

INNERVERSE

by

Melissa Hill

A Thesis

Submitted to the

Graduate Faculty

of

George Mason University

in Partial Fulfillment of

The Requirements for the Degree

of

Master of Fine Arts

Art and Visual Technology

Committee:

_____ Director

_____ Director of the School of Art

_____ Dean, College of Visual and
Performing Arts

Date: _____ Spring Semester 2015
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

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Melissa Hill
Bachelor of Arts
Old Dominion University, 2012
Bachelor of Fine Arts
Old Dominion University, 2011

Director: Tom Ashcraft, Professor
Department of Art and Visual Technology

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my amazingly supportive husband, Christopher Norton, for his tremendous help on both logistical and theoretical issues and for his encouragement to continue to do what I love doing. I would also like to include our two cats, Seth and Emmit, who have been exemplary studio assistants considering the amount of string I use in my work.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

George Mason University	GMU
Master of Fine Arts	MFA

ABSTRACT

INNERVERSE

Melissa Hill, M.F.A.

George Mason University, 2015

Thesis Director: Tom Ashcraft

I am looking at the notion of contingency and how random events construct the self at any given time. The concept of the contingent self is centered on the amalgamation of experiences that one undergoes throughout one's life. Each experience, layered upon other experiences, and the choices and outcomes that come about as a result of such experience make us human. It was a fragment attributed to the Greek philosopher Heraclitus that started me down this path of thinking. In the fragment Heraclitus states: "We both step and do not step in the same rivers. We are and are not." By turning not only to philosophy but also to scientific theory, I look to the universe as a whole and how its constantly changing states mirror the human condition.

Welcome to My INNERVERSE: An Introduction

We both step and do not step in the same rivers. We are and are not.¹

– Heraclitus, B49a

Heraclitus, a pre-Socratic philosopher from ancient Greece, is known through the many remaining fragments of his works. The quote above, in conjunction with readings from several other, more contemporary philosophers, helped me to establish the foundation of my research toward the end of my studies at George Mason University and helped me to realize that I was blindly stumbling through in my earliest semesters.

In this section I will be reflecting on the evolution of my process starting with my first semesters at GMU and culminating with the end of my time as a student engaged with my MFA thesis exhibition, *INNERVERSE*. This reflective process is important because it highlights the very concept that I celebrate in my final work at GMU. I speak here of the notion that we are all shaped and molded by our experiences. That there is an infinite number of paths that we each could have taken, any of which would have changed us in ways that, though they may

¹ "HERACLITUS, Greek Philosophy and Heraclitus," William Harris, Accessed April 3, 2015, <http://community.middlebury.edu/~harris/Philosophy/Heraclitus.html>.

seem insignificant, provide the subtle nuance which makes us unique, not only in this universe, but in an infinite number of universes.

When I began the MFA program at George Mason I was creating pieces that were overly focused on precision and control. I attempted to relate to the human form in my works in what proved to be an effort to investigate issues related to the human condition. My inroad into this examination centered on constructs like the sublime, fate, and the commodification of the self.

Because my subject was the human condition, my earliest works used the human form as a means of entry. My final work of my first year, though unbeknownst to me at the time, represented a large breakthrough with regards to my process and my thought, and it put me on the road that led to my current place. *A Segment of Infinites* (Fig. 1), was a series of boxes that sought to speak to the larger, macroscopic world to which humans belong. Each box is like a small individual, distinct in its own way; thus, a box becomes analogous to the personal self. As the title and the pattern of the works may suggest, the boxes can be imagined to go on forever in all directions in an orderly and constant manner

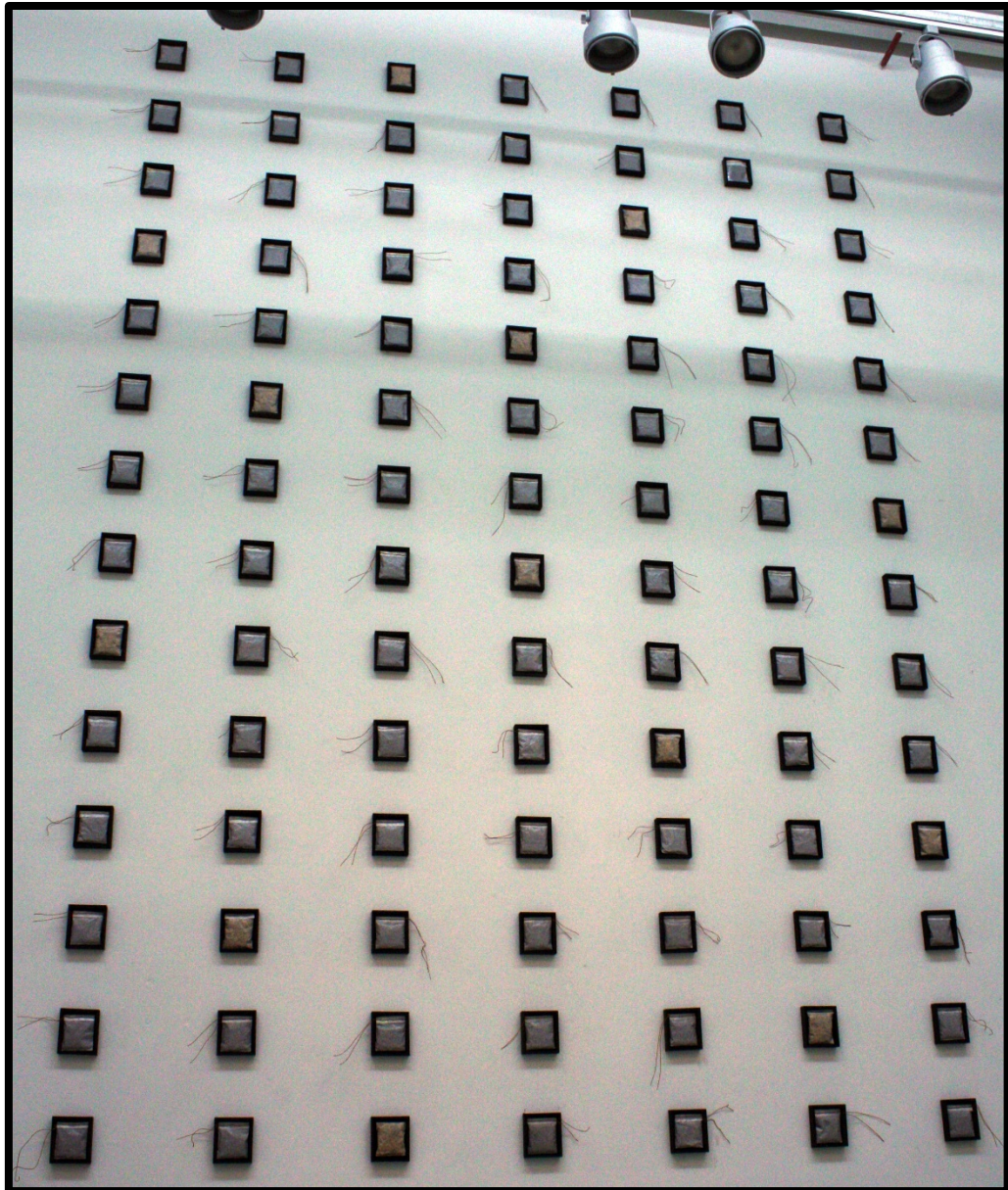


Figure 1 - *A Segment of Infinites*

and can be read in various ways. At the time I believed that it represented the uniqueness inherent in each person, and each box represented an individual – an infinite number of boxes for an infinite number of people. As I have grown,

changed, and reflect back, perhaps now the boxes could instead each represent an infinite number of selves of a single person. In looking back at my first semester, I think that this piece was perhaps the most important work I did, and it certainly mystified me more than any of my other works.

My primary evolution as an artist from that year came about with the understanding that I could represent the human experience in an abstract form. I decided to break away from using the human figure and free myself to be more conceptual. This allowed me to investigate issues that I had hitherto been unable to face with a naturalistic approach to art. As I worked my way through this process and began to think about my own human condition, I began producing works that were largely cohesive aesthetically, but which were hugely diverse contextually. In a way this makes sense, as humans are comprised of large swathes of cares and concerns, but I still felt that I was missing something. I did not want to look at individual manifestations of the human condition, but the human condition as a construct in and of itself.

Tilting at Windmills (Fig. 2), stands as a pertinent example of both my new forays into the human condition and the very beginnings of a transition away from simple mathematical abstraction to something more organic, something more fluid, and something more human. Mathematically, all of the strings are set

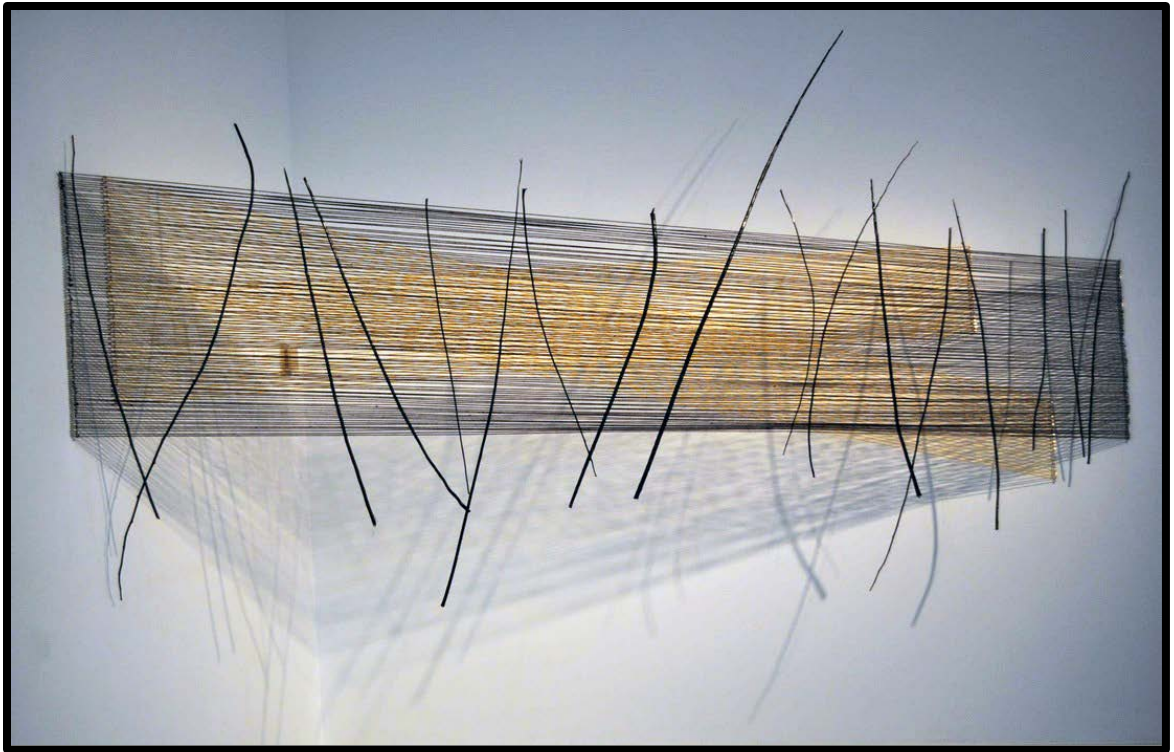


Figure 2 - *Tilting at Windmills*

to specific locations, and the illusory effect created with the yellow string behind the black string is predictably scientific – a moiré pattern I knew would develop due to our understanding of optics. However, the inserted sticks break this hard abstraction and add an element of unpredictability, which could arguably be seen as humanity.

The work drew upon the notion of setting up artificial boundaries and constraining oneself into a paradigmatic world – something that Don Quixote, the fictional hero famed for tilting at windmills thinking they were giants, was both

guilty of doing and guilty of shattering. On the one hand, Don Quixote fashioned a world of his own design, a chivalric world in which he was (unknowingly) the only inhabitant. And yet to construct that world, it was necessary for him to (unknowingly yet again) destroy the constraints of the socially understood reality in which he lived. In thinking back, if *A Segment of Infinites* might have been seen to have dealt with the multiplicity of self, then *Tilting at Windmills* might be viewed as an attempt to interrogate our constructed reality. They both dance around the same topic but fall just short of hitting the mark, one I did not know I was aiming at.

With *Tilting at Windmills* behind me and the first half of my second year before me, I experimented with different ways of bringing a two-dimensional line into a three-dimensional space (Figs. 3-5). These works, consisting of branches bound and wrapped by string, were my first attempts at that idea, and while I thought that they were primarily process oriented, I quickly realized that I was still dealing with a host of personal issues. I came to the conclusion that my primary motivating factor still centered on the human condition, but that my only avenue of entry to that was through my own life. I felt that working through my problems was a necessary component of moving beyond simply looking at simple fragments of the whole. In a way, the branches in my works were analogous to myself, and

the string that bound them were the problems that constrained me as an artist, as a scholar, and as a person.

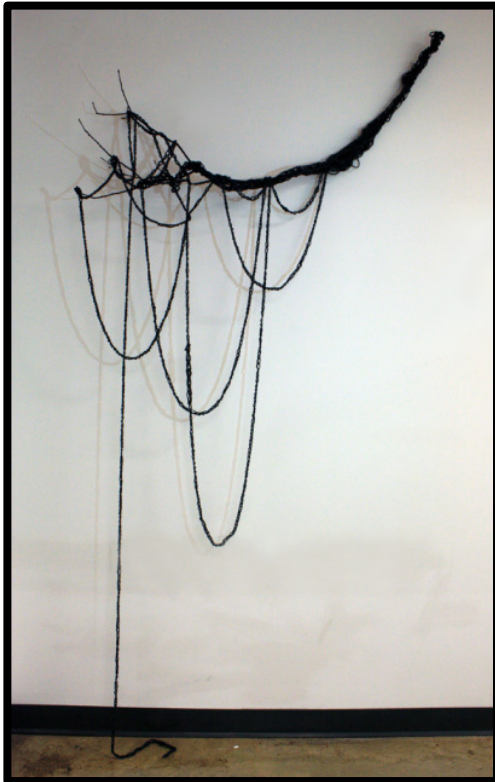


Figure 3 - *Of Things Seen*



Figure 4 - *July Horses in the Snow*

Throwing myself into the process, death was the very first subject I approached because of how much it had shaped me as a person. I found that my fluid, abstract forms were an excellent means of manifesting my relationship with death because it has always been, and still remains, a concept that I have found to be impenetrable. I simply lack the means to understand why it is the way it is, but

through my work I developed a means through which I could cope with and consider death without looking away abashedly. The mysterious nature of death and its seeming finality led me to a place that was infinitely more personal and infinitely more human than my earlier works. While uncomfortable in this place, I forced myself through the experience because I felt it projecting me forward in my goals as an artist. Rather than a cold view of the human as a component, I started to reflect upon the human as human, and began to understand that even things that we fail to consider, or shy away from recalling, shape us in ways that we sometimes do not understand. All of these things comprise what is human and are part and parcel of the human condition. I view all of the works from this semester as results of such self-reflection, a process that helped me to realize that those considerations that I always avoided fundamentally impacted my world view. I acknowledged that my experiences not only existed in the past, but they left their marks inscribed upon my current self, even if I could not see them or did not recognize them.



Figure 5 - Hinton

During the winter break of my second year I read Thomas Kuhn's, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, and it had a profound impact on my worldview. In the book Kuhn indicated that with the birth of a new worldview an old worldview must fall by the wayside, experiencing a type of death.² By extension, I found that any change could be considered a type of death, and that, for me, the hidden reality behind death could be seen simply as change, even if it was a change so radical and so complex that it was impossible for me to wrap my mind around. I think that the works that I created in the second half of my second year began to access this hidden realm behind the notions that I was looking at in previous semesters. It seemed so sudden, but dead was the Melissa that grasped

² Thomas S Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 111.

for the meaning of human death and its impact on the human psyche, for dead was the worldview that colored her existence. The new Melissa looked instead at a different type of death, the death of preconceptions. It was this Melissa that had the tools needed to look not only at the manifestations of the human condition, but at the construct itself. She would just need some time to develop and understand that she had those tools. The second half of my second year marked a dramatic change in how I both approached my art and how I approached my subject matter. And it was this turning point that provided me the tools that could sew together the threads laid down in *A Segment of Infinites* and *Tilting at Windmills*, and come to the point that I have come to now.



Figure 6 - *Irregular Pearl Side*



Figure 7 - *Irregular Pearl Front*

Irregular Pearl (Figs. 6 and 7), bears witness to my desire to recapture the craftsmanship in which I was originally trained, something that I discarded to satisfy what I thought was “appropriate art.” *Irregular Pearl* is composed of the dead husks of many earlier works. In much the same way that my old worldview became a stepping stone to move forward, I found that so too did my previous works become components in the new. While I may not have realized it at the time, in retrospect, this piece can be seen as an allegory of the contingency of self. All of the dead and dying worldviews and all of the new ones to come are born and slain by our multitudes of experiences. It is upon the backs of experiences past that the future is forged. To the present Melissa, this work represents my grasping of what I needed to become who I am now, and for my work to become what it is now.

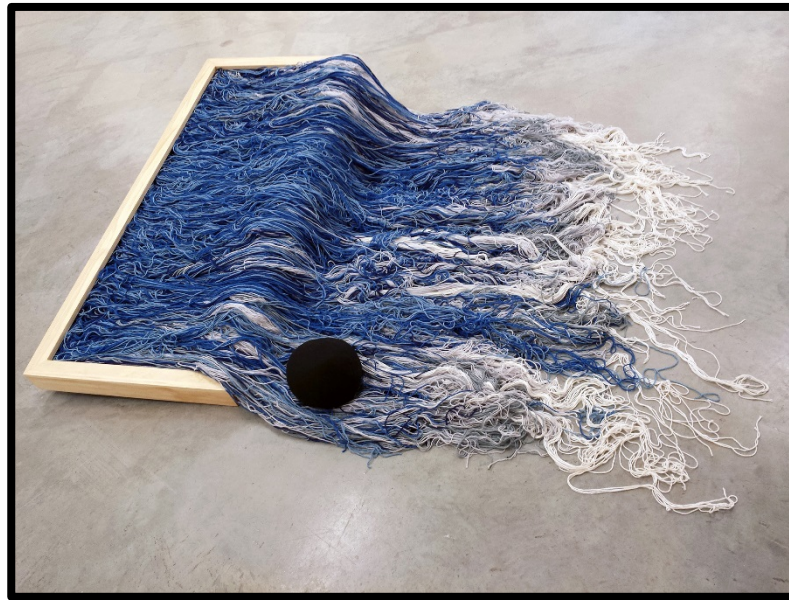


Figure 8 - *We Contained the Sea*

We Contained the Sea (Figs. 8 and 9) was the final piece in which I investigated conceptual death, the death rattle of the old Melissa and the entry of the new. It is an interrogation of the downfall of constructed barriers that protect the projected self and all that it entails. *We Contained the Sea* can be seen as a manifestation of being overcome. We can be overcome by emotion. We can be overcome by hostility. And – most importantly for my work as it currently exists – we can be overcome with a new way of seeing. Barriers are broken irreparably and what once was neatly held together must now be reconciled in all of its nuance. This piece saw the emergence of my earlier interest in two-dimensional line becoming three-dimensional form, for a painting or a drawing to become a sculpture. But it also saw the death of my previous ways of considering and dealing

with the human condition. As I moved away from *We Contained the Sea* and reflected upon Kuhn, I was introduced to Heraclitus. I realized that while change might be the overarching theme under which my foray into the human condition could be contextualized, it is in contingency that we are the most human. Notions of contingency and the contingency of self – described by Heraclitus and Kuhn, and also by the philosopher Richard Rorty – are the foundations upon which my current world view rests. Contingencies are the means by which my artwork currently interrogates the human condition.



Figure 9 - *We Contained the Sea Side*

My *Star Chart* series (Figs. 10-12) and my installation, *On the Edge of a Dying Light* (Figs. 13 and 14), mentioned in more detail below, play with the notion of reconstructing and then mapping an imagined universe, one shaped by our own experiences and desires. I'd like to introduce those pieces with a story.

Remapping the Stars: The Reconstruction of a Universe

It is the imagination that engraves [real images] on our memories. They deepen the recollections we have experienced, which they replace, thus becoming imagined recollections.³

-Gaston Bachelard

On a hot summer night, where the only relief from the heat is a rare breeze, I decide to escape to the water. The sound of waves crashing on the coast of the Chesapeake Bay surrounds me and the shore break calls to mind ragged breaths almost as though the earth itself inhales and exhales. I match my own breathing to this rhythm without noticing. The experience begins to take its full effect as I turn my gaze from the darkened horizon where the water and the sky touch, to the expansive blanket of stars overhead that venture on into forever. This is as far as I can come, my most distant escape from the rush of the city and the light pollution that drowns out the glittering specks that have been peering down since what I can only call the beginning.

³ Gaston Bachelard, "The House. From Cellar to Garret. The Significance of the Hut," in *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1994), 32.

A small wake disturbs my kayak and I sway back and forth, still breathing, thinking, considering. The stars look down on me; it feels as though they are asking me to consider them in their infinite individualities. It is as if they want me to consider them – not only as massive bodies of burning gas strewn throughout the cosmos, but individually, each as a unique and wonderful thing. The longer I stare the more I ponder. The more I ponder, the more I am engulfed in a sense of wonder and the more this experience is imprinted on my very being.

The next night I take a small, blank sketchbook with me; I hoped to contain the wonderment that I felt when I gazed up at the stars and they looked back down upon me. My hand moves, first a dot, then a circle, a line, a universe. I create a whole world here on this paper, a world sprung forth from my being and that only I know, but something is missing, something is wrong and I feel myself failing to capture the experience that I so wanted to share.

I take my sketches home with intentions of transferring them to a new surface. That perhaps reflection and process could help me to bridge the gap between what I felt and saw, and what I drew. For an entire week I toil, layering sky upon sky, record upon record. I have here a documentation of the past week and I start to research what other objects were overhead but were invisible to my eyes. I decide to do the same the next week, and the week following. When the sky

is veiled by clouds I use technology to see beyond them. One of the very things that I first sought to escape becomes a chariot to take me to the heavens.

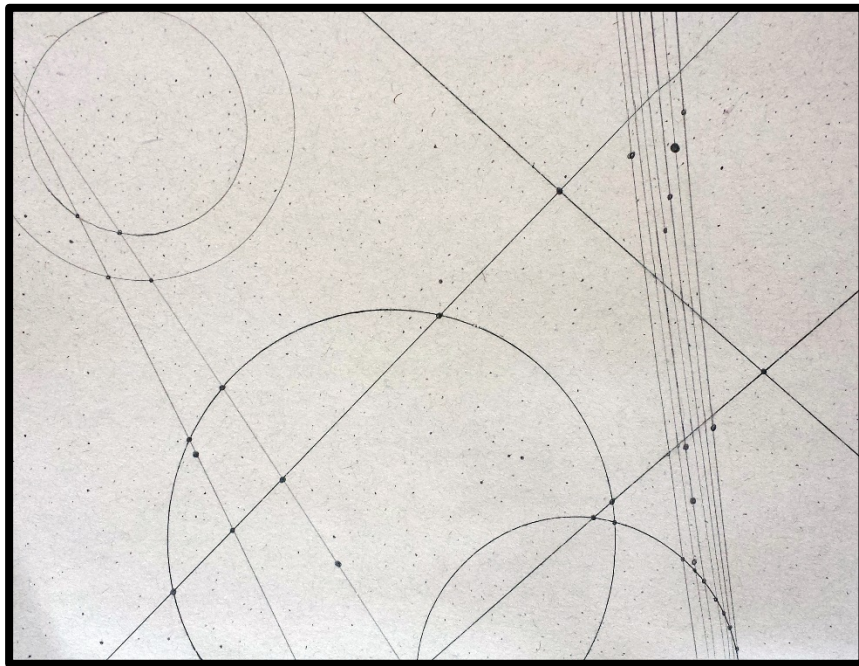


Figure 10 - *Star Chart Sketch 2* VA 6/2014

As time progresses my sketchbook paper turns from white to gray as my medium seeks to expand beyond its bounds and invades the empty paper. The now overused transfer paper is being carefully saved because it is not ready to become the trash that it usually becomes after fulfilling its duty. It lives with me unassumingly until I happen to notice the patterns I unknowingly etched into its surface. The subtleness of the drawings on the transfer paper pulled me in and I realize that my work is not the product of the transfers but the unassuming tool I

had been taking for granted. The voluptuously plush surface of the carbon began to serve as a smooth palette upon which my experience could be fully realized.

In looking beyond the story of their origins, and thinking critically about my *Star Chart* series, it seems obvious to me how they moved me forward in my interrogation of the human condition. The markings on the surface of the transfer paper can be looked at in a very experiential fashion. In effect, it is as if each action done to the paper is an experience that the paper receives. The process and the idea of taking material away from the surface when I rendered my charts is akin to investing those works with experience. From a philosophical and allegorical perspective, my hand or process might be seen as the event which imparts an experience, the paper becomes the recipient experiencing, and the movement of medium from transfer paper to drawing paper becomes the instantaneous event that plays out as event and recipient come together.

As a result, the experiences are inscribed upon the transfer paper in much the same way that our experiences are inscribed upon our being. The outcome of the transfer is like a memory of an event, over time it fades, greys, and becomes fuzzy, but we recall it nonetheless. Most importantly for me is the subtle nature of the impressions in the transfer paper as I find them to be an excellent example of how the experiences that shape us may, at times, be almost invisible to the conscious construction of the self. At this point it becomes evident that my *Star*

Chart series in fact has a duality of purpose. On the one hand it was my original intention to convey the wonderment of the night sky as seen that day on the bay and on many nights since, but on the other, they should be seen as reflections of the human condition and how our experiences shape us in ways that are almost entirely unseen.

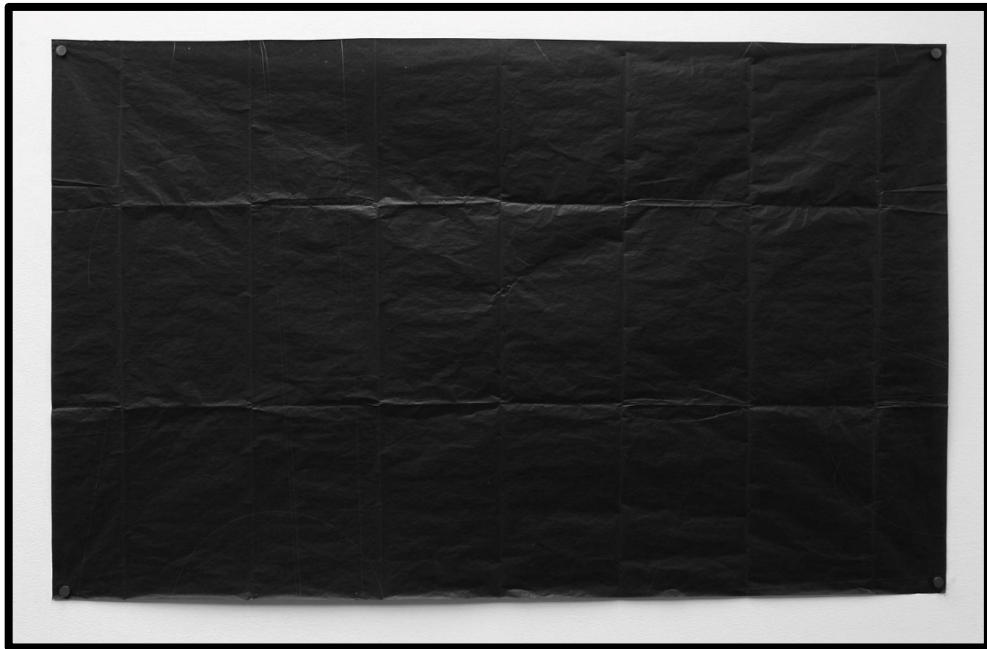


Figure 11 - *Star Chart 12 Blood Moon VA 8/2014*

The density of the black carbon is a wonderful representation of not only the inky night sky but also the nebulous void that is the philosophical self. The marks remaining from the process of the transfer are subtle enough that they beckon the viewer to the paper, inviting her/him to confront the work in close

proximity and to fill the viewer's sight, away from external distractions. In this way, the viewer can reflect not only on the work itself, but on the concept of the constructed world and the constructed self. In a way this mirrors the way that we look at the night sky and how we turn our gaze internally – the sky is so vast and the self so complex that we often focus exclusively on one or the other.

The physical act of looking at the piece and the contemplative act of self-reflection are both modes of discovery. Viewers become active participants in what might otherwise be seen as a static, two-dimensional world and as they explore the work they help to invest it with meaning. They then construct their own visions of the world that is presented before them, and the experience that they have while doing so, in turn, etches some mark on their very being.

In a broader sense, gazing at the stars has long been one of the most intimately moving experiences in which humans have engaged. It has fueled curiosity and inspired creativity for generations. Entire civilizations have myths and deities based on the stars and celestial objects in the night sky. And while my charts are created by observing the night sky and making notations of where I perceive star positions to be, shooting stars, and airplanes flying overhead, I make use of and combine these various elements from my collected notes, reimagining the night sky as I see it. I carefully construct celestial orbits and tracks in my new sky, based on observation and research, invoking the work of early astronomers

and cartographers, and the observations they made in an era before telescopes. The works play with the idea of the macroscopic and acceptable “shared reality” that we all inhabit. And it juxtaposes this reality to the creative inner universe that we constantly create and recreate.

Due to the constant observations and records that I had been making, I found myself frustrated upon returning to Fairfax in late August and began the ritual of making charts in this new environment. Less light pollution obscured the sky over the bay in southeastern Virginia, than where I live in northern Virginia. The reality is that, as I moved closer to a larger city, many of the stars simply vanished from view due to an over-spilling of light caused by urbanization.

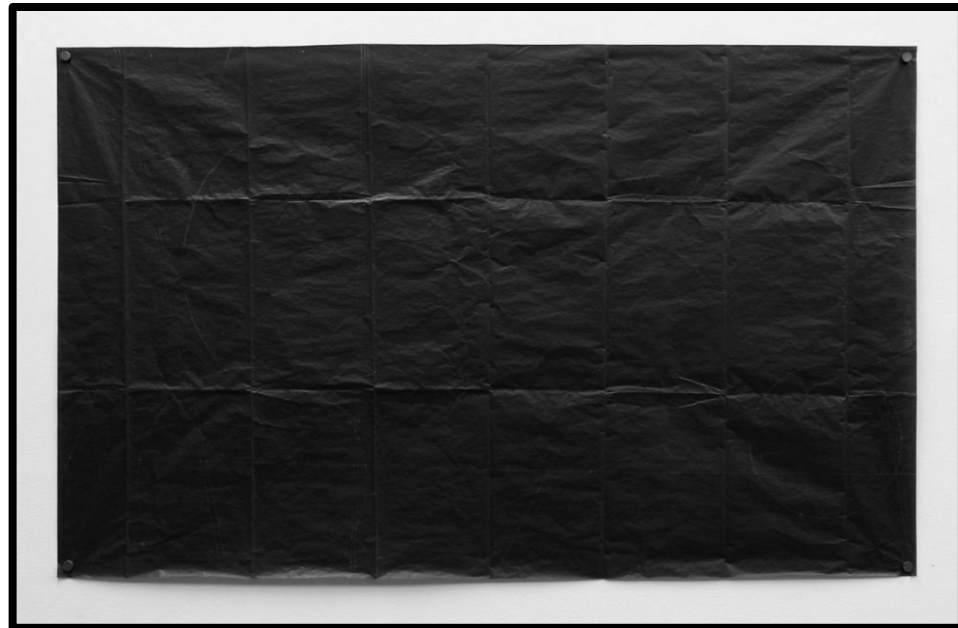


Figure 12 - *Star Chart 30 NE 12/2014*

In much the same way that our city lights blot out the stars, so too does the light of our shared reality infringe on our creative spaces at times. The further inward we travel, the easier it is to drown out the external expectations and realities that sometimes blind us, and the easier is it to see the constellations of creativity that exist within our own personal, ever-changing sky.



Figure 13 - *On the Edge of a Fading Light*

On the Edge of a Fading Light acted as an as an investigation into our creativity, and from whence it is derived. It explored the waning night sky as light

pollution from cities grows and infringes on areas that were once clear windows to the stars. Even in a locale more than thirty minutes away from a major U.S. city, the effect that light pollution has is nothing short of astounding. While our civilization constantly celebrates itself as the shining beacon of a modern world, I wonder if we might be losing something that humanity has relied on for millennia to inspire our creative passions? Are we supplanting it? In light of the numerous other environmental issues we face, the loss of the stars from the night sky may seem somewhat insignificant, but they have been one of humanity's primary inspirational forces throughout history.

More and more of the population gravitates towards large urban sprawls and within those spaces the natural world is becoming ever less present. Bright city lights drown even the brightest stars, leaving the sky in a dense haze of polluted blue-gray. I often wonder what would become of us if all of the stars were just to fade away, consumed by our own manufactured light. Would we end up losing our connection to something greater than us; would we lose a part of ourselves? The installation, much like the *Star Chart* series, was an experience that had been informed by the impact of my surroundings at the time and the documentation I took while stargazing.



Figure 14 - *On the Edge of a Fading Light Detail*

The installation's dualistic intent is manifest in its form. The gallery space abuts a solitary window outside of which stands a light. The light is incorporated into the piece as a manifestation of the two-part criticism of what many might call the "light of civilization." On the one hand, it represents the actual light that drowns out the stars and obfuscates our more natural environment. On the other hand, it is also intended to be a commentary on ways in which a shared reality and strict social mores may impede people in a creative context. As the strings of the piece approach the window space, they become lighter and less populated with

stars. As they recede into the gallery the strings become darker and the stars that are present are more diverse in size and are far more numerous. As we pull away from the city, our natural environment comes into much sharper focus, and as we look inward and question social norms and our shared reality, perhaps we too develop our inner universe and feed our creative drive and stoke the fires of inspiration inside ourselves.

With the completion of this piece I had everything that I needed to move forward to what I have been doing most recently, and what comprised my MFA thesis exhibition. The love of the sky and stars, the dread of a loss of something irreplaceable in the environment, considerations of change, the contingent self, and where we derive our inspiration all swirled around inside my head and led me to what would be my largest installation to date. This work is the most clearly defined expression of my investigations into the human condition thus far, and while it too will eventually become a worldview to be trodden on and reflected upon, currently it is what I am and it represents a visual analog to the culmination of my experiences.

Reflections on Contingency: The Poetics of Self

‘Thus I willed it,’ because she has found a way to describe that past which the past never knew, and thereby found a self to be which her precursors never knew was possible.⁴

-Richard Rorty

An installation is akin to an anomaly; it is almost a parallel universe in and of itself that one can walk into with unusually easy access. The artist who approaches this way of working wishes to transform a space in such a way that viewers find themselves transported to somewhere completely new upon entering, forgetting where they had been only moments before. An installation should have the gravity to reshape an empty room into an experience, an adventure which imprints itself not only on the people who witness it, but also the place where it is installed. On the surface, *The Stars Remember Pangea* (Figs. 15-18,22), is about creating, capturing and mapping the infinite as it pertains to both the human condition and, as an extension, of the universe. Wonder and experience were the key factors on a purely subjective level but there are many levels that can be explored as one spends time and reflects on the work.

⁴ Richard Rorty, *Contingency Irony and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 29.



Figure 15 - *The Stars Remember Pangea* Panoramic

Each component of this piece hangs simply from a different point on the ceiling. They are all between a half inch and eighteen inches above the ground throughout the installation. Irregular paths are created by the spacing between objects, inviting visitors to explore the area that this work fills differently each time they encounter it. As they move through the piece, viewers become engulfed by the star field created by the wool balls threaded on thin, black string.

The effect of the low hanging land masses and the rising stars relative to the height of the viewer is intended to produce an almost out-of-body experience that expands the viewer's vision and juxtaposes the self to the infinite. The viewer looks down upon the universes in their multitudes and they are forced to contend with their own uniqueness as a result. In a comment book left for people to record their experiences, some noted that floating above the worlds, hand in hand with the stars, had a lonely, somber effect, and made them consider how they are related to



Figure 16 - *The Stars Remember Pangea* Detail

everything and how small they are. Many others made note of how uplifting the experience was and how it made them appreciate their own personal uniqueness even among what might be an infinite number of alternative “thems” in an infinite number of alternative universes.



Figure 17 - *The Stars Remember Pangea* Detail



Figure 18 - *The Stars Remember Pangea* Detail

As I conceptualized the installation, I knew that the most demanding part of creating it logistically would be covering the gallery with just the right number of hanging pieces. Too few and there would be awkward gaps, too many and the space would feel crowded. Doing a rough sketch of the gallery and how my works would specifically be made for this space (Fig. 19) had me considering how similar the initial sketches for my star charts were to this planning. I had to take into

consideration balance in a space that I would not see finished until the actual installation. Blindly making plans, creating, and reimagining the universe. This time however, the universe was not being channeled from outside sources but from me.

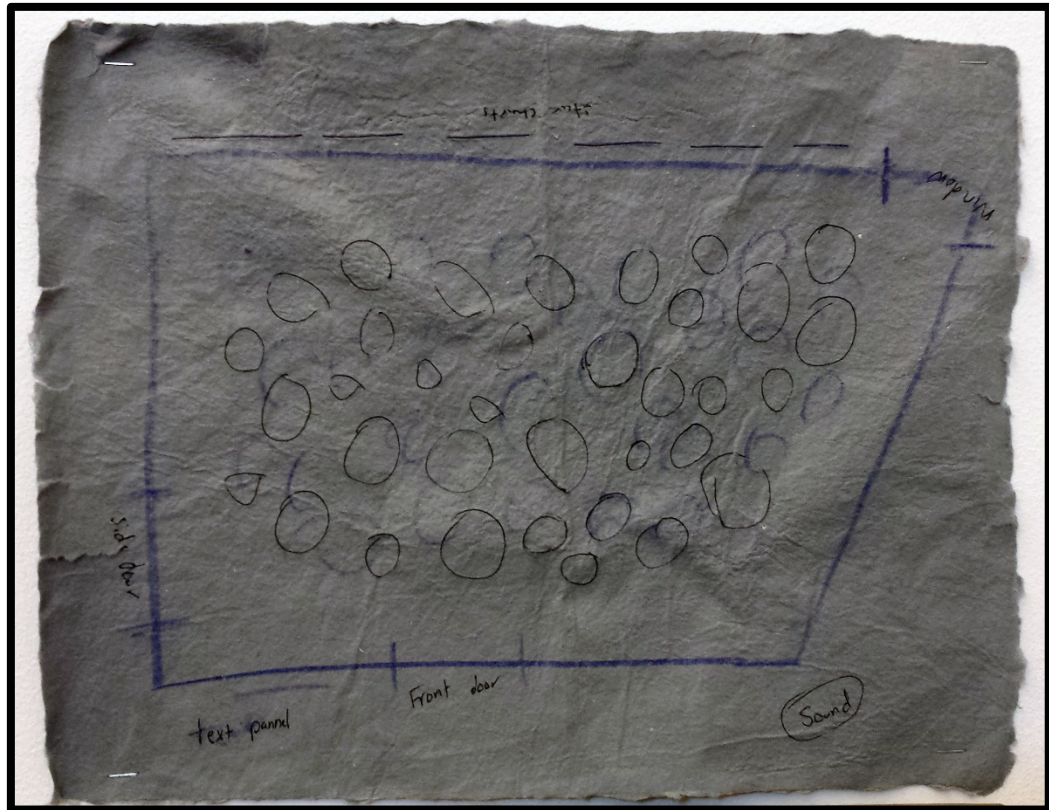


Figure 19 - Gallery Plan Sketch

I reflected on my charts and the mapping that I had been doing in relation to creating maps of existing places. Starting out, I simply made a circle much like the ones that frequent every chart, and filled it in with a different type of map, one with topographic elements (Fig. 20). A physical object felt more grounded than a

thin sheet of transfer paper, and that extended to the type of mapping I wanted to explore. This circle became a shallow cylinder which would then defy gravity through its suspension by thin string. The land needed the sky so stars were added

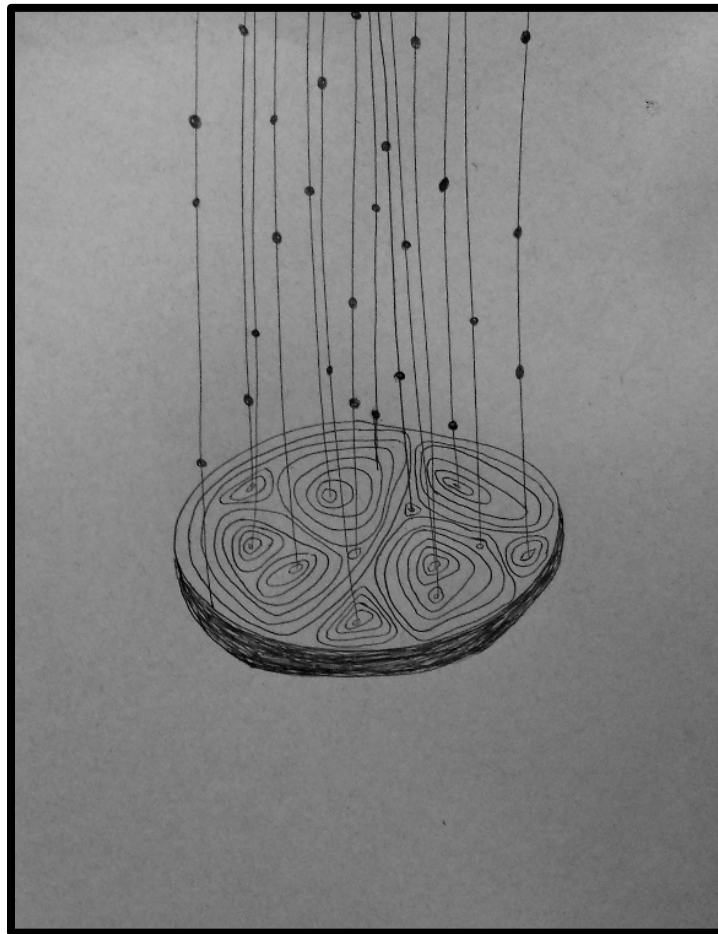


Figure 20 - Sketch 1 *The Stars Remember Pangea*

to tie everything together. The shape began to multiply in my mind and I found myself drawing the same object but with different surfaces. (Fig. 21) One drawn object became many different sections but together they are still part of a whole.

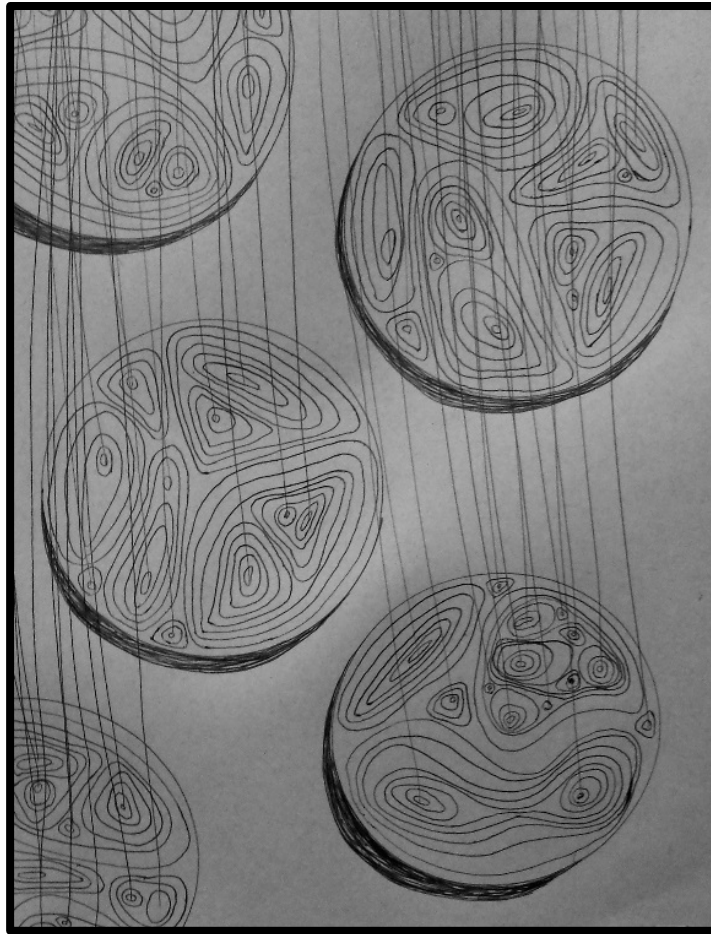


Figure 21 - Sketch 2 *The Stars Remember Pangea*

While working on the objects for this installation, I realized that my experience at George Mason was coming full circle. I considered some of my earliest pieces and one in particular, comprised of repetitive components with subtle differences, sprang to mind. However, *A Segment of Infinities* looked at the multitude of humanity through the thought of an infinite number of different people, while *The Stars Remember Pangea* deals with an infinite number of selves and the myriad potentials of one person's contingent self, based upon that person's

lived experiences. The installation, *The Stars Remember Pangea*, is then a natural progression from the star chart. In those works I “created” a fanciful sky from a series of charts based on night sky observations. They represent my first foray into the realm of contingent and constructed worlds. In *The Stars Remember Pangea*, everything comes together and becomes not just a reimagining of the stars, but a reimagining of everything in the universe, including the self.

Pangea had a multitude of probable outcomes, but due to certain events happening the way that they did, the Earth is how we know it today. This world exists in a state of constant flux, though it may not seem so, based on how short the lifespan of an average person is relative to a cosmic body. It should be noted however, that at any moment, through either human or natural intervention, there exists the potential for everything to change radically and for the world to be entirely “recreated.” The stars, much like the land, also have an unknown future and perhaps even an unknown present. There are numerous possible outcomes in a star’s life – burn out and collapse, turn into a black hole, become a supernova or perhaps even give rise to new stars.⁵

Although we may not see it, some of this could have already happened. As we look at the stars we see the past. As they look at us, they also see the past. Many

⁵ “Stars - NASA Science,” NASA, Accessed April 3, 2015. <http://science.nasa.gov/astrophysics/focus-areas/how-do-stars-form-and-evolve/>.

of the stars may already be gone, their bodies cooled and burned out, but their light travels still, long after they are a shadowy remnant of their former selves. Perhaps looking to Earth those stars still see Pangea? Or the Earth being created? Perhaps there are stars so distant that the existence of Earth is as imperceptible to them as their existence is to us? Maybe, like people, perception is relative to position both physically and mentally? Perhaps each of these innumerable stars sees a different Pangea? A different Earth? For us Pangea has come and gone, but the stars remember it and some see it still. An infinite number of them might see it infinitely differently due to the simple physics, much like an infinite number of selves might see the same thing differently contingent upon the infinitely different experiences they have undergone. Multiply that by an infinite number of possible universes and the notion becomes so overwhelming and awe-inspiring as to become sublime in nature. Against the backdrop of an infinite number of universes, each with an infinite number of possibilities, the fact that we are here and that we are uniquely us is a direct result of the human condition and the experiences that have imprinted themselves on our beings to be a bright light. We are each a unique outcome of an infinite number of contingencies, and I find that to be very poetic.



Figure 22 - *The Stars Remember Pangea*

May We Meet Again: Closing Remarks

It's no use going back to yesterday, because I was a different person then.⁶

-Alice in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

All of the works from the past semesters that have been mentioned so far overlap and create a path that leads to where I am as a person and an artist today. Physically there is the continued use of specific materials – such as wood, cotton, and wool – and the labor intensive handwork that goes into each of my pieces through repetition in process and in objects. The experience of creating these works with similar media has allowed me to understand the material on an intimate level and has helped me not only to master the use of them but also to learn what each of them adds to the whole.

The progress of suspension that started with *Tilting at Windmills*, and evolved into *On the Edge of a Fading Light* eventually led to the framework upon which I would suspend *The Stars Remember Pangea*. My numerous past successes and failures on projects such as those, a process that involved an exhausting amount of trial and error, led to the understanding that keeping the rigging simple

⁶ Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Kindle Edition: Public Domain Books, 1997), 72.

and not overly complex was ideal. I knew that complex rigging would not only make installation and deinstallation problematic, it would also have detracted from the simplicity of the finished work by overcomplicating the space. *On the Edge of a Fading Light* also showed me how to adequately use and fill a space in a way that allowed me to create an experience for the viewer, and that, combined with the *Star Charts* and *We Contained the Sea*, began to shift my views toward a more naturally focused inspirational force.

We Contained the Sea proved to be a major turning point in my practice that allowed for the conceptual dissolution of the barrier of the self while also proffering the recognition of the immensity of the universe. The two notions combine philosophically in my work to manifest the opening of the self to the acceptance of contingency. This in turn pulled in the concept of *Irregular Pearl*, which recognized experience's role in the construction of self. After accepting not only contingency as a whole but as a state of self, the experience I had on the water and the subsequent creation of the *Star Charts* further pushed this concept and led to the creation and understanding of constructed realities through mapping elements and construction of a universe. This force was later harnessed and brought to bear in *The Stars Remember Pangea*.

Although my work has invoked and examined the human condition and its myriad aspects, the way that I have approached my subject matter has varied considerably based entirely upon who I was at the time of creation, which non-

ironically encapsulates the very theme that I am attempting to invoke with my work. My confidence grew in my abilities while I progressed through the program at George Mason and my focus became clearer. The Melissa that made *Tilting at Windmills* is different from the one who made *We Contained the Sea*, or *The Stars Remember Pangea*, even if she seems to be the same physical being. While my evolution as an artist has followed my evolution as a person, I hope that my work has the longevity for people to come back to it, reflect upon it, and reconsider it in different lights as they themselves evolve as people. Because in the end I think that the act of creating and recreating meaning is at the very heart of being human.

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BIOGRAPHY

Melissa Hill (b. 1986 in Norfolk, Virginia) is an award-winning artist who received both her Bachelor of Fine Arts in 3D Media (2011) and her Bachelor of Arts in Art History (2012) at Old Dominion University in Norfolk Virginia. She completed her Master of Fine Arts in Sculpture (2015) at George Mason University in the Washington D.C. suburb of Fairfax, Virginia. Hill's art has been presented in several solo shows, group exhibitions around the world, and has been collected internationally.