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CRISTELA'S SHADOW

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ABSTRACT

Cristela's Shadow

Saul Villegas

This thesis thoroughly explores the potential of using artistic practice as a research-based approach to facilitate positive experiences and engage with traumatic memories. It is firmly grounded in the five stages of grief outlined by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in “On Death and Dying”: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. The project constructs a non-linear narrative around the traumatic memory of losing a loved one to violence. The central research question investigates how imaginal exposure techniques using aesthetics in mixed-media design can aid individuals with traumatic memories of grief. The research draws on Prolonged Exposure (PE) therapy techniques, focusing on *in vivo* and *imaginal exposure* methods. These techniques involve confronting traumatic memories to reduce associated fears and anxieties through staged encounters and narrative rescripting experiments. Imaginal exposure primarily extracts memories through verbal interactions, which inspired the creation of a mind map that encapsulated these memories’ mental, physical, and virtual environments. By utilizing an autoethnographic lens, the research meticulously maps these emotions and translates them into a mixed-media art framework, reflecting the abstract, fragmented, and overlapping nature of mental imagery. This process aims to build on extracting a cathartic and transformative healing journey through art. The findings highlight limitations in this method related to language, memory complexity, and the elusive nature of memory formation and their temporal perceptions. The PaR

autoethnographic approach suggests that PE therapies can benefit from evolving with new technologies and frameworks taught to people undergoing treatment. This adaptation to existing therapies could enhance the discovery, design process, and narrative articulation, offering individuals a means of expressing and communicating their contained recollections of personal experiences.

keywords: imaginal exposure, mental imagery, optics, perception, autoethnography, grief, crystal-image, therapy, art, memory

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my mother, Cristela, and my brother, Marcos Villegas, 'Shadow.'
To all the people who have been disrupted in their lives, I dedicate this work to help inspire you to learn from the human condition and to value your life and those of your loved ones.



Figure 1. *Marcos Villegas & Cristela, ~2004, Printed semi-glossy Photograph, Family Portrait Collection.*

SPECIAL THANK YOU

Cristela Ruiz mother of Saul Villegas

Delta, Javier Sr., Javier Jr., & Marcos. + Family + Friends

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PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

On August 28, 2004, the phone rang non-stop through the early morning hours. That Saturday morning changed our lives forever. We received a phone call from a sibling saying simply, “They killed Marcos.” My brother, Marcos Villegas, was our family's third sibling out of four. He was three years older than me, and at the time of his death, I was twenty years old. That morning, in shock, I ran across the hall to wake my sister. The room was dim, and she jumped out of bed, frantically covering her ears as if to block out the sound of this horrific news. This was my first encounter with an awareness of an external problem being forced into my mind through a voice. Then, the instant became more vivid and confused. How can this be real? What exactly happened? More importantly, who did this? As my mind raced to piece together the news, my first instinct was to find out if it was true—and how to get to our hometown, Avenal, CA, where my mother lived.

Returning to her house reminded me of her vibrant shrines and decorated walls with artwork, house plants, and trinkets. I have always been fascinated with mental imagery and creating images by looking at my surroundings. This inspiration came from my mother, who enjoyed decorating our house with interior designs inspired by Spanish and Italian baroque. Her eclectic style invited me into a world where color, objects, and their arrangement meant more than their decorative quality. It helped me understand that creating areas to worship a god or meditate on a candle helped ease the mind and spirit. Not only did we share our collective grief in this experience, but we also connected in an artistic way. Understanding my mother’s way of transforming her struggles into art has given me a way to perceive the world

through symbols and the energy one might feel when using them. During this time, even the artistic assemblages she had poured so much time into blurred away. My mother, although Catholic, had always been intrigued with esoteric knowledge. One example of this was every evening in popular Spanish news channels during the late 90s, an astrologer would deliver horoscopes in his flamboyant capes and jewelry. Walter Mercado was a symbol of the connection between nature and the cosmos and always sent his horoscopes to each and every one of his followers, sending a message of peace and love.¹ I believe that growing up with the duality of religion and esoteric knowledge made me appreciate the universe and nature. This is where the idea of the sun began, as a fascination with our solar system, through astrology. Mercado, in his time, was an opulent stage character and delivered powerful messages to the audience. He demanded respect and charisma despite his gender-non-conforming appearance. He gave queer people like me hope to think beyond ourselves and our society and appreciate the connections we have outside of our perceptions and into the universe that connects us.

Although growing up in a state of this newfound consciousness and eagerness to create art about nature and the beauty surrounding me, my attention was also drawn to the ugliness I saw and experienced. This project traces the moment my appreciation of the arts converged with the disturbed quality of my memories that interfered with artistic inspiration. My research in optics and perception, which I will later address in this work, has allowed me to refocus my way of producing art through conventional means and draw from the disturbances of experiencing trauma after losing my brother through gun violence. This

¹ “Blessings from the Universe: Walter Mercado,” National Museum of American History, September 5, 2023, <https://americanhistory.si.edu/explore/stories/walter-mercado>.

enabled me to create an experimental approach to multimedia installation. I have spent the last two decades investigating this encounter. The formation of the ugliness surrounding those events was used as a reference to transform the mental images of grief and make way for new and improved ones. Intrusive images and memories and their characteristics, as described in Brewins article, “a person can often tell how the image entered awareness, its duration, associated emotions, the relationship of the emotion to the external world, efforts to change or discipline it, and the sequential or simultaneous arrangement of a series of images.” (Brewin et al, 2010).² Being able to find awareness of both the good and bad in the human condition enabled me to externalize those thoughts through art-making practices. Using various ways of paying attention to my body’s reaction and emotional state led me to closely identify what memories made me feel positive or negative. Understanding the characteristics of each memory was key.

Experiencing synesthesia during this experience created vivid and detailed scenarios based on the information being passed around in the community about the suspects. Ward’s article reads, “Synaesthetes have a particular tendency to think using vivid mental images across multiple senses, which is likely intimately related to the synaesthesia.”(Ward, 2021.)³ The phenomenon of recreating the violent scenario in my head affected my family and me, resulting in our collective trauma. Much of those internalized emotions and sounds of the

² Brewin, Chris R, et al. “Intrusive Images in Psychological Disorders: Characteristics, Neural Mechanisms, and Treatment Implications.” *Psychological Review*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, Jan. 2010, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2834572/.

³ Jamie, Ward. “Is Synaesthesia a Predisposing Factor to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder?” *Frontiers in Bioscience (Scholar Edition)*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, June 2021, pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34256526/.

screams and cries arose from the grief that landed in our bodies. It accumulated over time as we mourned his death and talked about how we *felt my brother's pain*. Not only did we mentally experience the event second hand, but we also felt the psychological and emotional impact of human cruelty.

As we began the arrangements for my brother's funeral, the question lingered: where were the killers? Melinda Smith describes one component of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) by saying: "Experiencing a shooting in person can be especially traumatic. It can leave you in a state of shock and despair, overwhelming your nervous system and making you anxious and hypervigilant. If you live in an area prone to gun violence, you may be fearful or on edge every time you venture outside" (Smith, 2024).⁴ I was unaware that this impact influenced how I interacted with my friends, family, and society. The confusion of not knowing who had committed this crime made my entire family hypervigilant. Our anxiety noticeably changed our behavior toward the alleged suspects and their families. It seemed as if people who knew about the murder and kept silent added more disappointment to the situation. This encounter with shock and confusion was the beginning of my awareness of mental imagery.

INTRODUCTION

Cristela's Shadow is a three-part art installation that explores my encounter with a traumatic memory that I experienced when losing my brother that disrupted my way of life.

⁴ Melinda Smith, M.A. "Effects of Gun Violence on Mental Health." *HelpGuide.Org*, 5 Feb. 2024, www.helpguide.org/articles/ptsd-trauma/effects-of-gun-violence-on-mental-health.htm.

This project's main goal was to create a cathartic experience for me and my family to confront the passing of my brother through such violence and to support each other's grieving process. The work is a compilation of digital materials used in photography and video that attempts to display experiences of chaotic and fragmented imagery with an outlook of transcendence through that emotional journey. In each area of the work, viewers encounter visual representations of scenes and locations that have formed core memories of the experience leading up to the present.

Using an autoethnographic approach in my Practice as Research methodology, I dove deeper into my memories to intimately describe the ramifications of losing a loved one through violence while detailing the abstraction of the lingering thoughts. Through photography, video, digital design, and generative AI art image-making, mental imagery became a reference for designing the work's aesthetic. The descriptors of each memory were translated by an image, video, or auditory digital collage of an overlapped version of the memory. My idea going into the project was that applying distortions and exaggerations to the materials of the digital artifacts would closely describe the mental conditions and be able to recreate the media to portray the complex scenarios.

When trying to make sense of those abstractions, it was evident that there were many limitations to my ability to reproduce such recollections. I realized that no matter what form of technology, whether through video, photography, or VR headsets, the quality of the original memories still lacked a bridge to the projected screen. That is when I created a method to attempt to recreate a timeline of the events with the most pressing memories and worked out from there. By combining multiple angles and building on images to create

collages—the work began to describe the conditions of the impermanence of my thoughts. The turning point for me in the project was being able to piece together the narrative to begin making digital materials to identify key moments of my brother’s story. This was possible because of what my mother shared through her perspective. Interviewing my mother with prepared and informal questions, I began to get a sense of an outside perspective instead of just my abstract thoughts. The moments of shared conversations transmitted an emotional depth missing in the technology. The insights into leaning towards faith and prayer allowed us to summon parts of ourselves with the hope that my brother was in a better place. In a way, retrieving these memories needed an omniscient voice or guide to prepare for the journey ahead. My way toward finding the balance between my faith and the exploration of technology inspired me to embed prayer into video projections onto a physical space. This is what I found to be the most compelling part of my exhibit. The humanistic qualities of voice and movement that needed to be applied through our bodies and voices allowed me to expand my practice while bridging the gap that technology could not respond to. The form of video projections manifested from internal memories as projections themselves, resulting in two forms of projecting imagery. One is physically projected through video montages, and the other is an umbrella of ideas as projections of thoughts that form mental imagery.

I have relied on my artistic abilities to make sense of the world through aesthetics and practice as research experiments. The methods employed are techniques for encountering, reinterpreting, and reframing memories to mitigate the psychological harm caused by intrusive memories—which can change your perception. I understand that dealing with these internalized thoughts would require a long-term approach to coping. Science research has

enabled me to understand more about merging art and science capabilities in the long term.

When researching if it were possible to use art as therapy, I encountered research about Prolonged Exposure Therapy (PE) and its various methods. The idea of prolonged exposure therapy is that you make a plan to approach memories that show up as intrusive or as *mental imagery* to eliminate the natural response of avoidance through a prolonged period and sessions. The underlying structure of PE is that the person alleviates their anxiety and fear of these traumatic memories by taking control of the narrative and developing the ability to revisit the memory without those symptoms causing real-life disruptions.⁵ I discovered various approaches to prolonged exposure techniques being part of a larger framework. What drew me in were the explanations of how to rid yourself of the symptoms of PTSD through treatments of ‘drawing your way out,’ a technique used to sketch out a timeline of traumatic events. This allowed me to rescript my experience towards an empowered version of myself and overcome the experience.⁶

Imaginal Exposure Therapy is a therapeutic technique commonly used in the treatment of trauma-related disorders, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This technique involved guided imagery, where the individual is instructed to vividly imagine the traumatic event in a safe and controlled environment. During imaginal exposure, the individual describes the traumatic event in detail, focusing on sensory experiences, emotions,

⁵ “Va.Gov: Veterans Affairs,” Prolonged Exposure Therapy (PE) for PTSD, April 22, 2009, [https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/ptsd/pe-ptsd.asp#:~:text=Prolonged%20Exposure%20\(PE\)%20Therapy&text=In%20PE%2C%20the%20process%20of,in%20real%20life%E2%80%9D\)%20exposure.](https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/ptsd/pe-ptsd.asp#:~:text=Prolonged%20Exposure%20(PE)%20Therapy&text=In%20PE%2C%20the%20process%20of,in%20real%20life%E2%80%9D)%20exposure.)

⁶ Timea Kehr and Suzanne Haeyen, Drawing your way out: Imagery rehearsal based art therapy (IR-AT) for post-traumatic nightmares in borderline personality disorder, January 9, 2024, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282752562_http_onlinelibrarywileycom_doi_101002_eji1830270613_epdf.](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282752562_http_onlinelibrarywileycom_doi_101002_eji1830270613_epdf)

and associated thoughts. The goal of imaginal exposure is to facilitate and process the memory to reduce stress symptoms associated with trauma. After exploring this angle of creating a hierarchy of intrusive memories, I designed a map surrounding my experience. I created designs with different materials as markers for each event that constructed the narrative arch of the story. Imaginal Exposure assisted me in creating a bridge to that trauma—leading me to ponder questions of how to introduce this into my art practice. How can imaginal exposure techniques using aesthetics in mixed-media design be used to aid people with traumatic memories of grief? The experimental project sought to highlight my experience and use imagery that staged the trauma through my lens. In this project, I aimed to analyze the emotions, actions, behaviors, and memories that formed and were affected by the incident. I used my memory of the traumatic event to figure out answers to the conditions surrounding the event—discovering a way for me to expose those internal thoughts with a cathartic expression to extract it. I would like to clarify that although this complex structure is primarily designed from my perspective, there are segued connections to my mother’s memory and experience.

In creating materials multimodally and assigning specific memories to the media, I became aware of the complexity of extracting and reconstructing thoughts. It made me realize that I had avoided it for many years, and it was quite difficult to describe the conditions for others to be able to encounter. Trauma is elusive, and it was part of the difficulty in this project to stage the memory in a way that resonated with my cathartic experience and a comprehensive narrative. Creating this artwork addressed the impermanence of memories of my brother before and after his death. The work intended to create a new method of

extracting traumatic memories. Using both exposure therapy techniques as an art-based experiment, my work describes imaginal exposure for the projected *mental imagery* and the *in vivo* exposure for the memory locations in physical spaces.⁷ The two methods of prolonged exposure, *in vivo* and *imaginal*, created the bridge between the locations of in-person memories and distinctions of the memories in my mind. These two structures were applied to my project by confronting real or outside stimuli by visiting the locations where my brother lived and died, where the connection to the trauma resided, and how I remembered them. The *in vivo* method allowed me to confront that anxiety more directly. The *imaginal* created a portal into my direct thoughts.

In curating the final project for the MFA showcase, I staged the memories' mental, physical, and virtual environments. Each section had descriptions of how the conceptual content related to each installation. I created dramatic compositions, allegories, and personifications of symbols that drove emotions and entries into the memories. I focused on designing a character called *The Sun* that metamorphosed throughout the materials and illustrated various emotions through facial and body expressions. My vision for *The Sun* was to develop a physical character throughout the work that would act as an omniscient narrator guiding the spectator through the staged trauma. In reality, this character acted as my safe point of contact and a person who understood my internal thoughts and could describe a direct connection to my emotions. Developing the character of the Sun allowed me to rescript the narrative in ways that placed a new memory, transcending fear and anxiety.

⁷ Joel Pearson et al., "Mental Imagery: Functional Mechanisms and Clinical Applications," Trends in cognitive sciences, October 19, 2015, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4595480/>.

The experimental imaginal exposure techniques present in this project gave me a way to create newly staged dioramas of scenes that surrounded the trauma, but also a way to create a polarity to it by introducing new positive memories. For every negative thought or feeling from those portrayed memories, I intentionally incorporated a design element that beautified and treated the imagery with peace and aesthetics to form and alter colors and textures. This alteration was my first-hand approach to visualizing and manipulating the once-destructive memories into a better one. This method of editing media restructured new favorable memories.

This work combines art and technology with psychological techniques to create a path toward healing. Coping mechanisms are not enough to address the issue of trauma, one must sit with it, understand it, and form new pathways to a more authentic self. Verbal techniques used in (PE) are not enough to recreate a complex scenario for practitioners to gain insight into our complex traumas. In this work, a new proposed method of combined imaginal exposure techniques can lead to experiments in extracting mental imagery. Creating a direct encounter with the effects of mental distress can enable people to find agency in their suffering. Families of the victims can express their stories of the trauma of losing a loved one through violence with empathy and dignity, and, most importantly, clarity in their perspectives.

IMAGINAL EXPOSURE TECHNIQUES

The two *in vivo* and *imaginal* frameworks used in treating trauma through prolonged exposure techniques inspired a large portion of my project that resulted in various mediums. I

will highlight the materials and themes I addressed in the work and ways that I put them into my art practice. I used a range of emotions to express the thoughts surrounding my feelings and behaviors, each working towards building emotional regulation towards coping.

The National Health Institute of Mental Health describes post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as “a part of the body’s “fight-or-flight” response, which helps us avoid or respond to danger.”⁸ Avoidance was the symptom I was most focused on in my project. Prolonged Exposure (PE) intervention strategies, often labeled as *imaginal exposure*, are described in the American Psychological Association’s *Clinical Practice Guideline for the treatment of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder* site as “nine to twelve sessions, each 90 minutes in length, 60-minute to 120-minute sessions are usually needed for the individual to engage in exposure and sufficiently process the experience.”⁹ The sessions I engaged in were not with a psychiatrist, rather, I conducted these sessions through mentors and counselors who could counsel me and provide support during this time. I also practiced methods of participating in community building through philanthropy and art exhibitions at cultural centers as a way to use art as therapy to cope. Although some conversations were shared with my mother for support, I understood by experimenting with this project and its artistic expression would address the intention behind Prolonged Exposure therapy methods. Which aims to encourage the patients to gradually reach a level of comfort with their most traumatic memories by creating a plan to reach them and be able to sit with them. The patients are then asked to

⁸ “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder | NIMH,” Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, 2023, https://www.nimh.nih.gov/sites/default/files/documents/health/publications/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/post-traumatic-stress-disorder_1.pdf.

⁹ “Prolonged Exposure (PE),” Clinical Practice Guideline for the treatment of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, June 2020, <https://www.apa.org/ptsd-guideline/treatments/prolonged-exposure>.

verbally describe what they see (their eyes are closed during this exercise) and relay the information. This method is called *in vivo* or real-life sessions.¹⁰ Having experienced avoidance of this topic since 2004, the past two years of developing this thesis project has involved me to engage with countless hours of approaching the memory and detailing the encounter. The experience of looking for clues from the past through memory enabled me to reimagine and describe the entire picture—creating the starting and ending points of the trauma. Through this process, I have reconstructed the narrative, enabling a clear and realistic understanding of the traumatic experience. By embracing these techniques and reconstructing the narrative, I have learned to confront and comprehend the trauma rather than avoid it. This shift has been instrumental in crafting a narrative that I can engage with and ultimately understand more clearly, resulting in a change in perspective from the experience.

CRISTELA'S SHADOW

The overall theme and the title of the work came from gaining insight into my mother's perspective of the events surrounding the incident, the trials, and the parole hearings. My brother's previous affiliated street gang nickname was *Shadow*, I decided to name the project *Cristela's Shadow*, in a sense, this metaphorically described the lingering shadow of grief. The title suggests an exploration of her grief, but also the connection between mother and son.

¹⁰ "Va.Gov: Veterans Affairs," Prolonged Exposure Therapy (PE) for PTSD, April 22, 2009, [https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/ptsd/pe-ptsd.asp#:~:text=Prolonged%20Exposure%20\(PE\)%20Therapy&text=In%20PE%2C%20the%20process%20of,in%20real%20life%E2%80%9D\)%20exposure.](https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/ptsd/pe-ptsd.asp#:~:text=Prolonged%20Exposure%20(PE)%20Therapy&text=In%20PE%2C%20the%20process%20of,in%20real%20life%E2%80%9D)%20exposure.)

The portion of the work that centered on the experience of putting imaginal exposure techniques into action were based on our sessions of speaking about the incident. With the help of the Victims of Crime unit in Kings County, we could present our perspective of how this incident affected our lives.¹¹ With several in-person and audio conversations with my mother, Cristela, during the 2022-24 project timeline, I continued to gather insights from her experiences. During this time, we collected images of my brother and talked about memories of him. Reconstructing his memory through ephemera has always been emotional—understanding that all we have left of him are the memories and materials. I was drawn towards the powerful statement she made in an online parole hearing where she recalled her emotional state and reasoning for her opposition to the offender’s release. Her approach to extracting the information was verbal, but she was also able to describe a mental image of her state of grief. Holmes and Mathew's review on *Mental Imagery in emotion and emotional disorders* describes mental imagery as “images that seem to be characterized by their subjective resemblance to sensory impressions, as if “seeing” with the mind's eye or hearing with the mind's ear.”¹² Similarly, the accounts for these flashbacks of this event are a collection of audio, visual, and experiential happenings that I have constructed to resemble her and mine experiences closely.

¹¹ “Victim-Witness Assistance Program | Kings County,” Victim-Witness Assistance, n.d., <https://www.countyofkingsca.gov/departments/public-safety/victim-witness-assistance-center>.

¹² Emily A. Holmes, Andrew Mathews, Mental imagery in emotion and emotional disorders, *Clinical Psychology Review*, Volume 30, Issue 3, 2010, Pages 349-362, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2010.01.001>.
(<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0272735810000140>)



Figure 2. *Cristela's Home*, 2024, Digital Still from Video.

To further expand on the ‘mind’s eye’ framework, the article reads, “This should not be taken as implying that images resemble “pictures in the brain” when describing mental imagery and its origins [...] imagery can impact emotion via its link to directly perceiving the world. There is a degree of competition between mental imagery and perceptual processes when they share the same sensory modality.” (Holmes, Matthews, 2010.) It is with this direct link to emotions that these recreated scenes, each digitally enhanced with color, light, and texture, describe each emotion using characteristics of mental disturbances. The imagery of the traumatic memory displays a distinct perspective that introduces a memory with the awareness of the character (observer) or a third-person perspective. The National Library of Medicine’s article on *Assessing Mental Imagery in Psychology* explains, “Emotionality is influenced, and this property has clear relevance to particular psychological disorders. Visual

images are typically described as if they were being perceived directly from our own eyes, referred to as the 'field' or 'first-person' perspective, but sometimes are perceived as if by another person so that we are included in our image, referred to as the "observer" or "third-person" perspective."¹³ This perspective of the *observer*, and seeing oneself, created a 'distance' or, as the article reads, "use of the observer perspective was found to be correlated with self-reports of emotional avoidance in another traumatized sample." (Clinical Psychology Review, 2010.) Looking closely at my memories of the day of my brother's funeral, I remember mostly seeing a wide-angle perspective of the participants and the event's location. This correlates with the theory that traumatized victims will emotionally detach themselves by using another perspective to re-enter the memory. Using both of our perspectives created a heightened sense of memory to identify and describe the event as we both perceived it, leading into a more expansive perspective both visually and temporally.

For this reason, I chose to not only enter the memory of my brother through my vision but also to gain entry into my mother's experience. This would allow me to process the grief together and in a safe way. For both of us, this meant describing in detail her emotions. This conversation would result in a statement to deliver her internal thoughts which was instrumental in framing her experience to deliver her message to the parole board.

On March 16, 2022, while preparing my proposal for this thesis work, my family and I attended our first parole hearing. It had been 18 years since my brother's murder, and the details read in the statements from the offender, the commissioners, and the district attorney

¹³ David G Pearson et al., "Assessing Mental Imagery in Clinical Psychology: A Review of Imagery Measures and a Guiding Framework," *Clinical psychology review*, February 2013, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3545187/>.

opened the floodgate of emotions and the realization of the physical and emotional harm this incident caused. As we sat anxiously to hear the responses to the materials in preparation for the offender's logic for release—I couldn't help but notice how scripted the narrative was and the importance of compartmentalizing their experience was from ours. In the recanting of the murder, the collective understanding of this past event revealed a direct entry to that story. It offered a place for the story to be told in the present.

In a recreation of the audio for her victim impact statement, Cristela recites:

Hello my name is Cristela, I'm the mother of the victim, and (uh) I want this individual to pay for what he did—he planned two weeks ahead to kill my son... he left me a grandson (he was five years old) when he got killed by him ordering the followers and doing drugs (selling drugs) just to kill my son, while he was waiting outside to go to work. I do not want him out. He did not did not remorse anything . He just wanted to be a big shot and kill somebody. Everybody right now is fine having their families, and nobody doesn't even mention him –they don't even want to hear about him, nowhere. Because of what he did, and that's my statement. I don't want him coming out because it hurts me until this day. Whoever has children should understand that he killed my son, and I don't want him out at all.

Thank you.

Dealing with this trauma was not a thing of the past. Our family met with resistance from the offenders, their supporters, and the legal system advocating for a Youth Offender law PEN § 3051¹⁴. The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation's description of consideration of parole hearings states, "The idea of a youth offender parole hearing is based on scientific evidence showing that parts of the brain involved in behavior control

¹⁴ "Code Section," Law section, n.d., PEN § 3051, https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=PEN§ionNum=3051.&article=3.&highlight=true&keyword=youth%2Boffender%2B%2B.

continue to mature through late adolescence and that adolescent brains are not yet fully mature until a person is in his or her mid-to-late 20s. Specifically, the area of the brain responsible for impulse control, understanding consequences, and other executive functions is not fully developed until that time.”¹⁵ Advocating for justice for my brother was supported by the fact that the offender fled to Mexico from consequences for over two years after committing the homicide. The pain and terror this act inflicted on my family was a disgusting form of insult after the injury, and my adolescent brain at 20 years old was not prepared nor fully developed to handle the impact it had on my life. That law doesn’t clarify or accounts for the offenders victims and their psychological well being. During this period, I turned to fatih and expressed themes of good and evil in paintings—a recurring theme in Catholicism.



Figure 3. *La Alegoría de la Consciencia Divina*, acrylic-pastel, 12.5 x 17 IN, 2014.

Painting by Saul Villegas of Moderno.

¹⁵ “Youth Offender Parole Hearings,” Board of Parole Hearings, n.d., <https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/bph/youth-offender-hearings-overview/>.

Above is a painting that was inspired by Luca Giordano's *St. Michael* portrayal of an archangel defeating a demon.¹⁶ I searched for methods to create dynamic imagery and contrast during the first decade after my brother's passing (2014). This painting was one of the few that started incorporating allegory with symbols and personification of ideas that I would later describe as the metamorphosis of the Sun. The concept of allegory and personification, as illustrated in Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*, was my entry point for creating fictional windows to stage scenes using characters and icons to create 'allegories' that included self-portraits. Unlike Bachelard's ideology of the architecture of physical and mental space when thinking of poetic philosophies and allegories, the works in Ripa's manual depict a baroque-style manual of illustrations that serve both as a visual dictionary to discover meaning, and allegorical topics of the range of human emotions.

I turned to making art and this project to find my voice in both academia and the rural community of the Central Vally. It is crucial for families of victims to understand the traumas that follow a homicide. The experimentation to extract those memories could serve as a portal for people to cope with similar themes, but most importantly present itself as a cautionary tale for others to understand PTSD and mental imagery.

¹⁶ "Wikimedia Commons," Saint Michael | Google Art Project, February 11, 2011, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fa_Presto_-_St._Michael_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

I explored an interdisciplinary Art & Science approach combining optics and perception with aesthetics in photography. In the initial phase of designing the project, I brainstormed what materials I would use, identifying what the imagined memory looked and sounded like. At first, my go-to was the mirrorless camera, where I created instant digital photographs. Then I assigned visual characteristics in the editing phase by applying specific filters to those photographs. Altering the images transformed them into digital artifacts across photography, video, VR, and staged performances to evoke and conjure complex emotions. I drew upon energy and light, and playing with dramatic effects through photography created portals in my mind. However, there were limitations to still images that did not portray the vast movement of the mental imagery that seemed to appear and disappear. In response I began to record scenes to capture movement. I started by recording myself in various poses and expressions. Then I progressed to placing a tripod at the beach, in the cemetery, at my mom's house, and in the green screen room I had set up at the DARC Light Lab. This enabled me to think of the entire work as an expanded vision of pictures and videos—which, stitched together, can form an understanding of the inner workings and representation of those ideas.

First, I paid attention to my peripherals, and I noticed that my field of view was concave and hyperfocused in the center where images were most clear. This was helpful in recreating imagery from my point of view. An afterimage lingered in negative color and space when I closed my eyes. By applying the aesthetic of the afterimage, I created characteristics to images that depicted an internal image, a photographic interpretation of a

memory similar to a daydream or a nightmare. A key term I found while researching optics was *palinopsia*.¹⁷ This led me to apply positive areas in the afterimage so that I retained the dark background and adjusted the hue and saturation of the image to develop a technique of inverting only parts of the image. This was the beginning of using editing filters to describe the conditions of such effects.

Another descriptor I would like to mention is hallucinations in mental imagery. Developing color schemes and mental images was a complex challenge in image generation. This concept of creating imagery based on my past led to understanding intrusive memories and their manifestations. The article *Intrusive Memories of Trauma* explains that “an image can be created entirely from previously stored information held in long-term memory. For example, someone can hear the word “horse” and then create mental imagery based on their previous experience of what a horse looks like.”(Llitha et al., 2018). For this area of the project concerning mental images, I meticulously documented my observations and, through a process of trial and error, refined surface qualities and lighting arrangements to match the memory. It was important to attempt to remember the memory for what the experience was rather than to incorporate new attributes to them. That also was complex to decipher and often the result was that the imagery held aspects of both the real memory and new characteristics of it—manifested by my ability to manipulate imagery as time when on.

¹⁷ <https://www.allaboutvision.com/conditions/related/palinopsia/>



Figure 4. *Close-up of eyes with digital inverted filter*, 2024, Digital photograph, various size.

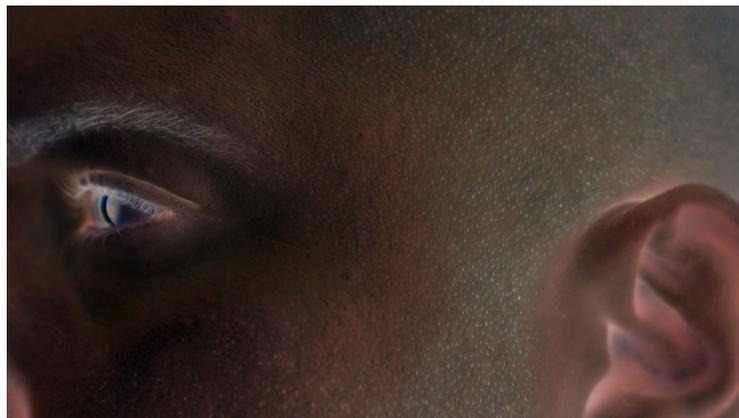


Figure 5. *Side profile of self-portrait with inverted noise filter*, 2024, Digital photograph, various size.

For example, if I imagined a dream-like scene that I wanted to look distorted, I would apply a warping and distortion filter to alter the surface and exaggerate the perspective.

Another example is through the audio, in which I would lower and echo the pitch of a voice

to sound distant and repetitive. The final example is the blending of digital media to create a fictional projection of the memory as a staged scene—similar to a film set. In each case scenario, the media and the material and the way it was created resonated with the formation of the thought process and recollection of the memory. The memory and the materials I used in each area of the work changed as the project evolved into a more expansive network of extracting the trauma. As I began to create images and videos, the need to sequence and archive them became necessary to evolve the work into 3D sculptures and a virtual reality environment.



Figure 6. Midjourney variation #5, *Reference photo of a self-portrait with a distortion filter*,2024

Digital collage, various size.

Drawing from these digital editing programs, my multi-media works were curated to represent a journey that the viewer would witness through an immersive experience. Much of the edited materials were located in a virtual world and were used as the central hub that created a mind-mapping diagram in the early stages of the project. The layout within the online gallery archived various media, including sound clips, video projections, 3D objects, and generative AI imagery. It allowed me to move around in digital space to find the best point of contact for the viewer. This virtual project inspired me to separate different sections of the work that were appropriate to each of the environments I describe in PaR below. This theoretical framework embarks on an exploration of the profound psychological and emotional voyage that individuals undertake as they experience the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. While these stages were initially proposed by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in the context of terminal illness, their application encompasses a broader range of traumatic experiences, including the loss of a loved one through violence.¹⁸ In my experimental approach for contextualizing these events, I used my artwork as containers for symbols and colors to represent coded memories. Through compartmentalizing these containers in the virtual world and as projections to memories, I was able to apply a hierarchy to them. In this version of the project, the online viewer can navigate through and in-between objects to encounter the digital material. In *Aesthetics in Photography*, Jonathan Friday explains “the frame of the Albertian picture encloses a

¹⁸ 1. MMSc Jennifer Fisher, “5 Stages of Grief: Coping with the Loss of a Loved One,” Harvard Health, December 12, 2023, <https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/5-stages-of-grief-coping-with-the-loss-of-a-loved-one>.

fictional or imaginatively transformed world, the frame of the Keplerian picture represents the frame of the visual field and thereby encloses a representation of the world seen or, more simply, a representation of vision.”(Friday, 2002,6). Throughout the work, you are pulled in close to a subjective view to create an Albertian picture—imaginative and from memory, as it would relate to a better understanding of the trauma and its visual representation. In the image-making process, the Keplerian picture or point of view sought to provide the viewer with an outward representation or a larger field of view of the entire picture. In my experimentation in creating the virtual component, you can move towards or away from these objects, giving you the illusion of both. In this version of the project I discovered a way to metaphorically allude to the sublime or the memories located in the trauma of an in-between state. The following figures show how navigating the virtual world provided many entry points viewing the staged materials.

The images created in the virtual world sought to create a collection of memories that held still as a point of entry in the memories. In Deleuze’s book *Cinema 2 Time-Image* when introducing the *crystal image* he explains, “its true genetic element when the actual optical image crystallizes with its own virtual image,”(Deleuze, 1989, 68-9). With this connection, I sought to capture real elements representing the locations, the portraiture, and the audio of real things and people embedded in memories. I placed them into the virtual world, creating a sense of direct connection and eliminating notions of time. Being able to refer to the memories nonlinearly meant that the digital artifacts needed to be set apart from the time-lapsed digital projections playing as a video in a sequential order. In a sense, the virtual world exists with crystalized memories—a metaphor of memories that once were and the

ability for a viewer to activate the virtual image by confronting it. The stillness of the mapping of the virtual world was an exploration of the compartmentalization of my memories and ways to stay connected to the past.¹⁹

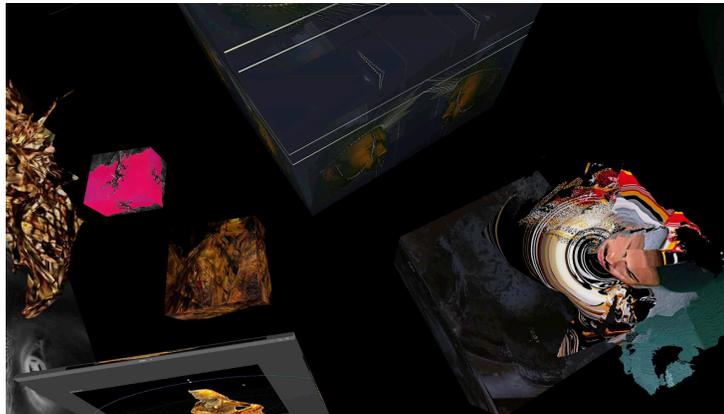


Figure 7. New Art City Virtual World (Keplarian View), *The Cathartic extraction of memories from the five stages of grief*, 2023-24, Digital mixed-media, various size.

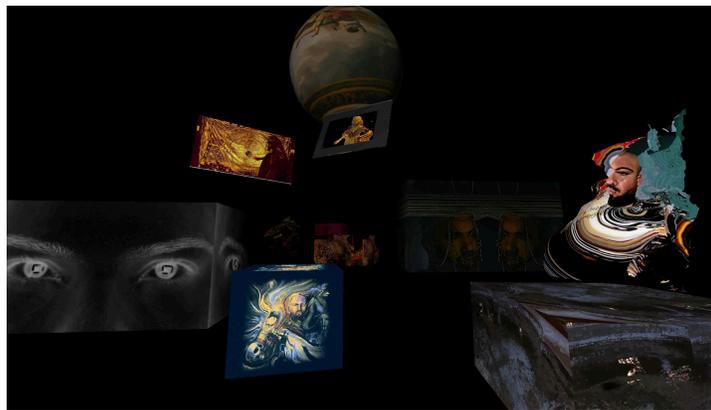


Figure 8. New Art City Virtual World (Albertian View), *The Cathartic extraction of memories from the five stages of grief*, 2023-24, Digital mixed-media, various size.

¹⁹ 1. Gilles Deleuze, Hugh Tomlinson, and Robert Galeta, essay, in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 68–69.

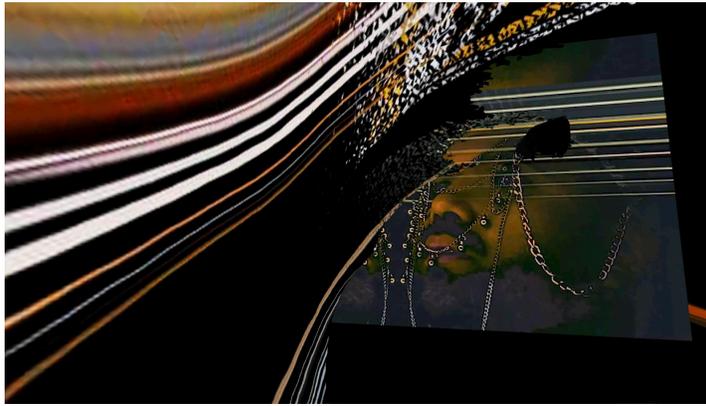


Figure 9. New Art City Virtual World (In-between View), *The Cathartic extraction of memories from the five stages of grief*, 2023-24, Digital mixed-media, various size.

When imagining how to produce the works that drew information from memory, I reverted to Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*, specifically his chapter on 'The Dialectics of Outside and Inside.' The explanation of anthropology of the imagination as a system of mapping memory from confrontational viewpoints of the inside and outside was described as not symmetrical, further explaining, "inside and outside, as experienced by the imagination can no longer be taken in their simple reciprocity; consequently, by omitting geometrical references when we speak of the first expressions of being, by choosing more concrete, more phenomenologically exact inceptions, we shall realize that the dialectics of inside and outside multiply with countless diversified nuances" (Bachelard, 2011)²⁰. Because the memory of a traumatic episode is nonlinear, this needs to be reflected in staging of the interpretations of

²⁰ 1. Gaston Bachelard, Maria Jolas, and John R. Stilgoe, *The Poetics of Space the Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011, 216).

the work. This made me imagine how the work would be displayed by creating windows through imagery with various scales, orientations, and optical qualities. Thinking spatially and poetically about my art expanded the entry points of vision, where the window of perception no longer resided with the traditional square as composition. The solution of reimagining the work as separate physical and digital environments allowed me the agency to explore a variety of expressive elements to fit the narrative of each experience and to correlate the medium that best described the conditions. I designed the media into three categories: mental, physical, and the virtual environment.

In a sense, mapping to episodic memories takes on a state of metaphors to confront past experiences through materials created in physical and digital forms of the present. With the challenge of working on memory, I sought to use the main markers of the event that we experienced on August 28, 2004, when my brother was killed, as a way to recreate a fictional timeline of the flashbacks with analog and digital media. Stanford's *Encyclopedia on Episodic Memory* explains, "It is possible not only to remember an event but also to imagine it. Thus, another core problem for a theory of episodic remembering is to distinguish between episodic memory and imagination, that is, to provide a criterion for the *mnemicity* of episodic memory". I kept this in mind when recreating artwork from memory and kept imaginative elements of the episode of the trauma separated. The article details the separation from mnemicity, mentioning, "when one engages in episodic thought, one is faced with the problem of determining whether one is remembering a past event or imagining a future or

counterfactual event.”²¹ This is pointed out to clarify that I am aware that the imaginative aspects of the work were separate from the actual memory and I didn’t seek to construct a traditional documentary-style narrative where everything was to be displayed *as is* or as it was. Rather, the recreations were used to compartmentalize the interference and the objective of rescripting trauma to produce a *new* and favorable memory to coexist with the truth and imagination. This method engaged me in investigating new media and exploring the transformative nature of spatial arrangement through memory, while allowing for various temporalities to exist simultaneously.

EXPERIMENTATION IN PAR

My primary approach in creating the media was to edit photographs on the computer editing program Photoshop. Creating compositions in the program (which uses a layering system) allowed me to use an additive lighting color system to affect the top layer and the layers beneath it. The composite becomes an endlessly editable collage with lighting, color, customizable templates, and texture through building layers with various opacities and areas revealed using masks. The ability to build on various compositions inspired me to think of each collage as a window into a memory. At first, the images started as landscapes, depicting scenery around the hills of Avenal, CA. However as the project progressed, the images created in Photoshop expanded into a larger scheme to produce imagery that would closely represent my memories and disturbances caused by the trauma. Being able to create portraits and complex panoramic scenes bridged well into the virtual world. Creating dynamic still

²¹ Kourken Michaelian and John Sutton, “Memory,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, April 24, 2017, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/memory>, Sections 2-4.

images inspired me to place the images next to each other in sequences that told a story. By curating the project's initial phase, I quickly merged into the moving image creation process by adding video elements.

One of the first approaches to creating media was to design reference images for the chapters describing grief. Making photographic images was my starting point. Using the principles and elements of design, each scenario of the montage was constructed to represent a mental image. I used a mirrorless camera and attachable lens to construct the points of view. Editing photographs of landscape nature scenes was a baseline to begin each scene. Once I set up the environment, I created various lighting situations to determine the time of day and overall mood. Emphasis was placed on character development, where the character of the *Sun* changed throughout the work. This method of modifying the character changed with the materials as the memory and story narrative changed.

I staged self-portraits to create a personification of the character that embodied anxiety, fear, resilience, conflict, and triumph—a nod to the stages of grief. In this part of the work, I explored costume, makeup, jewelry, and poses to create theatrical expressions for video and photographs. Inspired by Catholic religious art, jewelry from Arabic face masks, ideas in sacred geometry, and mosaic patterns, esoteric art and illustrations—an eclectic compilation of artistic style and medium handed down from my mother.

Compiling a myriad of styles into art came from using collage techniques in Photoshop. A new tool like Midjourney's AI generative image creation inspired me to expand each image containing descriptions that provided a new framework for my eclectic art style.²²

²² Midjourney Imagine, n.d., <https://www.midjourney.com/>.

Once the reference photos were created in the Midjourney's discord channel, helped me achieve a variety of outcomes, many that would not be possible with traditional modes of image making—at least not as quickly and of high quality. After taking many photographs, sequencing them into an overarching narrative helped me make sense of the intention of the photographs—this was achieved through storyboarding, a suggestion from my advisor Professor Marianne Weems.

While creating a storyboard of the event's timeframe, I noticed the images were static. This inspired me to think about how I would animate the photographs which led me to incorporate videography. The experimentation of video-inspired artworks was placed into a virtual landscape and served as the moving image. Another method of experimentation was incorporating the virtual world-building application using New Art City.²³ This platform allowed me to place the audio and video clips and arrange newly designed 3D objects into a set location. Creating this fictional mind map was key to orienting me to the trauma and applying a hierarchy to the memories as containers and objects you can navigate in the virtual world. Each object symbolized a memory and a new experience that reflected themes of portraiture, sculpture, and patterns that served as portals.²⁴ This underlying treatment of the artifacts began the mixed-media practice as a research methodology.

Navigating the virtual world had its limitations. A slow connection to Wi-Fi or a computer incapable of rendering graphics in real-time took away from the experience. One

²³ "Cristela's Shadow, by Saul Villegas of Moderno," New Art City • Virtual Art Space, April 2023, <https://newart.city/show/cristelas-shadow>.

²⁴ "Portal," YouTube, December 13, 2023, 2:10, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RcHffdiYXTs>.

way to combat this navigation within the virtual world was to recreate a pathway of the camera to autopilot around the objects to provide a point of view of the spectator

Using Adobe After Effects, I used photographs and video projections to create a 3D environment aesthetic where animating a camera mimicked a camera person to pan over areas of the plane. Inspired by this new camera movement within the program, I began to think of sculptural elements to create volume and depth in the image. This was the beginning of staging a diorama to invite the viewer into a particular enclosure. Conceptually, the experiments in PaR enabled me to view the larger mapping of the media as sign posts for temporalities of imagined futures that invited mixed media to coexist—enabling a portal to travel to and from the memories. Acknowledging that memories are complex, so would the understanding of time and the overlap of such memories in the assemblage of virtual materials. The overarching theme of staging materials within each environment constructs a process that build applicability for others to narrate their timelines and stories to describe their experiences.

MENTAL ENVIRONMENT

To discover a way inside the trauma, I began to recall what were the most vivid memories and how those intrusive thoughts made me feel, and I realized that many of my images and memories relied heavily on audio fragments. Because there are many stories surrounding the incident from the day of the murder, I remember many of them was through voice and flashbacks. There was a series of events that happened that day, beginning with the phone call in the morning and the drive to Avenal, CA, where my mother laid face down on

the bed, screaming in despair of her grief. I did not understand the gravity of the situation and was in disbelief at what I was experiencing. Pairing that encounter with the events that led to my brother's funeral felt like a horrible nightmare, one that would be revisited for some time. Through the senses, the memory became a part of my reality, and my body recognized it, and it shifted into anxiety every time I remembered.

During my waking state, there was a great effort to avoid that scenario. However, when I least expected, the abstracted voices and imagery fluctuated in my peripheral vision and auditory senses. The memory itself shifted every year or so. After about two years, the trials and tribulations seemed to become heavier, with details about the murder we later understood from the transcripts and courts leading up to the sentencing. My mother and siblings would gather and converse about the cruel documentation that was later revealed by the perpetrators.

There were many emotions that I experienced during this time, and the grieving process came in waves of understanding and confrontation—being able to create a portal into that timeline started by dissecting the senses and assigning materials to what I found most closely matched my internal thoughts. For this experimentation of the project, the mental environment was viewed as a mental projections and the formulation of thoughts. The brain as a screen image was narrated to describe the conditions during the time of exposure and attention to how the narrative has been transformed into the present. A great deal of effort was put into preserving the original materials that captured the sentiment of grief and the transcendent arch toward healing and reclaiming my brother's memory in a positive light.

The process of that transcendent arch was focused on portraying a character who goes on a hero's journey to retrieve themselves from a dark space. In an exercise during the Winter *Future Stages* course, Professor Yolande Harris had us meditate on memory and visualize the soundscape, looking further into our minds to focus on what it sounded like. My mind went into a space of disturbance, my recollection of noises from that exercise was abstracted by yelling, crying, and an operatic voice on repeat. The cadence of the unknown voice was a high to low pitch, much like a sine wave, and it helped me remember through sound.. The exercise allowed me to enter a space with fragments of conversations and even non-human participants, including birds and dogs.



Figure 10. Midjourney variation #17, *Reference photo of Black Drapes with skeletons*,2024

Digital collage, various size.

For the final montage video projection (see Video Projection Media), I added an audio clip where I recorded my voice and deepened the tone, reciting the Catholic prayer *Our Father*. I added the sounds of an ambulance, dogs barking, devious laughter, ambient tones, and a portion of my mother's voice. I had explained to my professor that in this memory—the face of evil resided in the holiest place, the church—at least in my nightmare. It's almost as if my mind juxtaposed both good and evil and became indistinguishable. It might have been since the memory of my brother in the coffin by the church's altar stood by candlelight in the sacred room while the demons who had done this to him still roamed free. With that description of the memory, I began to realize that, simultaneously, the nature of visual and audio fragments are not always aligned with normal perception.

Using the mental environment as the stage where the internal projections borrowed insights from my memory, I began to believe the viewers could 'see' a much closer encounter with these recurring thoughts. The edited scenes were stitched together in a timed moving image projection (runtime 35:36) that spanned five panels on the wall of the DARC Light Lab.²⁵ Each scene addressed the five stages of grief non-linearly. The overarching message introduces the initial encounter with the tragedy and, throughout the staged scenes, advances toward the Sun character that emerges from the depths of depressive emotions to a triumphant scene with the outburst of energy signifying the arrival of a new sense of self. The metamorphosis of this energy was intentionally depicted to show the trauma alchemized into a transformed and healed version of the memory. Threads of passed-down rituals from my

²⁵ "DARC - Light Lab - 3D Model by Coejenni," Sketchfab, 2021, <https://sketchfab.com/3d-models/darc-light-lab-bb36e474023048b0b9ab97d6e427ebe0>.

Catholic upbringing continued to resurface as a way to lean towards faith in an omniscient force that guided me.

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Spaces where I associated grief were connected to the environment. This section of the project focused on locations of trauma that reside in a church, the place of the incident, past rituals, and the cemetery where my brother is buried. Being able to confront the trauma prompted me to reflect on those spaces and how they made me feel. The *in vivo* practice occurred every time I planned a trip from Santa Cruz to return to the Central Valley, where my family lives.

Avenal, CA, is the small city in which I grew up and where the majority of these episodes occurred. Locating myself in the memories enabled me to picture what scenes I would be filming. At first, when creating the trailer for my project, my instinct was to start at the beginning of the memory—the most traumatic. I thought that if I confronted the main topics, I would be able to ease the rest of the work. I created a shot list of the locations that would make sense for me to formulate the reenactment of a recurring thought that showed up in mental imagery and sought to transfer it to digital film. I began to retrace the locations: my mother's house, my room, and the path from Avenal towards the cemetery in Lemoore, where I had experienced the brunt of the experience. The churches I visited to record the saints and architecture with stained glass windows were a portal into a space of ritual and prayer and where I had last seen my brother lying in a coffin.

When I created the film trailer I made for the proposal on this thesis, I recall starting at the location where the trauma is memorialized. I often remembered my mother and I walking around in the cemetery.²⁶ We had visited my brother for so long and, in a way, kept our privacy. I understood that the physical environment held a sentimental value and respected that. Naturally, I began to retrace our routine and asked my mother to walk alongside pathways through gravesites. We filmed her journey of grief—the silent walk. When I originally had shown the trailer to my thesis committee member, Professor Parker, she introduced me to Kehinde Wiley’s exhibition, *Archaeology of Silence*.²⁷ She explained that he had positioned large works in rooms to allow one to grieve and that I should go check out the exhibition. On her suggestion, I took a trip to San Francisco’s de Young Museum to view it in October of 2023. It was an incredible experience to see such beautiful and large-scale works portray a theme of black bodies—lying in different poses. The exhibition provided a beautiful space to grieve and call attention to our loved ones dying through violence, much of the conversations rural communities have, unfortunately.

²⁶ Saul Villegas, “Trailer Shadow,” YouTube, March 4, 2024, 1:44, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KI_4CL5lqxo.

²⁷ “Kehinde Wiley: An Archaeology of Silence,” Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, March 2023, <https://www.famsf.org/exhibitions/kehinde-wiley-an-archaeology-of-silence>.



Figure 11. *Cristela holding a bouquet of artificial flowers,*

Digital still from Video, 2023, Lemoore Cemetery, CA.

Returning to the locations of the burial site is always met with deep sorrow. The *in vivo* exposure for my mother and me in this situation is the confrontation with the harsh reality of those cemetery visits. Regardless of our pain, we always have immense love and show up resiliently. We wouldn't be there if we hadn't come to terms with his death. There are physical connections to the space and locations that expand outside our minds and can only be accessed through being present both in the physical and mental space. I recognize that *in vivo* creates a direct physical connection to the mind. I think that is what makes us rub the tombstones of our loved ones and caress the statues of divinity—the contact arouses the senses and activates our spirit. A sublime yet piercing emotion that inspires me to move around in the physical world to experience nature and all the other beautiful sights the world has to offer. I believe the ritual in living is about conducting a routine and manifesting your best intentions to summon your energy to grieve, celebrate, remember, and experience life through your perspective.



Figure 12. *Interview Film Scene by La Pietà*, Digital still from Video, 2024, Lemoore Cemetery, CA.

There was a recurring theme about ritual and grieving spaces—in that the spaces seemed to provide an area of beauty and arrangements with flowers, colors, and statues to adorn photographs and ephemera of loved ones. When visiting the cultural event *Dia de los Muertos* at the Quarry at UCSC, I was overwhelmed with the sentimental value of the photographs staged on an altar with marigolds, candles, and incense. The celebration of our loved ones had a location in an outdoor space at the university—I found that beautiful. Not only because my culture practices the rituals from *Dia de los Muertos*, but that at an institution of higher learning, there is space to grieve, connect, and talk about our loved ones who passed away. The staging of the musical performances of folklórico dancers illuminated the stage. The beat of the drums hypnotized the audience with a repetitive banging motion while chanting the names of loved ones and reciting:

¡Presente! ¡Presente! ¡Presente!



Figure 13. *Fotos en el Altar*, El Centro Dia de los Muertos Cultural Event, University of California, Santa Cruz, The Quarry, 2023, Digital photograph.

My project's physical environment describes moments when my mother and I prayed and lit candles in my brother's memory. It showcases intimate moments in architectural spaces in her home and the church. Being in the physical environment meant that the recreation of that scene was *real* and not imagined. This part of the project revives my brother's memory and locates the viewer in the spaces we visit to conjure that feeling.



Figure 14. *Self Portrait with Skull face paint,*
Hanford, CA, 2013, Digital Photograph.

Over a decade ago, I was introduced to a Nikon DSLR camera while looking at National Geographic’s online gallery, *Your Shot*. This was a website that hosted photographers' profiles and their late photos with chances for features and story write-ups.²⁸ During this time, I was inspired by monthly prompts that guided users to submit their best work for curatorial guest photographers for a shot to get featured. After seeing how people created still-life setups using portraiture, I began experimenting with staging myself as a character of the symbol of death. It began my understanding of the technical arrangement of the camera’s settings for a clear photo with balanced light. This practice continued to develop with wider perspectives and dramatic costumes to portray portraits with symbolic connections

²⁸ “National Geographic Your Shot,” National Geographic, n.d., <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/pages/topic/yourshot>.

to ritual and the ideas surrounding life and death. It helped me identify that taking action in the physical world by moving around and locating objects within a scene to create a diorama had the power to stage a visual story through photography.

VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT

I created a virtual environment for an immersive experience using an Oculus ProQuest headset. In this iteration my intention was to create a visual pathway to various materials and an overall immersive experience. Patricia Pisters' book *The Neuro-image* expands on connections to our perception by stating, "There are many different types of visual illusions and the ways in which our perception can be illusory, all of these having different implications for the ways in which our perceptual system functions in relation to our cognitive skills and consciousness" (Pisters, 2012, 80). When creating the virtual world, there was an advantage of the viewer being able to navigate through movement to come close to—in and around the subjects and experience them in ways that a flat screen would not permit. This activated more visual effects and their qualities as the participant moved around in the virtual space. I was thinking about Deleuzian film theory in crystalizing a moment in time when creating the images with different temporalities. I drew from this concept to situate the memories as containers through pictorial media made in the previous virtual world. In this new VR space, combining close-up points of view, wide angles, and pathways allowed participants to walk into a space where they exist as signposts to the trauma narrative as a participatory element. I created objects with visible volume and texture differences from those of square or rectangular photographs or videos to bring the viewer closer to spaces

within the virtual world. I designed 3D object files using photogrammetry through an application on my smartphone.²⁹ I then edited the .gltf (GL Transition format file), a standard method of sharing 3D files into editing software. Through this change of material surfaces, the arrangement of the virtual environment became more spatial. This area of experimentation through organically shaped objects enabled me to create the illusion of scale, and the balance of the compositions became limitless as depth was instrumental in signaling to the viewer that something was in the distance. This way of designing allows the viewer to interact with the objects and intuitively navigate the space.



Figure 15. *Portrait of hand in Swan pose*, 2023, Digital 3D object,
Metallic Texture Material overlay in iridescent violet.

My beginning design work in virtual worlds started in 2019. After working with Professor Jennifer Parker, who introduced me to virtual world-building ideas, I came across

²⁹ “3D Creation Made Easy,” Scandy, n.d., <https://www.scandy.co/>.

several artists working in digital forms. This opened up the genre of making artwork to archive and place in online exhibitions, as opposed to the traditional methods of hanging up art on the gallery wall. During the same time, Professor Laurie Palmer, with whom I had studied in my undergraduate studio art program, had seen similarities in my mixed media work, inspiring me to explore the possibilities of creating forms for ideas. She referenced the work of Jacolby Satterwhite's *Country Ball* project³⁰. What I found interesting was Satterwhite's ability to transport the viewer into his mind by physical manifestations of projections of a memory through his body and mind. His experimentation through drawing, dance videos, archived footage, and 3D models inspired me to think of the virtual world as a stage. Another aspect of that work that resonated with me was his adoration of his mother, whom he had collaborated with in some form to bring her drawings to life via digital sculptures. Collaborating with my mother on this project allowed me to find pathways to storytelling using mixed-media experimentation. It launched the idea of creating navigable mental projections and spatialized an internal memory-building device.

MFA SOLO EXHIBITION INSTALLATION | APRIL 09, 2024

The solo show *Cristela's Shadow* ran an estimated 180 minutes in the Digital Arts Research Center (DARC) as a three-part installation.³¹ Viewers entered the space around 6 p.m. and gathered in the center of the room, where two armchairs draped in black cloth faced the large projection wall. About a dozen more plastic chairs were arranged in a semicircle

³⁰ "Jacolby Satterwhite | Country Ball 1989-2012," Art and Artists, n.d., <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/203108>.

³¹ https://maps.ucsc.edu/printable-maps/Digital_Arts_Research_Center.pdf

behind them. The armchair was reserved for my mother and a family member. At the show's beginning, I addressed the audience, introduced them to my advisor, Professor Marianne Weems, and thanked all my faculty advisors, sponsors, family, friends, and colleagues. Our technical director, Colleen Jennings, also did a fabulous job helping me with the technical parameters of the two large projectors, theater lights, and sound and monitor equipment. The corner space had a microphone and speaker for me to use while speaking during the introduction, midpoint, and final reflections of the show.



Figure 16. Photograph by Delta M. Lara, *Mariachi Eterno serenades Cristela during Shadow's montage*, DARC Building, UCSC, 2024, Digital photograph.

After those introductions, the musical guest performer *Mariachi Eterno* arrived on the balcony, where they performed one of three songs on the balcony of the 3rd floor. The first song they performed was *Un rincón del cielo* by popular Mexican musician, composer, and songwriter of Norteño and Conjunto music, Ramón Ayala y Sus Bravos Del

Norte. My brother used to like listening to his music and often mimicked playing an accordion while singing his songs. The decision for me to select this particular song, *rinconcito* or ‘little corner,’ was to honor him with the music he loved and place the mariachi group in a corner of the show's space. I wanted to show my appreciation for the art of music and ritual by including the mariachi with songs he enjoyed listening to and songs we love to hear in his memory. My favorite musician is Juan Gabriel, a genial composer and singer-songwriter who, much like Walter Mercado, commanded a stage presence with the public through his messages of heartbreak, grief, and celebration.³² I chose the second song *Costumbres* (habits), written by Juan Gabriel and made famous by the Spanish singer Rocio Dúcal.³³ Dúcal’s emotional depth in her portrayal of the song through exaggerated flamenco-inspired performances and commanding voice transcends the meaning of human habits through love and grief. The song speaks about the impossibility of losing someone you love, no matter what the condition is, because the habit of remembering them is stronger than love itself. She often collaborated and had a long-standing relationship with Juan Gabriel throughout their artistic careers. Whenever you heard Juan Gabriel sing *Costumbres*, you thought of Rocio and vice-versa. Rocio Dúcal’s song *Amor Eterno*, although not sung at the show, is my mother’s favorite song as she relates to the singer on a personal level. The song sings about grief and losing a loved one. The song speaks to eternal love and a promise that

³² León Krauze, “Postscript: The Festive Genius of Juan Gabriel, 1950-2016,” *The New Yorker*, August 30, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/postscript-the-festive-genius-of-juan-gabriel-1950-2016>.

³³ “Rocio Dúcal - Costumbres HD (Sanlúcar de Barrameda),” YouTube, May 22, 2022, 4:53, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ewdMniCW1s>.

goes beyond death to vow to continue one's memory after one passes.³⁴ The final song was *Paloma Negra* (black dove), which speaks about a grudge one holds when someone leaves and wanders off without returning. This song spoke to the stages of anger and denial. We knew my brother wouldn't return, partly because of his lifestyle, which affected him and us. The song eluded to areas of my brother's rebellious character during his upbringing.



Figure 17. Photograph by Delta M. Lara, *Mariachi Eterno Group* poses with *Professor Lily P. Balloffett (LALS) & Saul Villegas (DANM)*, 2024, DARC Building 3rd Floor, UCSC.

³⁴ “Meaning of Amor Eterno (Rocio Durcal),” LyricsLayers.com, n.d., <https://www.lyricslayers.com/rocio-durcal/544285/>.



Figure 18. Digital Video Still by *Swan Dive Media*, *Interior Space of DARC Light Lab Room 306*,
2024 DARC Building, UCSC.

Once you entered the space, on the right side of the physical gallery was a large video projection and large printed portraiture banner. On the opposite side of the gallery, my mother's interview played on a large monitor, on the center wall was a large banner with an allegory image based on the iconic *La Pietà*, and a podium with a VR headset and projections.³⁵ Another large projection screen video was shaped like an orb on the left of the main exhibition wall. The concept behind the orb on the side of the large projection was to interact with the viewer's experience of seeing the main wall and to vaguely see the orb in their peripheral. The orb projection screen transitioned religious imagery and scenes of a rotating cross, *La Pietà* (Madonna holding Christ), and the Sun character with an extreme close-up view. The orb wall blurred the square window of the image. It acted more like a

³⁵ "Michelangelo's Pieta," ItalianRenaissance.org, July 23, 2012, <https://www.italianrenaissance.org/michelangelos-pieta/>.

floating spot in their field of vision—drawing another reference to the in-between or crystal image.

The artwork was built upon memory, perception, and trauma themes as viewers encountered the cathartic experience up close and personal. The amplification of the materials situated viewers in all areas of the room—activating the space with various shaped windows into memories.



Figure 19. Digital Video Still by Saul Villegas, *Sculpture of Christ on the Cross Orb Projection*, 2024, DARC Building, UCSC.



Figure 20. Sujesh Nair, *La Pietà*, Retextured in Metallic and iridescent violet filter, 2024, 3D object.³⁶

³⁶ "Pietà A 3D Tribute to Michelangelo's Masterpiece" (<https://skfb.ly/oMIDG>) by SUJESH NAIR is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

VIDEO PROJECTION MIXED MEDIA

The dynamic music videos of my favorite pop artist, Madonna, was always a great sense of inspiration for me growing up. The visuals, symbolic imagery, Catholic themes, and erotic poses in videos like *Take a Bow* and *Bedtime Stories* have left an imprint through her moving images and the staging of monologues and prayer. Aside from her lyricism, I appreciate her artistry and the depth of emotion she portrays through body movements, facial expressions, and elaborate costuming with hair and makeup. When I discovered *X-Static Pro=CeSS*, a series filmmaker Steven Klein had created for Madonna in the early 2000's, I became an instant fan of his work.³⁷ In his portrayal of Madonna's *Beast Within*, he photographed her in an elaborate red laced ornamented dress with a face veil and jewelry. She recites words from the *Book of Revelations* while the camera pans around her, and extreme close-ups reveal her mysterious gaze— as her eyes and body move in some sort of glitch to the words. The transcendence of an opulent character is staged near herself on the bed, with her coming in and out of states of consciousness, changing the scenery and expressions—as if the staged character next to her is an omniscient being witnessing her internal thoughts.

This imagery was so impactful for me that I returned to it in the *Metamorphosis of the Sun* video digital projection.³⁸ Using Klein's aesthetic from that video, I was inspired to dress the Sun character to wear black and gold fabrics with a long gold metallic cape throughout the scenes. Over my face was a black mesh mask with rhinestones and a gold

³⁷ "X-Static Pro=CeSS 12, 2002," Steven Klein, 2002, <https://stevenklein.us/collections/x-static-pro-cess/products/x-static-pro-cess-12-2002>.

³⁸ Saul Villegas, "Metamorphosis of the Sun," YouTube, March 24, 2024, 7:43, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w8Fh-qnA3dY>.

spike corona. A looping chain I adjusted to extend past my chin was draped over my face. The concept of the video screen projection would be that the character of the Sun would appear as a god-like entity, an omniscient being witnessing the stages of grief. Similar to Klein's camera focusing points on Madonna's face, I recreated a slow-motion rotating movement using my body to act as if I were the sun in rotation.

I used this section at the beginning of my video to imply that a portal into my consciousness was opened. After the scene of the rotating sun character, images of my mother walking across the cemetery lawn were interspersed with flashes of the scene and the location of the murder sight. The video shows the Sun character journeying through a series of *flashbacks* in sequential order, based on my real-world experience. A custom lumetri color was created in the video editing program to create reflections of gold with solarized illuminations on the highlights as the images moved.



Figure 21. *Metamorphosis of the Sun*,
Digital Video still, 2023, various size.

In the final montage of the storyboard, the journey begins with an open portal to my most disturbing memory, which is the real location where my brother was killed. The video then dissolves into a scene of me wearing skull face makeup, signaling death and Dia de Los Muertos celebrations. During the transition from the death skull mask and the collage of the rotating artwork of the Sun, I appear disoriented (violet clip) and confused. There were moments in the digital screen projection where I wanted to show a distinction between the character that was in costume and the stripped-down “real” version of me experiencing these mental images. Towards the center of the video, the *Metamorphosis of the Sun* shows me seated with a radial kaleidoscope pulsing in the background. The character of the Sun extends his arms and stands, exerting a force to *extract* built-up energy. As I recorded this moment, I felt a sense of control throughout my body. Though it was a silent expression, my body was able to expel internal thoughts, and I believe it was able to be captured in that particular moment. As the sun fades away, there’s a scene of multiple characters that seem like friars with their backs turned in formation toward the center. I appear with an extreme close-up, like Klein’s shot of Madonna, to reveal my eyes and gaze. This was the moment I felt that through this journey, I could return and confront the grief. The video ended with a scene in an achromatic color scheme with a sword and skull near a beach, symbolizing the warrior within. I completed the journey of retrieving a disturbed memory by recreating this narrative.

The major scene depicts a large figure with a black cloak by large concrete steps as he witnessed the figure of the Sun moving and morphing into distorted spirals and sine waves to portray mirage-like flares. In this encounter of the character leading up to the Sun, he holds his position and engages in the performance. This is the stage of confrontation and acceptance

in grief. Using the Sun as a metaphor for finding the light, the black-cloaked character accepts this version of himself that contains the truth and the path toward healing. Viewers could see the large physical projection of images reflected on the floor and onto surfaces as a time lapsed piece.³⁹ The concrete steps in the image were an extension of the real floor as a design choice. This detail allowed the viewers to witness the journey and encounter the Sun.

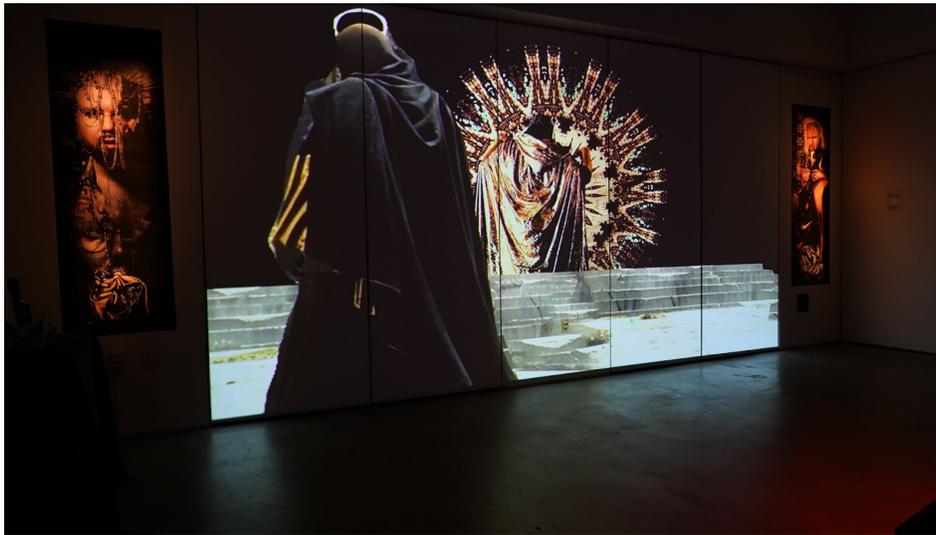


Figure 22. Digital Video Still by Saul Villegas, *Metamorphosis of the Sun Video Projection*, DARC Building, UCSC, 2024, various size.

³⁹ Saul Villegas, “MFA Final Show 2024,” YouTube, April 9, 2024, 34:11, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nMNUmsy21Aw>.



Figure 23. Digital Video still by Swan Dive Media, *Colleagues & Family* viewing *Projection Screen*, 2024, DARC Building, UCSC.

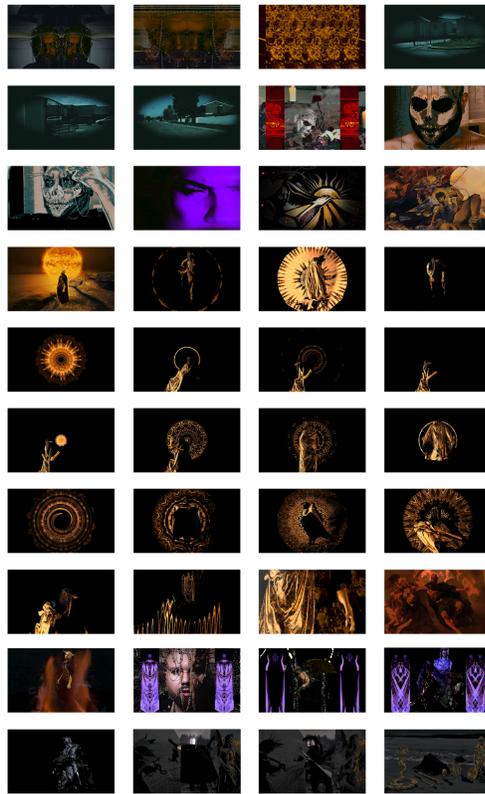


Figure 24. Digital Video stills By Saul Villegas, *Storyboard of Final Montage X*, Scenes projected at DARC Building, UCSC, 2024, various size.

VIRTUAL REALITY EXPERIMENT

Designing the VR experience was the final stage of creating the showcase's extension into the virtual environment. I placed a VR headset near the wall with the large orb in this showcase section. In the virtual gallery, there were AI generative images, a video of the interview with my mother, a looping auditory clip with my voice and church bell sounds, and a green screen performance of the Sun was placed in a virtual gallery. As I was building this interactive gallery, I searched for ways that the viewer could feel at ease when confronted with images and themes of trauma. I resorted to traditional gallery aesthetics by placing a large architectural model on Styly's platform and arranging spotlights to change the ambient color to a violet tone. The objective of this space was to have a portal gallery that I could revisit virtually but also move around in physical space to walk up to objects or look around at the art on the walls.⁴⁰ This was the interlocutor of the mental and physical environments as it hosted a more immersive opportunity to encounter the materials posed as memories. In a TEDX talk on YouTube, led by Alexandra Kitson's *How we can use virtual reality to support our mental health*, the researcher on Virtual Reality and therapy for emotional regulation talks about the VR space as being one with the body, explaining that the VR is 'visceral' and often feels real as if it were to be a 'vivid dream.' Part of Kitson's explanation of the logic of visiting the virtual world was to encounter these spaces in ways that can allow you to encounter the memory and experience it firsthand. This would allow you the needed practice of visiting the memory to be able to contemplate and regulate emotional states. Within

⁴⁰ <https://gallery.styly.cc/scene/362b7b7e-0358-4116-8987-2e534b04ce36>

multiple situations and multiple environments.⁴⁰ Kitson’s partner is a game designer who works alongside the researcher to create multiple arrangements of environments to elicit strong emotions from the participant—mainly creating a sense of *awe and wonder*.

I began to think of the virtual environment as a gallery space containing my memories. This gave me the agency to create a fictional environment to exhibit artwork in gallery representation. Something I had found made me happy in my earlier art career when I hung paintings on the walls at Artisans Custom Framing and Fine Art Gallery with my mentor at the time, Robert Braun. What made this angle unique from Kitson’s VR therapy was that I was fully engaged in recreating the experience and environment to express my emotions instead of reacting to them in a predesigned space. My practice as a research art experiment revealed that constructing a VR environment lends itself to drawing out the memory through engaging in the design process. In order to be able to rescript a traumatic experience by designing materials in digital space, I needed to move objects around as the memory and the narrative of grief shifted. Although the participants who experienced the staged environment in the VR headset at my showcasing did not experience the catharsis I felt, I imagine they felt a sense of wonder through the imagery. Having had a few years of virtual world-building experience through working collaboratively with OpenLab, I began to sketch out a design for a new VR space.⁴¹ I strongly believe that the combination of the construction and reassembling of digital objects within the virtual environment lends itself to the arrangement of our memories. Traumatic memories can be reconstructed into positive

⁴⁰ Alexandra Kitson, “How We Can Use Virtual Reality to Support Our Mental Health, Tedsxfu.” YouTube, March 23, 2024. Video, 4:36-10:49. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=stQfsauqIP4>.

⁴¹ <https://openlabresearch.com/>

experiences by providing a mind map representation of the trauma for others to see and understand their logic. Using all elements of the mental, physical, and virtual environments depicting your memories is a bridge to an internal archive site of your experiences. An adaptation to the staging of materials in physical and virtual spaces was accompanied during the thesis work on another art & science-related research project alongside Professor Lily P. Balloffet called *Antídoto*.⁴³ Using the framework of an already existing framework of ideas, we collaborated on a series of exhibitions that were staged in a virtual world, a video projection on a 5 panel digital screen (VizWall) at the DSC, and a physical location. This further emphasizes that moving through materials and spaces can all have the same theme but with a different perspective or location for its purpose.



Figure 25. Digital stills using Styly platform, *Views inside the virtual gallery*, 2024, Mixed media.

⁴³ <https://balloffet.sites.ucsc.edu/antidoto/>



Figure 26. Digital Stills using Styly platform, *Close up views from inside the virtual gallery entrance,* 2024, Digital stills, Mixed media.



Figure 27. Digital Video still by Swan Dive Media, *Participant using VR headset,* 2024, DARC Building, UCSC, Virtual Reality Gallery, Mixed media.

CONCLUSION

When I first created these techniques as a form of therapy, there were concerns that I would encounter barriers to accessing the necessary technologies, ranging from technical equipment from DANM, subscription to editing programs, and access to an open-source library for the latest methods on imaginal exposure techniques. Part of my work in the thesis was concerned with archiving the transcendent experience I would experience in creating a project to confront my brother's loss. I felt incredibly honored to have participated in a virtual program *EmergeNYC* in the Summer of 2023.⁴³ The virtual program was led by Marlène Ramírez-Cancio & and Nicolás Dumit Estévez Raful Espejo Ovalles by recommendation of my thesis committee Beth Stephens. The development of the character of the Sun emerged in that virtual incubator. I then continued to show up as the Sun at walking tours with the E.A.R.T.H. Lab SF and other artists and performers.⁴⁴ Being able to speak to other artists with such personal stories encouraged me to reach beyond the theory and bring it back home where it mattered. The concerns about technological barriers were put aside, and I was able to shift my art practice to recognize the importance of using my body and voice through performative acts with a community by engaging in theoretical and nature-inspired activations, which shifted my approach early in my thesis work.

On the one hand, I also got to spend a limited amount of time with my family and friends, which prevented me from creating new memories throughout this journey. This made it even more difficult and led to resort to old memories. On the other hand, this project

⁴³ <https://emergenyc.org/saul-villegas/>

⁴⁴ <https://earthlabsf.org/>

represented a way to deal with these emotions more effectively using the strategies of prolonged exposure therapies—understanding that a long journey of experimentation awaits me beyond this project—and my ability as an artist to practice creative research approaches. I will continue to use the triangulation of the mental, physical, and virtual environments to address memories and experiences. I found that complex memories associated with strong emotions are hard and somewhat impossible to reframe and to forget about. However, in this case, I was able to create new positive memories concerning this traumatic experience and created a cathartic moment of impact while sharing this experience with others. My mother and I bonded and used this experience to transform the trauma as a new beginning for us, as we coped together. Inviting the audience into our conversation at my MFA showcase allowed people to resonate and sympathize with our experience—providing a safe space for the display of grief. It transformed me into an artist in tune with a full spectrum of emotions. Using the methods described enabled me to expand the definitions of memories and my attachment to them. It gave me the agency to take control of my thoughts and project a more inspiring approach to the physical state of my mental health while honoring the memory of my late brother. Transforming his loss into a celebration of life defined for me a sector of the human spirit that we must find ways to keep alive through memory and experiences. As I reflect on the journey towards drawing my way out and expressing this grief through digital media forms using Imaginal Exposure techniques, I'm left with new memories of completing a large framework associated with joy and everything in between. The energy of the Sun transmuted my old mental imagery into a kaleidoscope of new visions.

What memories are next?

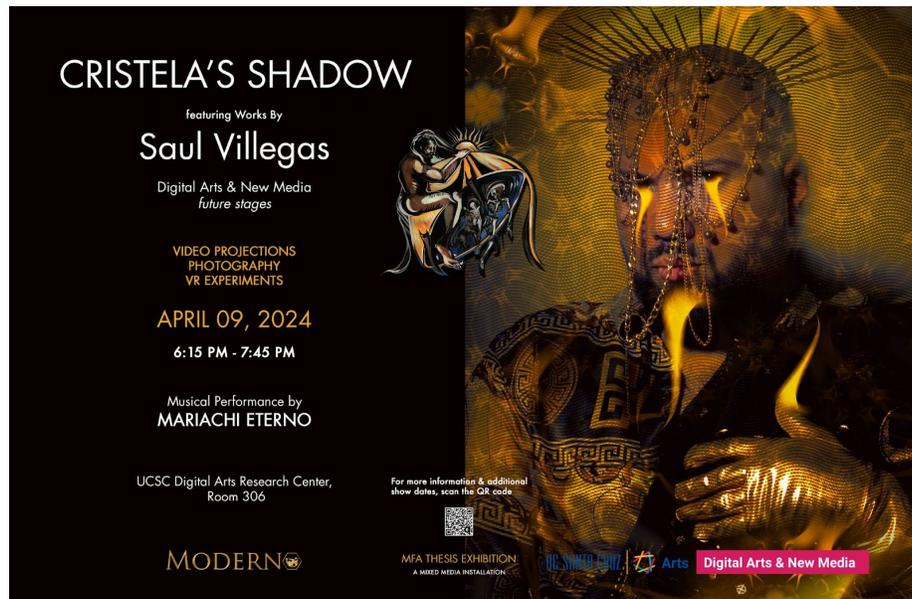


Figure 28. Saul Villegas of Moderno, *Cristela's Shadow* promotional flier, DANM, UCSC, 2024, Mixed media.



Figure 29. Photograph by Delta M. Lara, *Cristela's Shadow* Exhibition Night with Family & Friends, DARC Building, UCSC, 2024, Digital photograph.

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