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Might Be Tragic: The Lonely Voyeur in Narrative Art

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MIGHT BE TRAGIC: THE LONELY VOYEUR
IN NARRATIVE ART

A Thesis

by

ALEXANDRIA CANCHOLA

Submitted to the Graduate College of
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

December 2018

Major Subject: 2D Design

MIGHT BE TRAGIC: THE LONELY VOYEUR
IN NARRATIVE ART

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December 2018

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ABSTRACT

Canchola, Alexandria, Might Be Tragic: The Lonely Voyeur in Narrative Art. Master of Fine Arts (MFA), December, 2018, 58 pp., 21 figures, 37 references.

This thesis paper discusses the work displayed as it might have been seen in the exhibition, *Might Be Tragic*, completed by Alexandria Canchola. The work is inspired by and draws from narrative fiction, blurring the distinctions between our perceptions and our creations of reality. When one observes a narrative, they are unwittingly fulfilling voyeuristic tendencies by vicariously experiencing others realities or falsehoods. The exhibition challenges how narrative can function in a space. The process of walking through the exhibition, *Might Be Tragic*, brings the book, *Not That Tragic*, to life in a three-dimensional format exploring the intimate relationship one has with a book and experiencing a world separate from theirs. By playing with scale and rhythm, through the means of installation and large-scale reproductions, the space allows the viewer to experience a sense of immersion and take on the role of voyeur.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The work installed in *Might Be Tragic*, is inspired by and draws from narrative fiction, blurring the distinctions between our perceptions and our creations of reality. When one observes a narrative, they are unwittingly fulfilling voyeuristic tendencies by vicariously experiencing others realities or falsehoods. This exhibit is a culmination of the past two years spent working on a book titled, *Not That Tragic*, about a mailman living in solitude who watches the neighbors he delivers mail to from across the street and abruptly begins to insert himself into the neighbors' lives in subtle undetected ways. The mailman attempts to break the neighbors from the loneliness and detachment he observes. It is through the tenants emotional retelling of the events that illustrate the disparity of perception and truth. The exhibition engages narrative existing in a 3D space. The process of walking through the exhibition, *Might Be Tragic*, brings the book, *Not That Tragic*, to life in a three-dimensional format exploring the intimate relationship one has with a book and experiencing a world separate from theirs. In preparing work for the exhibition, it was important to take the book and transform it, but how? Why? By playing with scale and rhythm, through the means of installation and large-scale reproductions, the space allows the viewer to experience a sense of immersion and take on the role of voyeur.

Call for Narrative Art

The term *narrative* refers to a story or account of connected events and/or experiences, whether fact or fiction, often told in a timeline. There are counter genre examples, but this is the definition of narrative as it pertains to the discussion in this paper. The term *Narrative Art* refers to images (with or without text) that push for a form of reading rather than the sort of looking-at behavior we can experience with the collections found in museums and galleries.

The work in the exhibition showcases the power of narrative to act as a vehicle in engaging with human everyday concerns centering on themes such as loneliness, solitude, and voyeurism. The artistic research began with a very simple question: Why do we love telling stories? Why is this of interest to us? Anthropologists claim that storytelling is at the heart of the human experience, that the love for narrative is common in every culture from today to ancient times. Humans are inclined to see narratives where there are none because it can provide meaning to our lives.¹ Stories can be a form of escapism, a way of existential problem-solving. A narrative format continues to be an adaptable instrument for the expressions of human concerns. The narrative emerges through verbal communication, pictures, illustrations, film, etc. there is a staying power and inherent wisdom found in the narrative. Through narrative storytelling we research those universal and often unresolved themes that have preoccupied mankind since the beginning of time, such as issues concerning our mortality, our identity as individuals and members of a community, our need for survival, for love, for acceptance.² Narrative art provokes a thought response in the viewer; a tale, a story, a recital of facts in a pictorial format – it

¹ Rose, Frank. The Art of Immersion: Why Do We Tell Stories? March 08, 2011. <https://www.wired.com/2011/03/why-do-we-tell-stories/> (accessed 2016).

² Sutherland, Zena, and May Hill Arbuthnot. Children and Books. 7th. Scott, Foresman and Company, 1947.

involves the association of word and image working together to create a more vivid memory for the viewer. A successful narrative would largely depend upon the insertion of enough signals for some type of story to be conveyed and for there to be some type of an emotional response.³

³ Stansbury-O'Donnell, Mark. *A History of Greek Art*. John Wiley & Sons, 2015.

CHAPTER II

RELATIONSHIP OF DESIGN AND ART

The benefits of making narrative work the vessel in embodying multiple issues and emotions is that it allows for exploration in design, illustration, writing, typography, and color. It was important to treat the book project and the following exhibition work as a body of work that functions in both realms of design and art so that the audience could see the value in both working together. As a practicing designer, the words of Paul Rand come to mind when thinking of the ever-evolving discussion of design versus art. All art is crafted but not all craft is art. Is Design, Art? If it is, we must ask ourselves when did it become so? Has it always been? As Paul Rand stated, “Design can be art. Design can be aesthetics. Design is so simple, that's why it is so complicated.”⁴ Rand doesn't claim that design is art, he makes the assertion that it can be. In the same vein that traditionally thought of forms of craft such as textiles, metals, fiber work are now considered forms of art—so can design.

Designers from the Art Nouveau period, unlike those before them, showcased through their lithography posters that design can exist in both realms. In analyzing the posters from the Art Nouveau one understands that the discussion of whether design is a craft or an artform isn't resolved by taking a side, but by understanding that it can be both. Until the mid-nineteenth century “Printmakers were expert craftsmen who took no artistic liberties, since their task was to

⁴ Maeda, John. "Thoughts on Paul Rand." Paul Rand at the MIT Media Laboratory Writing for IDEA Magazine. Accessed November 06, 2018. <http://acg.media.mit.edu/events/rand/ideamag.html>.

copy, as faithfully as possible, the paintings or drawings entrusted to them.”⁵ Due to this practice, graphic design was perceived as most closely aligned to craft because the work was technically based and required specialist hand workers to fulfill the demands of the mass market.⁶ With the invention of lithographic printing a new approach emerged attracting artists to the mark-making qualities of the medium. Lithography, invented by the German Alois Senefelder between 1796 and 1799, could be described as an autographic medium because “what is printed is a direct record of the lines drawn by the hand of the lithographic artist or master printer.” The process involves drawing on a specially prepared stone or plate treated so that it will repel the ink composed of oil when printed except for where the surface has been marked with chalk or crayons. There was a freedom in lithography that hadn’t been seen before in prior printmaking processes, before printers were restricted to using metal or wood type which created rather constrained and uninspired compositions as seen in letterpress printing. In the 1880s there were a handful of truly innovative artists, like Jules Cheret, that began to experiment with chromolithography and developed a printing process that captured the vivid, painterly aesthetic beloved at the time. Soon enough there was an explosion of designed lithography posters that combined image, text, and decoration into a single composed piece. It very quickly became so potent a force that it transmitted an artistic style that transcended its original purpose of advertising and began to affect all the visual arts. Designers and artists such as Jules Cheret and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec composed lettering that complemented their pictorial compositions.

Both designers, Cheret and Toulouse-Lautrec, approached the poster as a means of artistic expression as well as intended communication and have utilized their skillsets as graphic designers in producing creative media. I’d argue that Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec contributed

⁵ Carvalho de, Fleur Roos Rosa. *Printmaking in Paris*. Mercatorfonds, 2013. Print.

⁶ Aynsley, Jeremy. *A Century of Graphic Design*. Barron’s Educational Series, Inc., 2001. Print.

more to the field of design than painting and could easily be regarded as a paragon of poster designers. In 1891, he created his first poster, “La Goulue au Moulin Rouge” (Figure 1) which quickly became the milestone of poster design. With Toulouse-Lautrec the art of the poster perhaps reached its climactic point of development. No other artist before him was brazen enough to simplify, to rely so much upon a few lines and shapes to command the viewer's attention.⁷



Fig. 1 Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *La Goulue au Moulin Rouge*, 1891, Lithograph Poster Design

In the Moulin Rouge poster the full force of Toulouse-Lautrec's design power can be experienced with the simplified symbolic shapes, dynamic spatial relationships, from the flat planes of the black spectator's silhouettes to the stark white undergarments of the notorious cancan dancer it all becomes part of a tense system of strong linear movements that form expressive and communicative images. Additionally, he was the first to use lettering in his

⁷ Selz, Peter; Constantine, Mildred; and Daniel, Greta. *Art nouveau : art and design at the turn of the century*. The Museum of Modern Art: Distributed by Doubleday. 1960.

posters “in a calculated proportion and size. Starting with a specific type of lettering, which he would adapt or alter at will, he made the text an integral part of the whole picture.”⁸ Because Lautrec had the realization that letters could be formal design elements as well as basic symbols of communication, he was able to showcase the significance that typographical forms possess. His posters showed perfect harmony of picture and text, one could not thrive without the other. In Lautrec’s work you can see how different kinds of proportions and rhythms in letters are used to reinforce the composition and become part of the visible poetry of the whole work, not just the message-carrying part of a poster. After Cheret saw Lautrec’s posters, he began to adapt the same care and attention to his typography choices. Cheret himself said,

“The lettering is one of the most important parts of the poster. It provides the key to the picture. It should always be done by the artist himself and should be so arranged that it clearly interprets the poster but without detracting from its artistic effect.”

A typeface was no longer viewed simply as a tool for communicating the letters that speak to the system of language, but as representative of a message.⁹ By manipulating the size of the text so that its either larger, smaller, bold or light in weight, tweaking the position of the letters, typography can give a voice to the text. They altered the practice and perception of graphic design by approaching poster art as an author in control of all conceptual aspects of a design they were able to cross the fine and often-times blurry line of craft to art.

There is an expressiveness in the typography choices made in the exhibition that pay tribute to the posters of the Art Nouveau. My piece, *It’s Not Me, It’s You*, (Figure 2) is an

⁸ Schardt, Hermann. *Paris 1900: the Art of the Poster*. Bracken Books, 1989.

⁹ Ballance, Georgette and Heller, Steven. *Graphic Design History*. Allworth Press, 2001. Print.

experiment in modern printmaking methods using polyester lithography plates (pronto plates).

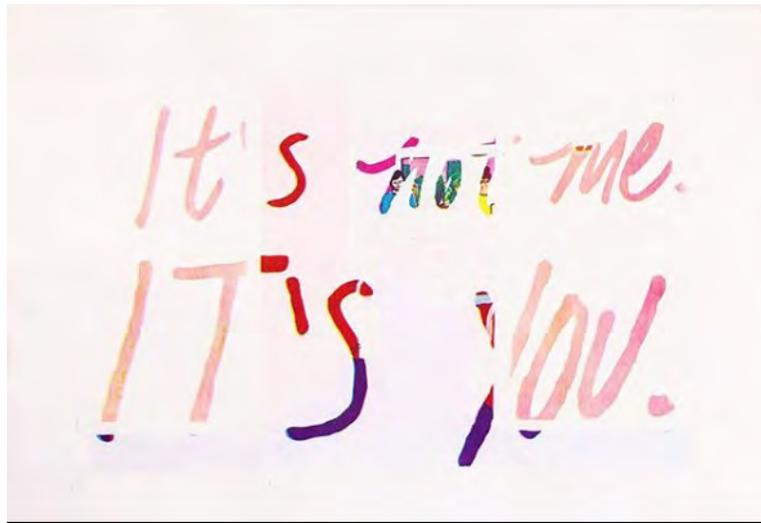


Fig. 2 Alexandria Canchola, *It's Not Me, It's You*, 2017, Lithograph Poster Design

The plates are used to layer word and image with the intention of giving the text a voice. The print piece is based on a sense of play with phraseology, twisting the common breakup saying “It’s not you, it’s me” so that it reclaims and rephrases it to achieve a sense of power. The words are quite large on the page and the first element the viewer reads. The piece asks for further exploration from the viewer as the letters which were at first glance just shapes of color actually include an image, an illustration, that gives context to the words. What was at first glance white space is in actuality a type of ghost image, a section that has been masked so that the viewer can only see part of it, only revealing itself upon closer examination. It’s easily taken for granted that design can be more than to inform and attract the eye but that it can convey a clear sense of meaning or emotion.

CHAPTER III

AESTHETIC INFLUENCE

The reality is that art style tells a story, style, defined as an aesthetic belonging to the artwork's "look" and "feel" is in service to the narrative working to complement the theme.¹⁰ In the quest to create equally powerful work as those historically prior, similar practices and techniques were employed. The handling of color is of vital importance in discussing the work seen in *Might Be Tragic*. Several sources of stylistic influence are visible in the work from Japanese woodblock prints to the poster designs of the Art Nouveau to the paintings of Henri Matisse to the films of Wes Anderson. Japanese woodblock prints are most definitely the dominant aesthetic influence, a style known for its use of flat color, sinuous lines, emphasis on single female figures, asymmetry, the natural forms of flora and fauna, and treatment of space.¹¹ The work in *Might Be Tragic* uses these stylistic features to conjure a meaning that goes beyond a first look. For example, bright vibrant color is used to attract the eye, often leading the audience to an initial misguided reading in associating the colors with a theme of happiness. When the audience has fully read the piece, they come to understand its narrative format, action, and mood. Centering on themes such as loneliness, solitude, and voyeurism and showcasing these emotions in the bright powerful hues in which they are felt color is used to subvert the audience's idea of emotion. Much in the same way that Matisse used color as a means of

¹⁰ Eisner, Will. *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative*. Paramus, NJ: Poorhouse Press, 1996. Print.

¹¹ Hollis, Richard. *Graphic Design: a Concise History*. Thames & Hudson, 1994. Print.

expression rather than description, it changed the way in which he could see, think and even feel about the act of observation.

Matisse did not attempt to reproduce, describe, or depict objects – he attempted to express the impact the object made on his emotions and imagination. “Employing new kinds of brushwork, light, and composition to create his own pictorial language”.¹² Matisse realized that painting could be a language and so that became his intention. When Matisse thought of his theory to artmaking, he said,

“A painter has a right to his own theory. Every theory makes its own demands...I felt things through color...For me, a color is a force. My pictures are made up of four or five colors that collide with one another, and the collision gives a sense of energy. When I put green, it doesn't mean grass. When I put blue, it doesn't mean sky.”¹³

Matisse's signature style surprised his viewers with equal components of saturated colors, flattened pictorial space, limited detail and strong outlines. “We were working for ourselves.”¹⁴ Abandoning the conventional rules of drawing and perspective you see a burst of color in the work of Matisse that manages to kill everything else in its vicinity. *Joy of Life* (Figure 3) features linear figures with expansive fields of acid-bright color highlighting the expressive power of flowing lines and strong brushwork, it truly captures the painter's passionate view of joy, and in so doing captured a mood rather than the mere attempt of depicting a realistic rendition of the

¹² Dabrowski, Magdalena. “Henri Matisse (1869-1954).” In Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000-. www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/mati/h_mati.htm (October 2004)

¹³ Matisse, Henri and Courthion, Pierre. *Chatting with Henri Matisse: The Lost 1941 Interview*. The Getty Research Institute. Print.

¹⁴ Spurling, Hilary. *The Unknown Matisse*. London. 1998. Print.

world. Expressing the figure not in terms of the exact details or anatomical exactitude, but of its essential qualities of significance.

“I found myself looking at pictures of nude men and women: they were perfectly executed pictures...but completely and utterly empty; there was nothing to them: just a method. I couldn’t see why I should do it.” he continues “There, in front of Goya’s Young Ladies and Old Ladies, I was overwhelmed. I thought, “yes, thats what I could really embark on. It was an open door; that Julian place was a closed door.”¹⁵

The freedom that Matisse found through the expression of color in conveying emotion so that the viewer will feel emotionally captivated when looking at his work rather than feel the immediate need to analyze its structure is the guiding principle that the illustration work in *Might Be Tragic* is based on.

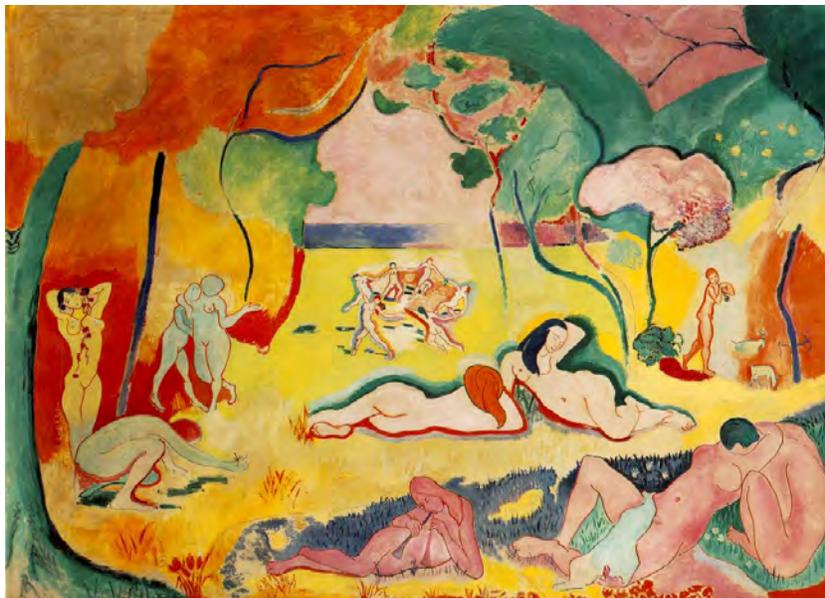


Fig. 3 Henri Matisse, *Joy of Life (Bonheur de Vivre)*, 1905, oil painting

¹⁵ “Henri Matisse: French Collagist, Draftsman, and Painter.” *The Art Story*. The Art Story Foundation. 2016. http://www.theartstory.org/artist-matisse-henri-artworks.htm#pnt_2

In considering how color can enhance a narrative few artists could do it better than Wes Anderson. He uses color in his films to do more than create visual delight, color is masterfully implemented to instill itself into the minds of the audience and act as a type of social commentary establishing a certain mood for each film. It's fairly well known that color has the capacity to influence a person's mental or physical state but understanding all of the ins and outs of its psychological affect is difficult. The intensification of certain colors paired with the overwhelming use of just one or a few colors creates this memorable visual link to his work. (Figure 4)



Fig. 4 Wes Anderson, *The Royal Tenenbaums*, 2001, film

The way he juxtaposes the use of exuberant colors with melancholic themes is inexplicably beautiful. In the pastel-hued dollhouse like world of the Royal Tenenbaums, bubble gum pink is used to contrast with the eccentric dysfunctional family. “Colors carry significant meaning in society, whether consciously acknowledged or not.”¹⁶ This perfect looking world is completely at odds with the sadness and disconnected cast of characters bringing about a “perceived irony in his filmmaking”. (Figure 5) When asked about the film in an interview with

¹⁶ Vreeland, Vaughn. "Color Theory and Social Structure in the Films of Wes Anderson." *Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications* 6, no. 2 (October 2015): 35-43.



Fig. 4.1 Wes Anderson, *The Royal Tenenbaums*, 2001, film

BBC, Anderson remarked “I am from Texas, but there were so many New York movies and novels which were among my favorites and I didn’t have an accurate idea of what New York was like. I wanted to create an exaggerated version of that imaginary New York”.¹⁷ To be completely honest his work holds a particular importance within my creative mind as it was the first time I recall feeling connected with a piece of art. His films are beyond beautiful and feature a “distinct directorial style that has garnered him fame and notoriety in recent years.”¹⁸

Filmmaker, Michelangelo Antonioni in many ways pushed the traditional boundaries of cinematic narrative and redefined the way characters, plot, and messaging were approached by playing with the concept of space in his films. and even objects so that shapes somehow take on emotions.¹⁹ This practice has greatly influenced the work seen in *Not That Tragic* and put to great use in the installation work present in *Might Be Tragic*. Objects and places are just as vital in Antonioni’s films as the figures, they share equal weight as seen in *L’eclisse* after Ricardo and Vittoria’s morning breakup. As the camera lingers on various objects in the room, the objects are

¹⁷ Mayshark, J. F. (2007). *Post-pop cinema: The search for meaning in new American Film*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

¹⁸ Vreeland, Vaughn. “Color Theory and Social Structure in the Films of Wes Anderson.” *Media Arts and Entertainment and French Elon University*. 2015.

¹⁹ Gravely, Brittany. “The Mysteries of Michelangelo Antonioni.” *Harvard Film Archive*. 2012. Web. 5 July, 2017.



Fig. 5 Michelangelo Antonioni, *L'eclisse*, 1962, film

given an incredible amount of focus and attention. (Figure 5) At first it feels like Antonioni is employing a narrative digression but after watching the director's work it becomes clear that the space surrounding the characters is just as important as the characters themselves.²⁰ He's able to do this in such a way that the surface takes on fascination, becomes a "subject" of its own."²¹ Style and theme are intertwined, and it is through Antonioni's directorial style that we are able to grasp themes such as alienation, isolation, and society's failure to interact. It is easy to argue that the best of his films are stylishly beautiful, one can take any still from one of these three films and it would stand on its own. His careful use of control in his "compositions and palette compel us to view his images as ends in themselves", which Joseph Luzzi argues is "independent of the film's actual story and themes".²² I would argue, rather, that style and theme are intertwined, and it is through Antonioni's directorial style that we are able to grasp themes such as alienation, isolation, and society's failure to interact.

²⁰ Cortez, Michael A. "Chatting about Antonioni." Interview.

²¹ Sitney, P. Adams. *Vital Crises in Italian Cinema*. New York: Oxford University Press. 1995. Printed

²² Luzzi, Joseph. "The End of the Affair: Rossellini and Antonioni after Neorealism". *Raritan*. 2013.

CHAPTER IV

NARRATIVE CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT

The basis of this thesis exhibition is narrative; a personal form of storytelling that helps us to make sense of the everyday, of the societal patterns we see and the relationships we experience. There is a beauty associated with loneliness that narrative works like the illustrated books of Maira Kalman and films of Jean-Pierre Jeunet, Wes Anderson, Sofia Coppola, and Michelangelo Antonioni capture. *Not That Tragic* aims to create a similar sensation, although it focuses on a different concept. It approaches the concept of voyeurism with the tightly controlled aesthetic seen in the work of the aforementioned artists but uses it as a juxtaposition in chronicling the manipulative and elaborate ways in which the mailman resists an examination of his own loneliness by secretly inserting himself into the lives of his neighbors.

The common thread throughout the work is in making the universal personal and the personal universal. Personal experiences manifest themselves in the work. The 2D pieces introduce the voyeuristic relationship to the audience in contrast to the 3D work which intends to immerse the audience into the world of *Not That Tragic* so that they become the voyeur. The book is narrated by two voices, the mailman (the watcher) and the woman in apartment 6R (the watched). This unorthodox choice allows for a contrasting plot perspective creating this blurry line in perception and truth often riddled in works of fiction. The book features contrasting color palettes in order to distinguish the change in perspective. 6R's story is in black and white and incorporates the use of panels, reminiscent of a sequential narrative aka comic strips, (Figure 6)



Fig. 6 Alexandria Canchola, *Not That Tragic*, 2017, page spread

and the mailman's perspective incorporates the use of bold colors hand painted with gouache. (Figure 7) It juxtaposes these two perspectives so that one is reality and the other is perceived, reflecting on how our perceptions of reality can often be misguided. The book and exhibition deal with the voyeuristic tendencies present in us.

Inspiration for the book began with image and the words followed soon after. The idea to create a long-form narrative was sparked after completing the illustration, *Falling For You*. (Figure 8) The illustration was a beginning study into the theme of voyeurism featuring the use of distance between the viewers and the narrative action. When studying *Falling For You*, it's clear that someone is watching this uncomfortably intimate scene, questions like "who is it?" and "why are they watching?" come to mind. The idea that someone could know details about strangers that the strangers aren't choosing to tell them is intriguing. The pieces are interactive

in their vagueness, the viewer is meant to read into it, it should lead them to speculate a potential conclusion. As can be seen in the treatment of space, distance is used in several of the images to showcase the act of watching. In *Falling For You*, the viewer sees distance created through the use of color blocking as well as a clear disconnection obvious in the fractured positioning of the figures. There is a stillness, almost a calmness present in the piece, a balanced asymmetrical design pointing to the figures toward the right. The characters are essentially touching but not in any real way, a true sense of detachment is present. The body language seen in the female character opens away from the male character, the direction of her head is the only sign of engagement and it can easily be argued it represents a true minimum amount of effort on her part. The female character's eyes are shut while the male character's are fixed on her, he fails to connect with her, it is as if though she lacks the ability to engage in eye contact. You can almost feel the silence, her mouth is closed so tight as if though she can't speak, she has no words, the

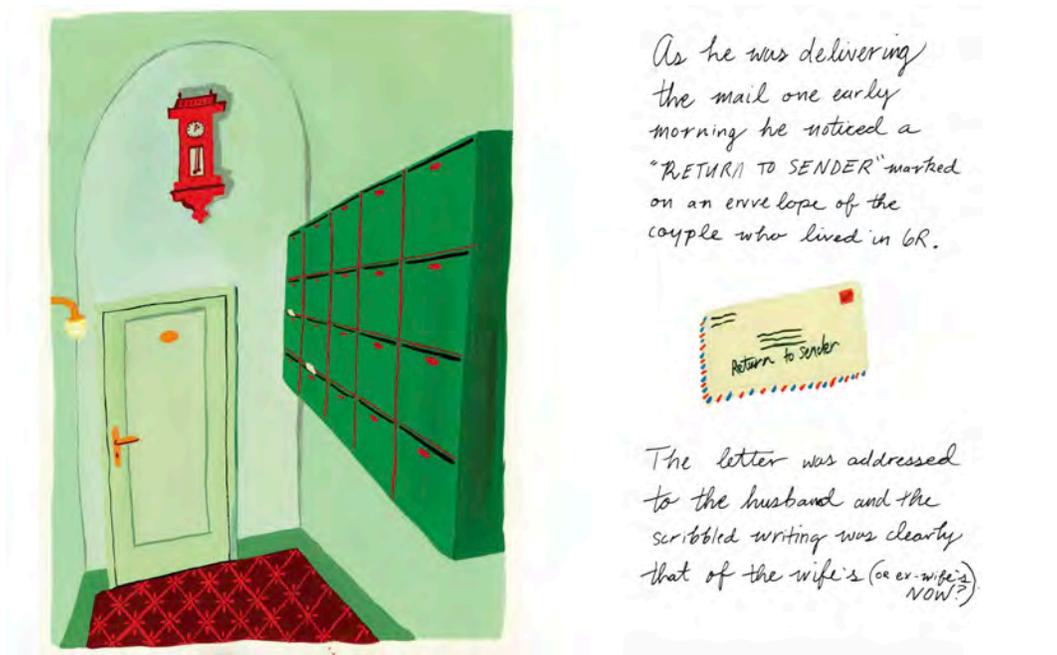


Fig. 7 Alexandria Canchola, *Not That Tragic*, 2017, page spread

viewer and the voyeur can conclude that the characters are wrestling with detachment. Upon completion of this artwork my mind had formed the narrative concept that would become the basis of the thesis exhibition.



Fig. 8 Alexandria Canchola, *Falling For You*, 2016, gouache painting

For several months after completing *Falling For You*, windows became a reoccurring visual motif in the illustration work. In the gouache painting, *Scene from Not That Tragic*, the viewer is given the role of voyeur. There is a yellow edge around the painting creating a window view, the window looks out on a building of windows, in one of the windows is a woman perched in a melancholic disposition. In the book, the illustration is paired with these words “*With Henri by his side he follows the subtle changes of his neighbors' lives. He really only watches one building, and in that building he only looks into six windows. It confuses him how people in such close proximity to each other could live such disconnected lives.*” (Figure 9) The words work in unison with the image in giving each character a presence. Although the mailman is not pictured the words give details about his life and habits. In the image his presence is

hidden and instead his view is given visual weight. While 6R inhabits a small amount of space in the painting it is her body language and blank expression that set the mood of the piece.

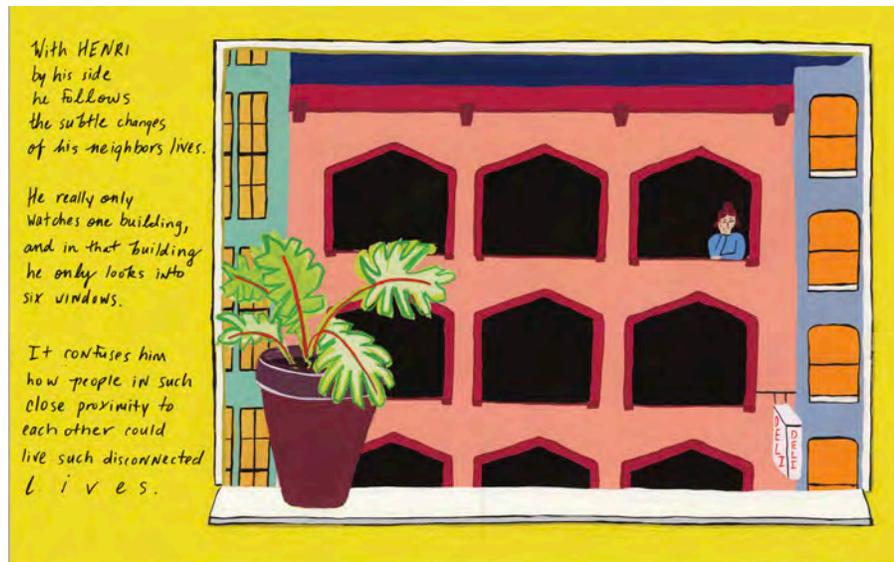


Fig. 9 Alexandria Canchola, *Scene from Not That Tragic*, 2016, gouache painting

Windows are like an invitation to look and take in the world around us. Human beings are tremendously curious about each other there is an innate desire to observe and understand one another. Perhaps in some ways because we find it entertaining to do so, but also because observation and understanding of others is one of the surest ways to better understand ourselves. However, despite our voyeuristic tendencies, we can frequently go through life with a disregard for those around us. There's a loneliness in community that the book *Not That Tragic* and exhibition *Might Be Tragic* seeks to shed light on. By taking the voyeuristic approach, the windows serve as a cue into the realities of the world around us - realities we may not take the time to observe on our own.

The Female Lens

So many narrative works, especially books and films, often treat their female characters as side-kicks. Their story is only relevant in how it relates to the male protagonist. *Not That Tragic* seeks to break that cycle by including and highlighting the female voice. 6R's story is emotional and real, it deals with human connection and experience. The book details the internal thoughts of its heroine who speaks her truth about her newly found state of solitude in opposition to the mailman's perceived notions of her loneliness.

The work in *Might Be Tragic* seeks to portray women and men as thoughtful and complex characters whose emotions relate to the reality of the human experience. Understanding how to integrate my ideals (political and non-political) into the work has been a struggle. Because narrative work has the capacity to reveal a deeper understanding of society it can be valuable to integrate a sense of reality into the work. The technique employed in the work is thanks to the films made during the Golden Age, also known as Italian Neorealism. Like the films of Neorealism, Michelangelo Antonioni was a filmmaker grounded in the art of observation. The groundbreaking informal trilogy (L'Avventura, La Notte, and L'Eclisse) is unique in Antonioni's career because it epitomizes his choice to use the female point of view in expressing what he had to say about Italy and the world at large. Antonioni is the kind of artist who makes his own rules and achieves an unconventional mastery. Antonioni is unique in that he made women his surrogate in his films, specifically in this trilogy. When studying films in history women were generally used to provide sexual content to a film, which is alarming seeing as how these films and the portrayals they made captured a time in history and can allow for a deeper understanding of a past society perhaps far removed from our own. When modern films came into the picture, directors in Italian cinema began to further develop the role of the woman, but none did so the way Antonioni did.

“One question I am often asked is why the women in my films are more lucid than the men. I was raised among women: my mother, my aunt, and lots of cousins. Then I got married, and my wife had five sisters. I have always lived among women; I know them very well. Yet this is only the anecdotal aspect of my answer. Speaking for myself, I find that the feminine sensibility is a far more precise filter than any other to express what I have to say. In the realm of emotions, man is nearly always unable to feel reality as it exists. Having a tendency to dominate woman, he is tempted to hide some of her aspects from himself and see her as he wants her to be. There is nothing absolute in this area, but it seems to me that is at the heart of it.”²³

Antonioni’s narrative work serves as an example of an artist whose work features the concepts of feminism without being outright political in its messaging. Instead of emphasizing the natural eroticism that women possess he depicts the uncomfortable intimacy of women and their relationships. In *L’avventura* Claudia is shot from unflattering and/or awkward angles, especially during her time with Sandro thereby desexualizing the character and these scenes. Most of his films feature women that are more believable, they feel real, because at the heart of it his films are about the interactions between people. The way he accomplishes this is not loud, because his films are character driven rather than plot driven.

This demonstration of feminism has greatly influenced the techniques used in *Might Be Tragic*, the work in the exhibition comes from the self-identified voice of a feminist, and its values permeate the artwork, but a feminist political cause is never made the focus. The intention of the work seen in *Might Be Tragic* is to portray the emotions felt by women with a realness not

²³ Antonioni, Michelangelo. “My Film.” *The Criterion Collection*, 4 Nov. 2013, www.criterion.com/current/posts/2937-my-film.

often seen in characters. As seen in the work, *Woman With Words*, a twelve foot wide by ten foot tall hanging typography installation pushes to bring the female voice to the forefront.

(Figure 10) The words are a collection of written words lasercut out of wood. The piece reads,

“He was late again. Always late. Finally, he came up the corner and he didn’t look up at me. He never would, at least not anymore. It was like he couldn’t feel me watching him. I remember when he would joyfully turn and wave to me. Happy to see me. Happy to be home. Now, his whole body looked like it had collapsed on itself. Broken. When he walked through the door there was no How was your day, Honey? Just silence.

I don’t understand the decisions I’ve made. I don’t understand the thoughts or the words that came out of my mouth that brought me here. The things that have bothered me, I don’t want to be bothered by. The things that should have made me HAPPY just can’t. And so I’ve sat here listless night after night with so many...unthoughtful thoughts. I wonder what went wrong, what happened to me that made me unable to want all the things that everybody else did. To want the man I know I should want. Am I just built differently? We went out that night. We went to a fancy restaurant with fancy people and fancy food. He ordered all the things he knew I loved. He talked to me about all the things he knew I loved. All the things that have kept me away from him. So we left. We went home. We even tried to keep the night going. The night I will always remember as the night we both tried for the last time. We went and walked at the track of the school nearby. He talked...I listened... But tragically or maybe NOT SO TRAGICALLY, things could no longer be avoided. We both talked about the end, the end of us. He said to me, So you’re not mine anymore? I wasn’t.”

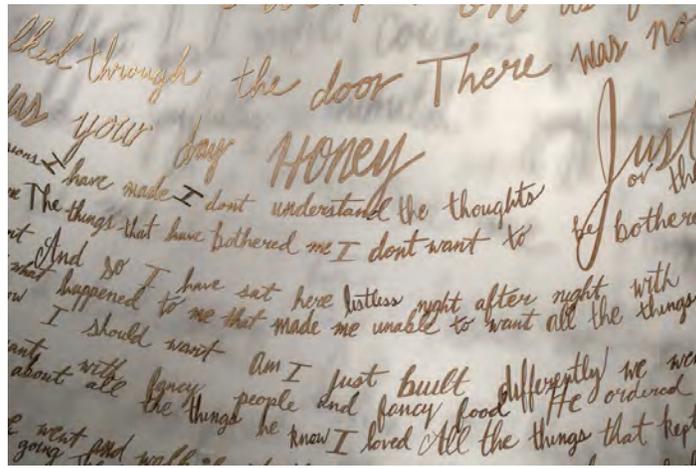


Fig. 10 Alexandria Canchola, *Woman With Words*, 2018, typography installation

The large scale is meant to call out to the viewer, it demands their attention, and like a page from a book beckons to be read. The text becomes image with the use of handwriting, and conjures up a sense of familiarity in the viewer reminiscent of reading your own diary. The words are in a less than formal cursive creating shapes and curves that propel the eye forward while at the same time being difficult to read as they simultaneously merge together and break apart. The choice of wood gives warmth to the work and creates a type of yellow glow in the piece as the light hits it. This warmth works in contrast to the stark shadows present on the wall casting a nonsensical version of the words that fascinates the beholder. *Woman with Words* asks more from its audience than typical, it asks to be appreciated for more than aesthetic beauty, but for its content, for its voice. Consequently, this aesthetic sculpture engages the audience in a perceptual monologue; asking the viewer to take the time to read and reflect on the emotions that are captured in the narrative. The artwork details how 6R feels emotionally which works in contrast to the *Tell Me A Story* typography installation which describes the mailman, his habits, and the plot of the book. (Figure 11) The work represents women truthfully through exploring their humanity showing them in all their complicated beauty.

Obviously, being able to portray women accurately as thoughtful and complex characters rather than submissive sub-characters is the intention. This is achieved through the use of dual

narrators in the book, *Not That Tragic*, in this way the custom of only including a male perspective is broken. Going beyond how to capture the female voice in a work of narrative, *Might Be Tragic* seeks to reframe the way the female figure is depicted. The female figure is often fetishized in art and film often presented nude or in a sexual demeanor simply for the ogling of men. Feminist film theory had its roots in the 1960s and 1970s and was mostly based on sociological theories focused on the function of female characters in the narrative. It was later influenced by Laura Mulvey’s essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” which shifted the framework from sociological to psychoanalytical. Alternatives to the psychoanalytic feminist film theory now raises questions about the “representation of women in films because of their different accounts of the self, agency, identity, and the cultural surroundings of the subject.”²⁴ It’s obvious that analyzing whether or not works of art are feminist is a complicated matter and one must weigh the nuanced views in regards to the complexity of one’s identity. Increased focus

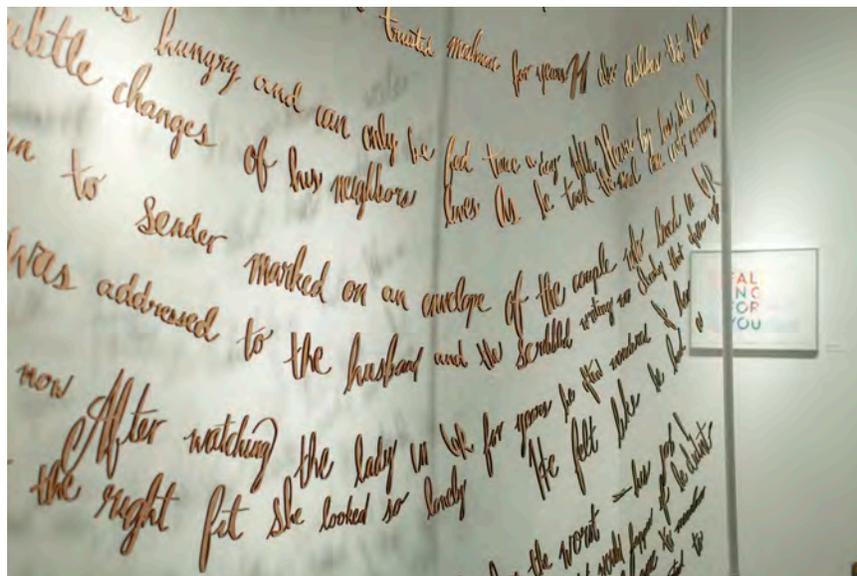


Fig. 11 Alexandria Canchola, *Tell Me A Story*, 2018, typography installation

²⁴ Freeland, Cynthia A. “Feminist Film Theory.” Draft for the Encyclopedia of Aesthetics. Oxford University Press.

has been given to offering a larger scope for feminist social change than a view that argues we are products of the work around us.

“Going far beyond highlighting a woman’s to-be-looked-at-ness, cinema builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself. Playing on the tension between film as controlling the dimension of time (editing, narrative) and film as controlling the dimension of space (changes in distance, editing), cinematic codes create a gaze, a world, and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire”.²⁵

One of the factors that distinguished Antonioni’s films in the 1960s was that his point-of-view shots often included the observer (both female and male), rather than using the standard shot/reverse shot system of conventional filmmaking, which shows the character looking, and then what he or she is looking at, without including the character in the second shot.”²⁶ Many of Antonioni’ film practices display a “female gaze” rather than the conventional “male gaze”. This

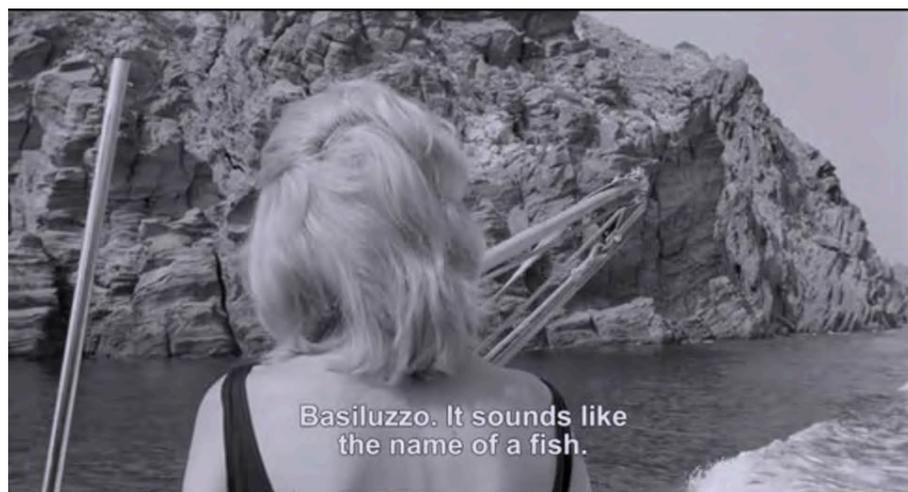


Fig. 12 Michelangelo Antonioni, *L'Avventura*, 1960, film

²⁵ Mulvey, Laura. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” *Film Theory and Criticism : Introductory Readings*. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. New York: Oxford UP, 1999: 833-44.

²⁶ Brunette, Peter. *The Films of Michelangelo Antonioni*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1998. Printed

type of “gazing” often explores themes of sexuality. In a great number of shots in *L’Avventura* women are shown from behind as observers. (Figure 12) During the boating scenes there are several shots of the backs of the characters. Anna at one point gets incredibly frustrated while they are all out on the water and makes the remark that it is ridiculous that all of her friends are so worried about doing a little swimming that she just jumps off the boat and into the water. Any other director would have shot this scene with the camera solely on Anna jumping out of the boat as her figure plunged into the water, playing up the sexuality of the character. Instead Antonioni has several other backs of the characters included in this scene, like Claudia’s back, as the camera pans the water and they “observe” Anna’s figure getting further and further away from the boat. (Figure 13) Antonioni’s films clearly depart from the masculine model of filmmaking by approaching the essence of the characters from a feminine perspective. Women are more than just beautiful figures on a canvas, they cannot simply be an “objet d’art”, something to be looked at and admired, for Antonioni at least they are the filter he used to express his thoughts.



Fig. 13 Michelangelo Antonioni, *L’Avventura*, 1960, film

What we don’t want to see in narrative works, but often do, is that men are treated as subjects - central characters, speaking, thinking, desiring, etc. and women are objects, seen, desired, silent, passive. It's hard to deny that this is a real tendency. An interesting exercise in creating artwork for the book and exhibition was to put male characters in similar nude and/or

sexual positions that females are often viewed in and see how the audience feels about this type of representation. In the artwork, Godard Guy (Watching French Films Like He's on a French Beach), the neighbor 5C is watching the French film, *Pierrot Le Fou*, in his underwear. (Figure 14) The voyeuristic, almost God-like perspective is somewhat unnerving as we see this male character in his bedroom vulnerably splayed out on his bed; he clutches his arms for comfort and wraps his legs together almost as if though he is aware he is being watched. By adding the perspective of the voyeur in the painting it altered the viewer's reading from no longer seeing the sexual representation of a nude male on a bed and instead interpreting the painting as a display of vulnerability and perhaps loneliness.



Fig. 14 Alexandria Canchola, *Godard Guy*, 2017, gouache painting

The experiment warranted further investigation and was explored more thoroughly in the piece, *Peek-a-Peep*, an installation piece encompassing two wall structures with several peep holes placed at varying heights. (Figure 15) The paintings, placed in the wall structure, were



Fig. 15 Alexandria Canchola, *Peek-A-Peep*, 2018, installation

created with gouache paint on paper and feature the same aesthetic choices found in the illustration work of the exhibition: flat areas of color, simplification of forms and figures, a bold and vibrant color palette, and a playfulness with perspective. The peep holes and illustrations were paired based on height placement of the wall and its most likely potential audience. Each wall is a little over six feet tall and eight feet long and placed on opposite sides to create an immersive hall space at the entrance of the gallery. The installation functions as a bit of a



Fig. 15.1 Alexandria Canchola, *Peek-A-Peep*, 2018, installation

surprise to most viewers who don't realize upon entering the gallery that they are in fact standing in an installation. For most, who don't notice the holes, it isn't until they see the words, "For a good time look here" on the left wall that they understand the intent. (Figure 15.1) This moment of discovery washes over them and they take delight in becoming the peeping Tom. What they find when they look in each hole is a moment captured from the eyes of a voyeur. The installation quickly introduces the audience to the theme of the exhibition: voyeurism. The decision to include certain artworks at fairly high heights was an intentional one, a way to weed out the audience so that statistically mostly only males were encountering the artwork that heavily featured the female lens. The illustration, *The Morning After the Night Before*, as viewed in *Peek-a-Peep* was created with the mission of making men uncomfortable about viewing male sexuality as seen from a female perspective. (Figure 15.2) That isn't to say that sexuality shouldn't be explored in artwork, but that it can be done so in a way that respects the body and its beautiful form and isn't for the sake of ogling. Additionally, the choice to represent the female body in various forms was an important aspect in these paintings. Shying away from today's idealized thin figure and showcasing the incredible beauty that can also be found in curvy feminine forms. The figures seen in the illustration, *Boop Booty Boop*, display the feminine form



Fig. 15.2 and Fig15.3 Alexandria Canchola, *Peek-A-Peep*, 2018, installation

our eyes are accustomed to seeing. (Figure 15.3) The work does not aim to celebrate or even judge the figures of women (or men) but to include a realness to the figures seen in the world, perhaps even if the colors are a bit unreal.

Word and Image

Words finally are not pictures, nor are pictures precisely the same thing as words, but both have the ability to provide knowledge to their audience. The relationship between word and image is complex and fascinating, especially to a designer and illustrator like myself.

“Of course words themselves, more than all the other visual symbols, have the power to completely describe the invisible realm of senses and emotions. Words can take even seemingly neutral images and invest them with a wealth of feelings and experiences. Pictures can induce strong feelings in the reader, but they can also lack specificity of words. Words, on the other hand, offer that specificity, but can lack the immediate emotional charge of pictures, relying instead on a gradual cumulative effect. Together, of course, words and pictures can work miracles.”²⁷

Part of the task in *Might Be Tragic* was in producing words and images, and then finding interesting methods to merge them in the gallery space. In considering how to blend media together so that they could tell a more effective story, it became an obsession to create a series of work that showed the efficacy of design as related to traditional media. In the series of prints, *The Neighbors*, a combination of methodologies are implemented: gouache illustration, hand lettering, and letterpress printing. (Figure 16) Being trained in the careful and complex art of pairing word and image I expected that they would exist as natural partners, but in fact there seems to be little intimacy in how they are treated by designers. Generally speaking they exist as separate units that live on a page, apart, rarely touching or interacting with each other. That isn't the case in the print, *6N*, words sit atop of illustration creating a fluidity between the narrative

²⁷ McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. 1994. Printed.



Fig. 16 Alexandria Canchola, *The Neighbors*, 2018, gouache and letterpress

image and narrative picture. (Figure 16.1) This piece, like its series, plays with space and image in order to represent the relationship between the words and the illustrated subjects. It almost looks like a page in a book in the way the space is constrained. Neither element is competing for attention but rather there is a wholeness, an expressive power. I have had this experience myself in looking at the work of Maira Kalman who blends words and image seamlessly.

Maira Kalman is a type of remix artist, one-part designer, one-part illustrator, one-part writer. A true original with a profound ability of intertwining image and word so that they are of equal importance. She has described her artistic process as, “*How do I combine this writing and this art to say as much as I can with as few words as I can*”²⁸ Kalman has this wonderful ability of combining her many skills to create deeply personal work that connects with an audience. This personal connection is possible due to the childlike quality of her illustrations paired with handwritten text in an almost diary like familiarity that feels very intimate. She paints with gouache on paper and like Matisse has a complete “disregard for the conventions of perspective,

²⁸ Alam, Rumaan. “The singular magic of Maira Kalman.” TheCut.com. <https://www.thecut.com/2018/04/profile-maira-kalman-author-and-illustrator.html> (accessed October 20, 2018).

heads askew, arms akimbo, hair floating in defiance of gravity; colors filled with textures and lines, in a recapturing of that “Rules? What rules?” innocence that artists often lose with training.”²⁹ Somehow she manages to do this in the most sophisticated way. These stylistic choices allow for the feeling that somebody is really talking to you about life.

The inspiration for the series of prints was derived from this confluence of memoir and portraiture that Kalman often employs. As each piece in the series functions as a character study, *6N*, shows a young woman in her bedroom, a towel wrapped around her body as she looks into the mirror and takes photos of herself. The words in the print say a lot and allow us to conclude that she’s late all the time, takes selfies that she doesn’t post, is aware of her beauty, and isn’t friendly. The image functions similarly to social commentary, illustrating how often our insecurities work in tandem with our narcissistic tendencies. It brings about a genuine phenomenon in today’s world where we simultaneously judge ourselves harshly while still



Fig. 16.1 Alexandria Canchola, *The Neighbors-6N*, 2018, gouache and letterpress

²⁹ Parker, Charley. “Maira Kalman.” LinesandColors.com. <http://linesandcolors.com/2009/02/17/maira-kalma/> (accessed October 20, 2018).

holding ourselves in high regard. Society has a terrible ability of making women feel the need to be visually appealing in order to possess any worth, but in doing so women often feel worthless. This worthlessness stems from the impossible standards often encountered on social media, a place where we are all bombarded by people's best images. The fact that 6N doesn't post these images can lead to one of two conclusions depending on the given reading of the viewer. One that she possesses such confidence that she doesn't seek the validation one can find by posting photos of themselves on the internet that quantify your value by the amount of likes you gather or secondly that she doesn't believe any of the photos she takes of herself are good enough to post and they simply point out her less than desirable traits. In today's modern world where we spend our moments alone not reflecting on our state of mind but instead soaking up the images of our peers can one ever truly feel solitude? These new ways of connecting can most definitely lead to us feeling a state of loneliness.

The Lone Figure

The exhibition, *Might Be Tragic*, showcases how melancholic feelings can be translated into art. Perhaps there are many ways to visualize the feeling, but the work most frequently explores it through the representation of the lone figure. As illustrated in the painting, *She Prefers Eating Alone...But Not Really*, the woman is sitting alone, isolated in the center of a fairly quiet restaurant with the exception of two other patrons sitting and talking in the background. (Figure 17) This everyday scene is imbued with poetic mystery. The woman is a bit



Fig. 17 Alexandria Canchola, *She Prefers Eating Alone...But Not Really*, 2017, gouache painting

of an enigma, wearing sunglasses inside, she looks off to the side avoiding eye contact with the viewer. Her expression is vague leaving the viewer no clue as to her emotional demeanor. For the more inquisitive viewer, they might ask questions regarding why she's wearing sunglasses inside: Is she holding back tears?, Is she in hiding?, Is she just getting ready to leave? There aren't any answers present. The perspective is dynamic and almost cluttered in a way moving the

eye in a diagonal fashion. The use of foreshortening creates a distance between the viewer and the subject characteristic of the voyeur relationship seen in many of the works of the exhibition. This strangely dramatized vantage point amplifies this woman's vulnerability and makes the viewer feel unsettled and melancholic. The vibrant color choices juxtapose against the muted subject matter to jarring effect. The painting is fairly obvious in regard to its meaning of solitude. "Psychologists argue that solitude refers to the idea of being completely alone –let's say in a physical way–, but it doesn't imply a feeling of loneliness. Actually, it's a state where the mind, far from constant stimuli, becomes self-aware."³⁰ This is a compelling argument, similar to the concept of melancholy, but what happens when the physical state of being alone becomes tainted by loneliness? This question can be answered by taking a look at the much beloved and critiqued work of Edward Hopper.

The work made by Edward Hopper has made it so that his name is now associated with the emotion of melancholy. He told the story of modern American life; his images generally feature a lone figure sitting in a cafe or room, sitting adrift in this transient place, and saturated with suggestion. Whether or not it was Hopper's intention, his paintings have often been critiqued as having narrative content. In *Automat*, a woman sits alone drinking a cup of coffee, the room is empty, but brightly lit, the time of day is unclear even though it is dark outside, and her facial expression is ambiguous, leading to some explanations like Alain de Button's:

“The woman looks self-conscious and slightly afraid, unused to being alone in a public place. Something appears to have gone wrong. She unwittingly invites the viewer to imagine stories for her, stories of betrayal or loss. She is trying not to

³⁰ Carrasco, Maria Isabel. “10 Paintings That Show How Solitude Can Be Your Best Companion.” *culturacolectiva.com*. <https://culturacolectiva.com/art/10-paintings-that-show-how-solitude-can-be-your-best-companion-2/> (accessed October 14, 2018).

let her hand shake as she moves the cup to her lips. It may be eleven at night in February in a large North American city.”³¹

It has been said that *Automat*, like many of Hopper’s paintings, is a picture of sadness – and yet it is not a sad picture, it is a melancholic one. Hopper invites us to feel empathy with the woman in her isolation, through his use of light and shadows; she is the brightest part of the painting. He uses geometry to his advantage in creating a strong image without being flashy as we see in the positioning of his characters.³² Do we read melancholy into the work of Hopper because it is his intention, or because it mirrors what the painter may have experienced in his life, and art is the form in which he may unintentionally share this feeling? This we simply cannot answer. To analyze an artist while not truly knowing them is futile, and to conclude that they fit the image of a melancholic soul is erroneous. Paintings are the perfect vessel in which to illustrate the emotion or even mood of melancholy, “perhaps because they allow us as viewers to witness an echo of our own griefs and disappointments, and thereby to feel less personally persecuted and beset by them.”³³

It perhaps goes without saying that melancholy is an incredibly complex emotion that is often confused as being a mood, because there is no purging of emotion as we see in sadness, rage, or fear. It is additionally misinterpreted as a clinical condition most commonly associated with depression. Melancholy has a fascinating history that “begins with Aristotle and continues with Robert Burton’s, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, works by Freud, Julia Kristeva, and

³¹ de Botton, Alain. “The Pleasures of Sadness.” *Tate Etc. issue 1*: Summer 2004 <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/pleasures-sadness> (accessed 2018)

³² Levin, Gail. *The Complete Oil Paintings of Edward Hopper* (New York: Norton, 2001)

³³ de Botton, Alain. “The Pleasures of Sadness.” *Tate Etc. issue 1*: Summer 2004 <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/pleasures-sadness> (accessed 2018)

contemporary psychologists, all of which have covered several quite different things—at the very least: fleeting moods, mental disorders ranging from severe to very mild, normal reactions, and long-term character traits.”³⁴ As we understand melancholy today, it is not a mental disorder of any kind rather it is a more refined emotion with qualities of its own.³⁵ By contrast, melancholy is not draining or debilitating, rather it involves the comfort of contemplating things we love and perhaps yearn for.



Fig. 18 Alexandria Canchola, *I sat, I waited*, 2017, gouache painting

As visible in the gouache painting, *I sat, I waited*, there is a calmness in the female character, a sweet longing, for what we don't know, but there is a true sense of melancholy. She seems to be lost in thought and the fuchsia sky and bright orange sand contrasts beautifully with the pastel buildings, highlighting the power of her thoughts. As Maira Kalman has said about her own work, “There's the duality of the sorrow of the moment and the joy of the moment, which I see very acutely all through the day.”³⁶ This painting is comparatively the most loud in color of the pieces present in the exhibition; its vibrancy calling out to the eye. The character lives in an

³⁴ Radden, Jennifer. *The Nature of Melancholy: From Aristotle to Kristeva*. New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. Print.

³⁵ Brady, Emily. “Melancholy as an Aesthetic Emotion.” *Contemporary Aesthetics* <http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=214> (accessed 2018)

³⁶ Alam, Rumaan. “The singular magic of Maira Kalman.” *TheCut.com*. <https://www.thecut.com/2018/04/profile-maira-kalman-author-and-illustrator.html> (accessed October 20, 2018).

unreal, dream version of the beach a place of dramatically contrasting colors, of idiosyncratic buildings, it does not try to define what the beach is really like - it is set in a world of its own, which makes a welcome relief from its realities. The scene is not captured realistically. The colors are brighter than they are in actuality. There are shapes rather than shadows. The objects are rendered flat rather than dimensionally. It offers an idyllic and escapist vision of everyday life. Leaving the viewer enchanted by this make believe world beset in pure nostalgia. Artworks of this nature tend to stay with viewers, they look for a version of themselves in the painting. She may sit alone, but she is not alone in feeling.

The embodiment of melancholy was a common and repetitive motif in the exhibition because melancholy is rather intriguing to see in visual art, especially work with narrative content, as it does not feature a single emotion, “rather it is an emotion with various shades: a shade of longing; a shade of sadness; and a shade of feeling uplifted, or even a subtle sense of excitement.”³⁷ It has had such resonance with artists through time, and is an important aesthetic to art because while the work may appear sad it does not make us feel sad. Art, by definition, evokes emotions and melancholy has always been attached to the creative process of artists because it involves self-introspection and examination. This universal human emotion, nuanced by sadness, but not belonging to sadness, awakens our deepest creative instincts as it is closely tied to the act of reflection.

There are art critics that argue a single scene can only be suggestive of a narrative. Perhaps that is true, but even the suggestion of a narrative allows for an emotional connection. I'd argue that an analysis of the feelings provoked and invited by reading (and creating) narrative art illuminates the workings of contemplation and that the formal elements of plot arouse the

³⁷ Brady, Emily. “Melancholy as an Aesthetic Emotion.” *Contemporary Aesthetics* <http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=214> (accessed 2018)

emotions. In some sense, Plotinus' philosophical theories provide the answer to this issue. Plotinus argued that art does not just imitate the external appearance of things, it imitates principals, "The artist can help us see the spirit world by injecting beauty into matter; he or she does this through creativity."³⁸ As Vernon Hyde Minor points out in the book *Art History's History* in his discussion of the Greeks and their beliefs regarding the arts is that art has the ability to speak to the viewer. I'd argue that that form of communication is the attainment of knowledge. "The arts speak like orators; what they say changes in syntax and vocabulary depending upon the form. But utterance is important."

³⁸ Minor, Vernon Hyde. *Art History's History*. Prentice Hall. 2001. Print.

CHAPTER V

DESIGNING A SPACE



Fig. 19 Alexandria Canchola, *How Yellow Behaves*, 2018, installation

Rhythm

The process of walking through the exhibition, *Might Be Tragic*, brings the book, *Not That Tragic*, to life in a three dimensional format exploring the intimate relationship one has with a book and experiencing a world separate from theirs. By playing with scale and rhythm, through the means of installation and large scale reproductions, I've designed a space that allows the viewer to experience this sense of immersion and take on the role of voyeur. In order to fully convey the story, which documents the emotional breadth of human experience, through images and structures alone, the work had to be strategically laid out. In sharing the character's world it was vital to utilize the gallery space efficiently, similar to a book, so that there was an emotional

build up and flow in the narrative. Treating the space like a narrative or labyrinth so that the action of walking through the exhibition and interacting with the work, the passage of time (a marker of narrative work) is built into the experience. This presented its own set of new challenges because time in film or animation, is built into the experience, so that story time and viewer time run together as a vehicle in unveiling the story. “A narrative needs to indicate a sequence of actions in time and space, the viewer needs to understand how the characters move through space to interact with each other.”³⁹ With this in mind each installation and artwork is placed accordingly so that there is a clear beginning and a clear end to the show, like opening and closing a book.

³⁹ Stansbury-O'Donnell, Mark. *A History of Greek Art*. John Wiley & Sons, 2015.

Installation

The exhibition, *Might Be Tragic*, begins and ends with installation. It was important to create a body of work that literally brings an audience in to the space allowing them the opportunity to emotionally connect to the work and perhaps relate to the characters of the book. Prior to this exhibition work, most of the pieces made were relatively small, mini works on paper, handheld ceramics, tiny maquettes, there was an intimacy captured in the work. Translating that intimate feeling so that the viewer additionally feels a sense of immersion is why installation art became the format of the work. The idea to create the installation, *How Yellow Behaves*, completely out of corrugated cardboard was largely influenced by seeing Tom Burkhardt's, installation *Full Stop* at the McNay Museum in 2016. Up until then I had been using paper and cardboard to create mini maquette pieces for editorial projects. This type of work captivates the viewer, playing into the love many have for a more childlike way of making and enjoying art.

The concept was to create a work of art that made the viewer feel as if though they were walking into one of the illustrations in *Not That Tragic*, fully experiencing a world unlike their own. The challenge in *How Yellow Behaves* was to take what narrative art does so well in its power to communicate emotion and build connection with its audience and heighten this sensation into a self-contained work of art, in which visitors can be totally immersed. (Figure 19) "Each [installation] requires the individual beholder to reconsider their identity in light of a given situation and the freedom or restriction of movement—imposed upon them within it"⁴⁰

As the viewer enters the gallery, there's what appears to be a painted cardboard box in the center of the room, the viewer must wait to approach it, hanging typography pieces work to block viewers from cutting through the labyrinth. Understanding the importance of space is

⁴⁰ Reiss, Julie. *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art*. MIT Press. 2000. Print.

integral in the potential success of the work and the reading of it from an audience. As the audience makes its way through the gallery they have no option but to walk around the cardboard installation. The outside of the right side cardboard panel is painted to mimic the bricks and vines found on an apartment building. There is a cut out rectangle, a window, which occasionally depending on timing features a person looking out the window at the viewer simultaneously surprising and creating curiosity in the viewer. The installation is similar to how Richard Serra has described the process of looking at his work, “viewing his sculpture involved a process, not just of looking, but looking and walking, and walking through it and not just around it as with more traditional object-oriented work.”⁴¹ As the viewer approaches the entrance of the installation, the outside panel wall is painted to mimic the hall of an apartment building, the viewer comes into contact with an open door and a doormat with the hand written words “Welcome”. This use of play allows the viewer to leave behind the gallery experience and now experience the narrative in a completely different format. (Figure 20) The work transforms based off of the interaction that people have with it. For many its an impactful experience. There is a



Fig. 20 Alexandria Canchola, *How Yellow Behaves*, 2018, installation

⁴¹ Potts, Alex. "Installation and Sculpture." *Oxford Art Journal* 24, no. 2 (2001): 7-23. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3600405>.

feeling of walking into a picture, where you are now living what you were viewing. The audience has now reached the climax of the exhibition, the entire process has been working toward this moment, the audience is now in the story. The installation surrounds the viewer in colorful cardboard forms, bright lemon yellow walls, bookshelves filled with colorful books, filing cabinets, a hanging plant, and the desk framing the window that they encountered earlier. (Figure 21) As they approach the window and look out, they are fully channeling the mailman. They are now looking out at the other people walking through the exhibition, the people looking in. They have come full circle to the end. They are now the voyeur. By walking through the gallery's exhibit one was given more than a narrative account of voyeurism, they experienced the many shades of voyeurism, from the watched to the watcher.



Fig. 21 Alexandria Canchola, *How Yellow Behaves*, 2018, installation

CHAPTER VI

PROCESS

The Studio

The studio is cramped and messy with works collecting piles and piles on tables. There are scribbled notes in countless journals, lists of ideas, lists of things to do, endless lists of color combinations to try. There are shelves full of supplies, nothing is thrown away, because there will be a day when that egg tempura kit is used, when that box of ribbons is necessary, when four staplers aren't quite enough. Its difficult to find a place to sit and make and yet that is precisely what this space is for. It is a place that brings joy, a place to exercise one's voice, a place to think, a place to make.

Illustration Process

Color and design are integral parts of my creative process. Quantity over Quality allows the freedom to explore new ideas and mediums. Quantity leads to quality work.

I create illustrations with gouache paint on paper. It is a medium that I love for its velvety matte finish and opaque highly pigmented color. After experimenting with various types and brands of paper I consistently go back to Arches Hot Press paper and Windsor and Newton gouache, when I can spare the additional expense I prefer to use Holbein gouache, because the colors appear more vibrant on paper. The switch to Holbein gouache changed my process of working, expanding my color palette and allows me to work faster, because I spend less time mixing colors. I'm not precious with my tools and have never chosen to invest in quality brushes, because I don't trust myself to take care of them. Instead I have about a hundred brushes, because I can never bare to throw anything away once I'm done using it. Generally speaking I prefer to use angled brushes because they allow for the application of flat color. For detail work, which there is a lot of, I use the smallest spot brushes I can find. I prefer working small, there is an intimacy between myself and the illustration. I hunch over the page, a closeness I'm not sure is healthy, but a position I constantly find myself in. Gouache is an unforgiving medium, and close attention is necessary, plans are necessary. I start with reference photos, I make a quick light sketch, and move forward. Painting is an additive ongoing process, at least for me, I start with the background, laying down the colors I'm most interested in exploring. I approach color in regard to their relationships with each other, one and then the next, and so on. This process was learned through pursuing a 100 Day Project in the Spring of 2016. I would illustrate a historical painting created prior to 1900 every day as a creative exercise. Through this project I was allowed the freedom to experiment further with color, shape, composition and detail and able to eliminate the anxiety I often felt when starting a new project. The pressure had

lifted, because I knew I would be making a new illustration the next day. This project gave me the confidence to continue working as an illustrator and deeply informed my stylistic choices in art. The process is very intuitive.

Printmaking Process

My printmaking work is often inspired by color and my continuing quest to pair image and type to create a more complex artwork. My work in illustration, typography and narrative are the elements I use to design these works on paper. I explore using modern non-toxic printmaking methods like polyester plate lithography to tell a story.

This type of printmaking is incredibly versatile and has allowed me to explore various techniques and methodologies of making prints with photographic, drawn, or painted imagery. Polyester Plate Lithography was developed by George F. Roberts while he was Professor of Printmaking at Boise State University.⁴² As it is no longer acceptable to use hazardous materials to make prints Printmaking has undergone significant changes in regards to safety and environmental issues. This has lead many to research safer and better printmaking methodologies and materials. What attracted me to Polyester Plate lithography besides the fact that it is a safer and more environmentally friendly printmaking technique is that it combines old and new technologies. This contemporary method of lithography uses what are most commonly known as Pronto Plates (polyester plates) and it is one of the simplest, least expensive, and most direct methods of making prints. One is able to draw on the surface of the plates (not unlike drawing on paper or vellum) with a range of simple tools from ballpoint pens, China marker, Sharpie markers, India ink, quill pens, and more. However, for most of my prints I prefer to transfer the image to the plate by printing directly onto the plate with a laser printer. The process still maintains the adhesion between hydrophilic and hydrophobic substances but does not require chemical processing in the form of etching with nitric acid or the use of turpentine. The plates are rolled up with oil based ink that clings to where your drawing is all without the need of the

⁴² Kiekeben, Friedhard. "Polyester Plate Lithography." nontoxicprint.com. <https://www.nontoxicprint.com/polyesterplatelitho.htm> (Accessed November 4, 2018).

harsh and unhealthy chemistry of traditional lithography and then printed with an etching press. The plates can then be layered or easily cut into shapes to create dynamic and unusual prints.

My process involves scanning the design elements I intend to use that most generally involves scanning gouache illustrations, lettering, or patterns. This is followed by color separating the pieces into cyan, magenta, and yellow plates using the computer program Adobe Photoshop. Each file is saved individually and then the image is printed directly onto the plates with a laser printer. Once my plates are ready, I heat set them, then wet them in a bath of water containing a splash of gum arabic and a pour of distilled vinegar, they sit in this bath for about fifteen seconds and are then placed on a glass table. I roll out the first color of ink, usually yellow, the plate is inked and ready for printing. I prefer to print wet as it allows for the ink to appear more vibrant. The wet paper is placed on the press bed followed by the plate and then run through the etching press. I usually do a print edition of ten, anything more than that and the pronto plates looks less sharp. After testing many ink formulas I have developed a process that creates an accurate full color process. Each edition involves printing each color one by one until the final print is pulled.

Technical Development of the Installation Work

At some point in the process I expanded the media in which I wanted to work. I'm sure this change was influenced by the study abroad trip I participated in to Florence, Italy organized by Professor Donna Sweigart. Until that trip I had not encountered a variety of installation work, as the area I live in is mostly composed of painters. The visit to the Venice Bienalle was a break from the artwork I most typically saw and awakened something in me. The choice to pursue creating installation work for *Might Be Tragic* had everything to do with the feeling of fascination I experienced. I wanted to create a similar type of feeling in my audience except I wanted to go beyond fascination and leave them with the feeling of being transported to another place.

For the installation piece, *How Yellow Behaves*, I created drawings of the mailman's room, a maquette that mapped out the space and size of each furniture piece, and illustrations that experimented with using different shades of yellow. After months of collecting cardboard boxes I began building a few pieces of furniture from the set. In the beginning it was mostly trial and error to figure out the best approach in regards to materials and methodology. In all honesty there was a lack of refinement in the first few pieces as I figured out that the best approach required: drawing out a vector map for each piece with exact dimensions of each panel or curve, using the laser cutter when possible to attain cleaner edges in the pieces instead of the ragged edges I was getting in cutting by hand, using both wood glue and hot glue to attach pieces, and priming the cardboard with two coats of paint. I built each piece of the installation one by one, constantly reviewing the illustration for a likeness. Many times it felt like there was picture in my mind that I was working really hard to get out. Progress felt slow, as is to be expected when working with large scale installation work. Once a piece was completed being built it was then painted with an indoor matte finish wall paint, which after testing many different paints I

concluded most closely resembled the gouache paint seen in the illustration work of the book. There were a lot of questions I needed to work out, but couldn't until all of the pieces were in the gallery. One of the main concerns was how to logistically keep the walls up. Hang the eight feet tall by eight feet wide cardboard panels up with wire? Build a wooden box frame to nestle the cardboard panels in? Create ninety degrees angle jacks that adhered to the cardboard walls? In the end, to save on time, material and gallery floor space I decided to hang them from the ceiling utilizing a gallery fixture of a metal grid. When it finally came time to move the pieces over to the gallery I still hadn't seen the piece in its complete form. It wasn't until hanging the yellow cardboard walls up with fishing wire so they just skimmed the floor that the vision was fully realized. What was just a space before was now the home of the mailman.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

Concluding Thoughts

The decision to take on a body of work that examines the alienation experienced by voyeurs was largely influenced by an interest in showcasing the power of narrative to connect to the human experience. In creating a work of fiction that is tied to emotional truths the audience can experience what several are struggling with internally, emotions such as loneliness, melancholy, and solitude. It was my intention to not only take the story of *Not That Tragic*, its plot, and its emotional experience but truly bring the audience into the mailman's space so that they become the voyeur, they in essence become that character, to experience that character's experience as if though it was their own. It is through narrative works that we are able to understand different perspectives and see and relate to the truths of our being. The work in the exhibition, *Might Be Tragic*, was guided by the knowledge that all are watchers and all are watched, there is no truth or fallacy in either, they are simply differing perspectives.

Epilogue

Approaching this type of work created a lot of self-doubt as I have always had difficulties with the term artist. I feared making something I was ashamed of. I remember reading the book *Art & Fear* in Professor Donald Jerry Lyles class my first semester in graduate school and its discussion about ordinary people making art. The book made the assertion that it doesn't rely purely on talent, but that the skills to artmaking can be learned. I wholeheartedly believe in that.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Alexandria Canchola is a Texas-based designer and illustrator whose work is often inspired by a fondness for storytelling, color, letterforms, paper, printed ephemera, and filmmaking. Through narrative storytelling, the work explores universal and often unresolved themes that have preoccupied mankind since the beginning of time. Color is used to document the human experience by connecting narrative and emotion.

Her career in the arts was not quite a straight line path, but instead included detours in the fields of journalism and filmmaking. After earning a bachelor's degree in Government and Journalism from the University of Texas at Austin in 2008, she went to work at an alternative weekly newspaper in Ithaca, New York. While she enjoyed working in journalism, she found that she was more passionate with the art of creating visual content. Alexandria had found her love for design and the power it manifested in giving form to content. Since then, she has worked as a designer, illustrator, and artist; whatever the role or medium, her goal is to solve problems creatively so ideas can come to life. She received an MFA in 2D Design at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley in 2018.

When she is not elbows-deep in a design project, she is probably drinking coffee, poring over print magazines, brainstorming her next letterpress project, or adding to her collection of Wes Anderson memorabilia.

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