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Driving in Circles with Monsters

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APPROVAL PAGE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I signed up for a Master of Fine Arts degree with the intention of becoming a better artist, unsure what that might look like. After three years of reinvention, it has become clear who that "better artist" is. She continues to ask questions of herself and others. She trusts the process of knowing and making. She will always be a better artist, tomorrow, the next day, as long as she engaged in making, looking and questioning.

I want to thank my committee, Laurie, Deborah, and Alison, for having faith in my ability when I fostered doubt. For providing an amazing example of what it means to be practicing artists. For asking questions and for your patience when the road was winding in directions I couldn't yet see.

My cohort: Jeanne, Luke, River, it has been such a privilege spending these last three years together. Thank you for putting in the effort to be the best artists you can be, for your perseverance and the unique perspectives each of you have to offer. I have learned a lot about art and life through knowing you all.

Lastly, I'd like to thank my friends and family. For listening to my "art problems" for too many hours to count over the phone. For encouraging me to be an artist and trusting my ability. For keeping me grounded and helping me realize what a unique opportunity I have to share my experience through art. Thank you.

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The monster won't look at me, his eyes assume position in a downward gaze. Still, his lid captures a small halo, resting under a heavy brow. I can only see this thing from a certain side, his good side I presume. That's his choice. His hair lays in pieces, joined with large staples, clasped to a blank space where I assume thoughts live. His cheeks fall like craters to meet a mouth pursed shut. I follow the light to another halo, resting just below his mouth. I move backward into shadow, cast by a jaw too strong. Another halo burns, just below the ear. A scar lives there too. It serves to separate the head from the body, at least that's my hope. I land on a bolt, that rests in his neck, a fixture surrounded by wrinkled flesh. I know if I turn it, both tight or loose, his head risks rolling of shoulders. I let him rest and admire tenuous composure.

I discovered the story of *Frankenstein* in my second year of graduate school, when I thought I needed a bible. *Frankenstein,* I thought, could serve as a guiding text, something to help me justify, or explain, or understand why I wanted to make things. I wanted a concrete thing, something I could point to and say "on page 27, Mary Shelley explains…" *Frankenstein,* a creation story by ungodly means cannot serve as a bible, but the monster and Doctor were good company as I was coming off of a particularly challenging final critique. I doubted my intelligence, my ability, my stamina, and my commitment. I felt like I was driving in circles, both literally and figuratively. I didn't know where my ideas came from, they always seemed to float in a loose patchwork above my head. At times, I wished I could lay out all the pieces and force them into arrangement. In that regard, Dr. Frankenstein and his monster are fitting companions for such a task. I let the monster ride shotgun in my 1989 Mercury Grand Marquis and hit the gas.

A majority of the work I produced in my second year of graduate school was about my relationship to the studio. At times I didn't want to be there, I could feel myself looking out the window toward a life outside of me. Instead, I taped up the windows, painted them shut, resisted cracking the door, and forced myself to look inward, to pay attention and make deliberate choices. I took pictures of tape on the ground resting in a certain slant of light. I painted milk jugs gray and let them sit among beer bottles. I was embodying an amateur Morandi. Everything I made that year was rooted in observed experience. I made my life small, it existed in a triangle: home, school, studio. I wanted to make an art that was authentic, I had to erase all the variables, until there was only me. At times, I felt like the mad scientist, locked up in her lab trying to make something happen. That's when the Doctor stepped in. His ambition was terrifying, I wanted in earnest to make something as true as Mary Shelley's monster, and like every other scientist, I wanted to produce consistent results. I made some rules for painting: 22" x

22" square of printmaking paper, two hour timer, no stopping, no going back in. I used the square as a cropping device to make compositional decisions. I worked primarily by noticing, arranging compositions when necessary. I wanted to create an environment of decisiveness, to let my marks speak and have agency. I knew if I painted like a "painter's painter" laboring over every mark, not only would I be locked in my room, I'd be locked in indecision. I hoped the anxiety of the clock, of time disappearing, would make me realize what was important relative to what I was looking at.

Analogous to my painting practice, lived my video practice, a means of building time as opposed to watching it disappear off a stopwatch. My early videos incorporated stop-motion animation studies, men throwing rocks, angel cat halos that expanded and disappeared, text rendered abstract on top of glass, with images tied together with the suture of sound. I was interested in portraying a disordered sense of time, an abstraction and a feeling that circled a central concept. While this montage approach continues to inform my practice today, I also had a longing for a more directed narrative. I was extremely frustrated that I couldn't externalize my thought thread, make it visible. It seemed so obvious to me, but I didn't have the words. During my second year, I made a replica of my studio and filmed it in stop motion. I also filmed my filmed my actual studio with a "pixilation" animation effect and intercut them to obscure the real and the replica. It was about noticing, much like my painting practice, but the speed at which images passed was breakneck. My video wasn't about slowing down in the way that my paintings were, but about speeding up and moving through an experience as quickly as possible. Looking back, I realize this miniaturization was an attempt at distance, to see my life and my practice more accurately, and parse what was reality and what was art. What actually came through was a manic Alice in Wonderland caught in the throws of a manic episode. Initially, I was very irritated by this read, I assumed it was shallow. The

last thing I wanted to be was the hysterical blonde girl archetype. This idea of the hysterical infantilized woman would return in my third year however, when I decided to take control of her narrative, instead of being subjected to it, in the form of a character I call Eve, in my short film *To The Second Power.*

I don't know where my interest in the unsettling or eerie came from, I never truly questioned it's origin or thought it to be good or bad. Eeriness, creepiness, the uncanny, they didn't feel like a means to an end, they felt like *the thing.* It is a way of looking and seeing the world that I have lived by since I was a kid, forming a club called The Clown Haters Association, painting the walls of my best friend's basement red, digging holes to cast spells, reading Edward Gorey. Living with a certain paranoia and cautiousness was and is a large part of who I am, getting close to fear and things that scared me was a way of making sure they didn't catch me by surprise. I want to know fear, as a person, as a friend. I often occupy this eerie space, and so does my work. Still, I recognized that this mode wasn't everyone's default, that it could easily be construed as a gimmick. If I wasn't careful I would make corny Hot Topic art that pointed at dead sad things and exclaimed "isn't that creepy?!" or worse "isn't this artsy?" My favorite films sit on the edge of humor and terror, Jennifer's Body, Rocky Horror Picture Show, they display a considerable awareness of the genre, utilizing the horror and science fiction genre tropes with a forceful knowing wink. They are a way of saying "look, I know I'm being dumb, but I can't help it, let's laugh about it. " Through a self-imposed film education the summer before my third year, I expanded my film vocabulary, viewing as many horror and science fiction film as possible. Through my participation in a film history course I learned about experimental filmmakers like Maya Deren, the French New Wave and German Expressionist film. Armed with a more balanced understanding of film history, I

considered the camp arena fertile ground to build my own Frankenstein story, a way to be light in sadness instead of locking myself in a room like my manic Alice character.

I had made a stop-motion puppet of myself for an assignment in animation class, and wanted to expand on the idea of a clone in a short film, exploring birth by unnatural means similar to Frankenstein's monster. I began to ask questions. What if you could clone yourself? Would you then be twice as much? Could you feel with intensity doubled, learn from yourself? What happens when self love becomes insidious, and not like love at all?I thought about being caught in a cycle of self improvement, indebted to the idea of progress when I'd rather rest. In considering these questions, I started to build the character of Eve, my mail order clone. The following is a beat by beat analysis of my aesthetic choices and intentions for *To The Second Power:*

> The film opens with a stop motion animation replica of my bedroom, with a computer sitting open on a bed facing the viewer. The computer then doubles; the original copy continues to sit in a fixed position, the replicant slides off the bed and crashes on the floor at the exact moment a distorted Mac power-on sound bite plays and the title of the film *"To The Second Power"* flashes in a 80's inspired Sci-Fi font. This first clip was very important to include, in that establishes a number of key concepts that play out in the film. First, it places the viewer in the intimate space of a bedroom: a site of both introspection and a place where private acts unfold. Similarly, the laptop is a site of intimacy, a place where the main character will share her feelings with the audience via a google docs diary entry. This digital self is represented by the spawning computer, and is a secondary representation of the main character, establishing the idea of a clone or a second self. The replicant slides off the bed and collapses on the floor, implying a task doomed for failure. The font choice was important in establishing

the tone of film, in that it places the film in dialogue with sci-fi and horror films of the past that employ a similar sense of camp, failure-oriented humor. The set is constructed in a very in a precarious fashion, with digital printouts eskew, rough foamcore edges and unconvincing faux wood painting, repurposed from a previous film. It is meant to communicate a simulation and its failure to convince a viewer of its authenticity, much like that of a clone.

After the title credit, the film crossfades into a close-up of a pink nightgown with a cartoon cat face, as the main character comes into a cropped view and settles onto her bed in front of her laptop. This is not a webcam view of the main character however, but presumably a camcorder she has turned on herself, sharing a private experience with both her computer and the audience. This character's choice to film herself implies that she is constructing her own narrative, through her own lens, seperate from her digital self. The nightgown, pink fuzzy blanket, and stuffed bear strewn are mise-en-scene that communicate youth, but also hold a sexually infantilizing connotation. This infantilized woman is an archetype I use for two reasons. First, I think archetypes that employ a level of flatness that is a great starting point to complicate a narrative by revealing a "hidden" emotional or intellectual depth. Second, it fits into the canon of camp horror and sci fi films, in which sex is a central theme to the point of parody. The flatness of this archetype allows the viewer to project themselves onto this character, but also provides a comical failure to present a dimensional representation of human emotion, allowing the viewer to see this character as a parody to create an intellectual distance. The character chooses to crop her head from the shot, a framing device used in amateur pornography to obscure ones identity. In addition to that connotation however, It also allows the viewer to

connect with the person depicted on screen as a body separate from a face. I want the audience to consider this body as their own, not as an experience they are observing, but a narrative in which they are acting out *with* and *as* the main character. It implies a control implemented by the filmmaker. She is choosing to share her experience of her body, not for vanity's sake, but to promote understanding, using her body as avatar. Furthermore, cropping the main characters' body through framing indirectly links the film to the Frankenstein narrative where Dr. Victor Frankenstein assembles a body through cropped/chopped body parts.

Eventually, the main character begins typing, and a small window pops up on the upper right hand corner of the screen. She begins her diary entry, narrating the text with an exaggerated slow, girly, speaking style. She explains her desire to improve herself and how she's been performing internet research for a solution. This is an unfortunate practice of mine that I have chosen to parody. If I have a question about a situation i.e. "large, bump on wrist. cancer?" "how do i navigate conflict more effectively?" I more often than not turn to the internet to quell my nerves, rather than sharing my neurosis with those closest to me. Much like Dr. Frankenstein who chose to lock himself in a tower in isolation to perform his research, this practice places myself and others who practice it in isolation. I've also implemented journaling into my daily routine as a means of therapy and have chosen to parody this practice as well. I like the idea of a exaggerated hyper-femme character stereotype performing a diary entry in that it presents an opportunity to laugh at her through an established stereotypical activity, while simultaneously revealing a poignant truth, professing that it is "much easier to go online for confirmation of feeling," as stated in her diary. A diary entry was also

important for me to include in that it draws a structural parallel to Mary Shelley's text; her novel begins with a series of letters exchanged between Dr. Frankenstein and his wife-to-be. While the main character is essentially in conversation with herself, she considers the diary to be a conscious entity, "of course there's you too diary <3," drawing a parallel to another common science fiction trope of sentient artificial intelligence .i.e. HAL in 2001: A Space Odyssey, Samantha in *Her* etc.

Two central themes of both *Frankenstein* and *To The Second Power* are progress and self-improvement. Dr. Frankenstein hopes to become a pioneer in the scientific community and thus improve his social standing with his father, wife-to-be and community. Eve wants to live her "best life," a slang term/ideal minted on the internet that allows individuals to claim that they are indeed living the ideal version of their lives, particularly their internet life. While this may not necessarily be true, the belief that their life is worth living in the eyes of others provides temporary comfort in the face of concerns such as student loan debt, lack of romantic prospects, and insecure employment. A lot of contemporary internet culture, particularly culture targeted towards women is centered around the idea of self-care, therapy, emotional labor, and many other tenets of pop feminism. I wanted to center this narrative around these themes as means of navigating my personal algorithm and poke some holes in the pop feminism dialogue. I recognize that not everyone's home page on instagram is filled with depression memes or self care rituals, nor does everyone turn to WikiHow or Quora for their social questions, but this is a percentage of my internet reality. I think of the internet culture and the aesthetics associated with it as a form of science fiction, in that technology and science fiction are pretty closely aligned.

Hacker culture of the 90's communicated an idea of the future with a series of green "courier new" numbers sliding across a screen in films like The Matrix, but technology is no longer a concept reserved for rogue hackers or control rooms, but an integrated product of contemporary daily life i.e. the laptop, google docs. Thus, their inclusion not only places the film in dialogue with older science fiction films by incorporating technology, but also seeks to give a disordered sense of time, in that things like wikihow and laptops exist in tandem with the dilapidated cardboard cloning machine The Replicator 3000 that echoes 50's style science fiction props. Intercut with the google docs window and the woman typing are two scenes: a purple-tinged silhouette and a set of hands entering a set of armoured gloves with a chain. The silhouette serves as a structural parallel to a different silhouette featured later in the film. The armoured gloves indicate a struggle with control or protection, and will show up later in the film.

The first two shots were important in establishing a framework for the viewer, creating a clear motivation for the character and establishing the central themes of cloning, self-improvement and control. The scenes that follow are less linear and implement a montage editing style. We cut to a cartoon dream clock that doubles as a doorbell for a mysterious package. The footage is hyper saturated and then severely desatured, echoing the aesthetic of a menacing Oxyclean infomercial product demonstration. The main character then struggles to put together the machine. The idea of the infomercial or failed demonstration video functions as a means of parodying the idea of self improvement, letting the viewer consider the idea self improvement as a product and perhaps something that they *don't* want to buy. I don't know many people who legitimately believe the claims made in infomercials or made for TV products, but I am very much

willing to "buy" the advice given to me on Quora answers as truth when in a depressive spiral.

Eve swabs the inside of her mouth and puts the sample in a petri dish, both of these shots are lit with a red gel, in an attempt to imply a menacing/infected connotation. I enjoy the lighting design in the original Suspiria film from 1977, as special effects were limited and lighting carried a lot of the psychological weight of the film. My access to special effects technology was also limited, thus I relied on red light and sound effects to produce the comedic and horror-tinged tone of the film. I used stock sci-fi sound effects from a number of sound sampling websites, adjusting them as needed in adobe audition. Sound design is an important part of my filmmaking practice that I hope to expand on in future projects. I use the tenets of minimalist compositions, field recordings, and stock sound effects to create a psychic landscape that is both laughable and unsettling. I plan to expand on this skill set in future projects.

Eventually we get to meet the infamous Replicator 3000. Eve approaches the machine in a gingham mini-skirt and saunters toward it with a visible curiosity. Again, her body language communicates an archetype of a sexualized innocent woman falling into danger because of her own curiosity. Similar to Dr. Frankenstein, we view her curiosity as a potential threat to her well-being. She steps inside the machine and we become disoriented as the camera attempts to map the machine's interior. We see skin turning green, a woman in silhouette dancing like a poorly trained stripper as we, the viewer, attempt to understand what is happening inside the machine. Eventually, three sheep leap across the screen, forcing a clone association with Dolly the sheep, the first successful clone. The armoured gloves reappear, and the hands exit the gloves, implying a

loss of control, willing or not. The last shot is of the Replicator emptying a steady stream of smoke into the night sky. Again, this is another horror and science fiction device. Did the machine malfunction? Did the clone disappear? Where did Eve go? This open ended narrative was important in constructing the first part of this video series, in that it allows for the project to be expanded upon and simultaneously produce a sense of mystery. I hope in future installments I will be able to expand more on the relationship between Eve and her clone, and incorporate more dialogue into the work, as performing this character of Eve was a very cathartic experience. I relish any opportunity to laugh at myself. Self parody functions as a means of relieving the intense pressure I put on myself to perform a certain way. Eve will eventually have to come to terms with herself and her clone, and only one will be able to survive. Which version will it be?

Ultimately, *To The Second Power* is an investigation of self through the lens of parody, exploring the struggle between self improvement and self acceptance. Failure takes shape in the form of camp humor in my short film, but it is also an important impetus constructing my paintings. At a certain point, I realized I could no longer afford to be a painter in the traditional sense. I felt like I was wasting my money, my time, and my sense of self. I admired artists like Wayne Thiebaud, or Morandi, but I was not an image maker, despite a very earnest effort. If I was being honest, I felt more comfort in Anne Truitt's minimalist columns of floating color than the story of person or a thing, locked in a still image. The last straw was a painting called *Meat Me.* It's literal subject matter was/is an interior of a refrigerator with an imaginary package, either a steak or an ominous envelope. The painting has a subtle softness, a cakey paint application, allusions to food and pleasure or lack thereof. I was attempting to use painting extenders, build large panels with cradles, the whole painting bit. I later renamed it

Compromised, a decision that arrived from seeing the work hanging in a space where art was supposed to be and deciding it was only telling a half-truth. It was middling. It was an amalgamation of advice half-heard. I had to move on. I recovered some old house paint in the supply closet, bought a role of brown butcher paper, and started to experiment. What I discovered was a way of working that used the principle of frailty and failure to my advantage, fashioning pieces that land somewhere between armour, clothing or scraps of metal from another planet. I don't think I would have had the courage to work in this way had it not been for my experience in Experimental Drawing. Their ambiguity fuels me. Again, I think about Frankenstein's monster, the frailty of his flesh, stitched together in pieces, with skin folds and scars on full display.

I employ the principles of failure in my painting practice, not only through its recognizable trademarks of ripped edges and pin-sized holes, but an awareness of failure as record. Through pinning my paintings to the wall ten times over, I have recorded our relationship, our interaction, through visible marks. They hang slack at the corners and start to slide, creating tears out of puncture wounds. Each hole acts as evidence of human activity. Unlike a drawn mark, however, these holes are an act of deletion, too many or too deep and the piece risks collapse. This action marks a odd tension for me as a maker. I claim each piece as an art object, and demand respect as such from the viewer. However, my reckless treatment of each piece creates a paradox: my lack of concern for each pieces produces concern in the viewer for each piece and it's injury. I think of each piece as a breathing thing, they refuse to adhere to a fixed position; paper is of course inherently flexible. Every time they hang on a wall, they are different, but echo a rough gesture. I see their movement as a way a creating a relationship to clothing, but also in an indirect way, to the moving image, constantly shifting in form. They are a facsimile, paper masquerading as fabric and metal, a painting a sculpture.

This contradiction and failure to maintain a fixed identity is appealing to me, in that it represents my own willingness to change.

Each painting embodies a sort of character, through shape, color, and gesture. They are a generally sad bunch, hanging slack in particular ways hoping you'll notice them. When I'm making paintings, they are as much about sensation as they are feeling for me as a maker. The isolation needed to produce these paintings creates a loneliness that I have managed to harvest for my work. Color is an important component of the work, it's application is twofold. The latex house paint acts as a first layer, to both improve the structural integrity of the paper and to shift the color relationship for the secondary spray paint application. I generally use recycled latex paint and use spray paint for a more considered and focused color application. Color application is crucial, I generally favor a more minimal palette, emphasizing gloss and matte finishes over too many colors. I hope to encourage the viewer to slow down and notice subtle changes in texture, color and light. A piece like *72" U* that offers little in the way of light, with only a hint of purple, pink, and gold in a sea of black, rewards the patient viewer in the details. Generally, they should suck you in, more than they shine out. Restraint is a quality I seek to employ in my painting, a skill I sometimes lack in daily life which makes it all the more appealing to me. The spray paint collects in both a fine mist, and large drips that slide across the latex surface. The overall shape of each piece is also constructed through an act of deletion. Oftentimes, I will paint a large body-length ream of paper with latex, to later be amended through cutting, tearing, crumpling or folding. They are shrinking as opposed to expanding, and still seek to take up space through their sculptural form. They reference shapes I have observed and remembered, a shield, a ghost, a cape, a car door. I hope to evoke a sort of memory for the viewer. An echo of a real thing. This act of

shrinking, negation, and masquerading are all ways I engage with the concept of failure in my painting practice.

Given the divergent nature of my practice, it can be difficult to explain what unites them, or why they live apart from one another. Painting/sculpture for me is a way of being physical and manipulating material. I would consider myself to be a very tactile/physical person and making work of this nature satisfies this need. The pieces operate in a rather formal capacity, while still engaging in an interior emotional dialogue. In an indirect way, my sculptural paintings inform my video work as a relief from looking at a screen. Creating a video is an intense exercise in editing for me, where I have to have a certain intellectual distance that I find harder to uncover in the process of painting. My painting practice supports my videos, in that it allows me to draw on that skill set to make props and animations. In terms of formal qualities, they share a common thread, a futuristic aesthetic. However, I feel my paintings are more of an opportunity for me to be serious and engage with conversations of post-minimalism and casualism and my videos allow me to be silly and engage in a conversation of maximalism and camp. These two modalities however, are united by an interest in the human quality of failure. Post-minimalism is fueled by restraint and exists on the edge of being "not enough," camp maximalism exists on the edge of being "too much." Like Frankenstein's monster, looming large with big emotion, my videos explode with speed. My paintings are my Dr. Frankenstein, restrained and shrinking away. I need to be monster and doctor.

I'm sitting in the driver's seat. My 1989 Mercury Grand Marquis suffered an engine failure. I'm driving a 2004 Ford Taurus wagon now, the fourth and final car of my graduate school career. I've stopped driving in circles, I've found new roads, a path to being an artist that exists in a spiral instead of a loop. My art functions as armour, much like the metal sides of a pre-millenium beast. It is protection, it's a vehicle for change, it

is shelter and space for thoughts to live that can't exist outside a four-doored cabin.

Monsters can exist as passengers, in their own peaceful composure. My art won't

always look like aluminum or the future, but it will get me to where I need to be.

Carotid, 2018, House Paint, Spray Paint 64 x 28 x 9 inches

Poke and Cry Pt. 1, 2018, House Paint, Spray Paint, Upholstery Pins, 33 x 27.5 x 2.5 inches

Poke and Cry Pt. 2, 2018, House Paint, Spray Paint, Nylon Fastener, 42.5 x 9.5 x 8.25 inches

Shrug, 2018, House Paint, Spray Paint, Tape, 35 x 30.5 x 0.5 inches

Bombshell, 2018, Butcher Paper, House Paint, Spray Paint, Nail,16.5 x 14.5 x 4.5 inches

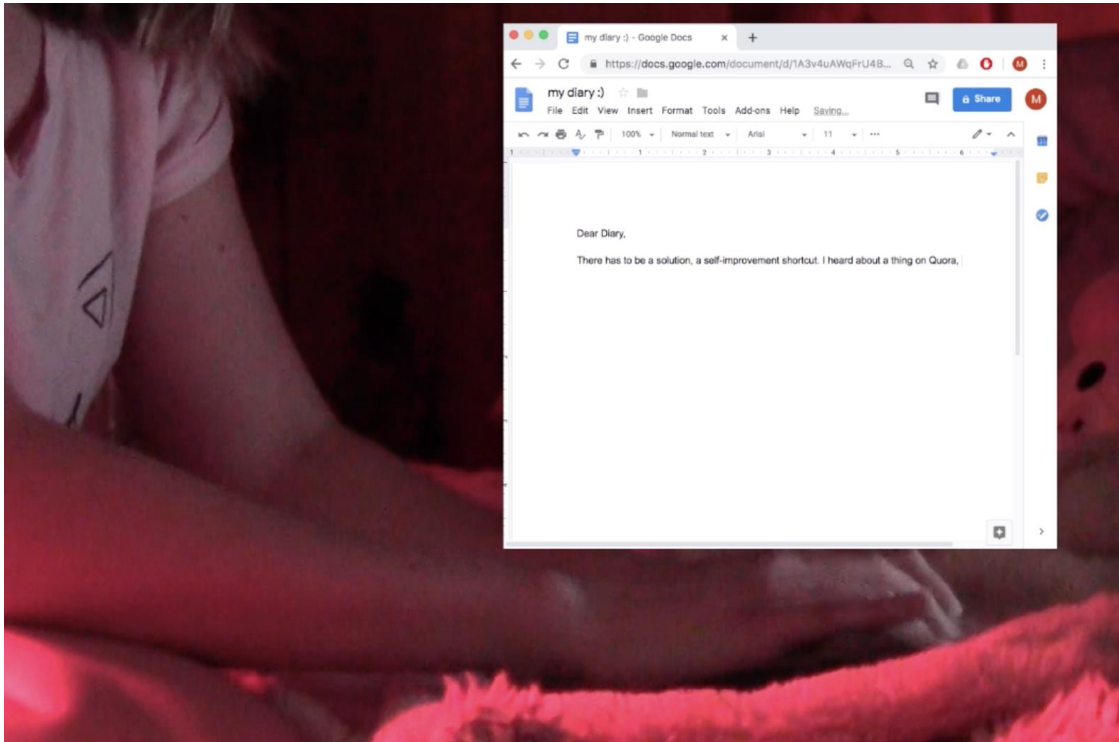*Curtesy,* 2018, Butcher Paper, House Paint, Spray Paint, 40 x 31.5 x 5.5 inches

72" U, Butcher Paper, 2018, House Paint, Spray Paint, Upholstery Tacks 64 x 29 x 2 inches

Mom I Tore My Uniform, 2018, Butcher Paper, House Paint, Spray Paint, 20.5 x 22 x 3 inches

To The Second Power, film still, 2019

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To The Second Power, film still, 2019

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