen windows. The experience of “real time” through windows via social media on our smartphones is actually a distortion where time is pushed and pulled and becomes subjective.

In a Time of Images

The 2002 horror movie *The Ring*, directed by Gore Verbinski, is an American remake of the Japanese film *Ring* (1998) based on the book by Koji Suzuki in which a young girl psionically creates a cursed videotape to unleash her fury upon the world.

After watching the videotape, the viewer will die in seven days. In the American version, this young girl, Samara has the power of thoughtography, the ability to project or burn images onto surfaces by psychic means, as evidenced by the videotape. In addition to imagery alluding to the curse, Samara burns an image of herself on the tape which, in the final scare of the film, physically comes out of the television to kill Noah who had been investigating the curse and watched the film seven days prior.



Figure 1 The Ring. Poster, DreamWorks, 2002.

2002 was a time before smartphones and social media and although it is unlikely that the filmmakers could foresee the future, they do clue us in to something fundamental about our current state. For so many, like Samara, accessibility and ease of transmission make living through images appealing. This, however, causes the

reality of the image and the reality of the view to become blurred and may, in fact, signal the death of the human.

We have embarked on a time where we can experience almost everything through technology, even things we are physically present for. Concert-going is filtered through Snapchat, our children's firsts happen live on Facebook, and increasingly we craft our lived experiences to match the expectations of our imaged ones on platforms like Instagram. Physically present viewers are experiencing live events through compressed, digital, pixelated images and videos via handheld devices. It's become second nature to understand our world through compressed images. At some point, it appears that the imaged versions of our lives actually become the real thing of which the "live" event is merely a perfunctory performance.

Image as Object

I am interested in the intersection of the body and technology and specifically how we negotiate those two as mediators between the self and the world. In my work, I am not intentionally after low quality images verging on pixelated abstraction just like I am not intentionally after the most high-quality images aimed at yet another kind of illusion. If the image even slightly, or in a subversive way, recalls a quality of imagery experienced in the everyday through media and smartphones, then it brings it into the space of body/technology interface. It also begins to recall or make visible the process of the image-making, similar to how the process of medical imaging, like tomography, is inherently stamped on the images it produces simply because of the kind of images it produces. It's a performative process where the thing is the action of its own doing and in this way, the images now become objects. As objects, it would

seem that these images could live out in the real world just as our filtered images on snapchat may one day leap out of the device as projected objects in real space through things like virtual reality.

Living Through Images

There is a theory in quantum physics called the Holographic Universe Theory. This theory asserts that everything, the entire universe is an image on a surface existing in a black hole. This image is made of interlocking interference mesh patterns created by reflected light waves. When light passes *through* the interference pattern, a three-dimensional projection of the object emerges. A hologram. Every fragment or part of this hologram contains information about the whole. Cut a part out and the hologram still exists. The implications of this theory are immense. Furthermore, gravity wave detectors indicate that cosmic background radiation, or cosmic noise, undulates in a regular, ordered series of dots as if the universe were pixelated. (Morton 46-7) What else would you expect from an image?

In this light, could the human be understood *as* an image? Like Samara emerging from the screen, is it possible that we potentially exist as projections of flat imaged versions of ourselves. And if we are mere holograms, can those imaged selves be considered our true selves?

Living by way of images would give them their own life. These images would move, shift, and live out in the real world. They would come out of their frames and exist as living entities. The pixels of these images would be ever-shifting. There would be a density and depth to the layering of pixels. An imaged world would not be flat. It would not be linear, yet it would be orderly. Pixels would sit on top of each

other and move across each other with a certain level of transparency so they are never still or flat. Although we may sense a stillness or freezing of pixels when thinking about images, layered pixels would continue to move around, behind, and in front of these images.

Pilgrimage to Hell and Back: A Guide to Disappearing and Resurrecting



Figure 2 Clay Dunklin. *Pilgrimage to Hell and Back: A Guide to Disappearing and Resurrecting* (installation view). 2019. The University of Maryland Art Gallery, College Park, MD. Courtesy of the artist.

Pilgrimage to Hell and Back is a series of three video installations that turn my personal experience into a science fiction narrative referencing image theory and medical imaging procedures. The first episode of the series, *A Guide to Disappearing and Resurrecting*, utilizes an automated female voice to guide the viewer through a procedure in which they become an image and then in turn a three-dimensional projection. The imagery used reference my personal experiences with medical imaging procedures while the overall video and sound editing turns the work into a kind of cheap and dated meditation video.

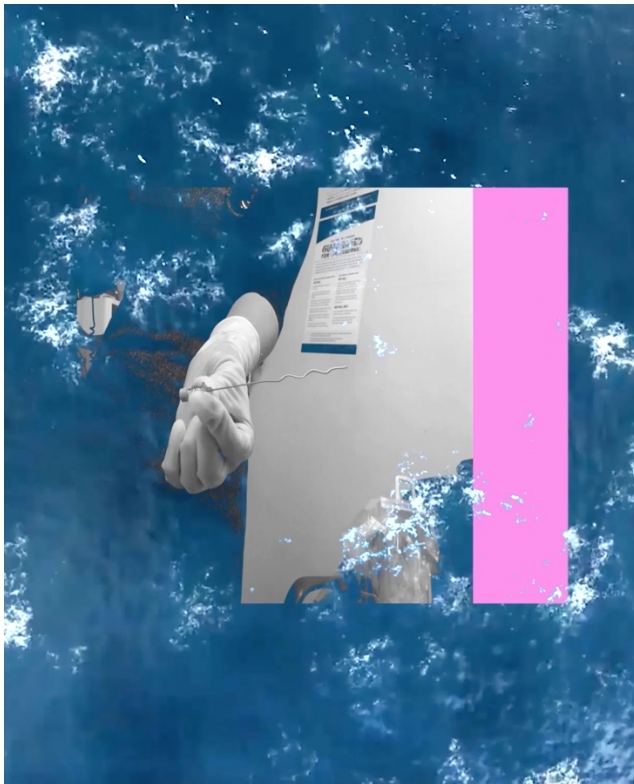


Figure 3 Clay Dunklin. *Pilgrimage to Hell and Back: A Guide to Disappearing and Resurrecting* (still image). 2019. Courtesy of the artist.

AUTOMATED VOICE. Hello. Please plan to arrive early for your appointment and bring with you your photo ID. Thank you.

CLAY. I've never done this before. Disappearing. Some advice I've gotten includes arrive early, wear a fucking mask, embrace the heat, don't answer any questions, don't try to get up, and always know where you are.

AUTOMATED VOICE. It is very important that you lay still. Lay flat. Become flat. Become 2dimensional. Become a surface. Become an image inscribed on a surface – a mere representation of 3 dimensions. As the waves pass through you it will begin to cause ripples. These waves move in an equally distributed pattern like a series of dots. Pixels. As these ripples continue to move out, your surface image will become distorted. Violently, this image will continue to distort until you are no longer flat. Soon, you will be able to move at fixed intervals across the dot series of your environment as if embedded in a grid system. Take it slow. Don't do too much.

Chapter 2: A Treatise on Teleportation

The Disappearance of the Human

If these image-objects are the “real” thing of which we are a sort of astral projection, do we then, like ghosts, have the ability to disappear? In her lecture titled “Bubble Vision” at Serpentine Galleries, contemporary artist Hito Steyerl states:

Immersive technologies like VR and 360 degree videos which are kind of spherical and they are built on a sort of very strange paradox which is also very well-known because the viewer is at the center of a sphere yet at the same time, he or she are actually missing from it...One could call this paradigm bubble vision. In the last decade 360 degree panoramas became common in photography, in video, and there were, of course, lots of discussions about so called filter bubbles on social media that have been said to nurture division by creating parallel information universes. (00:00:52 – 00:02:10)

Steyerl later goes on to declare, “In other words to be eliminated means to be automated and conversely to be automated means to be eliminated.” (00:08:40 – 00:08:49) We are seeing this physical disappearance, or elimination, happen culturally in an ever-increasing way through social media. Our society is increasingly withdrawing from cultural images (spam and advertisements) as representations of people in favor of carefully curated images of the self as digital manifestations.

(Steyerl, *Spam* 165-6) Political correctness runs rampant and we no longer accept

ideal standards of beauty, body size, or lifestyle. Instead we let these digital manifestations of our own creation stand in and experience for us while we reap some kind of temporary emotional high from our location in the highest room in the tallest tower of our fortresses of isolation. In my own work, I position this stance as our digital indoctrination within the age of the cyborg.

The Cyborg

In her essay “Embodied Differences: Monsters, Cyborgs, and Cinema” for the *Dreamlands: Immersive Cinema and Art, 1905-2016* exhibition catalog at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Karen Archey describes the cyborg as a feminist means to emancipate oneself from the jail cell of their own body, specifically writing that “From the 1960s onward, the cyborg has become a central cultural allegory through which to understand the body in a society increasingly marked by advancements in info- and biotechnology.” (194) But what if the cyborg is no longer a cultural allegory but a human reality? Historian and author of the book *Sapiens*, Yuval Noah Harari states in an interview with The Guardian, “When people talk about merging with computers to create cyborgs, it’s not some prophecy about the year 2200. It’s happening right now. More and more of our reality exists within computers or through them.” He then follows that thought with the prediction that, “we will see real changes in humans themselves – in their biology, in their physical and cognitive abilities.”

Returning to the *Dreamlands* exhibition catalog, two out of myriad artist examples of cyborgs referenced stand out. The first is Walt Disney and his groundbreaking 1940 animated film *Fantasia* (1940) for which the immersion of

sound and color occur beautifully and perhaps unmatched. *Dreamlands: Immersive Cinema and Art 1905-2016* curator, Chrissie Iles, casts as the cyborg the animated broom that Mickey Mouse brings to life in The Sorcerer's Apprentice section of the film writing, "An uncontrollable technological force is unleashed as the cyborg sprouts hands, then rapidly clones itself, producing an unending procession of copies that march robotically back and forth carrying buckets of water, drowning the workshop and everything in it, until order is finally restored by the Sorcerer." (123)

The second noteworthy example of the cyborg from *Dreamlands* is again referenced in the Karen Archey essay regarding the work of Serbian artist Ivana Bašić. In her ongoing work *SOMA*, Bašić has created a state-of-the-art 3D digital model of her body that is fully ready for animation and is available for resale online. Archey writes that "Bašić saw creating an exact, realistic replica of herself as a way of being freed from her own body, appearance, and mortality, as well as a way toward anonymity and multiplicity." (198) Although separated by a span of seventy-three years, these two examples point to another characteristic of the cyborg that is particularly interesting for today: cyborgs exist in a state of multiplicity.

Images live in a state of multiplicity as well through file uploads and downloads, copying and pasting, and the sequencing of images in film and video. Beyond just an attachment to devices and a dependence on technology to sustain daily life, humans are cyborgs because of our multiplicity as well. Living as images transfers a state of multiplicity onto our lives thus making the idea of human-as-image a bit too simple. In actuality, we are images of cyborgs. And cyborgs, like all machines, have the capacity to malfunction.

Corrupted Files

If, as stated earlier, we have become images and our physical experiences serve mostly to provide the content for our imaged selves, this then opens an interesting discussion about medical imaging. When our ghostly projections existing outside of the digital reality become sick does this signal some kind of corruption in our source file? Perhaps we need more imaging to know – like tomography. Images within *the image* – the re-flattening of dimensional images.

Tomography is a kind of imaging used most commonly in the medical field where the whole is broken up and viewed as layers. All of these layers are slices of the whole that still contain information about the whole. These layers are a flattened compression to be read as a revealing of the body that we can see no other way.

When read, we seem to instinctually allow these medical images stand in for the body. But what if medical images are, in fact, the real thing as well? Perhaps imaging does not illuminate us to the presence of damaging matter within the body but instead the reverse is true. What if the processes of creating or reading these images actually physically manifests their contents in the body? What if an ultrasound, which use sounds waves, or an MRI, which use radio waves, actually caused its pixels to become dimensional and when the light waves necessary to read those images passed through them, they became convincing three-dimensional models in the body?

In quantum physics, the observer plays an active role in shaping reality. The chunks of unwanted matter in our body, be it bacteria, viruses, or tumors, are either there or not – a state of indeterminacy. The Observer Effect posits that by looking the

observer ends the state of indeterminacy and fixes this matter in reality. So, in a sense, the reading of the images truly does manifest their contents in the body.

Journal Entry #1

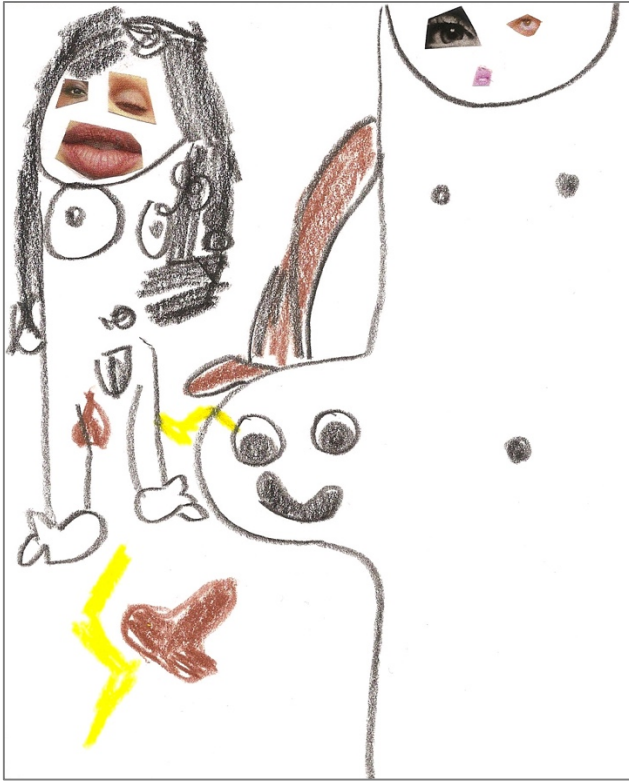


Figure 4 Clay Dunklin. *After Anushka*. 2018. Drawing and collage on paper. 4 in x 5 in. Courtesy of the artist.

My student Anushka gave me a picture she had drawn one day in camp. It is a picture of a man and a woman who are naked and are urinating and defecating on each other. The man has a living protrusion on his side.

Anushka was embarrassed of the picture and thought her parents would be mad at her for it so she gave it to me saying she thought I would like it. I do. It's now one of my prized possessions.

The picture is an illustration of the Czech opera *Rusalka* by Antonín Dvořák. The woman is a beautiful water nymph who has fallen passionately in love with the man and so trades her immortality to be with him. Her life is now inextricably linked to his.

Yet he rejects her. Scorned, she vows to exact her revenge and desperately seeks to regain her immortality. The gods hear her and grant her wishes but not without a price. She must instead return to the immortal world as a terrible demon of death. Disguised as the man's lover, she waits for her prey at the edge of the lake. Smitten by her beauty, he makes to kiss her when she drags him to the bottom of the lake to meet his untimely demise. What a bitch.

The man in the story clearly has a fluid disturbance, similar to my own, possibly manifested by the reading of images. Has he undergone an image reading procedure to produce a living manifestation of the nymph's unrequited love that he must lug around as a bulbous projection? Is the procedure perhaps happening real time by my own reading of the image?

Pilgrimage to Hell and Back: A Treatise on Teleportation



Figure 5 Clay Dunklin. *Pilgrimage to Hell and Back: A Treatise on Teleportation* (installation view). 2019. The University of Maryland Art Gallery, College Park, MD. Courtesy of the Artist.

Episode two of the *Pilgrimage to Hell and Back* series entitled *A Treatise on Teleportation* explores the reading of images and the Observer Effect in relation to medical imaging. Specifically, I have cast myself as a patient recounting their experience with a procedure in which a medical imaging machine serves as a

teleportation device that deposits the contents of its images into the patient's body in real time.



Figure 6 Clay Dunklin. *Pilgrimage to Hell and Back: A Treatise on Teleporation (still image)*. 2019. Courtesy of the artist.

CLAY. I want to talk to you about the way I'm feeling since the procedure. Things don't feel normal anymore. I'm struggling to find a way to make things feel right. I do enjoy when we talk. It still feels simple. Normal. Right. We can chat over a drink and a snack of sweets. How are you feeling post-procedure? Are you having the same reaction to the deposit as I am. I know you need to know how well I'm functioning. I like your idea of a percentage system – I'll try to let you know at what percentage I feel like I'm

functioning that way you can know what to expect of me. My tongue tingles when I drink milk. When cream touches my mouth, I instantly feel nauseous. The bubbles too. You know how it works right? The imaging machine serves as a teleportation device to produce images that become dimensional and deposit fragments of themselves in your body. The reading and decoding of these images manifests their contents in your physical body. As these pixels materialize under the skin they become real in a tangible, visceral way like black ships docking in your cerebral vasculature or a terribly beautiful white stallion that has jumped through space and time and fixed itself permanently to the star system of your mind like a new constellation in your mental cosmology. Running at top speed across the never-ending loop track of your neural pathways.

Chapter 3: An Ad for Spatial and Temporal Relocation

Journal Entry #2

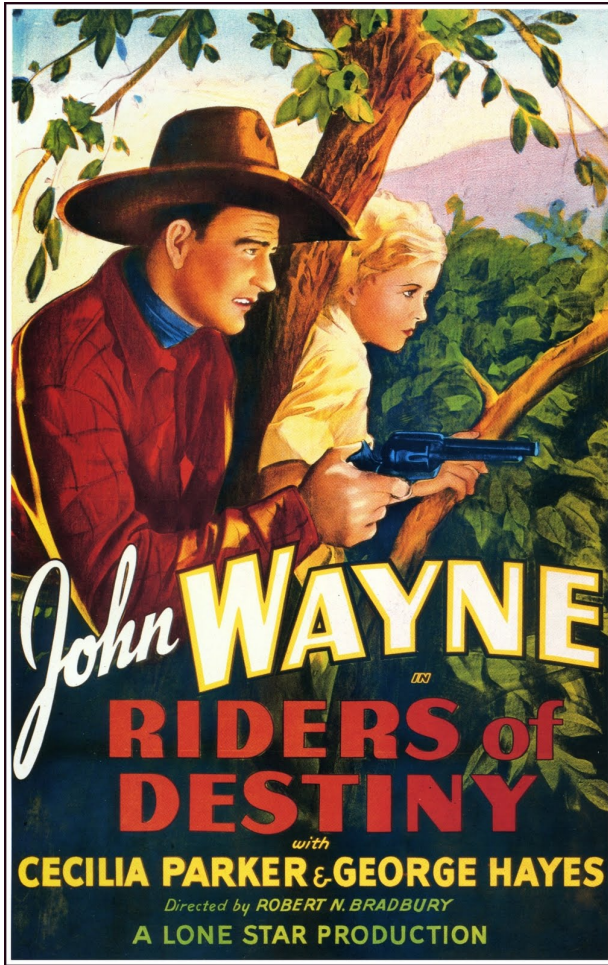


Figure 7 Poster for the 1933 film *Riders of Destiny*. Paul Malvern Productions, 1933.

My dad has a pretty large western film collection. His favorite is John Wayne who he always calls Marion Morrison as if they were friends. I remember a particular film, *Riders of Destiny*, where he rides into a quaint little town to discover that things are not as they seem on the surface. Some rich asshole has cut off the entire water supply to the area and is using this drought to maintain power and status. Like a hero-

god, or maybe even a cure, John Wayne sings and kicks ass after which the ground magically breaks open to release the captive water and relieve the social pressure. I always felt connected to that movie.

The Treatment of the Image

Obviously, we can treat or cure the projected ghost from various diseases and body malfunctions. Does this then retroactively edit the source image? Just as the image editing process of *Riders of Destiny* transformed the projection of John Wayne into a cowboy superhero who changes the social climate and defeats the antagonist, what if the source image of the projected ghost was editable? Could damaged pixels be thrown out? Could the image be compressed for easier access? Would this kind of lossy compression have its own set of problems and side effects for the projected ghost?

Pilgrimage to Hell and Back: An Ad for Spatial and Temporal Relocation



Figure 8 Clay Dunklin. *Pilgrimage to Hell and Back: An Ad for Spatial and Temporal Relocation* (installation view). 2019. The University of Maryland Art Gallery, College Park, MD. Courtesy of the artist.

An Ad for Spatial and Temporal Relocation is the final video installation in the *Pilgrimage to Hell and Back* series in which an automated version of myself simultaneously plays the roles of salesman, nurse, and customer in an advertisement

peddling image treatment procedures. The video pulls influence from pharmaceutical commercials and corporate training videos while the premade animation comes from Nawmal, a company that provides animation and video tools for corporate clients and small businesses. The production of this piece hijacks existing video production systems used by the pharmaceutical and medical industries to comment on current medical imaging processes.

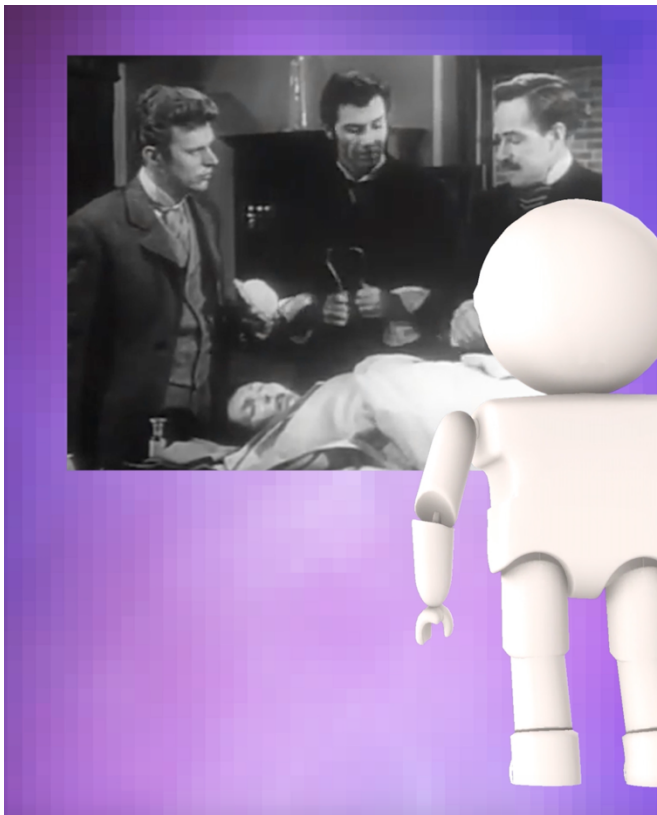


Figure 9 Clay Dunklin. Pilgrimage to Hell and Back: An Ad for Spatial and Temporal Relocation (still image). 2019. Courtesy of the artist.

CLAY AS AN AUTOMATED VOICE. Are you feeling sick? It could be because your source image has become corrupted. I would now like to introduce to you a new treatment to help heal your corrupted file. This treatment allows your source image to be

edited and for damaged pixels to be thrown out. To begin the treatment, a catatonic state will be induced after which the image cleaning will start followed the compression and data transfer. When you awaken, your cleaned image will have been relocated for easier access. You may feel disoriented by waking up in a new location. This is perfectly normal. Spatial and temporal relocation may result in data loss, the side effects of which may include amnesia, hemiparesis, hemisensory disturbances, aphasia, fragmentation, decreased resolution, homonymous hemianopsia, and photopsia. You know, when I got sick I was worried about what sort of plan could be figured out. So, I tried it. We certainly set out to do a major operation and I think we performed the first one. I have found the answer. Honestly, it seems as though my image had never been corrupted. These old bodies are dead! May our imaged bodies long live as new cave paintings for the digital gods!

Chapter 4: What You Should Know

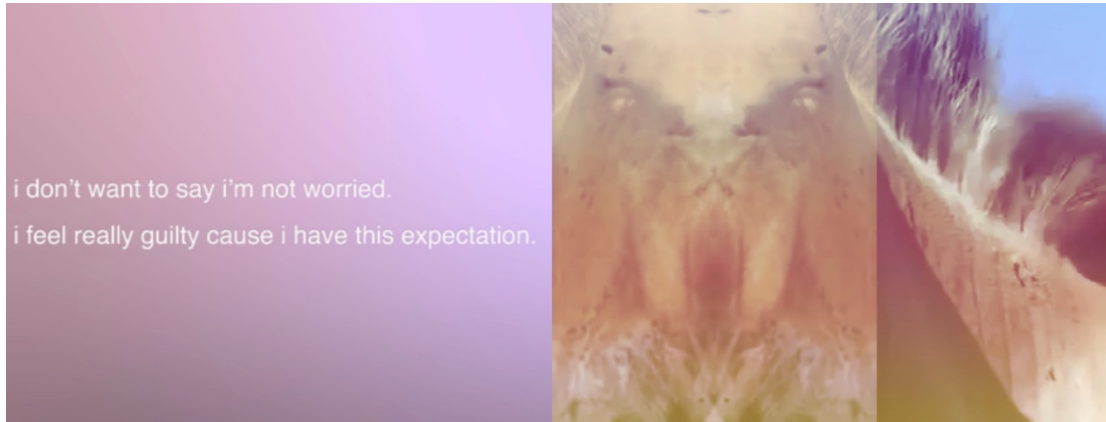


Figure 10 Clay Dunklin. *What You Should Know* (still image). 2019. Courtesy of the artist.

What You Should Know is a follow up piece to the *Pilgrimage to Hell and Back* series. This two-channel video projection continues the intuitive process of making by collaging personal footage from a time dealing with a rare neurological disease with found footage related to mental imagery conjured while on medication. The text comes from a series of interviews after I was well that recall specific moments and verbal interactions. The randomness here again relates to memory recall and the attempt to assemble a fragmented personal narrative.

you just left. why are you calling? you said it would be a late night.

i can't. i'm sorry. i can't do it. i can't talk.

are you fucking with me? are you playing some game?

...

i'm starting to get frustrated and annoyed.

i can't tell what's in your control. are you just being lazy?

...

i think my mom's here.

i don't think she's here.

someone's here. you're pissing me off.

i think your mom's here.

that's what I said. we're going to be late. you have to get up.

we're early. we're just gonna sit here and wait.

HOLD YOUR BREATH AND COUNT TO TEN.

PUT YOUR HAND OVER YOUR LEFT EYE.

IT'S IMPORTANT THAT YOU LAY STILL.

you're really being a dick. well not really a dick. she's doing the best she can.

i don't want to say i'm not worried. i feel really guilty cause i have this expectation.

sorry i'm not worried about you. you know me. obviously it's not productive to sit here and worry.

i know you were on your trip and you had to leave.

i was unsure about even going on the trip. i was really on the fence. but i went.

it's these fading moments. i can never depend on you. i never know. it's so frustrating to never know.

what's happening?

we have to stop. i have to throw up.

you're talking nonsense.

you won't even respond or acknowledge other people around you.

i could be freaking naked shaking my tits in front of you and you

would have no idea. you can't answer any questions.

WHAT'S YOUR DATE OF BIRTH?

...

we're getting to a point where nothing is working. we're not going to be able to keep up.

this is fucking me in a totally different way.

well this is what we're told to do so let's just do it.

this is better so it's good.

but you're more aggressive and have next to no patience.

you're being sensitive. we're not on the same page.

i'm trying to make our old normal work. you're not making anything work. i'm trusting you.

it's hard to do all of this. i'm trusting you.

we're both being sensitive and not ourselves.

i'm meant for somewhere else. i'm going to go to another place. i'm thinking about doing it.

oh shit. this is serious.

i shouldn't enjoy this...i need to...

you need to take it slow. you told me you were going to do less.

i'm done.

i didn't know you stopped. you seem better.

it was that one day at the waterpark in particular. i didn't even

remember being there.

first thing was the flower. we walk in and there's just this pink bloom.

just standing there.

you didn't say anything to anybody. you were just behind us. we were

going to leave and we got separated.

i thought someone was watching you but then i turn around and you're

gone. we couldn't find you.

i had gone to the bathroom and everyone left me.

but you didn't say anything to anybody.

how do you see them? what are they like?

i see them kind of changing.

Yeah.

Chapter 5: Do You Know Where You Are?



Figure 11 Clay Dunklin. *Do You Know Where You Are?* 2019. 96 in x 36 in x 120 in. Courtesy of the artist.

In the spring of 2017, I was hospitalized six times over the course of three months for a rare, debilitating, neurological disease called HaNDL. HaNDL is a transient disease of which there is no known cause that presents with intense headaches, loss of feeling and paralysis on one half of the body, changes in vision, and the inability to speak. There is also no cure, but symptoms typically resolve within three to four months. For me, a typical episode of HaNDL would leave me in a catatonic state requiring hospitalization. When waking up from these episodes, the most frequent question asked of me by my medical team was “Mr. Dunklin, do you know where you are?”

My exhibition *Do You Know Where You Are?* captures the feeling of disorientation and a sense of confusion I experienced when waking up in the hospital. The hallway entrance to the exhibition space is filled with ten ghostly screens suspended from the ceiling that are each printed with a rainbow of various color gradients and the text “DO YOU KNOW WHERE YOU ARE?” This entrance takes the viewer through a dreamlike hazy state until they emerge in the gallery which is designed as a cerebral space. Two large projection screens at the back of the room are suspended high from the ceiling and play the two-channel video *What You Should Know* to serve as eyes or windows looking out on the exterior world. Each of the three videos from the *Pilgrimage to Hell and Back* series are embedded in individual installations set around the perimeter of the room. Each of the installations is complete with carpeted floors, painted walls, objects referenced in the video, a seat, and headphones. Individual viewers sit down, plug in, and physically become part of the installation. Ultimately, *Do You Know Where You Are?* synthesizes my personal

experiences with medical imaging and contemporary image theory then embeds that in a fragmented science fiction narrative.

If we are to believe that we could exist as projections of fragmented images made of shifting pixels that constantly move between windows and cropped frames then I believe the same question deserves to be considered. Do you know where you are?

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