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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Scene of Shipwreck

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

Morgan Mandalay

Committee in charge:

Professor Amy Adler, Co- Chair
Professor Rubén Ortiz-Torres, Co-Chair
Professor Judith Dolan
Associate Professor Ricardo Dominguez
Professor Anya Gallaccio

2017

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The Thesis of Morgan Mandalay is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

Co-Chair

Co-Chair

University of California, San Diego

2017

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I would of course also like to thank the members of my committee Amy Adler, Rubén Ortiz-Torres, Ricardo Dominguez, Anya Gallaccio, and Judith Dolan for your support and care throughout my time at UCSD.

Thank you to my amazing cohort, without whom I would've been lost. I have grown so much through your own work.

The same could be said to all of the amazing artists who have allowed me the opportunity to learn and engage with their work at SPF15.

Lastly and perhaps most importantly, thank you to Kim-Anh Schreiber whose love, intellect, humor, and of course, patience have made me always strive to be better, work harder, and be more and more open.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Scene of Shipwreck

by

Morgan Mandalay

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California, San Diego, 2017

Professor Amy Adler, Co-Chair

Professor Rubén Ortiz-Torres, Co-Chair

My MFA Thesis exhibition, *Scene of Shipwreck*, is a synthesis of my practice as both an object and exhibition maker. Centered around the narrative described by survivors Henri Savigny and Alexandre Corréard of the raft of the French Frigate Medusé, I have constructed a number of rafts to explore context, materiality, and symbolism in a liminal space. The potentiality of both is used for revelation and concealment...or concealment through revelation... or the vice versa. This paper reveals the mask of the historical, philosophical and referential tropes to show their relationship to the emotional or poetic.

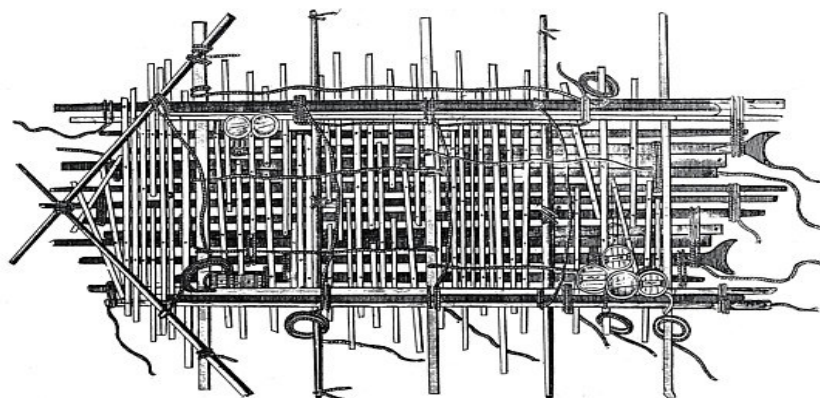


Figure 1: Drawing by Alexandre Corréard of the Raft, 1816

As the Argus approached the cannibalized Medusa, the Argonauts struggled to tell the difference between bodies of the living and those whose bodies had turned to stone. It had been 13 days and from the original 151 passengers on board the raft, 15 had survived albeit wounded, starving, and visions of their former selves. These numbers it should be noted have cosmic significance: 13 often considered an ominous number, excluded from elevators around the globe and 151 surpassing Dunbar's number, the assumed cognitive limit for human social relationships, by 1. Perhaps that's how we arrive at 15? Just lob off the 1. Over the course of the 13 days adrift on the raft the passengers suffered and caused innumerable horrors. First, the element of surprise: a collision rarely happens on purpose, it generally takes two parties, sentient or otherwise, not paying attention and then – BAM – you've stubbed your toe, bent your fender, got coffee stains all over the front of your new white shirt, etc. Close your eyes and envision collision. There's a violent physicality, head whipping back from inertia. In this case Viscount Hugues Duroy de Chaumareys, an emigré loyal to the now reinstated French king, had run their ship aground off the shore of Senegal. It was agreed upon that they would, from pieces of the shipwrecked Medusa, build a raft massive in scale. It was to be towed by the lifeboats which carried the other half of the crew of the ship, including their fair captain, to shore. The raft, having sunk to thigh deep, created a drag and so the order was given to cut the line. At first they thought it was a mistake and that help would be on it's way forthwith but when it be-

came clear they had been left to die, terror ensued. Night after night violent mutinies broke out. Having only brought wine they soon were starving and turned their hungry drunken eyes upon the corpses strewn about the raft. One day, as luck would have it, flying fish found themselves trapped in the rafts construction and they began mixing human flesh with the tiny fish. In the last few days people became hysterical. Some threw themselves overboard believing they could swim to shore and would bring help. They would have hallucinations of their salvation. A small white butterfly appeared, landing on their mast. On the 12th evening looking out on the horizon they saw a ship silhouetted. They debated if it was getting nearer or moving away. At times salvation and damnation share in appearances and with a flash the ship dipped out of view. The next morning, having all accepted their damned fate, they awoke with the Argus closing in on them.

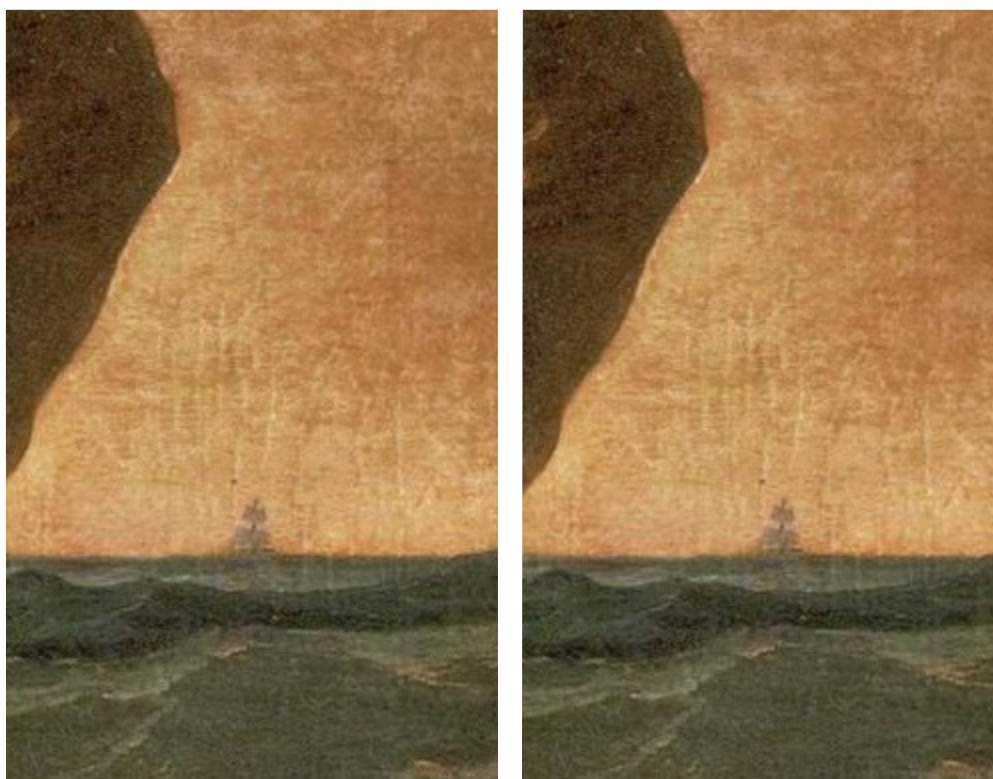


Figure 2: Detail of Gericault's "Raft of the Medusa" depicting the Argus on the horizon

On June 17th the French frigate Medusé set sail from the port city of Rochefort. On July 5th the ship was evacuated onto a 20 meter by 7 meter raft setting a course for disaster. On June 17th I was born in the naval hospital in Long Beach. On the morning of July 5th I got into a car with strangers setting a course for disaster. On June 17th, if all goes according to plan, I will graduate from a university built on a former naval installation, based on this very thesis. What is written in the stars for July?

On the horizon line of Gericault's famous *Raft of the Medusa*, deep in the distance of illusionistic space, is a ship. In the massive painting, it proportionally takes up the tiniest fraction of space. It's the moment of high drama. Silhouetted against a sky without land to tell us whether the sun is setting or rising, and no indication if the ship is coming or going, the viewer is left in a perpetual edge-of-their-seat moment. A visual homonym.

In Audrey Chan's talk at the UCSD Visual Art's symposium, "After the Fact: Feminist Cultural Production & Temporal Dissonance," she expressed the idea that if modernist time is a patriarchal time defined by the artist killing their father, then a potential feminist time beyond modernity could be that of learning from our mothers. In the current moment active listening, looking, and attempts at engaging from a number of angles are vital for me to understand not only my current placement in the world, but to see towards often hard to decipher hypothetical futures that appear in hallucinatory fever dreams. It's important to always keep an open eye because at times salvation and damnation share in appearances.

Am I a raft? Or am I a passenger?

Directness in discussing personal traumas is certainly not a strong suit. I know this is something I should probably work on with a shrink and not in a thesis, but it sets up a lot of the parameters from the viewer to understand my work which is filled with codes & symbols holding double meanings. Attempts at hiding in plain sight. Perhaps if I ever had developed the skill of being emotionally open, I could've avoided a lot of messes in my life. My own words just generally seem to only bring bad news. A gemini, I'm ruled by the planet Mercury. Ironically Mercury is the planet of communication. I guess it was never made explicit whether or not that communication was supposed to be clear or not. I was pretty young when I realized this. Directness seemed a dark spectre that only got someone in trouble in my home and, of course trouble was to be avoided. Instead of discussing feelings, we discussed politics and history, things that at the time seemed more grounded firmly in the real. It would take time for me to accept these as subjective, to realize the tales of my abuelo, who we called Papi, were far from fact. He loved poetry. His stories of Cuba, of the revolution, now seem at times like hyperbole. There was of course surreality to the revolution. Celia Sanchez Manduley, his cousin, a hero of the revolution and close confidant of Fidel's, would hide secret letters during the war on tiny scrolls hidden in butterfly flowers. How much more poetic can you get? He was one of my few sources to understanding my deeper self. Still, emotional conflict, discussion of traumas, these were things to be avoided. It was from this that I learned to lean on poesis to speak towards the personal, masking emotions in philosophical, historical, theoretical musings. In a way to write a thesis paper seems to be about avoiding my own tendencies. Instead my aim within this paper will be to give voice to them and clarify some of my own symbols, where they come from, how and why I choose them.

Symbols that recur in my work with frequency:

1) Cut Flowers



2) Clowns



3) Cages



4) Doors



5) Windows



6) Monkeys



7) The Ocean



8) Cars



9) Ships



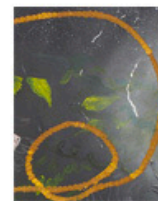
10) Death



11) Smoking Hands



12) Rope



13) Butterflies



14) Sunset/rise



15) Theater Curtains



Figure 3: List of 15 recurring symbols with images

Terry Smith in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist in his book *Talking Contemporary Curating* states “‘poesis’ means more than to simply poeticize something mundane, more than to romanticize material actualities. It is a creative process that seeks to make things while at the same time provisionalizing the hardening of distinctions, working against determination and opening out [...] certain parallel realities --- or at least hinting at their possibility.”² The symbols that I’m drawn towards point to the as yet to be or slowly unbeing. A clown’s makeup can be wiped away as the curtains draw to a close. Cars, ships, doors and windows offer means to ride away into the sunset. The cut flower, frozen in my paintings, in the real is on a one way track towards an eventual death.

Similarly my exhibition making practice derives itself from an interest in the liminal. SPF15 is a nomadic and amorphous exhibition platform utilizing the beach and pop-up canopy as its substrate to collide art patronage with the dominant outdoor-based culture of San Diego. When making an exhibition, first I find it important to consider the context having learned from mistakes with previous curatorial initiatives that I was a part of at Space 4 Art and Sunday Project. Both of these platforms ignored surrounding super structures of the community in which they were embedded, instead attempting to replicate exhibition models from larger more established market-based art centers such as New York and Los Angeles. David Byrne, from the Talking Heads, speaking about the influence of architecture on music says, “if we make music, primarily the form at least, to fit these contexts, and if we make art to fit gallery walls or museum walls, and if we write software to fit existing operating systems, is that how it works? Yeah. I think it’s evolutionary. It’s adaptive.”³ I wanted to make exhibitions that used part of San Diego’s unique cultural performativity to engage aesthetic dialogue in a space where viewers were already primed to engage visually, critically, and subliminally.

The beach and the painted picture are surfaces of the in-between: bi-curious spaces marking the division between land and sea, mind and body respectively. San Diego, my home city as well as the city of this institution, is itself situated as one of the largest doorways between two cultures in North America. Thusly, much of the artistic production in the city is engaged in a dialogue that enlists a government defined line that separates cultures, peoples, languages, and economies. SPF15 was meant to further expand this dialogue by not only looking south for lessons of interstitiality but



Figure 4: 'Scene of Shipwreck' 2017, oil on canvas, 16 feet x 10 feet (over 4 panels)

west, to a space of the ecological interstitial, constantly transformed by the crashing of waves bringing new information in the shape of wave patterns, biological matter, trash, and the like.

The narrative of the Medusa shipwreck is a point of departure, the story of a raft adrift on the open ocean. The raft in this instance is used as a representation of communal liminality in a moment of turmoil. It's estranged from a singular connectedness. In the show I have used the story as a backdrop to draw the connection between my practices as object maker and exhibition maker through five tactics I have named as collaboration, collisions, cannibalism, illusion, and visual homonym. But it is more than that. In this reimagining of the 13 terrible days of the raft I have repurposed these themes into 5 curatorial rafts, exploring the building of worlds, selves, and meaning in the face of horror. These tactics are not my own. They are inherited from a family that has entropically had to learn to rebuild from Cuba to the U.S., from the trailer park to the middle class, from the South to California, from suburbia to jail, high school dropout to grad school, mental breaks.

It's also a postmodern idea. Collecting images and narratives from disparate systems: conflating high, low, pop, and avant garde. However, unlike many of the practitioners of what has been dubbed postmodern art (here I'm thinking of Salle, Kippenberger, Prince and the like) who deploy these techniques as a sort of pseudo-critique of late capitalism and the avant garde, I am more interested in a generative relationship to images and narratives; specifically from which can derive what feels like a personal relationship. To this end I find myself attracted to the work of artists who refrain from the cynical.

As a model for how postmodern techniques can speak towards the personal I find myself drawn towards artists such as Karen Kilimnick, Rosemarie Trockel, or even Guston. (I should acknowledge that none of the artists in these lists adhere hard and fast to the general characteristic I'm laying out. Kippenberger for instance, a huge influence of mine, in many ways embodied his work in very personal ways. In fact his last major exhibition was itself designed around *The Raft of the Medusa*, which in posthumously appears all the more personal in his approach: placing himself as the sitter as an isolated passenger of the ill fated raft.) In writing about Kilimnick's work for her exhibition curator Ingrid Schaffer wrote:

Kilimnick's work displays the complete repertoire [of postmodernism]. However, to her credit, she calls these techniques into play without irony or detachment. Sidestepping all of the anticipated postmodern positions, Kilimnick's art is disarmingly subjective --- immersive, imaginative, opinionated, possessive. It simultaneously mediates and expresses those desires and emotions, which appear, like the imagery itself, to be left critically unresolved, full of mystery and anticipation.⁴

For me this is the goal post. A work that sincerely approaches elements of history, images, stories, and tropes not to show a lack of value but to engage in a generative sense with the past and ideas outside of the immediate cannon. In this way they can be used as languages of the personal or emotional, which of course has a slippage into the 'political' and a return to this notion put forward by Audrey Chan of a feminist approach to temporality in regards to post-modernity.

As an exhibition *Scene of Shipwreck* consists of one large scale (16' wide x

10' feet tall across 4 panels) picture on the back wall as you enter the gallery. Depicting multiple instances on the raft collapsed into one, it serves as backdrop for the exhibition as whole. Five paintings stand in the center of the clean well lighted space, dislocated from the wall resembling theater flats in this orientation. They are dark depictions of the night ocean. Wave patterns only emerge through the refraction of light against the brush strokes which swirl up and over each other, with a small strip of night sky at the top, and small bit of gestural seafoam across the bottom. These are attached, standing up right, atop representations of rafts crafted from shipping crates and cast away lumber. They serve a number of roles showing the often multiplicitous utility my paintings take on as:

- illusionistic space on a two dimensional plane
- objects in a field
- substrates for other objects to engage
- potentials

The number 'five' often comes up when breaking down the events of the raft: five panels of Messr Marshalls' *Grand Marine Peristhrophic Panorama of the Shipwreck Medusa French Frigate with Fatal Raft* (what a serious mouth full!) or Louis-François Charles Desnoyer's five act play *Le Naufrage de la Médusa*. In both instances the attempt to convey narrative is shown in five peaks. These peaks, however, are recurrent and passed from raft to passengers and the vice versa. (The number's ten, not five then right?) For example, I use the term "cannibalism." Now this term, as regards the story of the shipwreck, is often equated only to the moment that the passengers, starving after days with nothing but wine, turned their eyes and stomachs upon their shipmates whose dead bodies lay all around them. This is an echo of the week and a half before, when the crew learned the value of cannibalism as they stripped the lifeless body of their vessel to build the massive raft they would dine on. The raft is a body and the body a raft and together they are an index. Fifteen survived.

The flats are used as framing devices for the intermingling of the the story of the raft and the work of ten invited artists that have been influential in my growth and thinking over the years. The works chosen by each artist operate in conversation with the five key themes I will define in this paper. The art works lean, hold, hang, subvert,

highlight and play with my paintings. The artists have leaned in, held, hung with, subverted, shone a light on, and played with me, and I them. Community could be boiled down to that flip between raft and passenger, substrate and active site, figure and ground.

Hans Ulrich Obrist responded to Terry Smith's definition of poesis with a description of curating as making process as group activity. "It's always a matter of making something with someone else, or for someone else and always in dialogue with artists."⁵ In dialogue I've found that I can speak more clearly. Trust is created in the dialogic that is absent in monologic interaction. In the exhibition the interior exhibitions, the rafts, and as well as the works of each artist synchronize to create a provisional dialoguing, a theater of images and objects. There is a push from aft to bow, my paintings and the work of others shift from raft to passenger, always standing on their sea legs and never finding



It is placed to mostly block the painting of the dark sea, both a reminder of the events on the raft and also a protectorate, keeping the viewer from falling into the same dark water.

On the reverse side of the canvas, hung from the stretcher bars is a monitor with Farrah Emami's video *Swimming Lesson (Version 1.2)*. In the video Emami is with an older man, presumably her father, in what appears to be a public swimming pool at night. Maybe at a hotel. Father and daughter here have returned to the glowing primordial fluids as he works to teach her a lesson that went untaught. It's a strange echo, the water seems to refer to a return to the womb. Breathing, kicking, and paddling lessons are given all under the watchful eye of the camera. The flip of this video is Farrah's relationship with her dad who she puts at ease by asking him to perform this paternal gesture. The works imply movement toward or through, building in a foundational kind of way. The body and the structure in both instances being built through collaboration.

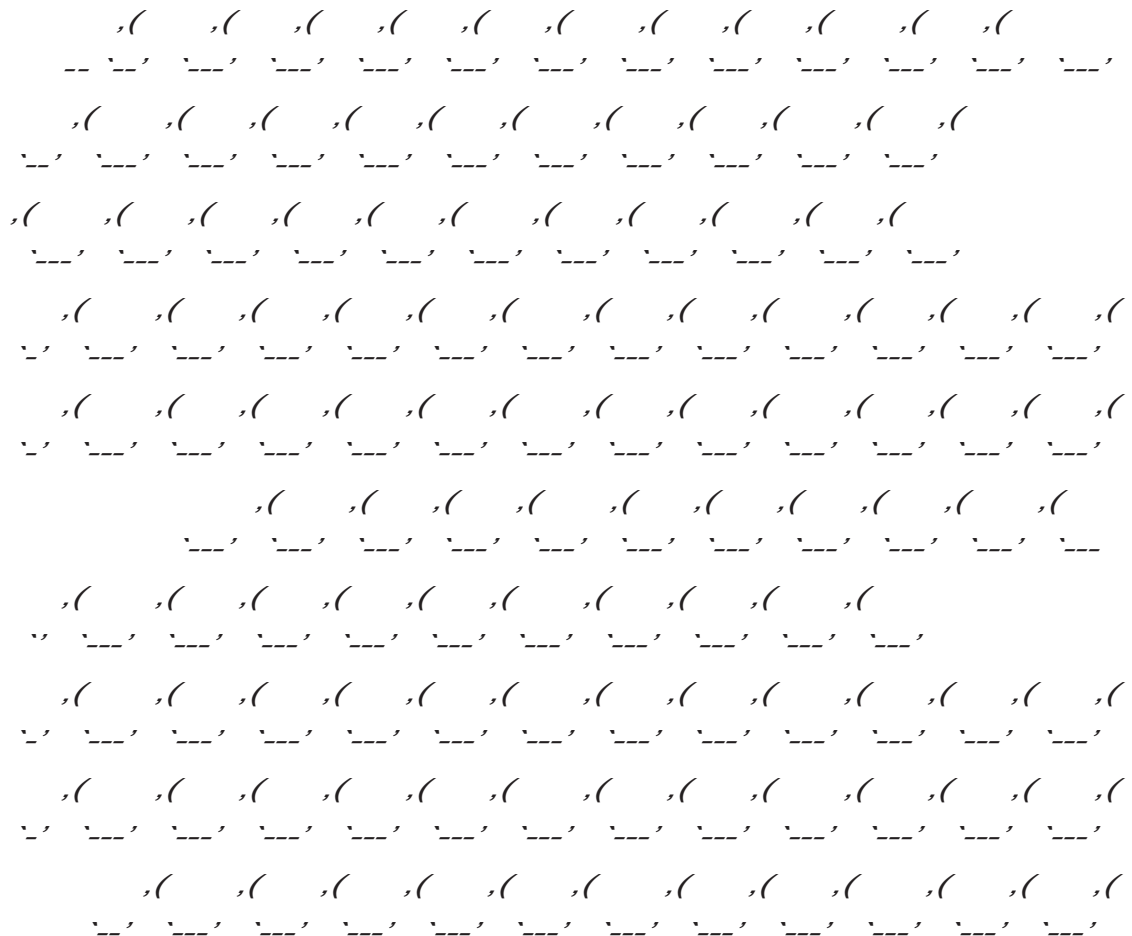




Figure 6: SANGREE, *Running Figure (dawn)*, 2016

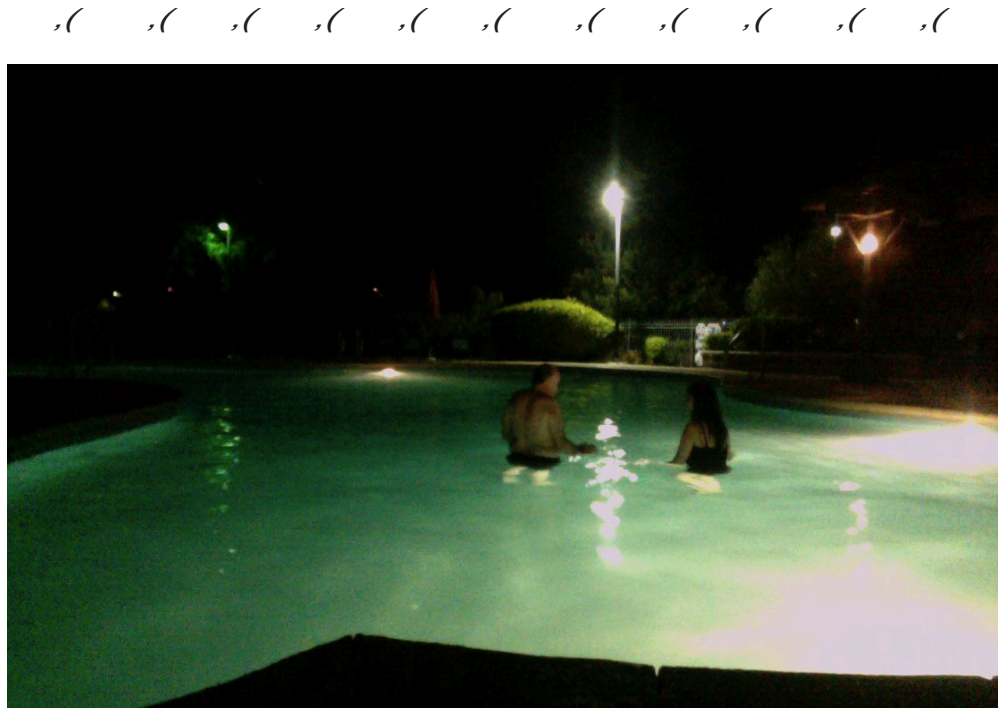


Figure 7: Farrah Emami, Stills from *Swimming Lessons*, 2012

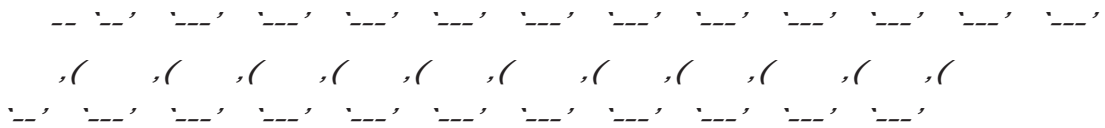




Figure 8: Mike Calway- Fagen, *Our relevance on us to be we*, 2012



Figure 9: Allison Wiese, *Every Man a King But No One Wears a Crown*, 2007

Raft of Cannibalism:

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It was composed of the top-masts of the frigate, yards, fishes, boom, etc. These different pieces joined together by very strong ropes, were perfectly solid; the two principal pieces were two top-masts, which were placed at the extremity of the two sides; four other masts, two of which were of the same length and strength as the first, joined by two by two, at the center of the machine, added to its solidarity.

-Pg. 57

Those whom death had spared in the disastrous night which have just been described, fell upon the dead bodies with which the raft was covered, and cut off pieces which some instantly devoured. Seeing that this horrid nourishment had given strength to those who had made use of it, it was proposed to dry it, in order to render it a little less disgusting.

-Pg. 108

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The crew tore into the Medusé, ripping apart her hull and deck, salvaging what pieces of wood, rope, sail and innards they could. What they crafted was a massive raft, 20 meters long and 7 wide: this was their ark crammed with soldiers, and sailors, deckhands, a boy, and one maiden. They were from a number of races and creeds but none of this would save most of them from their fates: meal time. Their bodies sacrificed as sustenance the way the Medusé a week before had given her body as well.

Aboard this raft ensues an entropic cycle of devouring. Embedded in Kim-Anh Schreiber's piece *Pain Killer* a voice recording cries out:

...the body is *BACK*, but not all boats are rising.

**I WOULD LIKE TO BE AS GRACEFUL AS A BOAT
FLOATING OVER THE SEA
I WOULD LIKE TO BE AS MUTABLE AS A MYTH**

In this siren story, as she might say, the 4x4 wood beam, chopped to the artist's height with cuts and lines that track her own physical traumas, lives out its dream. The raft on which the painting is attached is made from this worry dolls body, sliced down lengthwise it is now the boat. The painting becomes reminiscent of Arnold Böcklin's painting *Isle of Death* depicting an upright body wrapped in a funerary shroud being rowed to an island. In this case, the body is the painting flat, wrapped in Chelsea Culprit's *Every time you hear a bell, an angel gets its wings*, adorned with bells and crystal tear drops, hands reaching out for help but also holding the painting snugly. The dark sea is now barely visible through Culprit's shroud or body bag or cocoon that both consumes and gives new life to the painting underneath.

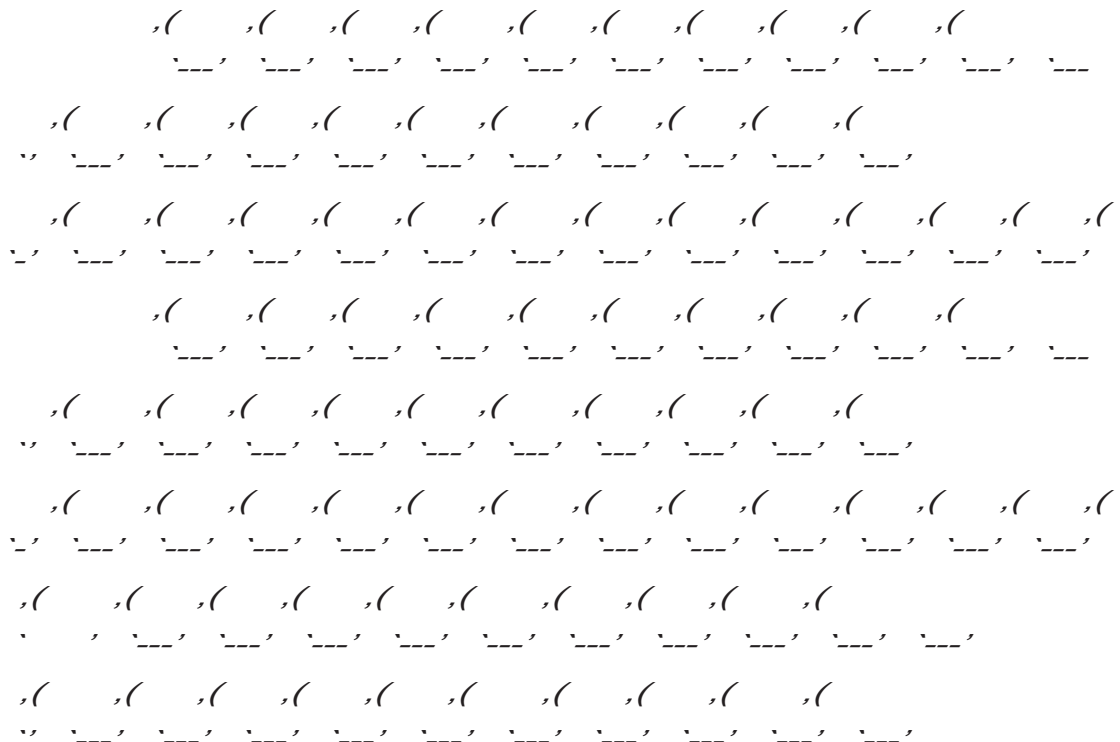




Figure 10: Chelsea Culprit, *Every time you hear a bell, an angel gets it wings*, 2017

the surface, looking away. From beneath the raft we hear the roaring of the wind in Tim Mann's sound piece, a digital recording of lake Michigan in the winter from the artist's cell phone. When I first exhibited this piece of Tim's, on a windless day by the ocean, guests repeatedly expressed their confusion and disorientation. They could clearly hear the beating of the wind. In congress these two pieces make the totality feel alive, pulsating light and sound.

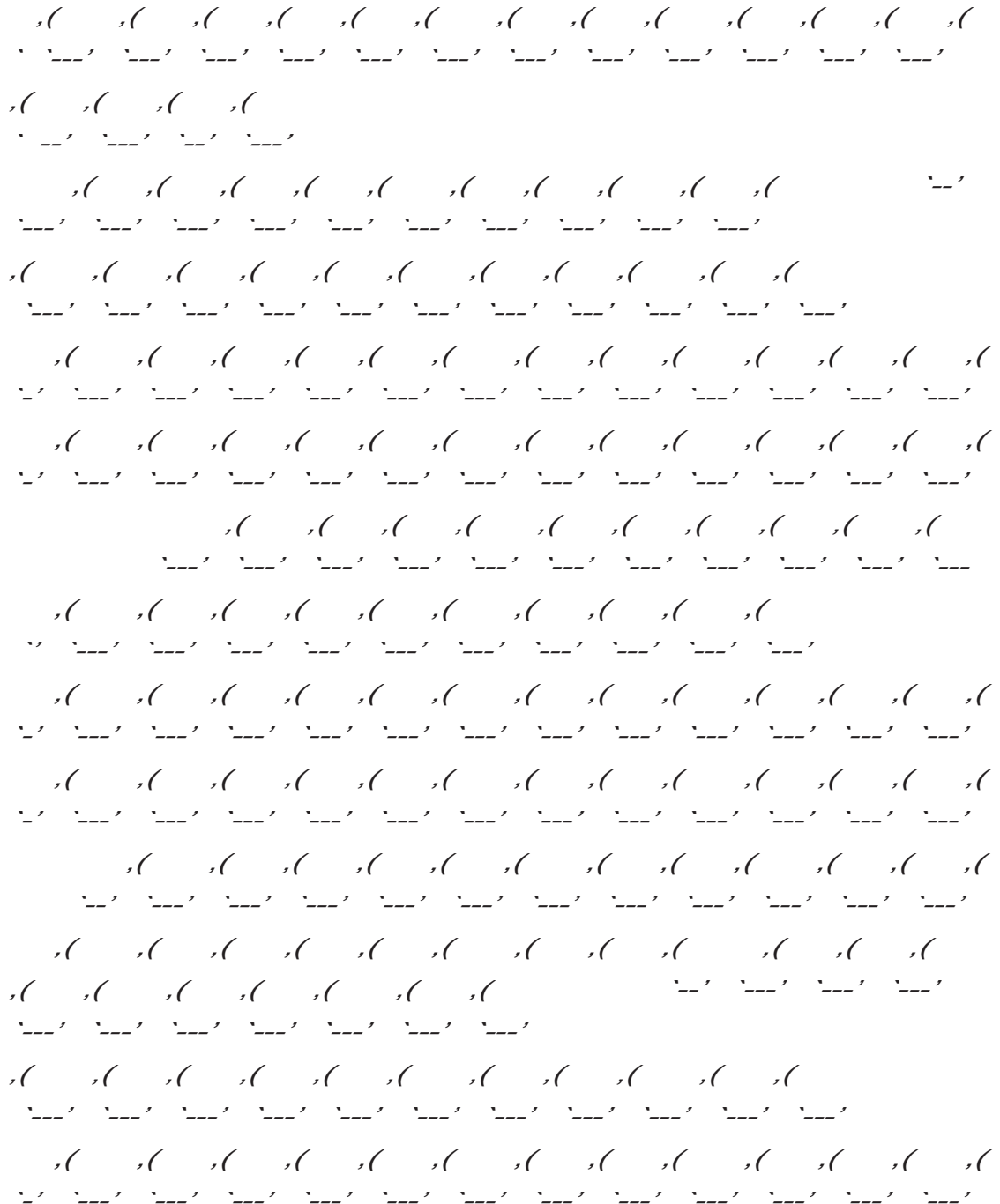




Figure 12: Chantal Wnuk, *Ignoring the Ocean*, 2014

The Raft of Homonym: ((((

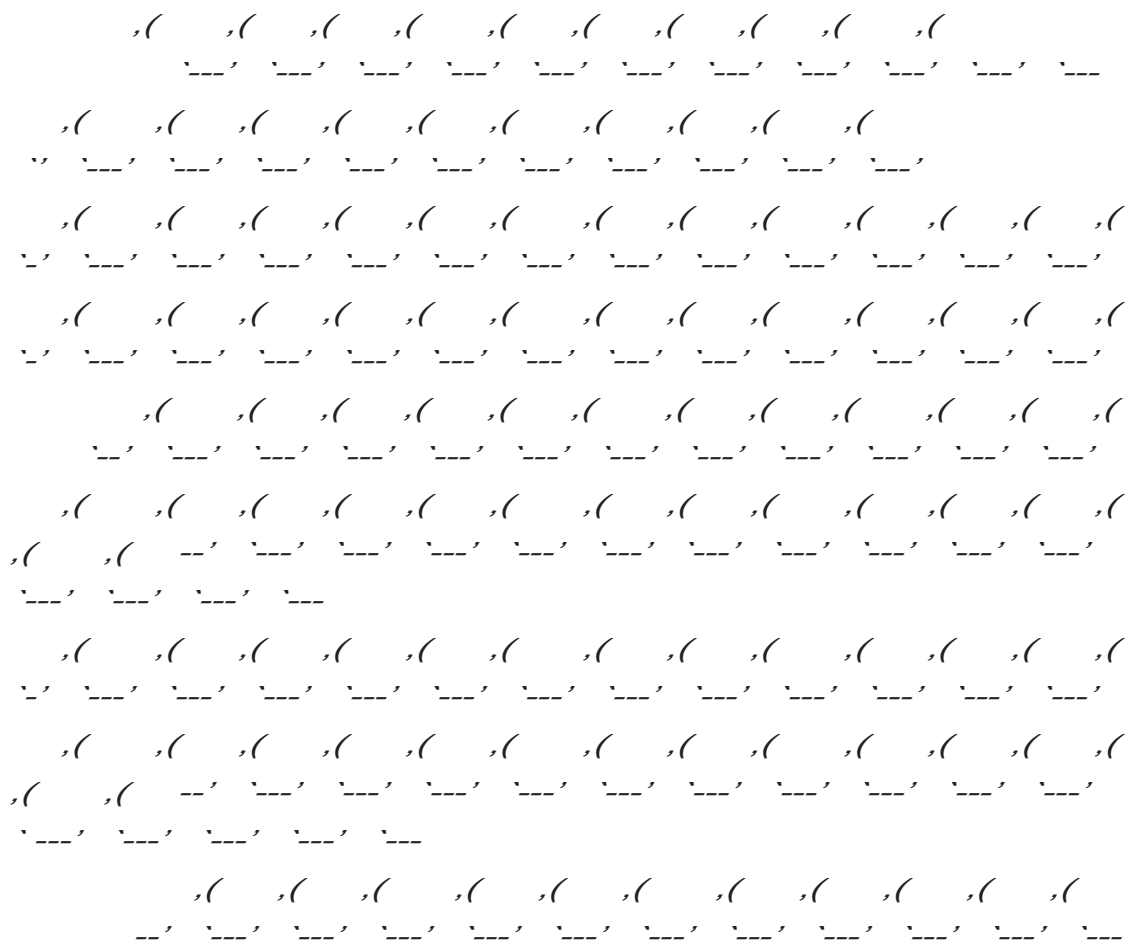
Looking toward the horizon he decried a ship, and announced it to us by exclamation of joy: we perceived it to be the brig; but it was at a very great distance; we could distinguish only the tops of the mast. For above half an hour, we were suspended between hope and fear; some thought they saw the ship become larger, and others affirmed that its course carried it from us : these latter were the only ones whose eyes were not fascinated by hope, for the brig disappeared. From the delirium of joy, we fell into profound despondency and grief. At last, to calm our despair, we wished to seek some consolation in the arms of sleep.

After we had passed two hours, absorbed in the most cruel reflections, the master gunner of the frigate wishing to go to the front of the raft went out of the tent; scarcely had he put his head out; when he turned toward us, uttering a loud cry, joy was painted on his countenance, his hands were stretched to ward the sea, "Saved! See the brig close upon us."

-Pg. 135-137

For the second time today, I am teary eyed. The first was in rereading this passage of Savigny and Corréard's book. There is something about this moment of not knowing, waiting, feeling distraught, done, over, and eventually redeemed saved by others that you thought had turned their back on you long ago. I've been fortunate in this regard. I've made terrible mistakes in all sorts of arenas. I've worked hard to better myself but am still shocked and filled with gratitude and humbled by the kindness others have bestowed on me.

This second time welling up just happened while mining through old messages exchanged between myself and the two artists on board this raft. This raft is unique in that the idea of a visual homonym, the moment depicted in Gericault's famous painting, isn't something immediately present in Audrey Hope or Trevor Amery's work. I can't point to a specific aspect as I've done with the other work in the show. Instead it's much more personal. I still remember meeting both of these amazing artists and humans while interviewing at UCSD. Trevor was charismatic as all hell with a glowing smile, Audrey was a beacon of kindness, and boundless amounts of fun...she desperately wanted a good burrito. They were two of my fastest friends in the program. Together we would work to start art fairs in dilapidated malls, write proposals, scale engineering buildings, collaborate, make exhibitions, perform together, travel to far off lands. I have learned so much from beginning to end with Audrey and Trevor. I have leaned on them in hard times and partied with them in the good. It seems all too fitting that my thesis would be smashed between these two amazing huggers. I'm lucky that in coming and going from UCSD my warm feelings for these two remains the same.



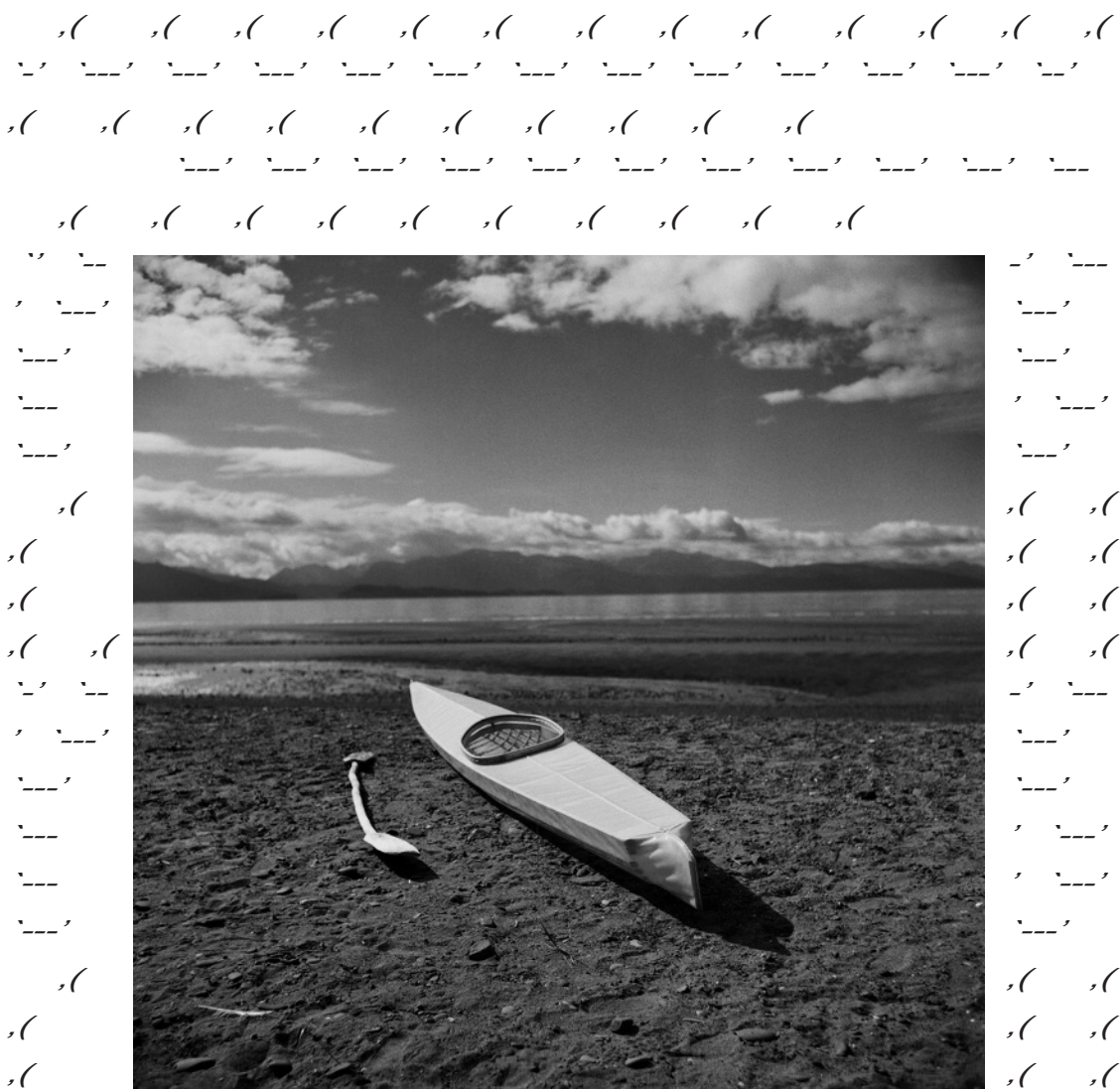


Figure 14: Trevor Amery, Baaidarka, 2016

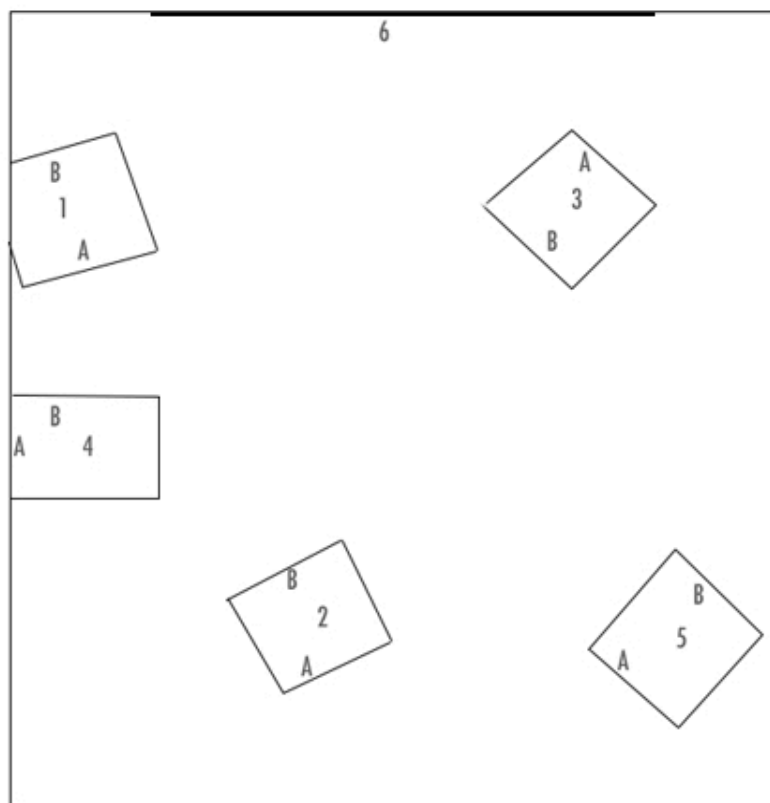
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Appendix

Scene of Shipwreck

an exhibition by Morgan Mandalay



1- Raft of Collaboration, 2017

- A. SANGREE, Running Figure (Dawn), 2016
- B. Farrah Emami, Swimming Lessons, 2012

2- Raft of Collisions, 2017

- A. Mike Calway-Fagen, our reliance on us to be we, 2012
- B. Allison Wiese, Every Man a King But No One Wears a Crown, 2007

3- Raft of Cannibalism, 2017

- A. Chelsea Culprit, Every time you hear a bell, an angel gets its wings, 2017
- B. Kim-Anh Schreiber, Pain Killer, 2014

4- Raft of Illusions, 2017

- A. Chantal Wnuk, Ignoring the Ocean, 2014
- B. Tim Mann, 150110_001.mp3, 2015

5- Raft of Homonym, 2017

- A. Trevor Amery, Bilge Pump, 2017
- B. Audrey Hope, Cloud, 2017

6- Scene of Shipwreck, 2017

oil and acrylic paint on canvas
16 x 10 feet (split into 4 panels)