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Looking Into Your Eyes, I See Myself

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UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Looking Into Your Eyes, I See Myself

by

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A THESIS

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Abstract

My thesis support paper consists of a five-chapter fairy tale in a fantasy setting with parable elements. Each chapter represents a different stage of research during my journey through the master's program. Via personal metaphors, mischievous iconographies, and childhood experiences, I traverse my psyche finding ways to cope with my childlike self / past and my adult self / present. By creating visual and written stories, I aim to develop a thesis support paper in a playful and creative writing style that both compliments the object of the artwork (a child) and contrasts the subject of the research (childhood memory, trauma, and family relationships).

This research helped me to discover a fascinating connection between making art and the process of healing or therapy. It is important for me to share my story and my healing process with viewers through this exhibition that documents my journey. Hopefully, viewers reflect upon their own stories, and are moved to find their own ways of creating a better ending for themselves. I experienced emotional and mental growth during the process of disclosing these memories through the works and this paper. I hope that I have offered an opportunity for my community to engage in a broader conversation about the significance of childhood memories and mental health.

KEYWORDS: childhood memories; fairy tales; research creation; trauma; drawing; sculpture; performance art; installation art.

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Introduction

My thesis support paper consists of a five-chapter fairy tale in a fantasy setting with parable elements. Each chapter represents a different stage of research during my journey through the master's program. Via personal metaphors, mischievous iconographies, and childhood experiences, I traverse my psyche finding ways to cope with my childlike self / past and my adult self / present. By creating visual and written stories, I aim to develop a thesis support paper in a playful and creative writing style that both compliments the object of the artwork (a child) and contrasts the subject of the research (childhood memory, trauma, and family relationships).

The fairy tale genre, allows the viewer to lower their defences vis a vis sensitive topics and distressing past experiences. Catherine Orenstein, in her book *Little Red Riding Hood: Uncloaked. Sex, Morality and the Evolution of a Fairy Tale*, highlights that, “[f]airy tales provide a unique window into our most central concerns, our sense of social and cultural identity, who we think we are (or should be) – and how we change.” (Orenstein 2002, 11). Arthur W. Frank in *Letting Stories Breathe* describes the important social role of narration and stories, “Stories work with people, for people, and always stories work on people, affecting what people are able to see as real, as possible, and as worth doing or best avoided.” (Frank 2010, 3) Therefore, stories serve to open a social gate that motivates the reader/viewer to build specific social patterns or educational frames. Fairy tales are powerful tools that allow one to examine previous experiences and process pain in order to reconcile all parts of the self, which is psychologically and physically beneficial.

References Informing my Visual Work

The work of Michael Sowa, Marcel Dzama, Kiki Smith, Mark Nixon, and Paula Rego have informed my visual process and direction. **Michael Sowa's** body of work focuses on children's book illustrations with a magical realism aesthetic using acrylic, oil, and gouache techniques. Sowa creates "provocative possibilities, enticing the viewer into considering the ultimate world of might-be's ... it is also a whack in the face-wake up" (Bantock 1996, 4). Through his playful subject choice, such as drag bunnies, moth pets and miniature piglets swimming inside big bowls of soup, Sowa aims to create peculiar visual statements about human behaviour, with the use of mischievous images and childlike visual jokes. His aesthetic has enhanced my artistic references, pushing forward my visual inquiries and imaginative written style, motivating me into the exploration of fairy tales and a whimsical aesthetic.



Figure 1. Sowa Michael.2008. *No go area*.
Source: <https://curiator.com/art/michael-sowa/10>

Canadian artist, **Marcel Dzama**, has been a source of inspiration. In The Guardian article, *Cult Artist*, Marcel Dzama states that he tries not to censor himself and describes the importance of randomness, playfulness, and a constant movement within his visual approaches. His iconography reflects an unlimited childlike spirit, constantly exploring different mediums, and developing a social and politically charged discourse.



Figure 2. Dzama, Marcel. 2006. *Tree with Roots*.
Source: <https://www.ikon-gallery.org/event/tree-with-roots/>

As an example, he drew amputated cowboys as a way to compare his masculinity to phallogocentric structures and drew bats for the simple sake of making them. (Hoby, 2013) In 2016, Marcel Dzama collaborated with Justin Pecks in the development of costumes for

the play, *The Most Incredible Thing*, at the New York City Ballet. This ballet project has particularly influenced my exploration, especially in the last stage of my research, where I seek to create a link between my sketches and tri-dimensional objects by using fabric and developing a theatrical aesthetic in line with my mischievous narrations.

Kiki Smith developed provocative imagery connected to childhood, nature, and fairy tales. Specifically, in her work involving the folktale *Little Red Riding Hood*, Smith explored the concept of femininity and the position of women within a patriarchal structure using several mediums: drawing, printmaking, sculpture, and painting. In my research, I found inspiration and conceptual connections with her pieces *Born* (2002) and *Daughter* (1999), that touch upon topics such as father-daughter relationships and the use of animals as archetypes.

In the MoMa article, *Kiki Smith: [brochure] prints, books & things*, Wendy Weitman describes the piece *Born* as a “relatively violent rendition” portraying one of the scenes from *Little Red Riding Hood*, where Little Red and her grandmother emerge from the beast’s stomach. The two heroes are shown standing as a statement of resurrection (Weitman 2003, 5). Smith relates this image to a self-portrait that represents the painful process of a woman transitioning from childhood through the stages of development to a senior citizen. It therefore symbolizes a type of empowerment in the face of this process. Coming out of the wolf symbolizes detaching the self from the phallic figure or the lost father, creating a relationship with one’s past, and constructing an improved present in terms of identity and body.



Figure 3. Smith, Kiki. 1999. *Daughter*.

Source:
<http://alicenations.blogspot.ca/2010/11/little-alice-riding-hood.html>

The piece, *Daughter* is an engaging approach to the symbiotic relationship between the wolf and Little Red Riding Hood. Rather than viewing the villain and the hero as two separate, opposite, and distinct archetypes, Smith views them as natural human instincts or qualities. Furthermore, she seeks to explore women's psyches as a complex and wild phenomenon. This piece, in particular, is very much related to the last iteration of my research where I became very intrigued by this visual approach. This



Figure 4. Nixon, Mark. 2013. *Teddy Moore, Much Loved*. Source: <https://flashbak.com/loved-to-bits-portraits-of-my-teddy-371450/teddy-14/>

served as inspiration for developing the symbiotic connection between the protagonist (Arielle) and the antagonist (Agus) of my story.

Mark Nixon's *Much Loved* project involved the New Zealand photographer inviting people around Europe "to share, their much-loved teddies, the more loved, unwashed, and falling apart the better, to be photographed" (Nixon 2013, iii). At first Nixon thought most of the participants would be infants, however to his surprise most of them were adults. In addition to the photo session,

Nixon interviewed the participants, asking about their bond with the stuffed toy. "The stories and memories became integral to the photographs, adding significance to them and bringing them to life" (iv).

It was fascinating reading stories of adults 40 or 50 years old, who still maintain an attachment with their stuffed animals. Nixon's project relates to the concept of *Transitional Objects*, developed by the psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott. Winnicott describes the "original not-me possession [...] along with the use made of objects that are not part of the infant's body yet are not fully recognized as belonging to external reality" (Winnicott, 1999,2). These objects provide comfort by coming from a familiar caregiver (i.e. a mother) or by being objects that provide a sense of stability (e.g. their thumb, toys, etc.). The objects are simultaneously "not-me" objects while allowing the infant to develop self-awareness relationships skills.

In my research, I applied the concept of 'transitional objects' through the creation of stuffed animals. Using notebook sketches as a starting point, the project became a ritual that included naming the big fabric sculpture *Agus* and making him the antagonist in the story. I brought Agus to life, akin to Frankenstein or Pinocchio, by placing a few strands of my own hair inside the fabric sculpture. I followed a ritual, which allowed me to take control of my relationship with Agus. This act of naming him created a different dynamic between us, in that Agus had always been the one to set the rules or boundaries of the relationship in the past. By naming him, I took the first step in

reframing the relationship on my terms at least in how I chose to process the past and set new boundaries.

Paula Rego creates compositions consisting of animals and humans in mischievous scenarios, and addresses concepts like abortion, sexuality, family violence, and politics. Using painting and drawing as her main media; she sought to connect intimate and whimsical approaches to her traumas and personal experiences. In the article for The Guardian, *All about my mother: the demons of Paula Rego - by her son*, the author describes Rego as a passionate and self-centred artist who suffered from depression for several years.

She developed an intense framework during her darkest stages of life, creating pieces that reflected all the emotion she felt drained from her.

“Traumas are turned into art; difficult emotions are worked through in images. Sometimes she uses dark fairy tales or children’s stories as a starting point and, she says, they turn into something more personal as she works. At other times, she is painfully direct.” (Rix 2017)



Figure 5. Rego, Paula. 1989. *Baa, Baa Black Sheep*.

Source:
http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=1402316&partId=1&school=13228&page=1

I find my exploration similar to Rego, in that I use my aesthetic approaches like a ritual or therapeutic process. This helps me cope emotionally and simultaneously open-up the conversation with the viewer. The subject matter and format of the final work invites the public to ask questions about the connection between mental health and childhood memories.

Description of Characters

Protagonist: Arielle

The main character is a reinterpretation of me, the project is charged with personal elements. My purpose was to create an alter ego to work on the narration within a safe space without crossing emotional boundaries. Arielle decided to put herself in a distressful situation as a result of not having an appropriate father figure who might have guided her. She called on ghosts from the past and fed a relationship that was not worth investing in. Throughout this heroine's journey, Arielle searched for a missing piece from her past, thinking that this would bring her peace. She did not realize that everything that she needed was either already inside her or present in her life. Creating this story and the accompanying artwork has been an amazing journey both as the writer and the artist; it has been a tool for personal healing. It is clear that the creative process, both in creative writing and visual work was a powerful tool in helping me find strength and courage to overcome life's challenges.

Arielle is petite and ethereal with long lustrous raven coloured hair, skin like a quiet autumn evening, and thoughtful eyes. She is sometimes energetic and at other times melancholic. These melancholic tendencies superficially connected her to Agus, to her own detriment. Stylish clothes were never of much interest to her as she preferred designing her own wardrobe, decorating her hair with found organic material like flowers and feathers. A little lizard once even lived happily in her locks for a couple of months.

Antagonist: Agus

The antagonist of this story represents my father. I was not interested in portraying him with human features. By focusing on applying a childlike approach, the reader may reflect upon the complex attachment that a daughter can develop towards her father. This exploration is made less threatening by covering all the bad dreams and memories with mischievous imagery, such as toys and stuffed animals. From the moment of his arrival in the story, Agus functions as a true narcissistic-sociopath in that he does not invest in a relationship with Arielle or acknowledge her presence, never mind her needs. He completely lacks empathy. His emotional capacity or lack thereof, make it impossible for him to create any other kind of relationship with people in his life. His only interest is to continue seeking out energy to feed on and to travel through time at the expense of others.

He is imposingly tall, with a hairy body, with long, heavy limbs that sometimes make it hard for him to move. His painful posture and broken heart made many of his days blue throughout his life.

Secondary Characters: Family of old dogs and mother

These archetypes is the main support for Arielle even though they appear at the beginning of the story and they do not reappear until the end. I considered different approaches to these characters, such as having them save Arielle at the end of the story. However, as a result of creating the costume of Agus (see Chapter 4), it became apparent that Arielle needed save herself and find her way out of the relationship with Agus. This seemed to be a significant and necessary step in her evolution.

Nevertheless, the secondary characters will be waiting for her with unconditional love and acceptance.

I based these characters on my mother (Angie) and my five dogs who have been my support and source of emotional stability. My dogs are two Chihuahuas (Rita and Negra), one Fox Terrier (Lula), and two mixed breed dogs (Candelaria and Cuca), who appear in the installation, *Looking Into Your Eyes, I See Myself*.

Chapter 1: The Red Forest

The whole town of Mazarine was troubled by a pack of wolves that arrived in the village one day, never to leave. Their howling outside Arielle's bedroom disturbed her sleep every night. One night was particularly difficult, as Arielle was trying to avoid her usual nightmares that these dreadful beasts outside her house unleashed within her. Moving from one side of her bed to the other, she was unable to fall asleep. Peeking her head outside the window, she observed their big, hairy, twisted forms, as long drops of cold sweat ran down her forehead. Droplets of perspiration glimmered under a full moon with wildlife creaking and squeaking against the staccato of her beating heart while ravenous bloodcurdling brutes lay in wait.

Following this last distressing insomniatic episode, she could not stand feeling afraid anymore, not like this at least. Arielle decided it was time to change paths, to search new horizons and figure out what kind of life she wanted. She lived with her mother Angie, in this wacky place called Mazarine, surrounded by sage mountains, skies blue as blooming hydrangeas in spring, and broken dreams. Angie's home was filled with plants and family photos of all kinds of memories, framed upon the many walls, smiling and curious in response to the slightest movement. Visitors came and went every day with their mouths full of harmful words, sharp like knives. Arielle never felt any emotional attachment to Mazarine, except to her mom and the framed memories hanging from the walls.

One night, while Arielle travelled between dreams, she felt a strange presence amid the shades of her subconscious. It was not the first time that she experienced this, however, the feeling was fiercer on this occasion. She caught a glimpse of a slow lumbering, tall, hairy figure following her dreams. Arielle started to wonder if it was one of those wolves outside her house, perhaps lost in another plane of consciousness. Yet, this creature was somehow familiar, as if they had met before. Just as the distance between them was about to be bridged and his face could be distinguished, she woke up. Rising from her bed and staring at the front wall, her voice echoed in her own ears, "This is the moment to move out".

Angie felt that something was changing in Arielle's psyche; that she needed space to have her own experiences and figure out who she wanted to be in the world. Standing in the middle of the living room, with memories hanging on the walls around her, Angie burst into tears making sorrowful noises. Arielle approached her mother giving her a long hug, promising her that she would come back for her one day.

Arielle was not sure where she was going, or her final destiny. However, something deep inside told her that she needed to go to the forest. She took the first bus that she found, sat down in a window seat, and waited for a sign. Days elapsed, and the infinite scene of trees disoriented and exhausted her. The bus came to a stop with an intense abrupt movement. The grinding of the wheels was so forceful that all the passengers were pressing their ears to protect themselves from the excruciating noise. When the bus stopped completely, all the passengers stared at each other with pale faces trying to figure out what had happened. The bus driver announced that, due to technical problems, it was the final stop.

Night sounds started to accompany the moon that was about to rise as shiny eyes popped out from the darkness. Arielle, walking outside near the bus, thought the best plan was to find a place to sleep for the night. Turning her head, a slight movement of light caught her attention and she ran as fast as she could towards it. When Arielle caught up to it, she was exhausted and realized that it was a lady dog carrying a silver candle, wearing a strident yellow and pink dress. Arielle, standing behind her, asked loudly, "Why are you alone at this time of night?" Candelaria answered with a tender smile, "Well, sometimes I just need some quiet time and what better a place than this beautiful view, so wild and free". The old lady looked into Arielle's eyes for a second, then she continued walking again, with a swaying movement. Candelaria and Arielle together strolled for a while among tall pines, with chatty crickets and little creatures that passed by next to them. In the distance, Arielle started to see glimpses of a small village hidden within the tree trunks. When they arrived at the village, they approached the third house on the right. There Arielle saw through the window four old lady dogs sitting in front of the chimney drinking what seemed like hot chocolate. Opening the door widely, Candelaria said, with a tender voice, "Welcome to the Red Forest".



Fiesta, Ink on paper, 90x81 inches, 2016

Image Description

The drawing *Fiesta* was created at the beginning of my Master's project. Based on a piece from my sketchbook, I wanted to experiment with very large-scale work. *Fiesta* shows a family gathered in the middle of their living room with family pictures (like those described in the first chapter) hung on the wall. I was interested in generating different gazes, postures, and gestures, showing anxiety, discomfort, and loneliness as a way of criticizing social behavior.

The purpose of this piece was to represent my layered familial relationships, thoughts about my hometown, and mixed emotions that I recurrently have towards my culture. "Nonsense", "violence", and "beauty" are some of the nouns that could be used to describe Mexico. This vibrant and chaotic place inspired me to create Mazarine as a metaphor of my home and memories. Therefore, *Fiesta* relates to this chapter because it communicates the same statement or affect as that of the story. It stands for my connection to Mexico and mirrors the process of how I decided to move forward and pursue other opportunities in my own life.

Furthermore, the animals standing at the foreground of the drawing are a visual reference to Michael Sowa and a statement about the objectification of domestic animals. Next to them, three girls represent my mother and two of my aunts. I based this drawing of them on a photo from their childhood. Next to them is my dog, Negra, wearing a flowery dress. Hence, the relationship between the drawing and the first chapter is a visual and narrative collage intended to reflect my homeland.

Chapter 2: Agus

The little living room was beautifully decorated, with dandelion coloured walls and individual couches for each one of the old dogs. They introduced themselves as the Blossom family. What a fascinating collection of characters, Arielle thought. The family consisted of two little Chihuahuas named Rita and Negra, a Fox Terrier named Lula, a young mixed-breed that was playing around the house named Cuca, and the oldest, Candelaria.

Seasons passed, and Arielle felt more at home, sharing picnics, small hikes, and good moments with her new community. One evening, after having a lovely meal with her friends, Rita approached Arielle and gave her a small velvet bag. Arielle grabbed it with excitement and opened it without hesitation. Inside she found a delicate petite stone pendant. Arielle tried it on, grateful for such a kind gesture. Rita responded giving her a little kiss on her cheek and said, "Every time you feel sorrow, just hold the necklace tightly and remember that you are never alone".

That night, as everyone slept peacefully, crickets sang joyfully, and the trees enjoyed watching the stars shine, Arielle heard an eerie voice emerge in the moments when her slumber lightened. The gloomy sound crept into her ear saying, "You will love me for the rest of your life". Arielle opened her eyes paralyzed by fear. Shaking, she turned her head in all directions trying to find the source of such a horrific utterance, but nobody was there. Suddenly she heard a sharp sound from inside the closet. Petrified, she looked at the closet door and wondered what she should do. Arielle got out of bed without making a sound and hesitantly opened the closet door. A gigantic crimson stuffed animal appeared from inside and fell into the centre of the room.

Arielle stared at it surprised, I do not remember seeing this before and it cannot be a gift, it's not my birthday yet, she said to herself. The object started to make small movements and she got closer to see what was happening. The small shaking became violent jolts, and the stuffed animal started to grow, "It's alive!", she screamed, as it swiftly puffed up before her with an imposing sadistic attitude dripping with grandiosity and narcissism. He had huge popping eyes, long dirty ears, a hairy body, and a growing smile. Goosebumps ran from her forehead to her back, this monster reminded her of those creepy wolves that haunted Mazarine's streets.

Her body felt heavy; everything around her began to spin intensely and Arielle fell into a deep sleep. Upon opening her eyes, she was no longer at home, but could smell the crisp forest air, feel soil, stones, and grass beneath her feet. Dodging between branches and plants, she tried to move in different directions, but her body did not respond. After a taciturn walk, during which Arielle's eyes were glued like magnets to the back of the creature's neck, they arrived at a denser part of the woods on the other side of the Red Forest, called Elderberry. There, they settled into a dark humid cave in the woody depths. Arielle was feeling dizzy and nauseated and she wondered if she was hallucinating because the foliage and wildlife appeared distorted, as if floating in the air like psychedelic ghosts wandering around the forest. It all gave the impression of eerie prisms reflecting rainbows in the pine leaves. After staring for a while at the surreal scenario, she turned around to where the creature was standing and asked, "Why did you bring me here?" Calmly the creature, turned around and answered: "Tu sabes porque, has estado preguntando por mi y al fin te he encontrado."

("You know why, you have been calling for me and finally I found you.") Arielle wondered why his voice and exotic language sounded so familiar.

The day was almost over, and the full moon was starting to rise. Without saying another word, the creature went inside his cave, leaving Arielle alone in the darkness. She could not stop thinking about those gloomy eyes, his wide, wet nose, and the tired, hunchbacked walk. She just wanted to stay forever and take care of him. Arielle built an improvised shelter, outside his cave, waiting for any excuse to be needed by him. Seasons went by like rivers, rapidly she lost track of time.

In Elderberry, nights were colder and quieter. Crickets did not sing their pleasant songs, animals did not blissfully pass by and pines behaved very soberly. Arielle deeply missed the restful nights in The Red Forest with the Blossom family. One night while dreaming of her beloved cricket friends from back home, she felt a strong vibration running along the tent floor. Running inside the big stuffed animal's cave to ensure that the creature was safe, she discovered he was gone. As Arielle turned around, a thick emerald mist formed into a gate in the blink of an eye. Without any hesitation, the creature went through it, disappearing from view. Like an electric shock, a long-forgotten memory came back to her mind, Its Agus! she thought. Petrified, the mist disappeared before her eyes. She ran into it trying to follow him, but it was too late, he was gone. Without knowing what else to do, Arielle went back to her tent, dragging her feet, with tears in her eyes, and feeling hopeless, waiting for Agus' return.



Danza, Ink on paper, 72x93 inches, 2016

Image Description

Danza is the second piece that I developed during my MFA research. The drawing consists of a witchcraft scenario where a group of women are dancing in circles in the middle of the woods, following their embellished leader. This piece was the starting point of the visual and written project, and the first time I named Agus, creating his role as the antagonist. At the same time, the woods that is illustrated in *Danza* represents The Red Forest. I apply the concept of the forest as a mythological world where magical entities and mysterious creatures creep around waiting to be awoken.

In the second chapter, *Agus*, the narration begins with a positive viewpoint of the forest and a new pathway for Arielle, where she can create a home of her own next to her new friends and community. At the end of the chapter, the environment becomes darker and gloomier, where, without consent, she is forced to move out into a wilder zone of the woodland, called Elderberry. These polarised components are an analogy of life's constant movement and personal growth, where every difficult experience comes with a lesson. As Marina Warner addressed in her book, *Once Upon a Time*, "No power of witches or gnomes or goblins or ogres or beasts, however, can completely extinguish the intrinsic good of the life force that runs through nature". (Warner 2014,25)

Chapter 3: Empty Portals

Autumn arrived as gales pulled the golden and amber leaves from the trees. The wind blew outside Arielle's tent as the familiar filthy fabric screen fluttered around her, while little leaves danced to the beat. "I wish knew where Agus went. It has been days since I saw him", she murmured gloomily. The twilight glow permeated through the tent, tinting everything with a violet filter. With a long sigh, she flipped onto her side in a fetal position trying to protect herself from the wintry temperature and loneliness.

On several occasions Arielle tried to walk away and go back to The Red Forest, however, the love and devotion that she felt towards him kept her from going back home. The remaining sun's rays reflected upon the leaves as she felt their fragile bodies fracturing beneath her feet. Meanwhile a group of cheerful birds had a heated debate, singing, chirping, and squeaking. It would be marvellous if I could transform into a robin and be as excited as them, she thought to herself. Arielle started walking without any specific destination, moving in a very rigid manner, looking away from the birdie gathering. Losing track of time, Arielle found a new pathway far from the campsite, covered with magnificent narcissus. Their pungent aroma impregnated her nostrils; everything around her felt brighter, if only for a moment. In the distance, Arielle recognized Agus standing vigorously amongst soaring pines, while the same emerald mist was seemingly suspended waiting his passage to evaporate behind him. She winced and her whole-body shivered. "Maybe he is a time traveller", she said underneath her breath. Arielle sprinted to her shelter and sat still until hearing Agus's footsteps. With each vibration from his feet, Arielle's vision became blurrier.

The feeling of vertigo, and nausea overcame her. When the tremors stopped, she moved slowly towards his cave to check if he had arrived safely. She climbed around the mouth of the cave, to its top and then poked her head inside. Agus was staring at a huge mirror made with shiny rocks, hanging from one of the walls, smiling at himself with a proud look on his face, he uttered, “Así te ves mucho mejor, unos viajes más y serás immortal” (“You look way better like this, a few more trips and you will be immortal”). He kept staring at himself in the mirror as his eyes shimmered with an egotistical glow. Full of self-adoration, he moved exaggeratedly, leaving Elderberry.

The azure vault wept for days, pouring rain from dawn to dusk. Elderberry, ended up swampy, covered by sludge, and brushwood. Arielle’s tent was no exception becoming quite boggy and moist. It did however offer shelter to blackbirds, chipmunks, and little snakes that had not had the time to seek refuge elsewhere. After a couple of lunar turns, the storm ceased. Arielle then cleaned Agus’s cave to the point of exhaustion until it shone spotless. She decorated it with lustrous pebbles and ornate feathers; certain that when he saw Arielle’s hard work, Agus would finally notice her. The cave was almost impeccable, when she noticed an unusual glint from the bottom of his bed. Cautiously, Arielle leaned towards its source, and reached out for a small box. The object gleamed so exquisitely, that she grabbed it without thinking. Her fingers were about to open the lid when she vacillated, “maybe I should not intrude upon Agus’s privacy”. Her words came out like startled little bits of breeze. Arielle put the box back in its place and returned to her shelter.

However, the thought of the box stuck in Arielle's mind and she decided that if he did not return by sunset, she would check out the mysterious treasure. Night came, and there was still no trace of Agus. She made her way back to his cave, crawled under the bed, and grabbed the box. Upon discovering its contents, she was gobsmacked to see a long ladder in the middle of the box that seemed to descend infinitely. Arielle closed her eyes tightly, held it for a moment and took the mysterious box to her tent. I wonder if there is some sort of hidden magic within, she grinned to herself. Arielle placed the object in the middle of the tent and in a moment, the box began to grow until she was able to enter. Hesitantly, Arielle started to go down the enigmatic hole. Upon descending, everything was pitch black, except for the ladder, which was gleaming like moonlight. In her mind, Arielle prayed she had not made a terrible mistake.



Stills from video *Agus*, 2017

Image Description

The video *Agus* is a looping 15-minute video/performance. It was presented in DVD format on a TV as part of an installation displayed with children's furniture, while a fabric sculpture of Agus hides under the table on the floor. The intention of this installation was to induce a self-reflective psychological state, where the viewer is encouraged to reflect upon their own childhood experiences.

I linked the performance piece with *Empty Portals* due to the emotional connection that the character, Arielle, and I developed towards Agus, and my own emotive response to carrying his physical weight or burden. In *Empty Portals*, Arielle struggles with her attachment and deep feelings of loneliness. While this was happening, Agus took advantage of her by feeding on her emotional grief. The video shows me carrying Agus around from morning to night for an entire day. Similarly, Arielle, in the corresponding chapter of the story, ends up in an unknown area of The Red Forest against her will with no possibility of escape. At the end of the chapter, Arielle finds what looks like a light at the end of the tunnel. In contrast, the last scene of the video shows me going to sleep by Agus' side and waking up next to him, symbolizing a timeless relationship. By creating a more constructive ending in the written story, and providing opportunities for Arielle to change her path, I am purposefully looking for a more hopeful ending.

Chapter 4: Embodied Memories

Each step Arielle took in the gleaming structure felt timeless. Her feet slowed and upon lowering her trembling right foot, a solid surface materialised below her. When she placed the soles of her feet on the ground, the cryptic space lit up magically. A sewing room appeared like a mesmerising firefly floating in the solitude of the night. Purple walls and delicate patterns adorned the chamber and safeguarded fabrics of all varieties were skilfully folded inside an art nouveau chest of drawers. In the centre, a marvellous pine table held a variety of supplies for crafting any kind of garment. Exotic vegetation hung from the ceiling, housing colourful birds that gleefully hovered from edge to edge. In the corner, next to a turquoise divan, a narrow wardrobe hid a quirky patched fabric. Arielle was unable to take her eyes off it. As she approached it, she noticed that it was covered with childlike motifs, sober colors like marine blue, and burnt sienna. She covered herself with the fabric and danced around in good spirits, "With this fabric I could make any garment, dress, or cape!" She exclaimed. Like a vision, Arielle decided what kind of costume she would create, kissed the fine material, and spread it on the pine board. "I am sure that crafting this piece is going to make me get closer to Agus".

Every time Agus left Arielle alone, she walked down to the sewing room. It was becoming her preferred part of each day and her only motivation. The silver disc of the moon was sliding into the dark night sky and making her triumphant entrance. Arielle, fully present, inserted a thin needle over and over into the costume. She grinned as she admired her little project.

Out of nowhere, a sharp noise came from outside the magical box. Arielle put everything in its place, hid the garment inside a fabric bag, and sprinted upstairs to stash the fabric bag in her tent.

Arielle encountered Agus quarreling with the cave he had been living in the last few months. The rock structure had been annoyed with Agus since his arrival at Elderberry and finally found the courage to share his complaints. "I never gave you permission to use me as a home. I do not know who I am anymore!" the cave whimpered. However, Agus without caring to hear the rest of his grievances went inside the cave with an indifferent look on his face. Frail droplets fell from the cave's eyes. Moving cautiously, Arielle approached and gave him a tender caress.

Back in her sanctuary, Arielle covered the little box under the blanket, started her Morpheus inspired ritual, and hummed nursery rhymes while the warm moonbeam lulled Elderberry. Her restless movements made it impossible to fall asleep. She finally gave up trying to sleep and grabbed the garment from the fabric bag hiding in the corner of the tent. After adding the last stitches, Arielle positioned the garment in front of her, gently tried it on, closed her eyes, and stretched her body in various positions, moving and dancing around inside the little space. Very pleased with the outcome, she lay down and almost immediately entered a profound sleep.

Arielle was awakened by a tug on her shelter. She opened her eyes and saw Agus's silhouette. Fiercely, he tore apart the fabric structure, staring at her wearing a costume that looked like him. With dreadful eyes, enraged he shouted, "Con

que te has estado divirtiendo, he?!” (“You have been having fun, right?!”). He turned everything over as if searching for something, finally he found the magic container.

Agus turned around and asked exasperated, “Quien te crees que eres para tocar mis cosas?” (“Who do you think you are to touch my stuff?”) as he marched towards her. Arielle moved backwards as much as she possibly could. However, what happened next was inevitable. He pulled one of the ears of her costume and started laughing, “¿Que ridiculez es esta? ¿Desperdiciar magia para esto? ¿A caso,quieres imitarme? ¡Que patetica eres!” (“So ridiculous! Wasting magic for this? For what!? To imitate me? You are so pathetic!”). Scared to death, she remembered the necklace that Rita gave her, and grabbed it firmly with her hand, hearing Rita’s voice inside her head, “You are never alone”. In the blink of an eye, Agus and Arielle disappeared into the night gloom.



Arielle and Agus 45x30 inch, 2018

Image Description

Following the video-performance exploration, and as a result of the emotional impact that it caused in me, I felt the need to convert the fabric sculpture of Agus into a costume in hopes of embodying my relationship with Agus. The whole venture (including wearing the garment during the photo session, using my body, and creating movement with different props inside the photo studio) turned out to be an inspiring experience. It triggered important realizations about this relationship that were then represented in the visual and written narrative. The creation of this garment became an essential research element that facilitated the realization that Arielle needed to become empowered. The ability to choose to wear or not wear Agus, as opposed to continuously carrying him, was vital to the emancipation of both Arielle and me. I initially thought to end the chapter with Arielle's friends rescuing her using magic spells. However, I later realized that for the character to show true growth, she needed to create her own costume and save herself.

After creating the costume and the photographs, I realized the connection between this work and Kiki Smith's piece *Daughter*. Marina Warner describes this "uncanny sculpture" in her book, *Once Upon a Time*, as a "dreaming hairy-faced wolf child, the offspring of Red Riding Hood and the wolf." (Warner, 2014, 125) I also noted a connection between Kiki Smith's piece and my experience creating Agus, the subsequent Agus costume, and the action of living in it. The process of disembowelling the Agus sculpture and transforming it into a costume reflects Weitman's analysis of Smith's work, *Daughter*; the detaching of the self from the phallic figure or the lost

father, and the creation of a relationship with one's past, and the construction of an improved present in terms of identity and body.

Chapter 5: Looking Into Your Eyes, I See Myself

Spiralling, tumbling, and flickering colours splattered the cylindrical conduit within which Arielle and Agus bounced with spasmodic movements. Massive energy surrounded them, twirling their bodies, blending them together for a split second. Arielle opened her eyes a couple of times and could not decipher if she had four arms or if her head was connected to Agus's body. There were moments when Arielle and Agus were one entity. Sky and firmament combined floating at the speed of light in a massive energy flux. Arielle started to look pale, her eyes rolled backwards, she repeatedly passed out and woke up to find herself still floating and traveling through time.

The enormous wormhole disappeared leaving the two bodies suspended in the air for a couple of seconds. Gravity did its job, causing them to descend precipitously, crashing and bouncing into leaves and branches, alarming the surrounding birds. After the long, turbulent fall, a vast expanse of bountiful grass skimmed her face. Gazing upon an empty meadow, Arielle touched her extremities, checking that everything was in its place and noticing that she was still wearing the Agus costume. She turned around to see that Agus was next to her. He jumped up and exclaimed, "Todo es tu culpa, si no fuera por tus tonterías nada de esto estaría pasando!" ("Everything is your fault, if it were not for your nonsense, none of this would be happening!") Arielle responded flustered, "What are you talking about? You are the one with the magic here." Agus, with shocked eyes, was stumped for a brief moment. Arielle mumbled to herself, "This is the first time that I have contradicted him". A petite chipmunk climbed upon her shoulder and sat comfortably.

She lifted her face, exhaling, stretched her shoulders back, and unknitted her brows. Agus immediately regained his posture, standing up and pushing out his chest. He looked down at Arielle and in a low tone said, “No tienes lo que se necesita para llegar a ser como yo, te falta inteligencia. Aunque veo cierto parecido, por algo sigues aqui, a pesar de todo. Quedate conmigo y aprenderas muchas cosas.” (“You do not have what takes to be like me, you lack intelligence. Although I see a certain similarity, you are still here, despite everything. Stay with me and you learn a lot of things.”)

The woods inhaled and exhaled, so deeply that the ground trembled. A subtle breeze swayed close to her ears, whispering something so low that it was hard to understand. The grass climbed toward her legs and emanated a sharp shriek, “Don’t go with him!”. Clouds amalgamated like a thick foam, tinting the meadow in a sapphire hue. Arielle mulled over inside her head why she enjoyed wearing this bizarre costume, if she struggled with his presence all the time. She remembered the cave at Elderberry and questioned what she had become. Arielle realized that she had gotten so caught up in this relationship, that she did not know who she was anymore.

Arielle beamed at Agus and responded, “You are right, I do not have what it takes to be like you, and I do not think I want to. However, I appreciate the time we had together”. Agus, with an uncomfortable look on his hairy face, turned around and snapped his fingers. An emerald mist emerged in front of him and he disappeared into it. Arielle was just behind him, but the mist dissipated as quickly as it had appeared, and she was not fast enough. Arielle bawled desperately struggling to pull her costume off and rocked her body in despair.

Abruptly, a spongy button appeared on one of the sleeves. Arielle, astounded, pressed it only to fade into the wind. Arielle moved one arm, but her elbow touched a fragile and noisy structure, that then fell into another object and reverberated with a percussive echo. Then she moved a leg, the other arm, creating the same effect. Her body was restrained in an asphyxiating confinement and her hair was stuck in between the strings. Every time she fought to free herself, her hair became increasingly tangled and painfully messy. She recognized the sound and grumbled, "Where I am and what are these guitars doing here?". She fought against the strings, eventually freeing herself and tumbled to the ground in exhaustion. Arielle managed to push the last guitar away, falling in disarray to the ground. The pile of guitars was inside an abandoned workshop. She moved towards the back of the room and opened the door. A garden cloaked in vines appeared in front of her. Like a sleeping beast, the chimeric house-vine peacefully rested in the lonely land. Arielle could barely distinguish where the octopus-like plant started and where the cottage that joined the back yard ended.

Arielle went inside the rundown cottage and found Agus situated in a corner of the living room. He was playing the guitar; discordant sounds emerged from the wooden object. Agus sat motionless and raised his gaze, then staggered to his feet and pushed the guitar far away. He rose briskly and cried out: "¿Que haces aqui?! ¿Como me encontraste?!" ("What are you doing here?! How did you find me?!") Arielle exclaimed frowning: "I don't know, a weird button appeared in my costume and I just press it!". Agus moaned: "¡No debiste de haber usado la caja magica!" ("You should not have used the magic box!")

Arielle clenched her fists, grimaced, and tossed a deep sigh. Gazing around, she noticed the little cottage had dreary vibrations, like an empty shell in the nethermost regions of an ocean, waiting for new life. The atmosphere of deteriorated furniture, moldy odor, and timeworn bedsheets matched with Agus's curved, fragile posture, and his glum appearance. Behind her, a small frame dangled, with a portrait of an expressionless family of rabbits inside of it. A large lump began to form in her throat and she tried to swallow it down. Arielle wondered if this was Agus's childhood home and questioned why he had looked so imposing in Elderberry. Agus thrust his chest forward and fixed his eyes upon her. However, he was no longer the daunting figure that held Arielle spellbound in the Red Forest.

She declared with a monotone: "You know, I have always loved you and waited a long time to tell you. And hoped that if I shared it, it would bring me a sense of peace and fulfillment, but it is not true." The wind blew agitatedly outside the cottage, making jingly noises with vines that rested gently on the ground of the backyard. Arielle waited for Agus's response and obtained only a hardhearted silence. She walked out of the living room, towards the garden. Agus did not articulate a word, neither did he chase her. Arielle hesitated for a moment, then continued moving towards the workshop. Stumbling forward, she babbled: "Angie, Rita, Candelaria, Negra..." The same button appeared in one of the sleeves. She placed her hand softly on top of it, paused a moment, sighed melancholically, and then pressed the small object.

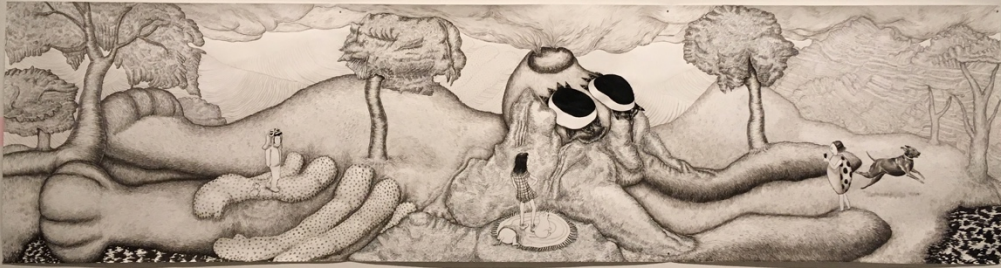
Lightning and electric colours surrounded her while she traveled at the speed of light. From her lofty position she could distinguish the cedar shakes of the Blossom home and all the Red Forest. Arielle was hanging from an enormous pine, her garment the only thing keeping her from falling. She slowly unhooked the fabric from the branch and began to fall. At last, on the ground in the Red Forest, Arielle shook out all the twigs and soil trapped in her hair and unzipped her costume with caution. When the garment fell at her feet, Arielle stepped out, freeing herself of it.

Arielle arrived at the Blossom's cabin glowing as always. She opened the door gently and closing it behind her. A candied lavender scent floated around the living room, bringing with it a sensation of warmth and love. With a bemused smile, she wondered, “¿Por que no respondió nada? Sólo se quedo ahí parado...” (“Why did he not say anything? He just stood there...”) The words dribbled from her mouth one after the other in a language previously foreign and distressing, now familiar and part of herself.

All of a sudden, Rita's tender voice came down the stairs like a gentle wave: “You should not feel sorrowful my dear, he cannot give anything else, and instead he let you go.”



Fragment of *Looking Into Your Eyes, I See Myself*, 2018.



Fragment of *Looking Into Your Eyes, I See Myself*, 2018.

Image description

The MFA thesis exhibition, *Looking Into Your Eyes, I See Myself*, is installed at the Nickle Galleries as a childlike space. Viewers can circulate in a childlike setting, entering into the fairy tale the installation offers. The exhibition begins in the long balcony-like hallway of the Nickle Galleries' second floor, where one ink drawing is displayed, titled *Agus's Visit*. The composition is based on the painting *The Nightmare* by Henry Fuseli created in 1790. *Agus's Visit* shows a horrifying scene, wherein two girls and two dogs are threatened by entities that emerge from the shadows of their bedroom. I installed this drawing at the entrance of the gallery, because creating it was a pivotal moment in my visual and written exploration. It contains the second representation of Agus, amplifying his character to reveal the darker qualities of his role in the narrative. Thusly, this drawing marks the conception of the idea of writing a fairy tale developing the characters in the drawings as my thesis paper.

A pink stripe along the middle of the hallway wall leads the viewer into the left side of the installation within the gallery, the second part of the exhibition. The pink stripe continues along the walls of this space. The intention of painting the pink line on the wall was to create a visual connection with my childhood bedroom that was painted a similar colour. It also functions to create a visual relationship between the drawing in the hallway and the installation in the gallery. Finally, it isolates *Looking Into Your Eyes, I See Myself* from the other artists' works found in the gallery. Following this pink line into the gallery, the viewer discovers a large format ink drawing, depicting a surreal scene wherein Agus becomes the entire landscape.

I began the drawing at the beginning of the year, just after coming back from my trip to Mexico. The intention in developing this drawing was to symbolize the eerie feeling of an absent presence. In this particular case, I did not have any contact with my father (Agus) when I was in Mexico, however his energy followed me constantly during my visit.

In addition to the drawing, the installation includes a small pink plastic chair and table, a small television screen and a DVD player. The TV plays a loop of me carrying Agus up the stairs of the Department of Art at the University of Calgary. The video embodies the timelessness of my bond with Agus, while the furniture setting recalls my childhood bedroom. Positioned under the table on which the television is placed, Agus confronts the viewer sitting in the chair. My aim in positioning Agus thusly is to create the sense that he is in charge of our relationship. At the same time, there is a group of stuffed animals surrounding the table. These stuffed animals are the archetypes of my dogs. Five of them signify the dogs that currently live with my mother in Mexico. The small, pale pink one, portrays my childhood dog, my constant companion. The dogs circle the furniture as guards, ensuring Agus remains confined to this space. They are there to ensure that this phase of our relationship is never repeated.

This research creation helped me to discover a fascinating connection between making art and the process of healing, “creative self-therapy”. It is important for me to share my story and my healing process with viewers through this exhibition that documents my journey.

Hopefully, viewers reflect upon their own stories. I experienced emotional and mental growth during the process of disclosing these memories through the artworks and this paper. I hope that I have offered an opportunity for my community to engage in a broader conversation about the significance of childhood memories and mental health.

Conclusion

Agus has been transformed into a costume; his burdensome figure mutates into an impotent pelt. In an effort to create a representation of their relationship, Arielle took out his insides, mutilated, and deconstructed his parts, akin to a Frankenstein procedure. She was afraid to conceive the visceral act, remembering all his previous frightening forms and how her bond with Agus was characterized by a paternal disfunction, like an unopened birthday card, never read, that ended up in oblivion.

It was shocking for Arielle to realize that she enjoyed wearing Agus as a way of healing a fragment of her past. In that moment, Agus became a warm shell for Arielle. During the dances, the two bodies explored their relationship, creating a symbiotic bond, like Little Red Riding Hood inside the wolf's guts, contracting and expanding, finding her way out. Arielle appears as a statement of liberation, without leaving behind what is truly part of her. Like a natural cycle, Arielle and Agus become one, searching for themselves in the other.

From a distance, Rita watches patiently, waiting to be noticed, and hiding her true essence in fabric and paper. The ink marks on her face and stitches around her body tell different stories of tenderness and devotion. Arielle will never forget those patient, loving eyes that with so much empathy watched the age-old ritual of becoming a woman. In case she fell, Arielle always knew that Rita would be there to support her.

Arielle lived happily ever after, more or less.

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Images

Figure 1. Sowa, Michael .2008. *No Go Area*. Private collection. Last modified, June 20,2018. <https://curiator.com/art/michael-sowa/10>.

Figure 2. Dzama, Marcel. 2006. *Tree with Roots*. Private collection. Last modified, June 20, 2018. <https://www.ikon-gallery.org/event/tree-with-roots/>.

Figure 3. Smith, Kiki. 1999.Daughter. Private collection. Last modified, June 20, 2018. <http://alicensations.blogspot.ca/2010/11/little-alice-riding-hood.html>.

Figure 4. Nixon, Mark. 2013. *Teddy Moore, Much Loved*. Private collection. Last modified, June 20, 2018. <https://flashbak.com/loved-to-bits-portraits-of-my-teddy-371450/teddy-14/>.

Figure 5. Rego, Paula. 1989. *Baa, Baa Black Sheep*. The British Museum Collection. Last modified, June 20, 2018.
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