

## UN | DOING: A Short Film by Frey Soares

Thesis Defense Spring 2021

I want to thank each and every one of you for taking the time out of your day to come support my project this evening. My name is Frey Dias Soares and I have been an animated arts Major here at PNCA for the last four years. I want to provide you a trigger warning for the contents of my defense. The topics I'm going to cover this evening include: mental health struggles, eating disorders, drug usage, death, and grief. This film and presentation are based solely on my own experiences with mental health and drug usage, and I don't claim that the substances I discuss will benefit anyone else struggling with grief or mental health issues since brain and body chemistries differ from person-to-person.

(Break for 5-6 minutes for the audience to watch the film.)

Let's start by saying this has been a hell of a last year, hasn't it? All of our lives have been significantly, dare I say, permanently, altered by the COVID-19 virus. Just about everyone I know has experienced some sort of loss this past year, and we've all made sacrifices for the greater good. Tuesday, March 17, 2020, will be a date forever marked in my memory, in the famous words from the fresh prince himself, as the day my life got flipped, turned upside down." I was an independent woman with a part-time bartending gig that paid all of my bills, a full-time animation student getting ready for my senior year of college (something I've been working toward for 10 years), money in my savings account, and an amazing community of artists that I got to see daily. In one day, all of that was gone, and let me tell you, I freaked out. I didn't realize how much of my self-worth was built on all of those things and for the first time in my life I had none of that, so I had to quickly figure out how to: 1) cope with the sudden losses of the components of my life that gave me purpose and 2) find myself after losing myself to (what felt like) a mental hell hole.

About 4 years ago I felt myself experiencing a similar state of mind. Back then, I struggled with depression, anxiety, and an eating disorder; I had dropped out of college to just work full time at a fast-food restaurant; I had little direction or ambition for my creative endeavors; I was taking antidepressants, and had been severely restricting my food intake and abusing laxative pills to further purge the weight from my body. That was when I had my very first acid trip where my mind was split open and time stood still. I searched through

every inch of my conditioned human experience in order to debug the viruses of my brain software. This acid trip felt like an out-of-body experience where I was able to actually see myself for the first time without all the mental fog aggressively demonizing the person I was. After this experience, I realized that I was a part of the beautiful natural world and that anytime I didn't feed myself or purged nutrients from my body, it felt as sacrilegious as the deforestation of the Amazon rainforest. Something clicked and my mental health thrived for six months following that trip because I suddenly understood that I am a very small, specific piece of the whole universe, but that my specificity was how the whole worked. How could a substance dissolved into a tiny, 1 centimeter by 1 centimeter, paper square break down the walls of such deeply ingrained behavior and survival instincts? That is a question that I continue to explore. It is a mystical experience like this that is shared by so many who find themselves acquainting themselves with hallucinogenic substances. So...I took it upon myself, with all this free time, to begin experimenting with psychedelic mushrooms and other hallucinogens during the lockdown to figure out how to find comfort within the losses I experienced.

Many people in this country have lost their livelihoods, and some have even lost family and friends during the pandemic. On January 13, my uncle Fernando suffered two heart attacks and two strokes a couple of days after which put my whole family and me into a frenzy. He died a couple of weeks after on January 28 which sparked the trajectory of this short film. Life continued after his funeral, and I had to find a way to cope amidst the busy semester and channel these emotions into the art. His death and processing my grief using psychedelics became the central focus of my film.

Now, I do not particularly like to reference Freud as he is a problematic influencer in the understanding of the human mental condition and experience, but Freud's concept of the self can be perceived as analogous to the psychedelic experience. According to Freud, the self consists of three components: the id, the ego, and the superego. The "id" is a human's most basic animalistic instincts that seek the instant gratification of the "pleasure principle". That includes emotions pertaining to hunger, anger, and sex, to name a few. He considers babies to be all "id" as they are consistently giving into the pleasure principle. The superego is motivated by a person's social and moral standards, which are usually influenced by our

parents and our environments. The ego is the mediator between the id and the superego allowing the two impulses to find themselves in reality so they can be acted upon accordingly. However, the ego is usually torn between the demands of both the id and the superego so, at times, it establishes defense mechanisms such as repression, phobias, and mental illness to cope.

Psychedelic substances, such as psilocybin (also colloquially known as magic mushrooms) and Lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) override a network in the brain called the "default mode network" which involves our sense of identity. Using Freud's language, these substances allow for the temporary dissolution of the ego, creating new connections within the brain. Thus, allowing the mushroom "voyager" to challenge their established mannerisms to bring clarity and understanding of their place in existence and the world around them. In other words, it erases one's preconceived notions of the importance of assimilating ourselves to the status quo and helps people find significance in abstract philosophies. American journalist and author of *How To Change Your Mind*, Michael Pollan, talks in his book about how psychedelic research is still a relatively novel frontier for scientists, but the overall impression is that hallucinogens allow the brain to essentially reboot for a moment and it usually produces a positive outcome for the voyager.

Psilocybin and LSD trials were federally funded between the years of 1953 and 1973 and were tested on many volunteers who struggled with addiction, obsessive-compulsive disorder, depression, terminal cancer patients, convicts, and so-called "healthy normals," such as artists, to improve or inspire creativity. However, no matter how promising the studies were, the manner in which these experiments were conducted back then was poorly controlled and structured. Since these substances were so easily obtainable, eventually they were leaked into the hands of the counterculture movement and President Richard Nixon launched the War On Drugs in 1973, shutting down all psychedelic research up until its revival in the United States in the early 2000s. A research group at The John Hopkins Center for Psychedelic and Consciousness Research became the first to obtain approval from the United States to again begin conducting trials with volunteers and in 2006 released a psilocybin study that has become a prominent resource for future research on its advantageous lasting-effects.

Last year, Oregon became the first state to legalize psilocybin therapy through Measure 109, which is an interesting synchronicity with the birth of my short film, UN | DOING. I knew, beforehand, that I wanted to make a film about my experiences with the hallucinogens I was partaking in during the lockdown and how that was benefitting my mental health, but I struggled with what I wanted to even say about it. When this project was at its infantile stages of idea development, I planned on creating an educational film to essentially persuade my viewers into being on board with this legalization and proving why it could be beneficial. I now realize that was an absolute vain attempt as I have only begun to chip away at the surface of all this complicated and extensive research. I was also adamant about not making an extremely personal piece as I've made embarrassingly cathartic work before and feared that this film could have taken a similar path. Originally I had proposed a story about a girl (not me) who took magic mushrooms with her friend and figured some shit out. I quickly, and reluctantly, began realizing that this character was (Surprise!) me, and my panel encouraged me to explore the close relationship I had with my character. It was at this point when I cut out my secondary character entirely to both ease my workload and to focus solely on developing my mini-me.

I had a trip to the coast planned the week my uncle was first admitted into Loma Linda Hospital, and I knew that tripping on acid might not be a good idea since it always reveals matters that one might not be wanting to or be ready to face. But I did it anyway. I began my journey at 2:30 PM, using this time surrounded by people I love and trust in a relaxing setting to conduct a fieldwork report on my experience with the substance as my previous attempt a month or so before conducting this report was diverted by my inability to focus on documenting my journey. Despite all, I needed SOME direction on where to take this project. My log was kept concise, but detailed, separated by time of day. Time becomes such a futile concept as the peak progresses so some logs were recorded at 13 minutes from a previous one or at like 22 minutes. About 3 hours into my "fieldwork report" I found myself sitting on a stump of driftwood watching the sunset over the Oregon coast. I began to break down and think of life in quarantine, my uncle and my family down in California. I wept like a child for several hours over the unknowns of my uncle's impermanence and the guilt that I felt celebrating a birthday that weekend when my family had been so burdened with worry and grief. I came to an epiphany as I logged this entry into my phone at 5:12 PM:

“I almost lost my uncle this week. My family has been through so much and it’s weird to feel a bit removed from everything right now. But it’s ok. I’ve just been needing some space to feel and cry by myself. And now I have it. This space feels so important now considering how **uncle almost lost**.

Just relax. It’s going to be ok.”

Before my uncle got sick, I was a bomb ready to explode. In that moment, I realized the importance of taking the time to feel emotions even if they are heart-wrenching. I felt so much anger and resentment towards the pandemic for taking away everything I’ve worked so hard for and I bottled it up and did absolutely nothing about it except the occasional outburst. I sat with myself for a very long time, repeatedly soothing my inner child as I consistently flipped between being my own emotional caretaker and that fearful child. Our family lost my uncle a couple of weeks after this experience and it devastated us. I felt the overwhelming collective grief from my family, but needed my own outlet, my own space outside of them to process.

I must make it clear to you all that I had no idea where my story was going even during the midterm review. The beginning, however, was always clear to me; a young woman’s previous attempts at subduing her grief and sadness weren’t working, so she takes mushrooms and...then what? I had chosen to begin this film with my character experiencing some degree of depression to which she had been prescribed the antidepressant Fluoxetine, more commonly known as Prozac. I used to take Prozac back before my first acid trip but stopped shortly thereafter because I wanted to try a different route on my mental health journey. The pills signify all the feelings I was “bottling” up last year; a behavior that was not working for me as well. The colors of the backgrounds are muted and monochromatic adding more visual insight into the mental state of the character. Working with this color palette was also done to completely separate the beginning half of my film from the psychedelic portion of my film.

It was very important for me to physically put myself into this film which I did through the animation technique of rotoscope. For those of you who aren’t familiar with the term, rotoscoping is an animation technique in which animators trace over live-action footage, frame by frame, to produce a realistic action. Physically acting out each shot allowed me to experience my feelings, making each element feel more real. I was better able to direct how

the story was going to unfold as each piece was revealed to me. During this time, I was also attempting to create my whole film on Photoshop, which was very counterintuitive and was stifling my motivation. It wasn't until a peer of mine presented an assignment of hers done on Adobe Animate, a program made specifically for digital 2D animation, which made my workflow so much easier. I was able to easily and directly draw over my filmed footage, encouraging my creativity to start finding the rest of the pieces and their connections.

The psychedelic portion of my film was the key to unlocking the rest of the pieces as it takes place in a parallel dimension and allows for basically anything to happen. This alternate dimension is where I can simply show the visual metaphors of my grief. It was essential that the trippy visuals did not assault my viewers as I feel like that would have taken attention away from the true essence of my film. It would have centered my narrative around the drug as opposed to the emotions surrounding it. I did, however, want to allude to the things one might see during a psilocybin or LSD trip. Colors swirl everywhere you look and the most random things seem to be breathing and alive. It is also a very common phenomenon to feel an out-of-body experience, where one might literally feel like they are watching themselves from above or in a movie. That's how the idea of the television and the moon came to fruition. I had a little fun with filming the portions of myself seen in these objects by getting dressed up and painting my face with wild makeup. This was my way of self-care during a mentally and physically demanding project. I wanted to be the psychedelic space guardian that encourages my character to go a little deeper into their psyche. The woman on the television gives my character a yellow rope trying to reassure her that whatever happens next is okay and that she will always have a tie to her safe place.

The color yellow plays a significant role in my character's relationship to exploring her emotions during her psilocybin trip. Originally I had made the rope red, but it felt too aggressive for the rope's intended purpose. I needed a gentler color, but one that was still just as loud and powerful. Yellow is the color of caution which speaks to the level of self-awareness she must have when processing very heavy emotions. It's important to not allow these feelings to consume her in the process, and when they do begin to feel overwhelming to try to find the balance. The color yellow is connected to the chakra located in the solar plexus which if balanced brings strength and confidence. This vibrant color

represents the cycles of birth and rebirth, a visual representation of the cycle of shedding the old and welcoming in the new. It is the color of mental courage.

Mental Courage is what the title of my film, UN | DOING is all about. It's sometimes so easy to give power to the things that can ruin us. The death of my uncle could have easily put me in a very dark place, and it's very natural to go to that dark place in grief, but I am trying to be mindful in knowing to keep myself in a healthy state of mind I must simultaneously disengage in harmful coping mechanisms (the prefix of Un- of my title) and be rigorously proactive in self-care and communication (the doing).

The second portion of my film takes place in a dark void with muted colors swirling about to mimic the psychedelic visuals seen when one closes their eyes during a trip. You know when you rub your eyes really hard and you see all those wiggly patterns and colors? Well, hallucinogens produce a very similar phenomenon, but more intense. I wanted to make sure that the dark void was still visually engaging and didn't look as depressing as it sounds. I used simple linework and kept my character's design transparent which not only cut my work time in half but also added the element of my character essentially exhibiting her insides for the world to see. She glows in this setting as she is her own guide and actively holds the power to the internal machinations of her mind. She wanders the cavernous void by herself going deeper into the stages of her grief. This section of my film is where my mini-me comes face-to-face with the harsh reality of losing her uncle.

California at this time in January had the highest recorded cases of the virus so the state implemented some very strict measures to ensure the safety of all patients. My family was not allowed to visit my uncle during his stay at Loma Linda Hospital due to California's COVID-19 regulations. Loma Linda Hospital scheduled an hour each day through a ZOOM call for my family and I to visit with him. It was so painful for us to see him in that state and have to face his mortality alone. In the early afternoon on January 28, I got the fateful call from my family telling me that my uncle's health had taken a turn for the worse and that the hospital had called to get my family to come in as soon as possible. Unfortunately, my aunt, my cousin, and I all live out of state so the only way we were allowed to say our goodbyes was through our group video call as my mom and my other family members took turns being in the room with him. There came a point where my family had overstayed their welcome and had to leave him there to die alone, not surrounded by his family the way he would have

wanted due to the COVID-19 regulations. I was able to allude to that crucial moment by having the machine code as my character puts her hand up to the phone, ending the call. Rain begins to pour as she is suddenly overcome with sadness. She trudges through the water as it comes to overwhelm her until she struggles to stay afloat.

Psychedelic journeys can at times include very intense emotional states and can earn the title of a "bad trip". An experienced psychonaut, someone who investigates their psyche through the use of altered states of consciousness, will tell you that "bad trips" are there to teach us a lesson. When I sat on that stump on the Oregon coast sobbing my eyes out, the darkness after the sunset felt like it was shrouding me, to a point where I thought I couldn't breathe. I felt like I was drowning in the darkness, which is shown through the imagery of my character drowning toward the end of my film. A figure appears in a glowing orb, extending their hand to rescue my mini-me from being completely engulfed by their emotions. I did this because I wanted to remind myself and my viewers that it's okay to let your guard down and come to others for help. It's okay to cry and have someone be there while you do it. My friends and partner had built a campfire on the beach which was my glowing orb, my safe place to return to after experiencing the darkness. As my psychedelic journey came to an end, remnants of that dimension lingered for weeks. I took conscious time and space to acknowledge my experience and work through some of it with this film. I came to the realization halfway through my creative process that my film wasn't really about how everyone should do psychedelics, but how psychedelics have suspended a moment in time for me to safely and deeply explore my sentiments with grief. Hallucinogens have helped me understand the highs and lows of going through this process and how that process will change over time.

My character finds herself back in her room feeling a bit different, her body language open and optimistic. I show this moment of clarity with the imagery of the yellow rope still tied around her wrist while she holds the golden, glowing orb. Remnants of the swirling colors from her psychedelic trip appear on the floor of her bedroom as the glowing orb pulses with power and energy. The orb signifies her tie to the alternate dimension she just arrived from. I left my film open-ended allowing my viewers to question whether or not she is still experiencing the psilocybin or if she has found closure to her grief. That is something I leave you all to ponder as there is no right or wrong way to navigate through such intense



emotions as grief. This project has allowed me to practice love, kindness, and compassion toward myself, something that I wasn't doing before. It allowed me to carve out a specific space just for me to articulate the things that are hard for me to talk about and actually show them to you. It allowed me to be completely vulnerable with you and be okay with that feeling. I still find it rather amusing that I went from trying to completely disconnect myself from making a personal piece to making such a deeply intimate piece of my internal workings.

This film would not have come to fruition if it wasn't for my mentor, Rose Bond who held me accountable, kept me honest and pushed me to delve deeper into the connecting themes of my film. I also sincerely appreciated her straightforwardness when pertaining to the limits of reality. I have a hilarious memory of me going on and on about 2 extra scenes I had planned, and she was like "Whoa, I'm gonna stop you there." She helped me gain confidence in my storytelling ability which there was none previously. Thank you, Rose. I am eternally grateful for your kindness and your guidance.

Another person I want to thank directly is the sound designer and music composer of my film, Sam Hutt. About two weeks ago my original sound person decided last minute that they did not want to compose for my film. That left me feeling very upset and with another added layer of stress amid everything that was already piled on my plate. I reached out to Sam since I have previously heard her work and thought that her electronic beats would be a perfect match for this film. I wanted the soundtrack of my film to reminisce that of *The Midnight Gospel*, a Netflix show that has greatly influenced the topics, themes, and visual look of my film, *UN | DOING*. I've also wanted the music to be inspired also by video games, such as *Super Mario Galaxy*, since the visuals would be colorful and trippy and to reflect upon my love for escaping into these beautifully crafted artificial worlds these games hold. Sam came through for me and changed the entire feel of my film by breathing life into it with her electronic synth beats. Sam, I am so appreciative and in awe of your sound capabilities. Thanks for coming through in such a short amount of time.

My partner, Anna Craig, has been a continuous fountain of unconditional support and love for me during this project. She provided me with the tools such as a new computer to actually make this damn film and an ear to listen to me rant and rave about my creative process and workload. Anna cheered me on when I wanted to give up from exhaustion from

countless late nights of work and offered me her sincere honesty when asked about certain aspects of my film. I love you so much and thank you for being amazingly patient with me.

I want to especially thank my grandparents, Natalia and Joaquim Soares who believed in me and helped make going to college a dream come true. Avó Natália, obrigada por tudo.

I am so grateful to Wendy Noonan for proofreading and looking over this speech literally yesterday to make sure that my grammar is correct and that my writing flows consistently and beautifully. I very much appreciate my dear friend, Clair Ballantyne for helping me film some of my most difficult shots underwater and having the patience and great creative insight to helping me get this footage. I also want to express gratitude to Linda Kliewer, Rory Homan, and the PNCA technology team for facilitating and hosting focus week during a pandemic and helping me get in touch with all the necessary people and resources to be able to present this film to all of you today. I am eternally grateful to PNCA for being my place of solace and creative freedom for the last four years. This community has helped me find my creative voice and style. Last, but not least I want to thank all of you, my friends and family, again for being here to listen to me ramble on about this film and for being kind in sharing this moment with me.

I am now open to questions from my panel.