

Tabitha Rickard  
Thesis Portfolio  
Spring 2022

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Thesis Mentor Laura Heit

## Artist Statement

As an artist my goal is to explore ways of visualizing and expressing real life situations and events through the lens of animation. Whether it be animated documentary, or a narrative influenced by real people and events, animation allows us to explore memories and emotions attached to lived experiences. It can give a visual representation of those memories using metaphors and symbolism and allow people a visual representation of trauma in a different perspective than just a real-life reenactment.

With my film "Home" my goal was to inspire hope and produce a film that talked about self-healing and healthy coping habits, above the trauma that was taking place behind closed doors. Teaching that trauma can coexist with strength and love that even if you don't receive it, you can create it. I didn't want my character to be the victim, I wanted her to be the quiet yet mentally strong hero that I felt was lacking in other films I have seen regarding similar narratives. You don't have to be loud, confrontational or outspoken to make a point, and it's ok to feel the emotions that come with living through a traumatic event.

I think as a society we are taught through media to hide these emotions, but I wanted to celebrate the countless individuals who respond to their trauma with compassion and a more open and caring heart than they received during those times. Quiet can be an appropriate response and stronger and louder than meeting it with the same energy. My film is meant to be appropriate for young adults and up, so that a younger audience dealing with trauma in their home could have access and a connection to the film. Many films dealing with themes of trauma and abuse generally are for adults and is extremely intense so I wanted to represent and include a younger audience so that maybe healing and healthy coping outlets could be potentially discovered sooner.

## Thesis Proposal

Animation and short films have been used for a long time as a way for artists to present and express personal and lived experiences. Animation is a medium that most think of is for children, but it can also be a place for filmmakers to explore and process more mature topics such as abuse and trauma. Most independent short films have stayed in the tiny realm of experimental film festivals, available mainly to students, professionals, or enthusiasts and never breaking out into mainstream media platforms. However, recently themes commonly seen in independent films have become appearing in commercial animated features, like many of Pixar's films. Wildly popular, their success comes from appealing to both adults and children equally, although these are still mostly marketed to children. Giant media platforms such as Netflix have also began featuring short films with very sensitive subject matter such as *If Anything Happens, I Love You* which is a short film about losing a child because of a mass shooting.

Animation has the ability to deliver a complex and emotional story without the intense reenactments of real-life situations that may trigger a trauma survivor. This can be done by using symbols, metaphors, sounds, characters, magic etc. Animation is no longer in the "real world" it's now a space to interpret and create and attach an individual's personal experiences to. For my project I am exploring how the commercial animation industry has mainly dominated mainstream platforms, the slow progression of popularity and accessibility to independent and experimental short films in recent years, and how they are now influencing each other. Why is animation the best medium to use for stories of emotional trauma? Where is the line from too much to just enough? Can a film with stories of abuse or death be suitable for all audiences? These are the questions I hope to begin to answer.

My project is a short film called *Home* and it is about a little girl who builds a friendship with the fireflies near her home, after she saves one from being stuck in a spider's web. The fireflies

represent the light and innocence of childhood, and their friendship is solidified when her sweet and caring nature rescues and releases the firefly. This seemingly peaceful and sweet interaction is then interrupted by the girl's reality; a turbulent unstable home life heard but never seen from inside her home. The violence at home transforms into a monster, who rises from the house, which causes the girl to then flee from her home and into the dark woods. The monster is the symbol of the trauma growing and becoming overwhelming to her, so much so she tries to escape it. The monster then pursues after her cornering her in the woods, when the monster is about to attack the girl thousands of fireflies appear and chase away the darkness. Using metaphor and symbols along with a narrative of trauma will help all audiences be able to view my film and connect with the entire story from beginning to end.

My initial process and method of creating my work was to first begin collecting a massive number of visuals from other artists. These were illustrations and art I have gathered from sites such as Pinterest and Instagram to create a mood or inspiration board. I then began gathering and looking for as many experimental and independent films as I could find. I gathered these mainly through sites such as Vimeo, YouTube, and archival DVDs in the PNCA library. I looked for films that had similar content to what I am making and researched their processes and why their films were successful. Three that really stood out to me were *Dust* by Alex Klexber, *Ahead* by Ala Nunu, and *Contretemps* by Gobelins. All these films have a narrative arc, they are dealing with emotional trauma and using metaphor and symbolism as tools to tell their story and I feel like they have a nice balance of commercial appeal and experimental artistic elements. Which is what I am aiming for in my own film.

I began work on this project in the Spring 2021 semester and I have completed a series of character designs, backgrounds, a full storyboard and have completed a full animatic. I ended up taking a break from this project over the summer because like many artists I became too attached and close to the work. Taking this break allowed me to come back with fresh eyes and be able to see the film at a distance and be able to change the parts that weren't working. I

have now refocused and have decided to change the ending of my film and add some scenes that will help clarify and strengthen the story. I am also implementing some different techniques that will both strengthen and add dimension to my characters that I felt was significantly lacking before.

I am now using reference footage as a guide for my character's movements and facial expressions. I do this by first video recording myself acting out the scene of my character, I then take the video and edit it down and cut out as many frames as possible, while still maintaining a realistic fluid movement. This reference film is then brought into Adobe Photoshop, I can then animate using my Cintiq over top using the reference film as a guide. After the outlines and color are completed in Photoshop, I can then bring them into After Effects where I will composite all my layers and add lighting and final effects to polish and finish my film. Another element that is super crucial to my film is sound, which is not my strongest area, so I am currently researching how other filmmakers are using sound and gathering possible solutions and techniques that I can use. Since my film uses metaphors and symbolism throughout and it crosses the boundary of reality, the sounds can mirror and compliment that.

I have made a schedule that breaks down each scene and the stages of progression from filming the reference film, rough pass, clean up, final outline and color. Each step is color coded by month of when they need to be completed and I put a check mark and highlight when they are finished, so I can easily see what's finished and where I need to go next. I also made sure to give myself extra time at the end to ensure some flexibility if something goes wrong and make sure I have it finished by May 2022. My hope for my film after graduation is to enter *Home* into international film festivals and have it as a polished portfolio piece that I am proud of.

For my project I will be making an animated short that expresses the emotional toll trauma has on a child. Through my research I have found that by using animation to tell stories with more sensitive content are better received by an audience, and they are able to relate and tolerate the difficult content better and are willing to follow an animated character much further

through difficult situations than a real-life reenactment. The ability to also visually use metaphor, symbolism and abstraction to bring emotions and fears to life to where you can confront and interact gives the opportunity to take back power and control over the trauma. Combining elements of both traditional commercial narrative storytelling with the complexity of experimental content and techniques make an extremely powerful and emotional storytelling experience for all audiences. My use of reference film brings real-life movements and emotion to my character, while still maintaining the comfort of an animated character. The use of 3D fireflies and their light visually represents the progression of hope and innocence in my film, contrasted by the manifestation of the monster which represents the turmoil and stress that is building inside the home, which leads up to a dark vs light climax. My project is both about self-expression and testing the boundaries of how storytelling, subject matter, audience and space impact each other.

## Abstract

My project is a short film about a young girl who is growing up in a home where domestic violence is occurring and how she processes and develops coping habits to help her through the toxic behaviors she has to live with. She finds happiness and security in caring and nursing injured animals she finds around her yard at home.

My reason for wanting to make this film comes from a hybrid of Animated Documentary and storytelling. I myself am a sucker for emotional touching films and the idea that stuck with me from my animated documentary class was using animation as a buffer from reality when telling stories of trauma and doing it with care and respect. Which eventually led me to my line of inquiry and research for this film.

“Why is animation so effective in telling stories of trauma? How far is too far? Where are the boundaries that are still appropriate for most audiences?”

What’s the benefit of using animation in telling stories of trauma? The answers to these began to unfold as I took the Animated Documentary class and expanded on later in the book *The Animation Studies Reader* on animation and traumatic memory. In the chapter that discusses trauma and memory it states, “while photographic-based live-action images might struggle to engage with trauma through traditional narratives, animation can offer an aesthetic response.” Animation can often break down barriers and bridge understanding of emotional and traumatic events. It helps to give a neutral meeting ground and is easier digested by an audience and can gain more ground in telling stories of abuse and trauma.

## Oral Defense

Hello and welcome. My name is Tabitha Rickard, I am an animated arts major and thank you for coming to my thesis presentation. A little about me, I was born and raised in Salem, OR. As a kid I was super into art, drawing, painting, sculpting, and I took every art class my high school had, but I lacked the confidence to pursue it out of high school. So instead, I went to beauty school and went on to become a hairdresser and makeup artist for the next 9 years. I thought that it was still artistic and that I could get my creativity out in a different medium and I would be happy. As you can see by me standing here in front of you all today, that wasn't the case.

I then found myself working retail and on a bad evening at work I decided that I didn't want to do that for the rest of my life so, I asked myself "What would you like to? If you could have a different job or career, what would you want to be doing?" And my answer to myself was I want to work on films, that would be so cool. At the time Laika was big here, their big exhibition was up at the Portland Art Museum, I think I went about 4 times. I knew people who worked there, and I thought maybe I could apply my hair and makeup artistry to the puppets. But they required a BFA to even apply and they had a link to Art Institute of Portland on their website, so I went and enrolled myself the next day, telling my mom and partner at the time I was just going to "check it out" and coming home enrolled in a 4 year long and crazy journey.

After 2 terms at the Art Institute, they announced they were closing their doors and my options were to either quit what I had just started, move to a different state with another Art Institute or transfer over to PNCA.

Luckily, I choose to transfer, and I was greeted by a different perspective on animation which sent me on a journey of exploring different styles and methods of creating animations. I think every semester I changed what I wanted to focus my career on. One semester I wanted to be a stop motion animator, the next animated documentary, 3D animator, storyboard artist. It may be a benefit that I came into the world of animation knowing almost nothing about it or had



expectations of what it was, because it left me open to experimenting and trying new things. Trying to see where I fit into mix.

Which ties into the short film I am going to share with you today because it took every single one of those classes plus extra research and artistic development on my side to be able to make. This film is a mash of all my skills I learned and developed while attending PNCA. My project is a short film about a young girl who is growing up in a home where domestic violence is occurring and how she processes and develops coping habits to help her through the toxic behaviors she has to live with. She finds happiness and security in caring and nursing injured animals she finds around her yard at home. As a kid I brought home all sorts of creatures and insects, from frogs, snakes, baby mice, an injured bird, even an opossum. My mom's favorite story to tell is how I rescued earthworms from drowning in puddles while at preschool. I would put them into my pockets for safety, but I forgot about them, and she would later wash my clothes to find poor little dried worms crusted to the inside of my pockets, which she then had to throw away.

My reason for wanting to make this film comes from a hybrid of Animated Documentary and storytelling. I myself am a sucker for emotional touching films and the idea that stuck with me from my animated documentary class was using animation as a buffer from reality when telling stories of trauma and doing it with care and respect. Which eventually led me to my line of inquiry and research for this film.

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For example, take NSPCC's advertisement Cartoon from 2002, where they had a live-action actor, as a volatile abusive father, and they animated the child as a kind of looney toons animated kid being kicked around the house by the father. While this PSA is extremely upsetting, by using animation in place of live action reenactments, which would most definitely cross the line for pretty much all audiences, it kept the overwhelming subject matter of child abuse to a relatively watchable level and had massive impact when the cartoon was revealed as a live action boy lifeless at the bottom of the stairs, telling people to speak up if you see abuse happening. This is a very strong example and was meant to shock and catch the audience attention and meant to be very upsetting to encourage people to report signs of abuse and was targeted to an adult audience.

I thought about audience a lot when developing my film, because it deals with domestic violence and trauma, I wanted to still make it accessible and appropriate for most viewers. Not super young children but as a teenager or young adult I would have liked to have something to relate to and see that you aren't the only one experiencing these kinds of things. So instead of actually giving screen time or visuals to the violence I choose to only have the audience hear it going on in the background. I chose not to give a face or character to it so that more people could relate their own personal stories and attach their own memories of trauma purely based on sound. Sound can be extremely impactful and intense just on its own and I felt it was the right amount for the story.

The next question I had when developing my film was where does my film fit in the world? So, a major part of my research was finding animated films that touched on trauma and where they were being screened. While there are a few big-name studios such as Pixar which has touched on topics such as death, afterlife and the complexity of human emotions and brought them to

the big screen with a worldwide audience, my film more so fits in with independent short film genre.

This broad area of film is usually shown in festivals along with being streamed online on sites such as Vimeo and YouTube. Because these films are independent, they can experiment more with themes, styles, and mediums. A large theme I saw with many of the films was anthropomorphizing human emotions and attempting to get across a feeling or inner struggle that you can't see in real life.

One film that really stuck out to me was a short film called *Contretemps*, which follows a woman who suffers with OCD disorder who must break her routine in order to help return her sister's dropped flute piece before her audition. As she makes her way to the auditorium her OCD manifests as a gross blob of monsters trying to stop her from getting to her sister. As she gets closer the monsters get closer and eventually overtakes her, but she fights through and the love for her sister is stronger than the OCD.

It's a very graphic and visual way to express what it's like to live with this disorder. The film's team of directors interviewed 5 people with OCD and combined all of the triggers and experiences into this one character giving the character the ability to relate to as many people as possible. The strongest impact I think a film like this can have is being able to connect and feel heard by an individual but also using it as a tool to show others "Hey this is how my OCD affects me, this is what it feels like to me" and giving that super important visual that others just can't see. That's one of the best things about using animation.

When I was first developing my film, I had the sound of the fighting parents morph into a huge menacing monster. I struggled with the look and feel of what I was seeing in my head and having it translate on the screen. I changed the ending multiple times trying to get my message across the way I wanted to and fighting for an ending that felt right. So as my character was fighting this monster, so was I in my writing and concept of what this creature symbolized and

how it related to my character. So, what did I do? I cut him from my film entirely right before this semester started and I rewrote the entire middle and end of my film.

I wanted my film to be based on the girl's emotions and from her point of view, and how she coped and found ways to empower and soothe herself rather than the focus be on the abuse and the monster. I wanted it to have a positive ending and provide hope for those who may be struggling, instead of the feeling of being trapped in a home where there is no escape. While the girl is still isolated in the film, she finds ways to escape and find purpose and fulfilment in caring for others that can't help themselves, since she is lacking that own care in her relationship with her parents at home.

Another change I made was to the animation style of my main character. I felt she was disconnected from the audience and that I wanted to bring her quiet sweet nature to the foreground and focus on her and her emotions rather than her competing with other characters around her. The way I decided to solve this problem was to use rotoscoping. So, I filmed myself acting out the scenes and using this as a guide as I drew my character on top. This helped her be more lifelike and relatable but also made it to where you could see her emotions and reactions and facial expressions clearly. Since there is no dialogue all of her emotions have to be conveyed through her body a face. I consciously decided to not have dialogue because my aim is to enter this in many film festivals, and I didn't want language to be a barrier for anyone to not understand my film.

The next major change that I made at the beginning of the semester was to use 3D animation in my film. I honestly have no idea why or how I thought I was going to be able to mix my very flat 2D style rotoscoping with 3D elements without it looking completely ridiculous but luckily, I had instructors like Zak to help me troubleshoot and find a solution.

The new character I introduced into my story is an injured bird that the girl is rehabilitating and nursing back to health. I was worried that it would look extremely flat and not as dynamic as my

main character because I didn't have reference film for the bird. So, I built a 3D model of a bird and rigged it in Cinema4D so the movements and proportions stayed consistent. The real magic happened when I was able to add a filter in the render that flattened and 2D-ified my 3D character. Down to the little hand drawn like squiggly line.

With this project I decided to fully rotoscope all my characters scenes, prior to this I had only really rotoscoped about 10-15 seconds short animations for different projects. I decided to fully color my animation which I had never done before, so I had to struggle and fight through finding the best and quickest way for me to get that done. I had to fully sculpt, rig, and learn a new filter in Cinema4D, where you are one button or setting away from a meltdown.

With all of these new techniques and very time-consuming animation process I was learning and taking on I realized I couldn't get it all done by myself, so I hired background artist Justine Cyplik, who did an amazing job, and it all came together so beautifully. Before hiring Justine, I had no experience hiring another person to work on a film and it was a big learning curve for both of us since she hadn't been hired for freelance work either. The biggest take aways I have that I know I need to do in the future are writing up a detailed outline of what I need for the person I'm working with to reference, like exact dimensions of the files, what kind of files I need, what needs to be on layers, naming and organization of layers, checking and making sure what I am animating and filming works with the background, and having this all in the very beginning.

I also hired Katie Close to do my sound design and she also was able to help me color the hand scenes in the second scene last minute, so thank you so much Katie. I took some of what I learned from Justine and set up the Photoshop file and labeled it all and put in all the color swatches for Katie to work from, so it matched with my workflow so when I went to composite it was set up the way I work best to make it easier for me.

For sound I wanted a quiet atmospheric ambiance. More of a soundscape instead of something musical. I made this decision because the subject matter is quite serious, and I didn't want music to interfere or change the tone of the film. I also wanted the fighting to disrupt and catch the attention of the audience and not be competing or influenced by extra sounds. I am eventually going to record my own sound for the fighting, friends that were going to do that for me ended up getting Covid so I had to reschedule, so for now it is a place holder, and you can get an idea of what the final sound will be.

The director's role was challenging but once everything came together it was extremely rewarding and I learned a lot from the process of working and hiring others to create my vision. Organization and communication are critical and having it set up from the very start saves a lot of stress and panic down the road.

With all the new learning curves and trial and error before getting my system down for animating, plus accounting for life that happens outside of work and school, I wasn't able to finish the last scene of the project in time for today's presentation, and there is still one piece that isn't colored yet that is in the film today. I plan to have these finished by the end of May along with some lighting and cleaning up in After Effects of the final look of the film. I knew this project was ambitious from the start and was told that, but I am very proud of how much I have learned and where it's at for the amount of work that it was.

For the future of this film, I am going to finish the last scene and add some final details to get it ready to enter into film festivals this summer. A few festivals that I am interested in are Open Mind Film Festival, Sundance, Genre Blast, New Filmmakers Los Angeles, Lady Filmmakers Festival, Portland Film Festival, Indie Memphis Film Festival. I think this will be a great way to get my work out there and set me up for future job opportunities.

For the future I would like to go into the role of Art Director and possible Director. I also really like being a rotoscope animator since I definitely have tons of experience now. I also enjoy animating 3D characters as well. I am happy this film shows a large variety of skills I have in one piece, as more of a generalist instead of a specialist showing versatility and flexibility of what I am able to work on, which I think sets me up well for the future.

## Annotated Bibliographies

**Dobson, Nichola, et al., editors. *The Animation Studies Reader*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2019.**

This book is a collective of scholarly essays about modern animation. The chapters I took inspiration from were on trauma and memory and animated documentary. In the chapter that discusses trauma and memory it states, "while photographic-based live-action images might struggle to engage with trauma through traditional narratives, animation can offer an aesthetic response." Animation can often break down barriers and bridge understanding of emotional and traumatic events. It helps to give a neutral meeting ground and is easier digested by an audience and can gain more ground in telling stories of abuse and trauma.

**Aguirre, Lina. *Columbian Animation and New Perspectives of Sociopolitical Reality*. DOCUMENTARY, POLITICS IN AND OF ANIMATION SOCIETY OF ANIMATION STUDIES. April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2017.**

In this article Lina is talking about how in Columbia, like many Latin American countries, the citizens were under harsh and corrupt dictatorship for decades, and how they are now processing and using documentary film and animation to express what they went through and the impact it had on their social and cultural lives. Instead of using animation as traditional children's entertainment like in the U.S., in Columbia a rise in independent filmmakers is using animation in an experimental way, using animated documentary to help express traumatic memories and events that happened during their violent dictatorship. Unlike in the U.S. where they would most likely only be able to share their work in specific film festivals and limited screenings, in Columbia they were able to get public TV sponsorship and were able to show these films on public television channels, making it more accessible and seen by the general public.

**Edited by: Miriam Harris, Lilly Husbands, and Paul Taberham. *Experimental Animation: From analogue to digital*. Routledge 2019.**

This book is about the history and growth of experimental animation, beginning with the long debate of how to define and what to call it. Experimental animation is often described by what it is not 'non-objective', 'non-narrative', 'non-linear', 'non-normative', or 'unconventional'. This is in contrast to mainstream or commercial animation which always has a narrative arch. Experimental animations use a wide range of aesthetic and conceptual approaches, styles, techniques, materials and media, often mixing different media together. The history of the term 'experimental' animation was agreed upon by curators and critics in the 70's, although experimental animation goes back further really starting to be seen as its own form in 1950, other terms that were used commonly were 'Avant Garde', 'Independent' and 'Alternative'. The word has stuck because it covers both traditional media such as stop motion puppets, cutouts, charcoal, film etc, with new digital 2D and 3D formats. Also in terms of experience such as large media projections or installations in a space.

**Jayne Pilling, ed. *Animating the Unconscious: Desire, Sexuality and Animation*:**



**On Andreas Hykade *We lived in Grass* and *Ring of Fire*. Published 2012.**

This book chapter in *Animating the Unconscious: Desire, Sexuality and Animation* is about Andreas Hykade who is a German film maker, and it is about two of his controversial films he directed *We lived in the Grass* and *Ring of Fire*. The chapter stood out to me because it breaks down all the little pieces and struggles artists go through while making a short film and how things can go wrong both internally and personally and how it is perceived way differently by others. It also talks about finding balance in our storytelling and in our practice.

**Moore, Samantha. “Does this look right? Working inside the collaborative frame.” Drawn From Life 2019.**

Essay by Samantha Moore about working in collaboration with people outside animation. How bringing in other people’s stories and having them be a part of the process can produce really amazing results. Her film was working with people with synaesthesia and trying to animate what they saw when they heard different sounds.

**Lina Aguirre. “Trend in Latin American Experimental Animation” Evergreen Art Lecture Series. Youtube video. Run time 1:40:00. Published 2017.**

(<https://moebiusanimacion.com/videos/evergreen-art-lecture-series-lina-aguirre/>)

Lina Aguirre’s lecture on experimental animation in Latin America, talks about what trends she is seeing in animators there, what materials and subject matter they are discussing. Lots of good references to many animators. I also saw her lecture in person about women animators in Latin America at PNCA.

**Ala Nunu. “Ahead” Vimeo video. Run time 5:21. Published 2021.**

<https://vimeo.com/524837064>

Ahead is a short film by Ala Nunu from France. It is a story about taking care of someone who is not whole or broken. You try to take care of them and find a way to help them heal but they have to be willing to help themselves. Nunu uses ambiguous character designs and limited animation that is really effective.

**Interview Ala Nunu. <https://www.zippyframes.com/index.php/shorts/ahead-ala-nunu>**

Interview Ala Nunu that describes her process and her intention with her film Ahead. I found her process of how she works out her film interesting.

**Alex Klexber. “Dust” Vimeo video. Run time 2:03. Published 2017.**

<https://vimeo.com/208998846>

Dust is a short film about a little boy whose parents are fighting so he hides under his bed. A magical dust bunny appears and starts turning things to dust, the fighting gets worse and then it ends with the boy reaching out for the dust bunny to touch him. This film inspired my film Home.