Stony Brook University

The official electronic file of this thesis or dissertation is maintained by the University Libraries on behalf of The Graduate School at Stony Brook University.

Meditative Aesthetic

A Thesis Presented

by

Fiona Naomi Cashell

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Studio Art

Stony Brook University

May 2015

Stony Brook University

The Graduate School

Fiona Naomi Cashell

We, the thesis committee for the above candidate for the

Master of Fine Arts degree, hereby recommend

acceptance of this thesis.

Isak Berbic – Thesis Advisor
Assistant Professor, Photography

Stephanie Dinkins – Second Reader
Associate Professor, Digital Art

John Lutterbie – Third Reader
Chair, Department of Art

This thesis is accepted by the Graduate School

Charles Taber
Dean of the Graduate School

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABSTRACT

Art should have a thread. A thread that leads somewhere – from something, to something – tangled, or not.

\- Fiona Cashell

Through the use of photography and digital media processes, my art practice explores themes relating to identity, the consciousness of self, home, environment and personal relationships. These themes are explored via an observational approach (external), or, via personal experience (internal); each approach highlighting psychological processes, the vulnerability of self and the commonality of human experience and behavior.

In my most recent work, I am using a combination of photography and video, site-specific installation and mixed media applications. Areas of research I am interested in and actively utilize in my work include relational and environmental psychology, cognitive aesthetics, visual communication and the philosophical argument surrounding the experience of art and the nature of the aesthetic object. I investigate collage and graphic design as processes of visual construction, and as methods by which we can formulate a visual language.

Presentation modes have become a significant part in constructing the possible readings of my work, as well as considerations regarding installation-based approaches. As an artist, looking at a space – both physical and psychological- and understanding it in terms of the experience of a work of art is essential. The space that the viewer enters can and should be considered by the artist prior to a work being shown, as this space will become a platform for the experiencing of art, and will therefore impact both reader and artwork. Thinking beyond traditional forms of framing, presentation and print processes- and instead considering the role of light, alternative materials, equipment, space, installation and site specific techniques- are all approaches I investigate and seek to involve as the creative process develops and expands, from concept to actualization.

This thesis will seek to show how my art incorporates cognition and communication through the manifestation of abstract and aesthetic appeals. I will explore how I do this through the specific and selective use of material and medium, and the resulting artistic process of image making.

MEDITATIVE AESTHETIC

BY

FIONA NAOMI CASHELL

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

IN

STUDIO ART

STONY BROOK UNIVERSITY

2015

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Environment and place are central tenets to my work. As an artist, I am interested in both the physical and psychological nature of where we find ourselves. I explore this in much of my work. 'Home' as a theme often crops up in individual pieces. I see it as an encapsulating environment that carries relationships, and as a place that creates and contains memory. This environment however is 'loose'. It moves around me and away from me. I am an immigrant, and have lived in multiple places including Ireland and Japan. I have always aimed to settle where I am, and this inane desire has never left me. I wonder if I will ever feel settled.

Distance and proximity is fascinating. It exists in every facet of my life in one-way or another. When you live with something, the tendency can be to overlook or ignore many aspects of it. When you move away from a place, suddenly, things move into perspective. Leaving Ireland made my awareness of relational environmental psychologies (how you feel, react, respond and function psychologically in an environment) even stronger. In my work *Home* (Fig. A), I explore my awareness of distance versus proximity, and the nature of structured suburban environments as strange yet interesting places.

Figure A: **A still from *Home*, 2014. Video and Sound. Image: Fiona Cashell**

How I respond to where I live and the places that I frequent- the places that are close to me- is something that pushes me creatively, philosophically, spiritually and mentally. I see environment and place as incredibly powerful entities. They make me very aware of myself- my desires, my needs, my solitude and my existence. By acknowledging and observing environment and place, my relationship with them and ignorance of them is also brought to my attention. This is an awareness I cannot ignore. This awareness involves my attitude, my emotional attachment to people, memory, nostalgia, romanticism, psychological existence and experience. I say 'them' or

'they', as I see environment and place as inseparably intertwined placeholders for our existence and experience of life.

I often explore personal relationships and personal struggle through environment and place. Recent videos including *Home*, *Getting Lost* and *Horizon Lines* have directly resulted from this approach. My still image series navigates the same content, however, video tends to reveal, and still image tends to conceal. The inherent nature of the photographic and filmic mediums dictate for me how concept is produced and realized. Photographic and filmic content I accumulate tends to have differing expressionistic natures. The language by which they communicate runs along the same line, but functions differently. However, both mediums traverse each other in my works. The still image is frequently featured in my videos, and my still images often have a cinematic feel.

Through the construction of my art (using the photographic or filmic content I have mentioned), I can enable deep introspective reflection on psychological and physical vulnerability of the self, through themes such as isolation, solitude, home and love. My belief is, as an artist, I must tap into true human struggle via my own struggle in order to connect with my audience on a more humanistic level. I aim for my art to contain truth at its core. Experiences can connect us- but only if we open up and share what these are. My aim as an artist will always be to attempt this connection.

PROCESS

Both physical and psychological experience is incredibly important in terms of the experience of art. As an artist, I need to be aware of how potentially my work can be perceived and experienced. I must attempt to understand how it needs to be shown- and I must strive to push the boundaries of my own limitations, and the limitations of any given space.

In my practice, I use predominately digital processes, but include analogue and non-digital techniques. In my most recent work, I am using a combination of photography and video, site-specific installation and mixed media applications. My work moves between emotion and the

more psychological side of logic. The content and composition I create usually explores this dichotomy. I believe the viewer can explore this territory when viewing the work, and within this space, there is always potential for interconnectivity between artist, artwork, viewer and life.

Abstraction has become a prominent part of the visual aesthetic of my works. I see my art as a system of visual communication. This specific system of visual communication- one that directly links to my study and practice of graphic design- is also akin to the process of collage.

In many of my works, I explore surface and depth, and play with what is both seen and unseen. I take away and give to the viewer any number of symbols or signs; thereby creating any number of signifiers, and any number of words, images or meanings. I want the viewer to read the work based upon his or her own preconceptions, experience and individuality. I control what is produced and I plan the conceptual grounding for works (choosing the signs), but as I make, I purposefully create work that leaves space for the viewer to enter and inhabit. Sometimes this space is psychological, physical, or both. By experimenting with both the still and moving image, I can contemplate, imagine and create these spaces.

Other conceptual and aesthetic approaches I employ include the specific and selective use of color. Color plays an active role, and is a key component in the process of meaning transference and in the construction of the artworks composition. Color is sometimes applied as a flat opaque block or shape that simultaneously gives and takes away information from the viewer (See *Home*, 2014. Fig A.). Color can imbue or accentuate a variety of emotions, such as anger and sadness, but it can also behave in a logical manner. I use color in this way for many of my digital stills and video works. For my series *pertubations*, color is a form of concealment. It also acts as a visual distractor. It creates within the composition a kind of static energy.

By working through these processes and approaches, I can give the viewer another set of possibilities for interpretation; a vibrant color to trigger an emotive response, or, a dislocated image which is not a whole but only a part, or, parts. In contrast to this, *Getting Lost (Fiona)* (Fig. B) has specific scenes where color has been utilized in order to inscribe the image with an emotional charge.

Figure B: Getting Lost (Fiona). 2014. *Still Image.* Video and sound. Images: Fiona Cashell

In this scene we can see a small apartment. This little dwelling came to be representative of many aspects of my previous relationship, which had disintegrated just month's prior. I had experienced both love and anger in equal measures. As the video runs, nothing moves in the image. We feel a sense of time that has stood still. The red fades in to full saturation, and then fades out. I wanted the viewer to sense emotion as they looked upon the scene. Changing color opacity through the saturation and desaturation of color, helped to signify how emotions can shift and change over time. As this scene develops, sound also plays a key role in pushing emotional content forth.

Aesthetic objects when viewed affect the brain on a cognitive level. Cognitive aesthetics is the study of how the brain perceives, translates and experiences visual imagery or similar stimulus[1]. My understanding of cognition as a function, is very much inline with the senses. Psychological processing of visuals can accommodate emotion and logic in different quantities. I say this not as a scientist, but as a person who has looked at a visual object and thought, felt or experienced something.

When viewing my work, I would like the viewer to move beyond what they can 'see'. The act of 'seeing' is in the eye, as well as in the mind.

There is no absolute in my work. There should be no absolute in art. I create work that allows for a type of interpretation and experience that can move in different directions.

1. THE EXPERENCIAL NATURE OF ART

Aside from the psychological space, the artist can 'set the stage' for the viewing of a work of art in the physical space. Different environments will dictate the kind of aesthetic and non-aesthetic experience that can occur. The aesthetic experience is visual and cognitive, as well as auditory. It is encapsulating of many elements. The non-aesthetic experience is physical. One must consider the size of the space for example, or whether or not the viewer can move freely; should they stand where they like, or are they required to stay confined to a particular space in order to view the art in question?

---

[1]Jacob, Pierre, and Marc Jeannerod. "Précis of Ways of Seeing, the Scope and Visual Cognition." *PSYCHE* 13.2 (2007): 1-8. *The Association for the Scientific Study of Conciousness*, Apr. 2007. Web. 20 Feb. 2015.

The experiencing of art can be seen as a whole event, and as an activity that both thrives and depends on multiple factors. There are always 'affects' to consider when presenting art to the public. If we think of art as 'living' in a space, we must consider the fact that art and space are inseparable entities that will always affect one other.

What we place between art and space is of course, viewer. Once art and space have been arranged, how is the viewer impacted? What exactly can they see and hear? Has the experience of art been maximized? In *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience,* Mikel Dufrenne describes the experience of the aesthetic object as an opera- a 'sensual' experience where all elements can come together in a 'symphony'[2]. If done correctly, the viewer is only aware of the experience, and not of the mechanisms that created it.

Organized and implemented prior to the event occurring- the artist can control, accentuate and heighten the experience of art for the viewer. The experiencing of art is a crucial event, and one that occurs at an important apex - the point at which viewer and art meet. An artist cannot control the individual's reaction, but we can imagine it and understand it in order to make better art. We must do this continually, until we get it right.

1.1 THE STILL IMAGE: MATERIAL AND LIGHT

Thinking on contemporary modes of presentation in photography, one is struck by the sense that its variety in forms is generally under-utilized by the artist and simultaneously homogenized in the realm of contemporary photography. When contemplating the language of an image and understanding how this is translated in the gallery space – I believe changing forms of presentation can dramatically affect meaning transference. Can the combination and use of selective materials and light act as a facilitator in this complex process, making the invisible, visible? If so, to what extent might it change the experience of the viewer? Acknowledging these concerns has pushed me to seek out the right kind of material for specific works.

Having exhibited and worked with light on many occasions, I believe that it can enhance an image, bringing it both a physical and ethereal energy- *illuminating* the content beyond what an

---

[2] DUFRENNE, Mikel, and Edward Scott. CASEY. *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* ... Translated by Edward S. Casey , Etc. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1973. Print.

ordinary print could potentially accomplish, and thus facilitating the viewer as they read, interpret and process the image. Light can enhance what the eye sees, and with selective use- can potentially change the experience of the printed image. Without it, we may be greatly limited in *how much* and *what* we can actually see. As an artist, I have to decide what I want you to *see*, and how you will see it, and by *seeing* - include the act of *experiencing*.

If defining the photographic act includes identifying the optical relationship with a tactile relationship[3]; and if we are to conclude that Barthes 'mania of the gaze' is subject to the *"tactile transport of the subject and its sensibility"[4],* it may be wise to make some connections between the materiality of image presentation and its important role in holding up much of an images content in a space. We must also include the immateriality of light as an 'invisible' component, paramount to the presentation of still works which ultimately render them, and most importantly their content, as visible and tangible.

The printed image is usually framed and hung against a wall. There are limitations that exist in the viewer experience when limitations exist in the presentation of printed matter. What we must understand is; the viewer has expectations when it comes to viewing a piece of 2D art- specifically that which is photographically based. As a lens based artist, I seek to exceed the viewer's expectations visually and otherwise, by pushing the content of the work into new contexts through the use of alternative materials and presentation techniques. By doing this, I can create a platform for new aesthetic and conceptual experiences.

With these considerations in mind, I sought to experiment with printed materials over the course of my MFA studies. I decided if I tested out and alternated how the image was presented, I could not only change how the viewer would react, but also I could potentially expand and deepen the images existence and meaning transference in any given space.

Reflecting on the content of an artwork is important. How does it look when printed? How does it feel? *Is it meant to be printed?* For my most of my still image series, such as *perturbatio*ns or *screen*, light became a prevalent 'activator' for experience and viewer response during development and in-process critiques. I spent the span of 2014 experimenting and showing

---

[3] Rancière, Jacques, and Gregory Elliott. "The Pensive Image." *The Emancipated Spectator*. London: Verso, 2009. 110. Print.

[4] Ibid.

sampled print and projection work. I noticed how people responded when direct and artificial light was involved. Viewers also reacted differently if printed material used was something other than your atypical gloss or matte paper surfaces.

In December 2014, I suspended a framed plexi transparency test piece in my studio for fall critiques with faculty and peers. This was the point at which I knew the development of material and framing approaches was moving in the right direction. Suddenly, the ability to engage with a framed 2d print from all angles, brought viewer and art together, in an exciting and interesting way. I stood back and watched my colleagues and professors walk around the piece. Intrigued by both its transparency and ability to engage their bodies in new ways; it was clear to me that this new method of printing and framing moved beyond the static energy created by traditional framing.

Light brings a temporal, ethereal feeling to still images, as well as to videos. It illuminates and accentuates content in different ways. My work responds to light. The aesthetic nature of it is suited to the interaction that takes place. Color, shape and texture come 'alive' when projected onto suitable surfaces (e.g. a white wall, curtain, or frosted vellum).

As an artist, 'setting the stage' means concerning myself with multiple aesthetic considerations, as well as those that are experiential in nature.

Light and material communicate and interact with each other. This is true for art and non-art works alike. Light helps us to see, but in terms of the art object, light takes on a meaningful role and an important one. As an artist, I can choose to manipulate light and work directly with it. It can be used as a tool for communication, and it can be used to heighten the experiential nature of art. It can give power to an artwork, but if used incorrectly, it can potentially overpower a work of art. The balance is finite and delicate. It is down to the artist to control these conditions.

Light dictates presence. Presence in regards to the aesthetic object and the aesthetic experience of a work of art is important. It enables visual communication and a variety of sensory and intellectual 'thought provoking' experiences to take place. Without light, image and its content are presumably 'not present', and thus the story becomes inactive or invisible. For my recent work, there has been a fundamental need in using light.

With transparency, one can see the image, whilst also seeing *through* the image (Fig.C). This of course depends on how the transparency is shown. For my show at Paul W. Zuccaire Gallery[*], the viewer could see through the image and walk around it. With this presentation mode in place, the viewer experience of the artwork suddenly became more physical and active. Their experience and indeed interpretation of it heightened and lengthened. They spent more time with it. Their interaction was both serious and playful.

I decided to utilize artificial light indirectly- or rather, by utilizing light from a greater distance (Fig. D). The content and style of work being shown was incredibly atmospheric, referencing aspects of the sublime and the transient nature of time. I wanted material and framing to reflect this.

A total of six still image works at 20 x 30"- all individually titled- were hung 3ft out from the wall, and 4ft apart. Lighting was delicate but highlighted each images detail appropriately. It also cast unusual shadows onto the floor, which I felt enhanced the nature of the work as ephemeral objects. Each transparency was sandwiched between two pieces of plexi, and hung using wire. Hardware was simple, with a small aluminum bolt at each corner of the frame. The finished look was minimalistic and contemporary in tone (See. Fig. D). The lighting enhanced the material to great effect.

[*] The MFA Thesis Show, took place between March - April 2015, at Paul W. Zuccaire Gallery, Staller Center for the Arts, Stony Brook University, NY.

Figure C: A Gallery visitor interacts with one of the hanging transparency pieces. Image: Kevin Barry

Figure D: Digital images printed on archival transparency, displaying at Paul W. Zuccaire Gallery, 2015. Image: Fiona Cashell

1.2 THE MOVING IMAGE

Video projection has always been the main mode of presentation for me. With projection, you are free to incorporate a wide range of materials, which in turn can (if desired) infer additional meaning onto the works in question. With projection, you can reposition and resize to your liking. Compared to television screens and other screen devices, there is no 'container' for the image. It is not a physical item. When projected, the moving image becomes a temporal entity, relying only on light and output to exist. Again, the experiential nature of the moving image projection should be be considered. How large is it? What material or surface is being used? How is sound installed?

In *The Pensive Image*[5], Jacques Rancière concludes that pensiveness within the photographic medium (still and moving image) may lie in the tension that exists between several modes of representation.

Rancière suggests that technology can be a resource for the artist to enable him/her to release it from "passive submission to the spectacle of the visible". Furthermore, noting Pascal Bonitzer's notion that the surface of video art is 'malleable' [6]- so much so that it moves towards 'perpetual metamorphosis'- Rancière concludes that "Cinema, like literature, lived off the tension between temporality", and that "video made this tension disappear, in favor of an infinite circularity of the metamorphoses of docile matter" (Rancière, 2009).

When I make video art, I can create both active and passive environments. The viewer can be mentally and emotionally stimulated, whilst still feeling a sense of calm and quiet. I believe the 'metamorphosis of docile matter' lies in the variety of motion, sound and timing an artist puts in place when making a video or film work.

Without light, there would be no projection or video, tension nor metamorphosis. Light is the absolute enabler for these two mediums to exist at all. With light, we have an active state in an active space. With light, my video works can come alive - illuminating content and creating sensory experiences.

---

[5] Rancière, Jacques, and Gregory Elliott. "The Pensive Image." *The Emancipated Spectator*. London: Verso, 2009. 110. Print.

[6] Bonitzer, Pascal. *Le Champ Aveugle: Essais Sur Le Cinéma*. Paris: Gallimard, 1982. Print.

Tension lies in the space that the artist creates. This 'space' in reality is a number of 'spaces' that we can enter– those of the physical, physiological and psychological sense. These spaces can be obvious or subtle- intrinsic or extrinsic. Working on many senses such as sight, sound, vision and touch - I can take advantage of the notion of space as within and outside. I can reach my audience by considering all the spaces that could potentially exist.

My solo show *Getting Lost* (2014), consisted of three separate yet related video pieces: *Getting Lost (Talia)*, *Getting Lost (Fiona)* and *Words* (Fig.E and F). All sections of the installation involved projection. Here, I was exploring our relationship to self and environment during times when inner turmoil mounts, but where the body and mind carries on, pushing forward, and seeking solace in what is both outside and in.

By turning Lawrence Alloway Gallery into a encapsulated and darkened space- blocking out all light from getting in - I could create a sensory environment; allowing both projection light and sound to saturate and fill the space. The viewer was invited to sit and relax as both image and sound worked together, stimulating the senses (see Fig E).

Figure E: A viewer sits and views *Getting Lost.* Video and sound. Lawrence Alloway Gallery, Sep – Oct 2014. Image: Fiona Cashell
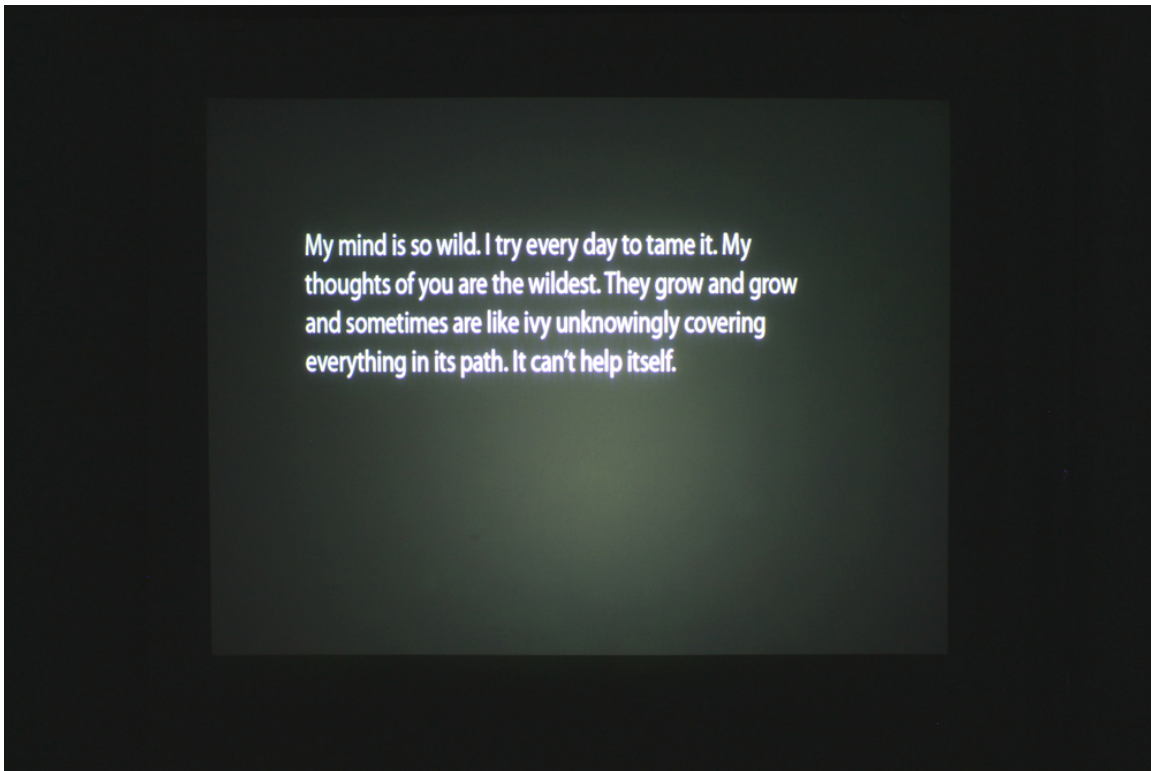
Figure F: *Words* **was back projected onto a hanging vellum screen, and was mostly hidden. Image: Fiona Cashell**

Getting Lost (Talia) and *Getting Lost (Fiona*) looped in sequence and were projected onto a hanging muslin curtain – a plain, inexpensive material that is lightly textured (Fig. G). It was my intention for the curtain to represent the psychological veil with which we use to shield true emotion and thought from others around us. We can construct emotional and psychological barriers whenever we feel the need to protect the self. The curtain can be left closed or pulled back to expose. I did not intend for the material itself to infer meaning onto the piece, but rather, its physical presence as a divider in the room was symbolic to the concept of the work as a whole.

Words was a hidden projection (Fig. F). It consisted of journal entries that looped on a blank vellum screen, which was suspended in the dark, narrow space located behind the main curtain. This space was meant to represent the inner sanctum of the mind. *Words* reflected directly on the world of our inner thoughts, and the repetitive nature of thought. In this case, they were journal entries that I collated and transcribed belonging to my friend and myself. Some visitors who spent time in this dark, essentially isolated and hidden space felt nervous at first. The simple white words that looped on the screen were heavy with emotion, increasing the tension in the small space. This was my goal, as the nature of the thought process is at times uncomfortable and smothering.

Figure G: *Getting Lost* **consisted of a hanging Muslin Curtain and a hidden back projection. Lawrence Alloway Gallery, September 2015. Image: Fiona Cashell**

2. VISUAL COMMUNICATION AND GRAPHIC DESIGN

> *"Design is a method of putting form and content together. Design, just as art, has multiple definitions; there is no single definition. Design can be art. Design can be aesthetics."*
>
> – Paul Rand

I studied visual communication, print production and technology over a span of six years in Ireland before I moved to the US to pursue my MFA studies in 2012. I have been practicing as a graphic designer professionally since 2004.

Terms with the field of graphic design vary widely from country to country and place to place- with individuals and institution's choosing to use terminology they feel is most suited to the discipline. These include 'visual communication', 'graphic design', 'graphic arts' and 'communication design'. The terms I use in my day-to-day vocabulary, and the terms I use in this thesis are *graphic design* and *visual communication*. Graphic design for *what it is*, and visual communication for *what it does*.

14

Studying visual communication has given me a different perspective on visual art and aesthetics. It trained my eyes to see and negotiate shape, form, color, space and composition in a unique way, thus enabling me to make the kind of work that I do today. I admire designs rooted core of communication via form and content; but it is a specific form of communication that can only be achieved through visual abstraction.

Graphic design is a visual language that incorporates and moves through many different areas, including typography, illustration, color theory, sociology, psychology and cognitive aesthetics. It can be incredibly abstract or incredibly simple, but its end goal is always to communicate something - a feeling, an emotion, a personality or a tone – essentially creating reactions and stimulation in the eyes and brains of the viewer.

I love both the ideals and science that lies behind the work of visual communication. I am deeply drawn to the flat, intersecting and abstract aesthetic appeals of graphic design. I am intrigued by both its order, and sometimes, its anti-order. Graphic design creates a platform for artistic creation and offers up a somewhat structured system of visual communication that has specific boundaries- those that are frequently adhered to, frequently crossed and frequently ignored.

My art is developed and constructed using many of the principles of visual communication, and includes many of the aesthetic qualities found within graphic design. In many of my still images and video works, I use geometric shape, bright colors and compositions that incorporate flat graphical elements (Fig I). My intention is to communicate an emotion or narrative - indicating the presence of an embedded message – via a visual signal - that tells you to stop and look. This is a visual language, and one which is non linear in tone. I use what is at my disposal to create it – in this case, it is the photographic image, the moving image and graphics.

Figure I: *Trickle,* **Digital Image, 2014. Part of Horizons Series. Image: Fiona Cashell**

American graphic designer David Carson commonly uses typography as form and artifact. Carson (born 1955 in Texas)[7] has a fractured and chaotic visual style. In the 90's he pulled apart the need to create linear, ordered design and instead, turned visuals on their head- bringing a fresh perspective to layout and design. In Carson's work, words and images move, mutate and interact together. The process of collage is present in some way- with letterforms and images overlapping each other. Fig. H shows Carson's design work for a Nine Inch Nails album, entitled *The Fragile.* Carson is known for his sense of openness when it comes to design, and for his belief in observation[8] and experimentation. On the development of the album artwork for NIN, Carson says: *"The one hour place called and said they messed up and used the wrong chemicals and the film was ruined. I said 'lemme see 'em anyway".*[9] Carson ended up using the destroyed film for the NIN album artwork.

---

[7] "David Carson | Biography - American Graphic Designer." *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*. Encyclopedia Britannica, 25 Apr. 2014. Web. 05 Apr. 2015. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/97120/David-Carson>.

[8] Carson, David. "Design and Discovery." *Ted*. N.p., Feb. 2003. Web. 13 Apr. 2015. <http://www.ted.com/talks/david_carson_on_design?language=en>.

[9] Carson, David. *The Fragile*. Digital image. *Ninwiki*. N.p., n.d. Web. 04 Apr. 2015. <http://www.ninwiki.com/images/thumb/0/02/Fragile_cover_explanation.jpg/800px-Fragile_cover_explanation.jpg>.

Figure H: **David Carson's design work for Nine Inch Nails album 'The Fragile'. Image: David Carson**

Paul Rand (born Peretz Rosenbaum in august 15th, 1914 – November 26th, 1996) was a well-known American graphic designer (Fig. J). He studied at Pratt Institute, the Parsons School for Design and taught at Yale University for many years.[10] As a graphic designer, his style had both an art and design aesthetic. He could seemingly work across a range of media, from editorial design to poster design to the more rigid landscape of corporate identity, all the while doing so in a colorful and playful manner. He managed to create highly original, minimalistic works- inspired by the many designers and fine artists that had gone before him.

Both Paul Rand and David Carson capture an aesthetic that feels truly original. In what they create or have created; I feel a sense of freedom in thinking and freedom in making. They show us that boundaries in all artistic forms do not actually exist unless we allow them to.

As an artist and educator, graphic design has become an important part of who I am and what I do. My knowledge and love for design fuels my art making, everyday.

---

[10] "Paul-Rand.com." *Biography*. N.p., n.d. Web. 5 Apr. 2015. <http://www.paul-rand.com/foundation/biography/#.VSrTsqZN10c>.

Figure J: Portrait of Paul Rand standing by his work (year unknown). Image: paul-rand.com

2.1 COGNITIVE AESTHETICS

If we consider the role visual communication plays in the meaning transference and experience of an artwork and aesthetic object; looking at its functionality and its relevance to the human brain may help us to understand how this process operates. How do color, shape, line and form affect the brain? How does looking help us to experience art cognitively?

According to Consolli (2012), cognition enables active experiences to take place[11]. The cognition of art is also different to the cognition of other objects: *"Many contemporary works of Art are devices intentionally designed to block ordinary sensory-motor operations, attract attention, and trigger an open process of categorization"*.[12] It is my opinion that these kinds of cognitive experiences can be both physical and psychological, affecting both body and mind. Perhaps when Consolli says 'active', we may come to interpret that as also meaning 'present'. Similar in view to Ranciere's 'emancipated spectator' and 'pensive image'[13]; the artwork contains visual stimuli, and our brains are essentially hardwired to receive them and experience them.

As an artist, I create work that functions quite closely to what Consolli suggests. My use of bright flat colors, or graphic shapes such as lines – which intersect, divide or block out parts of an image – creates in the composition dislocation, and a landscape that must be considered in the mind; a landscape that must be intellectually and conceptually explored.

Let us say I place in front of you a printed image of the sea. I can leave it untouched, or, I can digitally alter it– adding opposing, unnatural elements- taking perhaps an aesthetically pleasing, interesting and yet stereotypical image into new territory (Fig. K).

---

[11] Consoli, Gianluca. "A Cognitive Theory of the Aesthetic Experience." *Contemporary Aesthetics* 10 (2012): n. pag. Web. 04 Feb. 2015.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Rancière, Jacques, and Gregory Elliott. "The Pensive Image." *The Emancipated Spectator*. London: Verso, 2009. 110. Print.

Figure K: *Window,* **2015. Digital Image. Part of Horizons series. Image: Fiona Cashell**

In 2013, I began a series of still image works I called *Perturbations (Fig.L)*. These works consisted of photographic images that contained overlaying flat blocks of bright color. Images where edited in order to take new form. I took sections away and moved sections around. This new aesthetic or approach, allowed me to create work with a distinct psychological edge. Visual communication was both direct and subversive. I wanted to push against the boundaries of ordinary aesthetic appeals. I was seeking out a psychological edge. With a concept such as perturbation, it gave me new scope and new ideas for work that both excited and challenged the viewer, and me.

Perturbation is an area within Dynamic Systems Theory. Dynamic systems theory involves four structural elements: control parameters, attractor states, perturbations and phase shifts. Control parameters are the internalized conditions that are biological but also culturally derived. Attractor states tend to be habitual and relatively stable, while a perturbation is generally considered a disrupter, or a form of destabilization. The mind can switch back and forth between an attractor

state and a perturbed state (which is known as a phase shift).[14] These theories are useful in the area of art making. They emphasize cognition in the role of an art object or aesthetic experience.
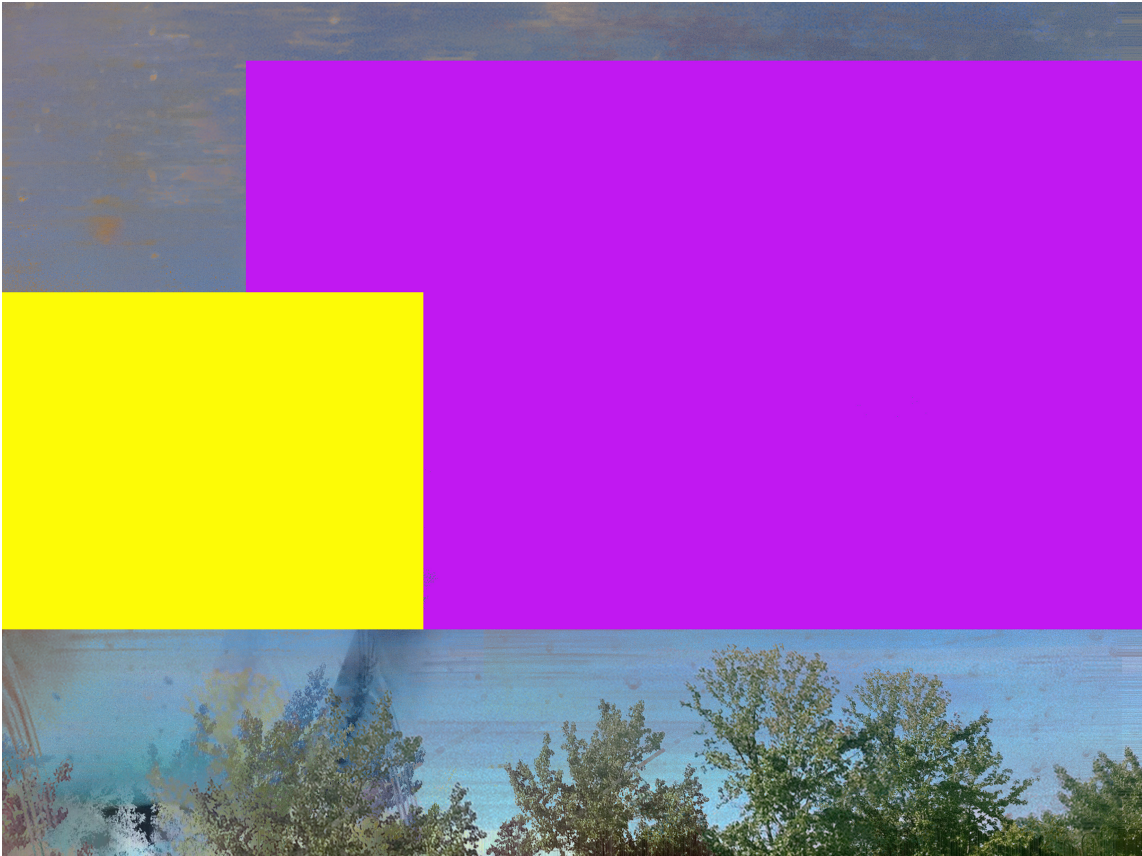

Figure L: *Beaches are for kids*, **or so I'm told, Digital Image, 2013. Part of Pertubations series. Image: Fiona Cashell**

For my body of work, I was more interested in the idea that a color or shape could interfere with interpretation, or that it would at least delay it – whilst also visually stimulating the cerebral cortex.

The evolution of cognition has long been linked to social psychology.[15] We learn and grow by observing our environments – images, colors, textures, perspective, movement, sound, etc. I believe cognition (and indeed those skills we learn by growing and observing the world around us) plays a key role in the experiencing of art and aesthetic objects. Perhaps cognition is the

---

[14] Shaughnessy, Nicola. Affective Performance and Cognitive Science: Body, Brain, and Being. N.p.: A&C Black, 2013. Print.

[15] Consoli, Gianluca. "A Cognitive Theory of the Aesthetic Experience." Contemporary Aesthetics 10 (2012): n. pag. Web. 04 Feb. 2015.

precise *thing* that transforms aesthetic object into art object?[16] Cognition is not what allows us to see, but what allows us to think and feel. This is most fundamental to our experience of art.

Studies have shown that our understanding of a visual image is based upon various forms of information processing, from the early stage of perception to the late stage of storage in memory.[17] So far, empirical research has shown us that subjects search for information consistent with their attitudes, exhibiting selective attention and selective interpretation. Many will only focus on information relevant to their expectations, ignoring other stimuli.[18]

In considering my art, including the *Pertubations* series (Fig. L) and *Horizons* series (Fig. K)- how does geometric shape affect cognition? How does color affect cognition? *Gestalt theory* states that the brain organizes elements into a whole – as opposed to simply reading parts. The Gestalt theorists were the first group of psychologists to systematically study perceptual organization around the 1920's in Germany.[19] Perceptual meaning: an image that is perceived based upon the capability of our senses or individualized cognitive activity.

Gestalt theory is based upon the notion of visual and cognitive construction, or reconstruction, and seeks to refer us back to the complex interaction we have with visual stimuli.[20] Gestalt theory suggests that the brain is capable of generating its own content- or reading content to generate a response. Algorithms and geometry have also been developed to support Gestalt theory. It has been used in instructional design and its impact when applied to design or art practices have been successfully proven through numerous academic studies.[21]

---

[16] DUFRENNE, Mikel, and Edward Scott. CASEY. The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience ... Translated by Edward S. Casey , Etc. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1973. Print.

[17] Consoli, Gianluca. "A Cognitive Theory of the Aesthetic Experience." Contemporary Aesthetics 10 (2012): n. pag. Web. 04 Feb. 2015.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ali, Abu, and Andre Liem. "The Use of Formal Aesthetic Principles as a Tool for Design Conceptualisation and Detailing." Nord Design (2014): n. pag. Academia.edu. Web. 02 Mar. 2015. <https://www.academia.edu/10504168/The_use_of_formal_aesthetic_principles_as_a_tool_for_design_conceptualisation_and_detailing>.

[20] Desolneux, Agnès, Lionel Moisan, and Jean-Michel Morel. From Gestalt Theory to Image Analysis: A Probabilistic Approach. New York, NY: Springer, 2008. Print.

[21] Chang, Dempsey, and Juhani E. Tuovinen. "Gestalt Theory in Visual Screen Design – A New Look at an Old Subject." *Seventh World Conference on Computers in Education* (2002): n. pag. Australian Computer Society, Inc., 2002. Web. 02 Apr. 2015. <http://crpit.com/confpapers/CRPITV8Chang.pdf>.

Gestalt theoretical principles[22] include:

The *Principle of Totality*— The nature of the mind demands that each component be considered as part of a system of dynamic relationships and individualized preferences.

The *Principle of Psychophysical Isomorphism* – Perceptual phenomena and conscious experience corresponds with activity in the brain.

Gestalt theory helps to explain many of the techniques I use, and it reinforces many of the principles I believe to hold true. When I make my still image works specifically, I am drawn to the interplay and relationship between line, shape, color and the photographic image. Line and shape dictates organization in my work. Color is used in order to stimulate the visual senses- in both my still and moving images. With cognitive aesthetics at play, my work can transform in the mind of the individual- enhancing both the experience and perception of the piece(s) in question.

3. COLLAGE

Collage as a process includes the abstract and random reorganization of images or printed matter. The collage method usually involves the cutting, ripping or shredding of original or appropriated material. Collage as an artistic process almost deconstructs to reconstruct– reorganizing, repositioning or reconfiguring content entirely- sometimes to the extent that the original images are no longer apparent or instantly accessible by the viewer.

Collage incorporates the specific and very selective grouping of image, shape and other material into a specific 'whole', or unified form. Semiotics plays a major role in the grounding of many collage works; with signs and signifiers offering up a new ideological, constructed signified. The eye looks as the brain pieces together these various elements to form a whole meaning, one that may differ potentially from person to person, depending on cultural background or exposure. This is the unique visual language of collage.

Today, I see the collage process as both digital and materially based. Artists can utilize a variety of programs and digital technology, as well as everyday materials to find new ways of layering

---

[22] "Psychology Concepts." *Psychology Concepts*. N.p., n.d. Web. 11 Apr. 2015.
<http://www.psychologyconcepts.com/>.

and deconstructing image plains. With collage, I believe both cognitive aesthetics and visual communication is most certainly at work.

Collage allows an artist to work in a non-linear and intuitive way, revealing unconscious connections and allowing unconscious thought to surface.[23] The spatial constructions of collage (spliced structure, angle, movement and frequent use of negative space) allow for aesthetic and visual experiences of space and proximity, as well as language; and within the object relations theory of psychoanalysis, these are seen to play an essential role in the individual's relation to the world and others.[24] With collage, our visual perception becomes skewed, but in understanding its context visually, we can move our cognition of what we are seeing to a place where we can receive some kind of message. This type of experience contains semiotic junctures; whereby we must locate multiple elements within one form, or *view* multiple elements as one form, in order to complete experience, thought or feeling.

In our everyday lives, we can never fully see everything. We can never really know what another person is going through. How do I transmit these notions to you in a visual way? How do I visualize thought? Collage enables me to put my feelings and ideas into action. At times, its principles and nature as an art form functions perfectly for what I need. I feel it is both an emotive and logical process. The multidimensionality of collage as a medium and as a process has the potential to set up 'conductive conditions' for both the artist and viewer.[25]

Collage artists transform and destroy. They mutate and redesign. They simultaneously conceal and reveal meaning to the viewer. With my work, I like to play with what is seen and unseen. I can use both digital and non-digital processes to explore this approach. Prior to 2012, I was using mixed media materials to make 2D collages, including paper, card, glass, plastic, paint and pen. When I began the MFA program, I looked to found materials in my environment for inspiration. I wanted to experiment and push the process forward. Working with small cuts of scrap wood allowed me to create multiples I called 'sculptural collages' (Fig. M). I went on to title the whole series 'Constructs'. From there, the process developed, and I carried on using the collage process in other areas of my practice.

---

[23] Butler-Kisber, L., & Poldma, T. (2010). The power of visual approaches in qualitative inquiry: The use of collage making and concept mapping in experiential research. *Journal of Research Practice*, *6*(2), Article M18. 01 Apr 2015 <http://jrp.icaap.org/index.php/jrp/article/view/197/196>

[24] Fuller, Peter (1988). Art and Psychoanalysis. London, UK: The Hogarth Press.

[25] Butler-Kisber, Lynn. "The Potential of Artful Analysis and Portrayals in Qualitative Inquiry." Counterpoints 275.What Difference Does Research Make and for Whom? (2005): 203-17. ERIC. 20 Apr. 1999. Web. 05 Feb. 2015. <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED431790.pdf>.

Since then, my use of collage as a process has metamorphosed and refined itself. Collage creates tension in my art as well as acting as a tool for aesthetic organization. However, as I progress as an artist and as my work evolves, I use the process sparingly and in a more minimalistic way. For me the collage process is always present, but now, it is digitally based and it is shifting in use as the work changes and as I explore different mediums and processes.
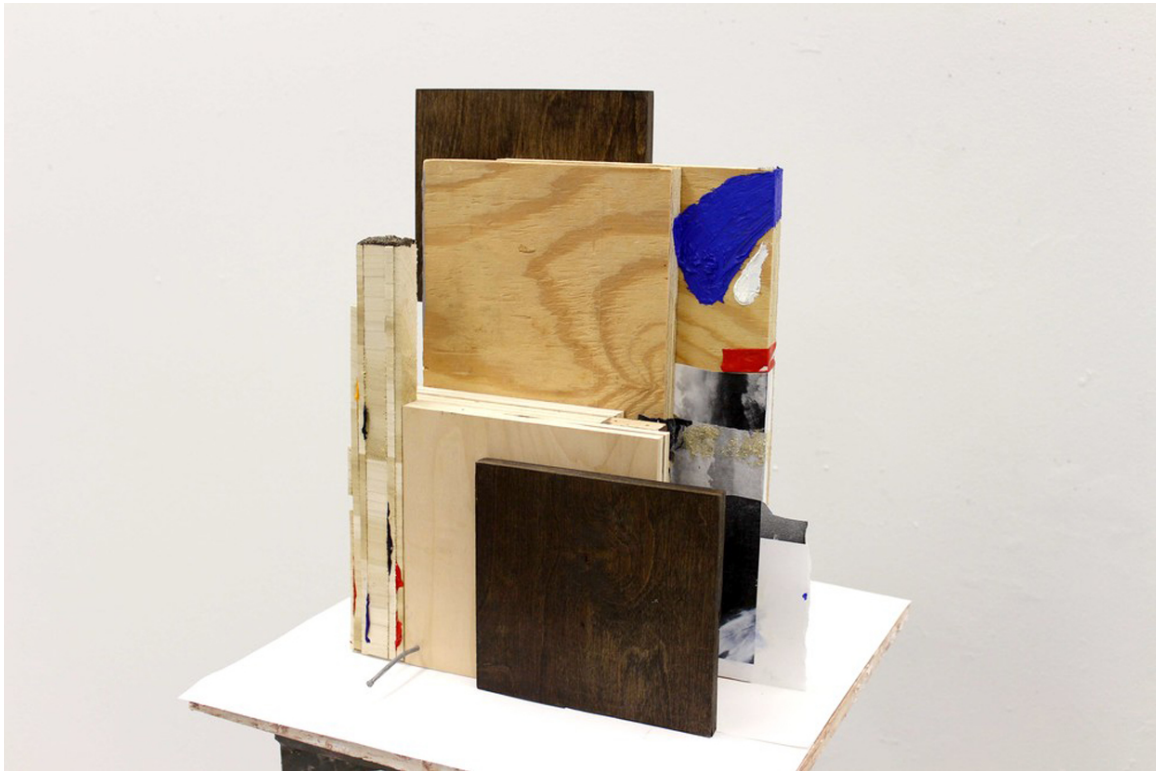

Figure M: *Something Like Resilience*, **Sculptural Collage, 2013. Part of Constructs Series. Image: Fiona Cashell**

CONCLUSION

I am an artist, designer, photographer, videographer and observer of things. Or perhaps, I am simply an artist and human being. The categorization and identification in terms of what I do and make, at times, gets a bit confusing. All I know is; I believe art and life to be one and the same. What that means is; we are all connected via art. There is quite a mystery and quite a power to that concept.

As I progress as an artist, I am allowing myself to transform and move through different areas and different ideas. This approach has been important to me, as it has allowed me to make work that I never thought I would have made three years ago.

Thus far, trusting my instincts visually and cognitively has been paramount to my progression as an artist. I push myself but I also allow the mediums to tell me when to remain constant, and when to move towards something else.

There have been two revelatory points at which I feel my practice, aesthetic and voice became defined and more distinct over the course of the MFA program. These have been a) the *Perturbations* series of images I began creating in 2013 and b) the first video I ever made in early 2014 – *Home*. Both *Perturbations* and *Home* represent an honest shift in me, and a shift towards a sensibility and vulnerability I realized for the first time as an artist, I had to confront and utilize.

Right now, my intentions are clear: to re-present, re-represent, re-situate and re-organize reality for the viewer. Moving forward I will endeavor to embrace the new and to embrace the aesthetic that I am drawn to; to not always be comfortable in what I am doing, but to feel challenged by it.

REFERENCES

Ali, Abu, and Andre Liem. "The Use of Formal Aesthetic Principles as a Tool for Design Conceptualisation and Detailing." Nord Design (2014): n. pag. Academia.edu. Web. 02 Mar. 2015. <https://www.academia.edu/10504168/The_use_of_formal_aesthetic_principles_as_a_tool_for_d esign_conceptualisation_and_detailing>.

Bonitzer, Pascal. Le Champ Aveugle: Essais Sur Le Cinéma. Paris: Gallimard, 1982. Print.

Butler-Kisber, L., & Poldma, T. (2010). The power of visual approaches in qualitative inquiry: The use of collage making and concept mapping in experiential research. Journal of Research Practice, 6(2), Article M18. 01 Apr 2015 http://jrp.icaap.org/index.php/jrp/article/view/197/196

Butler-Kisber, Lynn. "The Potential of Artful Analysis and Portrayals in Qualitative Inquiry." Counterpoints 275.What Difference Does Research Make and for Whom? (2005): 203-17. ERIC. 20 Apr. 1999. Web. 05 Feb. 2015. <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED431790.pdf>.

Carson, David. "Design and Discovery." Ted. N.p., Feb. 2003. Web. 13 Apr. 2015. <http://www.ted.com/talks/david_carson_on_design?language=en>.

Carson, David. The Fragile. Digital image. Ninwiki. N.p., n.d. Web. 04 Apr. 2015. <http://www.ninwiki.com/images/thumb/0/02/Fragile_cover_explanation.jpg/800px-Fragile_cover_explanation.jpg>.

Chang, Dempsey, and Juhani E. Tuovinen. "Gestalt Theory in Visual Screen Design – A New Look at an Old Subject." Seventh World Conference on Computers in Education (2002): n. pag. Australian Computer Society, Inc., 2002. Web. 02 Apr. 2015. <http://crpit.com/confpapers/CRPITV8Chang.pdf>.

Consoli, Gianluca. "A Cognitive Theory of the Aesthetic Experience." Contemporary Aesthetics 10 (2012): n. pag. Web. 04 Feb. 2015.

David Carson | Biography - American Graphic Designer." Encyclopedia Britannica Online. Encyclopedia Britannica, 25 Apr. 2014. Web. 05 Apr. 2015. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/97120/David-Carson>.

Davis, D. (2008a, March). Memoir, fantasy, media analysis: A collage-informed body of experience. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association. New York.

Desolneux, Agnès, Lionel Moisan, and Jean-Michel Morel. From Gestalt Theory to Image Analysis: A Probabilistic Approach. New York, NY: Springer, 2008. Print.

DUFRENNE, Mikel, and Edward Scott. CASEY. The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience. Translated by Edward S. Casey , Etc. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1973. Print.

Fuller, Peter (1988). Art and Psychoanalysis. London, UK: The Hogarth Press.

Heller, Steven, and Georgette Ballance. Graphic Design History. New York: Allworth, 2001. Print.

Jacob, Pierre, and Marc Jeannerod. "Précis of Ways of Seeing, the Scope and Limits of Visual Cognition." PSYCHE 13.2 (2007): 1-8. The Association for the Scientific Study of Conciousness, Apr. 2007. Web. 20 Feb. 2015.

"Paul-Rand.com." Biography. N.p., n.d. Web. 5 Apr. 2015. <http://www.paul-rand.com/foundation/biography/#.VSrTsqZN10c>.

"Psychology Concepts." Psychology Concepts. N.p., n.d. Web. 11 Apr. 2015. <http://www.psychologyconcepts.com/>.

Rancière, Jacques, and Gregory Elliott. "The Pensive Image." The Emancipated Spectator. London: Verso, 2009. 110. Print.

Shaughnessy, Nicola. Affective Performance and Cognitive Science: Body, Brain, and Being. N.p.: A&C Black, 2013. Print.

IMAGES

Fig A. Cashell, Fiona. *Home*. 2014, Digital Image. New York. Personal photograph by author. 2015

Fig B. Cashell, Fiona. *Getting Lost (Fiona)*. 2014, Digital Image. New York. Personal photograph by author. 2015

Fig C. Barry, Kevin. Untitled. 2015, Digital Image. New York. 2015

Fig D. Cashell, Fiona. *Horizon Lines*. 2015, Digital Image. New York. Personal photograph by author. 2015

Fig E. Cashell, Fiona. *Viewer*. 2014, Digital Image. New York. Personal photograph by author. 2015

Fig F. Cashell, Fiona. *Words*. 2014, Digital Image. New York. Personal photograph by author. 2015

Fig G. Cashell, Fiona. *Getting Lost*. 2014, Digital Image. New York. Personal photograph by author. 2015

Fig H. Carson, David. *The Fragile*. Digital image. *David Carson Design*. N.p., 1999. Web. 11 Apr. 2015. <http://www.davidcarsondesign.com>.

Figure I: Cashell, Fiona. *Trickle*. 2014, Digital Image. New York. Personal photograph by author.

Fig J: Paul Rand. Digital image. N.p., n.d. Web. 12 Apr. 2015. <http://www.paul-rand.com/foundation/portraits/#.VSrbn6ZN10c>.

Fig K: Cashell, Fiona. *Window*. 2015, Digital Image. New York. Personal photograph by author. 2015

Fig L: Cashell, Fiona. *Beaches*. 2013, Digital Image New York. Personal photograph by author. 2015

Fig M: Cashell, Fiona. *Resilience*. 2013, Digital Image. New York. Personal photograph by author. 2015