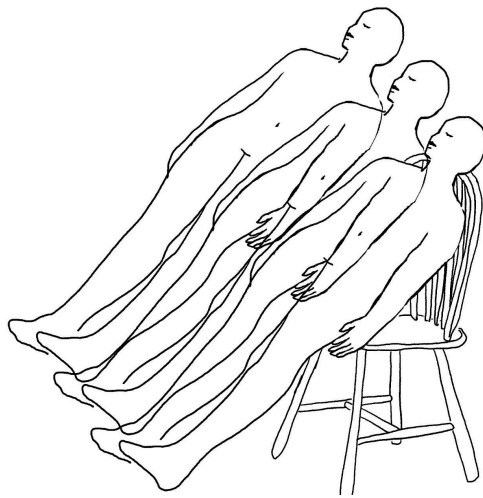


ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: REALITY INDEX
Julia Reising, Master of Fine Arts 2026

Thesis Directed by: Professor Cy Keener, Department of Art

A small, wooden frame with decorative doors breaks up the blank space of the wall. It is fixed; it cannot be moved like other frames. We have learned to choreograph our lives around it. On the two doors are two small knobs—they suggest action; perhaps I should open them. Perhaps many hands before mine have opened them. Perhaps not. In my mind, the frame holds many things. I cannot count them all, the possibilities. I open the doors to expose the innards of the wall; it tells me the house is made of straw. The wall frays toward me. The doors no longer hide many things—just one. The frame and I share this now. It is not a thing of objecthood, rather, it is a thing of candor. I walk outside the house to find there are many of these doors in the world, exposing the unique constructions of the spaces we inhabit. This one is mine. This is a truth window.



REALITY INDEX

by

Julia Reising

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
2026

Advisory Committee:

Professor Cy Keener, Chair
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Dedication

To my family, every step of the way.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my thesis committee—Shannon for your steadfastness and trust in my creative process, Mollye for your insight and questions that always hold the answers in reverse, and Cy for your grounding reminders about all the different facets of what being an artist can look like. Thank you to Evan Verploegh and Krista Kopper for putting together the soundscape for *You and a Deer* and for your shared excitement in cross-media collaboration. Thank you to my mother Kathleen, and Jon for making this thesis project possible. Thank you to my father Chris for instilling in me the belief that no matter what it is, I can figure it out. Thank you to my sisters Helena and Savannah for never batting an eye at my ideas and putting up with my whimsy. Thank you to my brother Gunthar, for being the creative partner I came to graduate school looking for, and for demonstrating what a real commitment to art and continued learning looks like.

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Chapter 1: *Constructing the room*

- i. A deer lies beside
a carcass in the grass
out of loyalty or love
or some invisible
tether. You are not
the deer nor the carcass
but you see yourself
in the glossy mouth
ajar, a window into
an image of the kind
you can't make up
but you can dream of

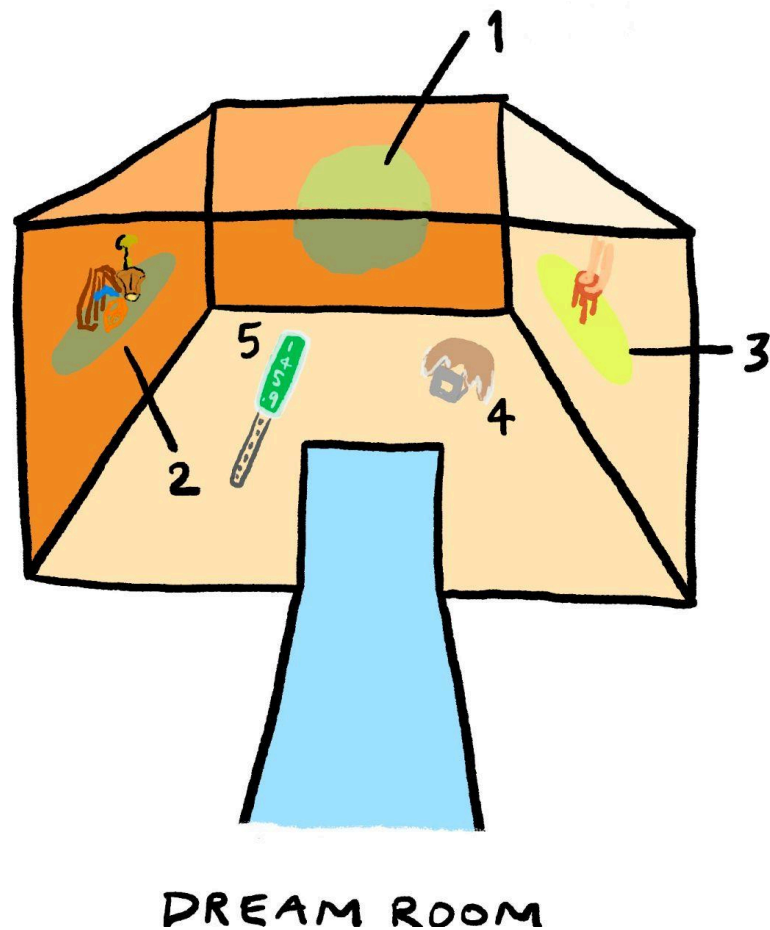


Fig. 1 — *Dream Room*, 2025

In my dream I construct a room. I see it from down the hallway. The image materializes as my body closes the distance between us. The wall directly ahead of me is not a wall of spackling. It is strewn with dirt and dead leaves, a forest floor from above. Ferns spin methodically, rooted on the periphery of an approximately eight-foot diameter circle of turning soil. It is not out of place in my dream—but *of course the ground is spinning*. With one thought, I have oriented myself to the dream room; it is familiar to me.



Fig. 2 — *Pitch Drift (aerial view)*, 2025

I turn to the familiar, the domestic aesthetic, because homes are our primary constructions of the individual and collective lenses through which we interpret the world around us. Art is an isolation of this lens, an unmasking of our personal translation, and an event of making it visible to others. The capacity to see the human condition for its complex and abundant truths begins as a possibility with an understanding of the realities of another person's experience. This begs the question of how we as social groups decide on a shared reality; and further, how do we escape the dependency on one another to affirm the truth of our own experiences? Constructing reality is a social contract, an agreement between you and me, that settles the topic of *what 'really' happened*. Reality glitches most often in times of crisis, in events laid bare by continued recollection and comparison. This brings us to a few guiding questions of my studio practice: how might we go about life in a way that allows for multiple contradicting truths to occupy the

same space? What is the human cost of doing so? And how might we use the making of objects as a way to concretize the experiences that cannot be affirmed by others?



Fig. 3 — *How real a stone is!* 2025

Raised in a small town in the Central Wisconsin Valley amongst the chaos of a seven-person household, it was easy to turn to the natural world as an escape. Deep behind my childhood home, I made nests against the root walls of fallen trees and floated secret messages to no one down the silent creek on smooth bark. Sun up till sun down, my summers were spent

below the protective shadow of the tree canopy, among the pines and sugar maples. These I remember as images of great wonder and beauty.

As the youngest sibling, I was of course at the will of my sister's direction, and I learned early to pause and pray whenever I heard the sound of a helicopter overhead; this meant that Dad would have to go into the hospital as the trauma surgeon on call. The operating room was a peculiar space for me, where people are flooded with images of violence that we learn to distance ourselves from in order to function in that environment. While we often associate violence with being out of control, the OR is perhaps a space of peak control and sterility. These are the types of images of violence I intend to focus on.

I recall being in seventh grade when I witnessed an open-abdomen surgery on an infant. The room was incubated to 80-some degrees to help regulate the baby's body temperature. I stood over the operating table looking down at the small rectangular cutout in the surgical drape sheet, repeating over and over in my head, *If you have to faint, faint backwards*. This cognitive dissonance became an important tool for me in the years to come as I navigated the rupture of my family. It was during these formative years of late childhood that my reality came into question, exposing the fragility of the constructions of normalcy rooted in routine behaviors and familiar objects that surrounded and supported my everyday life. This body of work, entitled *Reality Index* as a reflection of the ways we record and experience truth, offers a window into our personal constructions of perception—beauty as a mode of understanding, images as a form of violence, and the antiphonal nature of these disparate yet deeply intertwined phenomena.

Chapter 2: *Exposing the lens*

- ii. There is a deer lying
 next to you in the grass
 out of fidelity for something
 you cannot describe
 but you know, like
 what it means to see
 the color red or the last
 image that flashes
 before your open eyes
 gaping like a ten-point
 buck in the face of god's
 prophetic headlights

I walk down the hall to the center of the room, drawing nearer to the sound of squeaky bass and questioning percussion nestled inside the belly of a deer hide—not carcass, not taxidermy, just material and sheer association. It is draped over a side table, and I can sense the weight of it pulling toward the wooden floor of the gallery. I walk around the body to find a mirror embedded among the fur, a rectangular cavity in the rib cage reflecting the dim, glowing light of the room around me. But something else is offkilter; it is not just any ordinary mirror, it is a true mirror. As I lean into the body, I am met with an image of my face the way others see me—a non-reversing reflection.



Fig. 4 — *You and a Deer*, 2026

I turn to the other object staked in the room, a mile marker in the kind of emerald green and retroreflective white that takes me to the side of a highway. It reads “mile 145.9,” apparently on the brink of something. A small black circle is embedded in the sign. I peer closer and see that it is a lens in the shape of a keyhole. Just two inches in depth, the viewfinder elongates this distance into a world of its own.



Fig. 5 — *Milemarker*, 2026



Fig. 6 — *Milemarker (viewfinder)*, 2026

Gaston Bachelard, author of *The Poetics of Space*, ruminates on material imagination and the ontological forces that images can conjure. On the making of images, he remarks, “The image is created through co-operation between real and unreal, with the help of the functions of the real and the unreal” (79). He goes on to posit three points about the image, saying, “There will always be more things in a closed, than in an open box. To verify images kills them, and it is always more enriching to *imagine* than to *experience*” (108). This is reminiscent of Erwin Schrödinger’s thought experiment in which a cat in a sealed box is both alive and dead until observed as one or the other, a concept otherwise known as quantum superposition. This

experiment highlights how the construction of what we deem to be ‘real’ is dependent on our observation of it and functions as a limitation to the multiplicity of truth. As applied to visual arts, we may ask how does one create an image (substitutable with *object* or *environment*) that offers itself as a tangible memento to time while also leaving space for imagination to work beyond what is merely in front of our eyes? Through image association, also referred to as the Gestalt principle of proximity, the artist can construct a room full of meaning; simply by putting two images in proximity to one another (spatially or chronologically), the viewer will perceive them as relational without any statement of being so. If images conjure feeling, and feeling is inherently within the viewer, it follows that the viewer is in fact projecting meaning onto the image rather than the image carrying meaning in its own right. This begs the question of whether the dream rooms we construct in our minds and the dream room I constructed in the gallery are really so different from the realities we construct outside of ourselves; we see the things we *want* to see, the *way* we want to see them. We may return to Bachelard’s words, “To verify images kills them,” and read now that the act of defining a reality inherently terminates the potentiality of a moment to be anything more than the words we use to describe it.

FINDING THE IMAGE IN THE FEELING

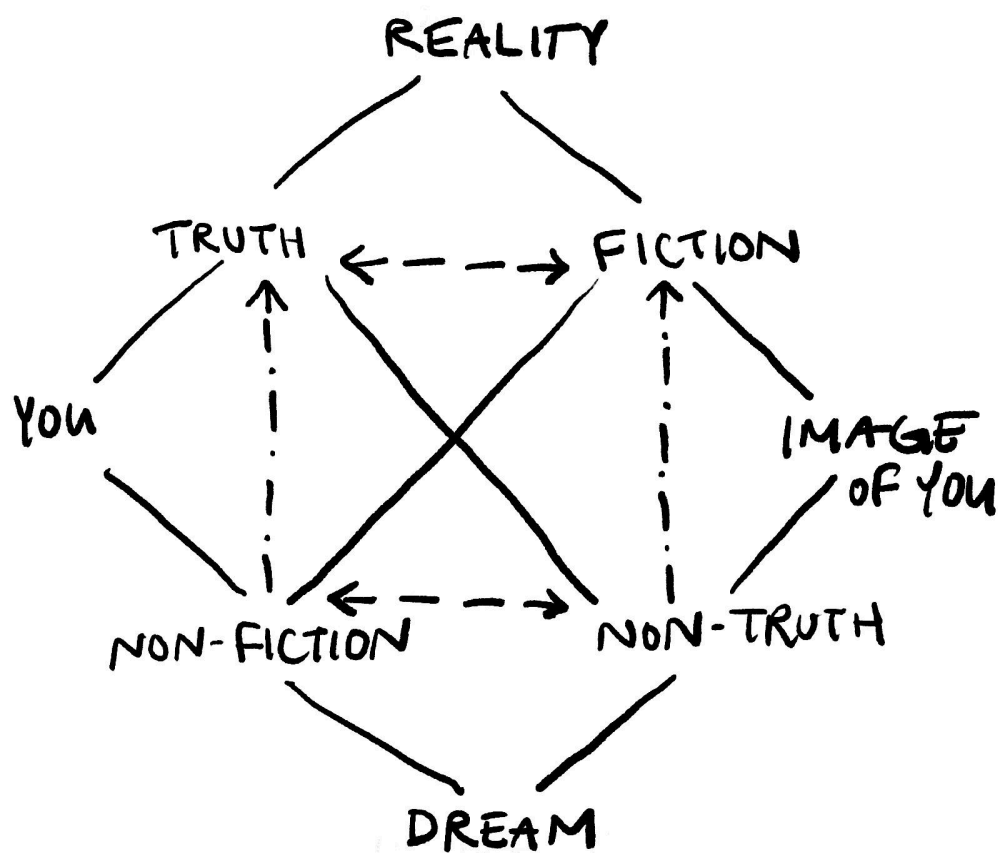


Fig. 7 — *Finding the image in the feeling*, 2025

Chapter 3: *You and the image of you*

- iii. You are a deer lying
 next to yourself
 in the grass, yes you
 are two deer—but the world
 is convinced there can
 only be one, so you learn
 to cope by consuming
 the parts of yourself
 you cannot explain,
 unjustly required to justify
 that you are in fact not
 one deer but two; you
 and the image of you
 lying together
 in the red grass they call
 the color green

On the other side of the window I see the slow turn of the ground again: a new wall, a new image. As the viewer, I no longer have an aerial perspective; rather, I am standing in the forest under the tree canopy, just a few steps from the edge of the turning plot of earth. This time, I am presented with a tumbled pile of furniture: a wooden rocking chair face-down, an overturned milk crate, a fallen lamp, hot glowing bulb to the dirt. I have not seen it before, but my feet are well-grounded in this image too—it is not the first time I have been here. In another dream room, I remember chairs protruding from walls, clothing covering the ground, picture frames of smiling people uprooted and strewn on the floor. I remember taking to all fours to make my way to the staircase; cardinal directions could not help me navigate this new terrain. My body was displaced, but another north appeared. A dream within a dream. *Wake up.*



Fig. 8 — *Pitch drift (left wall)*, 2025

My gaze turns clockwise 180 degrees. It is the same view, the same forest, but this time I am confronted with an image of myself. My legs, bare and standing on an antique octagonal side

table with a cherry finish. The image of me turns with the speed of the earth below it, glitching at almost a full rotation and resetting itself at the starting point again. *What am I doing?* It is my body and my dream, but somehow the image has taken on a volition of its own. I guess they tend to do that.



Fig. 9 — *Pitch drift (right wall)*, 2025

What happens, then, when the viewer is confronted with a reality that falters? What happens when the ground drifts beneath you, or when you see yourself in the belly of an animal you did not know you loved? Aesthetics of mystery tempt the viewer with resolution; we are tempted to write the ending and to conclude that we all must remember it the same way. We may see the bottom half of a woman standing on a table and hasten to presume that it is a scene of a suicide. We may see a pile of overturned furniture and assume a scene of domestic violence. But ultimately, these interpretations deny us of something more principal to what images can be:

mystery *itself*, mystery without resolution, mystery as morality. It is the practice of holding contradiction and rejecting the need to synthesize the vastness of experience into a single truth. This is the spadework for empathy.

Subsequently, if not for the imperial nature of human will thrust upon the natural world, there would be no concept of truth at all; truth becomes relevant only when people are introduced into the equation. That is to say, the sea does not mind that its waves clash, for there is no contradiction without the imposition of the human will for resolution. Louise Glück writes her poem “Portland, 1968” on this violence of perception:

You stand as rocks stand
to which the sea reaches
in transparent waves of longing;
they are marred, finally;
everything fixed is marred.
And the sea triumphs,
like all that is false,
all that is fluent and womanly.
From behind, a lens
opens for your body. Why
should you turn? It doesn't matter
who the witness is,
for whom you are suffering,
for whom you are standing still.

I highlight her words in line five in which she says, “everything fixed is marred.” The narrator describes a kind of suffering at the hands of a witness “for whom you are standing still.” In other words, a suffering at the hands of a witness *for whom you are stripped of your mystery*. Glück’s diction resists definition, making indirect comparisons among words such as “false,” “fluent,” and “womanly,” all words that embody unfixed images of contradiction. She suggests

violence—the temptation of a resolute image imparted on the narrator, that to come to a solid conclusion is to come to a misunderstanding. And with that she also suggests hope—hope that the world prevails in all its beautiful complexities, hope that we will never arrive to stand still.

And so, we record violence surfacing in three distinct ways, morphing itself into new forms as a way to persist inevitably in tandem with our realities. Perhaps most evidently, we see violence as a physical intervention: a surgical procedure, a dead deer on the side of a highway, the discarding or displacement of objects. We see violence as the projection of a fixed image or conclusion, an interpretive imposition made by the viewer. And lastly we see violence as a perceptual rupture, a collision of contradicting truths negotiated en masse. While the work suggests the presence of material violence, it resists the interpretive imposition by holding contradiction quite literally in the same space. We see this materially embodied in the side table placed in proximity to the road sign: a suggestion of an interior space, a suggestion of an exterior space. The sculptures rest on the brink of action, holding a potential energy without holding an answer. In this way, they resist a singular interpretation.

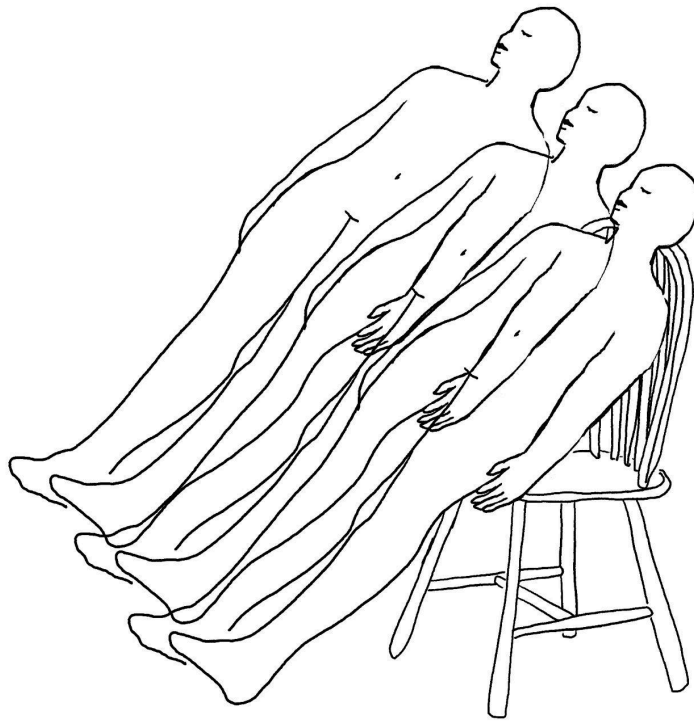


Fig. 10 — *Astral Projection (supine)*, 2025

As it turns out, corners are not just a philosophical metaphor for the perennial process of becoming. Corners are in fact a real fascination of mine, presenting themselves in a myriad of ways throughout my adolescence and into my adulthood. I have sculpted them and casted them and drawn them where they do not exist. I have hiked with them and laid in them and constructed them in the hollows of creeks. There are at least two folders of corners in my camera roll, the first dedicated to photos of me occupying small boxes and cabinets, and another of every corner in my mother's home where two walls meet the ceiling. As a child, I had an awful time doing as I was told, especially in any instance where I could see a light just around the bend. I can remember being in department stores, forests, strange houses, and inclement weather, but nothing could keep me from chasing after the enthralling beauty of a light shining where I was not. While this of course scarred my mother to the brink of making me one of those dreadful leash children (as I went missing several times), these are my earliest memories of experiencing what I have learned to call beauty.

These are also the kind of mundane experiences I have not attempted to convey aloud or in writing until now, nor will I dwell on any one of these experiences in particular. As they say, *beauty is in the eye of the beholder*. It prompts us to consecrate, to covet, and to share. I have yet to find a friend in anyone who cannot admit the merit, albeit silly and redundant, of sending a photo of the sunset to a loved one. But why do we do it? While we may not all agree on *what* is beautiful, it stands that beauty is perhaps the most ubiquitous and universal experience of assigning value to something we cannot fully understand. Beauty *is* a mode of understanding, unqualifiable by language or any other human invention that threatens the pixelation of comprehension. Gerald Murnane, Australian novelist and author of *The Plains*, writes,

How might a [person] reorder [their] conduct if [they] could be assured that the worth of a perception, a memory, a supposition, was enhanced rather than diminished by its being inexplicable to others? And what could a [person] not accomplish, freed from any obligation to search for so-called truths apart from those demonstrated by [their] search for a truth peculiar to [them]? (110-111)

In other words, what insights might we convey if we were unbound from the ingrained etiquette that our experiences must be digestible for our neighbors? Must understanding be the measure of assigning value, or could it be that those experiences which we may never understand are the ones that we should hold most cardinal? If I am so lucky as to discover a truth peculiar to me, must I be able to translate it to others in order to make it real? Or could there exist a world in which one person's *light around the bend* could exist simply by the merit of its mystery, and simultaneously among the merit of those mysteries held dear by our neighbors?

At its core, beauty is a suspension of meaning, daring to interrupt the mind's demand for explication. Beauty as a mode of understanding begins as a physical experience rather than an intellectual one; it is the experience of perceiving a truth outside of the body, whether that be our own or a truth felt by someone or something else, and to see the lens through which our reality is filtered. This form of comprehension is spurred by the visceral effects of empathy and requires no explanation to justify its being.

I return to the title of this body of work, *Reality Index*, to explore once again how the ways we record our perspectives are directly related to the ways we construct our individual and collective truths: how physical objects can tether together a sense of material and emotional order, how the human need to record experiences emphasizes the slippery nature of truth, and

how art can function as a peaceful antidote to the fragile construction of reality. I return to the call-and-response nature of violence and beauty; in a world where the limitation of perception is a necessary and inexorable part of life, how might we allow beauty to suspend our realities long enough to experience, however briefly, the mystery and multiplicity of a truth outside our own?

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