WHEN I’M NOT HERE

A thesis submitted to the College of the Arts of Kent State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

by

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PREFACE

When preparing to film myself, after the site has been chosen or the installation has been built, after the lights are in place and even turned on, it is then that I really start to contemplate, to imagine, to create a plan for what I am going to do on camera that day. When choosing a site for filming I look at the space as a whole, how my body may fit within it physically and how the space on film will interact with or within the piece I am creating. I avoid writing a script, creating a concrete sequence that I should follow. Instead I allow myself the freedom to explore the environment, the set I have built, letting myself do what comes naturally in the moment, to be filmed as I crawl, squat, and jump on camera. This may seem backwards, out of order, confused, but it is aligned with how I approach all the work I create. Rather than plan my pieces ahead of time or create an outline to follow, I prefer instead to get into something and just start creating. Sometimes I am working within a concept, an idea that I am trying to convey in the piece, but sometimes I am just playing around with an idea, seeing where it can go, just how far I can push it.

This is how I approached the three pieces created for When I'm Not Here. For each piece I had an idea I was trying to convey, an intention for how the viewer would interact with my work, but no concrete plan on how I was going to get there. I just started creating, putting my hands on the materials and building. The work sort of constructs itself. I build one part, make a decision on scale, the path a viewer will take to witness the work, then respond to that decision, like a painter making a mark on a canvas, then building a composition from it. This doesn’t necessarily create a piece that is pretty on the outside, that is a well composed sculpture that one can walk around, view
from all angles and feel that it is a work of “art”. The only way to see my work is to get inside of it, somehow enter it to become physically or psychologically engaged. It was only after the forms were constructed, after the walls had been built, even after the monitors or projectors were installed that I really began to ponder what videos may be played on them. This approach, while seemingly backwards, allows the videos to become integrated within my work, letting me determine how the frame of the monitor or projection will physically interact within the finished piece.

This method of producing a video for an installation allows me the freedom to explore, to sculpt myself on camera, respond to a given environment or installation without worry of breaking from the script. This filming tactic is taken in part from viewing the work of other artists such as Bruce Nauman, Martin Kersels, and Steve McQueen. Each artist reveals a sort of exploration in their work, an unrehearsed dialogue where they leave a certain amount of freedom to respond to an idea, a physical space at the spur of the moment without a plan or script they must follow. In Nauman’s films, especially some of his earlier ones such as Playing a Note on the Violin While I Walk around the Studio and Wall/Floor Positions, he would record himself continuously, with no stops or breaks in the film, get in front of the camera and create. In Wall/Floor Positions he studied many different ways to respond to a wall, whether it was leaning his back against it or lying on the floor with his legs up on it, with each pose lasting only about 45 seconds, and the entire film running for almost an hour.

In many ways I have been working in response to these artists work by trying to evoke in my videos the same playful energy that they exude in theirs. Some viewers of my work have perceived this energy as sort of humorous, as they witness me crawling through small holes or climbing down a flight of stairs on my stomach. This perception has always surprised me, as when I film myself I do so with no intention of it being funny. But perhaps this is a natural response by those who know
me, those who are most surprised by the difference between how I present myself in person and what they see me do on camera. I guess it can be said though, that what I reveal in person and what I do on camera are both very much aspects of me, they are both my personality, who I am, but what I do on camera is what is going on inside that no one else can readily see except for me.
The places I go when I separate myself from the world around me, when I’m there, but not here, are the places I find myself in every day. This space is real but imaginary, built up from memories of other places; places I’ve been before that I don’t want to forget; places I want to live on through my thoughts, my dreams, my memories. These spaces are not necessarily a direct reflection of environments I’ve been in before, but like a dream, they are a composition of many of the places I have been. Like a dream, these places are continuous yet disjointed, where an environment, a thought, a memory can flow evenly from one to another. This flow leads me from one idea to the next, with the doorway to the previous thought remaining open, allowing me to step back or to tear it down in order to merge the two into one. These places are where I am When I’m Not Here, when I have completely separated myself from the world around me and have entered my internal space.

I enter this space when I am in search of an exit, a departure from my surroundings. This withdrawal can occur simply, like during mundane daily activities such as brushing my teeth or driving to work, but can also occur during a conversation with a peer or while I’m in an important meeting. Entering this place can be easy, a single word, a picture, a sound can evoke a memory for me, help me remember something I’ve forgotten, answer a question that I can’t quite solve, or remind me of a piece I am currently designing. In this space I build environments that have never existed before, put up walls, and take down others. I layer sounds, like the annoying pop song stuck in my head combined with the sound of traffic flowing down the street, creating a unique orchestra that plays only in this space.
I feel at home here, lost from the world around me, tucked deep into my thoughts, my dreams, my memories. This sense of home allows me the freedom to daydream; to imagine a world that is far different from the real world around me, yet is still familiar. It is this feeling of home, of comfort, that draws me back time and time again. The sense of ease I feel when I enter my internal space gives me mental clearance, permission to disperse into my own world. The ideas I participate in, that I build up and knock down, I go to and come back from as needed.

When the real world interrupts me, asks me a question, begs me to come back to reality, this world is simply put on pause, waiting patiently for me to return. Time doesn’t exist here, deadlines don’t come and go, day and night are only relative to the idea, the memory I am interacting with. Here my thoughts, my dreams, my memories transition from one to another with little to no hesitation, merging seamlessly into each other. Like in a movie, one moment I will be walking down a hallway, and then all of sudden I find myself within a childhood memory of my brother and I digging a hole to China, and then just as quickly I will be climbing up and into and out of an installation I am currently building. In this environment, where I feel most at home, is where I am comfortable to ponder new ideas, to dream, to think, to remember.

For my MFA thesis review, titled When I’m Not Here, I have created three pieces that explore my internal space through built environments that incorporate projected videos. Each of these pieces explores different methods and concepts relative to the surreal depiction of my dreamlike world. Each piece has been designed and built to provide a physical representation to the viewer of the often contorted and misshapen nature of this space. By changing the perspective of the viewing area and the viewer’s orientation, for example by requiring one to lie down or to crawl into a sculpture to view my videos, the environments I’ve crafted depict the surreal world that I enter into
every day. Each piece is therefore experiential, allowing the viewer to gain insights and discover my unique world through their own interactions with the installations I’ve created.

Each piece explores the sense of home I feel in my internal space. I have taken this feeling literally: building each piece with symbolic remnants similar to the colonial style houses I have lived in most of my life. Whether these remnants are baseboards with crown molding or vinyl sided walls with column bases, they each represent a familiar place. For example, in *Somewhere Up There* I have constructed an environment of four walls with exterior siding, columns, and a roof (Figure 1). This piece uses architectural features similar to the house I grew up in and is similar to houses in the neighborhood in which I currently live. Scenes from my childhood or thoughts of what I did at home before I left this morning flow easily into this place.

The work is also intended to evoke a sense of recognition within the viewer. This is built on the idea that the places represented in my work are familiar to the viewer as well. The colonial style and its unique architectural details are very popular in American homes, especially in the Midwest. So as the viewer steps into, under, or around my work they may feel a similar sense of home, identifying features similar to their own home or to places they have lived before. But as they watch the videos and hear the sounds coming from the installations they are quickly reminded that this space is not theirs at all.

The pieces created for *When I’m Not Here* are also an exploration of the exposure between the internal and the external. As one walks around each of the pieces it is evident that various parts and structures were purposely finished and rendered to represent my sense of home, while other sections were left untouched, exposing the lumber and plywood used to create them (Figure 2). This exposure of each piece’s building materials is a representation of my inner self; an environment I have previously kept concealed, not really allowing anyone to fully enter before. By revealing this
environment to the viewer I have allowed them access to a part of me that is typically hidden and disguised by my persona. This persona is simply a curtain, however, that when drawn back exposes my bare bones, my structure, my internal space.

The exposed building materials in this work also reveal how each piece was designed as temporary installations, allowing me to put them up or take them down with ease. This design gives each installation flexibility, like that of a stage set used in a movie or in the theater, where they can be moved around, shifted to where they need to go, then easily deconstructed. The temporary nature of the pieces also reflects the exhibitionism that each represents. The pieces were created to put my surreal space on display, open for my viewers to experience, discuss, and judge. The revelation of the place beyond my persona is presented like that of side shows found at a circus, where the viewer can enter into my exhibit as they pass through the gallery. This does not mean, however, that I am a clown or a three-armed man, but rather is a depiction of the exposure I have felt throughout the design and construction of this work. In each installation I have given the viewer the opportunity to curiously peer into my world, thus baring more of my personality than I would typically reveal on any given day.

The integration of videos is a vital component to each installation. The videos showcase me existing and interacting within my subconscious. At first these videos remain mostly hidden to the viewer, until they peek through a window or open a small door. As I filmed myself for each of these videos, whether I was climbing through a small tunnel or sitting insecurely on a chair, I found myself further baring my personality to the viewer beyond what I am typically comfortable with displaying. The integration of these videos, hidden at first and exposed only by the curiosity of the viewer, creates a peep show where the viewer is permitted to observe my world for as long or as short a time as they desire.
By using the distortion of the camera lens and the way it records a 3D space, yet flattens it, I have manipulated how I reveal my internal space. For example, in the piece *Into Another* I have recorded myself crawling through a small constructed tunnel as if I’m trying to reach the viewer (Figure 3). By setting up the camera so it records the video as a vertical image I have reflected not only the frame of the door that the viewer is peering through, but have also continued to display the small tunnel that connects the viewer to the LCD monitor. The flatness of the monitor distorts the length of area that the viewer can see, thereby leaving the viewer uncertain as to how far away or close I am. In this video I have also spliced in images of myself participating in another environment that is distinct from the video of me crawling through the tunnel, thereby forcing the viewer to question what exactly it is they are experiencing.

In summary, *When I’m Not Here* is an exploration of my dream-like internal space displayed through built environments that incorporate projected videos. The following sections provide detailed summaries of the three unique experiential installations that comprise this body of work.
It’s hard to tell what someone else is thinking, what they are dreaming about. As you watch someone recall an idea, develop a thought, all you can do is observe and wonder what may be going on inside their head. One might look up a little with their eyes, as if they are trying to read information being projected from their head or attempting to see inside their brain if they could just roll their eyes back far enough. Sometimes they close their eyes as they push through a memory, a thought that is hard to recollect, letting the blackness behind their eyelids block the chaos of the world in front of them. One may move their lips, whispering through an idea, while others may blankly look straight ahead, staring completely through anything in front of them, as if the world before them doesn’t exist.

If you were to let someone into your mind, how would they enter? How would they see your thoughts, the memories you recall daily, the dreams you imagine when you have time to break away from reality? In the piece *Into Another* I have built an installation that explores ways in which a viewer can temporarily access my thoughts; to see what I am thinking, to witness the place I go when I am staring right through them, when I’m lost in my own world. The piece, which requires the viewer to lie down and look through a miniature door, creates a portal to my mind thereby permitting the viewer to watch me interact within my internal space.

As the viewer comes upon the piece they see a closed door and a slice of a wall, as if it were pulled straight from a living room and then placed in a gallery (Figure 4). Not all viewers will open a closed door; etiquette will prevail for many as they question whether or not they are permitted to
touch art, to interact with it physically. Only the curious will open the door, enter into the space to see what lies behind. To fully view the piece one has to be inquisitive enough to wonder what is going on in someone else’s mind, in someone else’s world.

If one chooses to open the door they will see a short, narrow, confounding hallway. The floor is sloped up, the ceiling sloped down, and the walls are pushing in. At the end of this hallway is a miniature door. The viewer then has to climb up and lie down in an uncomfortable position in order to peer through the small door (Figure 5). Looking through this door they see a long, dark tunnel with a monitor at the other end projecting a video of me. In this video I have recorded myself crawling through a black tunnel, slowly making my way towards the viewer. The video however is projected sideways, as if I am climbing along the wall, creating a surreal image of me approaching the viewer. Spliced within the video are other scenes, views of me interacting within doorways of other spaces, within other thoughts, like memory flashes that interrupt a stream of ideas (Figure 6). Through these glimpses I allow the viewer momentary access into my thoughts.
Where do your thoughts go when you lose them, when an idea, someone’s name, a place you’ve been before is right at the tip of your tongue, but is just out of reach? Where do your forgotten memories go; the ones that are trapped so deep in your mind that they are too far away to recall? These thoughts, dreams, memories still exist; yet you can’t remember them, see them, smell them, feel them. They disappear, floating away where you can no longer grasp them and have become separated from everything else you know. But where is this space that they end up? They have to be somewhere, but where?

What if you could get to these lost memories? What if you could pull them down and capture a momentary glimpse of what they looked like, what they sounded like, even if for just a second? In the piece Somewhere Up There I have created an installation that allows the viewer to catch a preview of these escaped thoughts. The piece, which requires the viewer to bend down, crawl on their hands and knees, then stand up in a tight, enclosed space, permits them to witness some of my lost memories (Figure 7). These memories are built from forgotten videos that have been recorded over the last three years but have never before been used in an installation or home video. Often times when I’m at home, at a family event, on vacation I’ll start recording my surroundings, capturing the people around me, recording them talking, laughing, singing, dancing. But these videos get lost, with no intention of being edited or shared. These videos represent the lost memories I depict in Somewhere Up There; buried deep within the files of my computer, lost in space, never to be viewed again.
In this piece I have constructed a telescopic periscope that the viewer can pull down to catch a glimpse of my lost memories. As they grab the handles and look into the periscope they see a small monitor projecting images from above (Figure 8). To explore this space the viewer is forced to maneuver the periscope by slowly spinning themselves around this small, enclosed room. As they turn the periscope turns with them, allowing them to witness various memories projected on the monitors above them. As the viewer stands and twists around to view these lost memories, there is also a continuous sound echoing down from above. These sounds are the voices, the music, the noises that have been recorded in the forgotten videos. By layering them into one file and then playing them on a single, mono speaker I have reproduced the lost sounds associated with these memories. These sounds, however, are no longer in sync with their memory, but are still there, waiting to be heard again.

Through the design of this piece I have also explored the internalizing of an external space. My lost memories contain visions of environments that surrounded me, that encompassed me when I was there, yet after they disappear they become trapped in an internal space. I have chosen to decorate the inside of Somewhere Up There with common features found on the exterior of a colonial home, such as siding, columns, a roof, and green grass (Figure 9). As the viewer walks up to the piece and steps on the grass they are reminisced with a feeling of home. The grass is soft, almost squishy under their feet. They squat down even further, crawl under the roof, pass the fluted columns, and into a four-walled vinyl sided enclosure. This structure is built to reflect the internalization of memories captured in an external space.
It is very interesting to watch someone who doesn’t know you’re watching them; to eavesdrop on someone else’s mistakes, curiosities, routines, visible emotions. Through various observations, which may occur as innocently as by watching someone walk down the street, buy milk at the grocery store, or play catch in the park, one creates a perceived personality of the person being spied upon that may or may not be accurate. Watching the people around us reflects one’s curiosity of another’s life and allows the observer to build up or knock down a person, their thoughts, feelings, past and future, without even allowing the one being observed to defend themselves. This character building is often based on one’s own personal history, comparing the one they are spying on to someone they already know like a family member, friend, ex-lover, teacher, or casual acquaintance, and is based entirely on one’s physical characteristics, like how the person is walking, what they are wearing, their hairstyle, or the look on their face.

What drives one to spy on another, to eavesdrop on someone else, someone who is unaware that they are being watched? Is there something that the observed person has done or is doing that pulls in the observer, tempting them to spy, to prey, to make judgments or incorrect observations? This eavesdropping may occur simply out of curiosity on the part of the viewer; perhaps something they see in the victim, some act they have done, something they have said draws them in. Whatever the reason behind deciding to watch someone else, the spy typically seeks an opportunity with a low risk of getting caught. This period of observation may last only a second or two, or may occur over an extended period of time, but is limited by the viewer’s sense of safety and concealment.
How far is one willing to go to observe another person, someone they don’t know or don’t know very well? Are they willing to pick, prod, peek, climb, hide? In *It’s Not What I Did* I am exploring the extent a person will go to spy on another, to make a judgment on someone else’s character, and the possible consequences of such an action. Based in part on Marcel DuChamp’s permanent installation at the Philadelphia Museum of Art titled *Étant donnés*, *It’s Not What I Did* is an installation that tempts the viewer to peep. By luring the viewer in through a small window on the side of a small room, *It’s Not What I Did* entices the viewer to explore what may be going on inside (Figure 10). The area revealed within is similar to that of a typical American room; however, the space is broken, sliced through. The walls are painted with baseboards and crown molding, but the room is small, smaller than any normal sized room, and the rug is cut, sliced through as if the four walls landed on it, cropping it down like a cookie cutter.

As the viewer walks up to the small window they begin to hear a voice, a narration (Figure 11). This narration is asking a series of questions like “how could you do that?” and “what would make you think that is okay?” As they peer into the room and look around they see a rug, a side table, a lamp, and a mirror (Figure 12). Through the reflection in the mirror they can see a chair with a blanket hung over the back of it. On the soft white throw there is a projection of a man, of me sitting, knees tight to my chest, looking uncertain, uncomfortable with what is going on. As they watch me they begin to wonder what I did, what horrible thing could I have done? But, as they look closer through the reflection in the mirror they see another image, a hidden projection that is breaking through the background. This hidden image, which is behind the reflection of the sitting man, is a projection of them looking through the window. The viewer soon realizes that the mirror is in fact a two-way mirror and that they are being spied upon as they attempt to spy on another (Figure 13).
In *It’s Not What I Did* I am challenging the relationship of the viewer and their curiosity to that of the feelings I’ve experienced while building this body of work. Throughout the creation of *When I’m Not Here* I have had to design ways to put myself on display, to reflect my inner personality to the viewer in an interactive, experiential way. But in *It’s Not What I Did* I’ve reversed the roles of the spy and the one who is spied upon. At first the viewer is the one doing the spying, but as they see the hidden projection and realize that the camera is actually recording them, they become the one being spied upon. It turns out that I am insecurely sitting on the chair not because of something I did but because the viewer is looking in, and that my narrated voice is not condemning my own actions but rather is questioning the actions of the viewer and why they think what they are doing is okay.
CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the work created for *When I'm Not Here* explores my subconscious world through three unique installations. Each piece allows the viewer access to a different aspect of my internal space, giving them glimpses into the world I find myself in everyday. The experiential nature of the work, requiring one to open a door, lay on the ground, or peek through a small window, creates an experience for the viewer where they are physically entering into and are engaged within my world. This experience crafts an investigation for the viewer as they search for what else may be going on, what other memories they may be able to pull down, and what else they may uncover behind the next closed door.
Figure 1. *Somewhere Up There*

LCD TV’s, continuous loop DVD players, mixed media, found objects

6’ x 6’ x 11’
Figure 2. *Into Another*

LCD TV, continuous loop DVD player, mixed media, found objects

8’ x 16’ x 8’
Figure 3. Into Another
LCD TV, continuous loop DVD player,
mixed media, found objects
8' x 16' x 8'
Figure 4. *Into Another*
LCD TV, continuous loop DVD player, mixed media, found objects
8’ x 16’ x 8’
Figure 5. *Into Another*

LCD TV, continuous loop DVD player, mixed media, found objects
8’ x 16’ x 8’
Figure 6. *Into Another*

LCD TV, continuous loop DVD player, mixed media, found objects
8' x 16' x 8'
Figure 7. Somewhere Up There
LCD TV’s, continuous loop DVD players, mixed media, found objects
6’ x 6’ x 11’
Figure 8. Somewhere Up There
LCD TV’s, continuous loop DVD players, mixed media, found objects
6’ x 6’ x 11’
Figure 9. *Somewhere Up There*

LCD TV’s, continuous loop DVD players, mixed media, found objects

6’ x 6’ x 11’
Figure 10. *It’s Not What I Did*

LCD TV, continuous loop digital projection,
security camera, two-way mirror,
mixed media, found objects
5.5’ x 7.5’ x 5.5’
Figure 11. *It’s Not What I Did*

LCD TV, continuous loop digital projection, security camera, two-way mirror, mixed media, found objects
5.5’ x 7.5’ x 5.5’
Figure 12. *It’s Not What I Did*

LCD TV, continuous loop digital projection, security camera, two-way mirror, mixed media, found objects

5.5’ x 7.5’ x 5.5’
Figure 13. *It's Not What I Did*

LCD TV, continuous loop digital projection, security camera, two-way mirror, mixed media, found objects

5.5’ x 7.5’ x 5.5’
REFERENCES