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This thesis entitled:
Elegy
Written by Dawn Hollison
has been approved for the Department of Art and Art History

Elegy

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A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School
of the University of Colorado
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Master of Fine Arts

Department of Art and Art History

2011

The final copy has been examined and approved by the Department of Art and Art History at both the content and the form meet the acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.



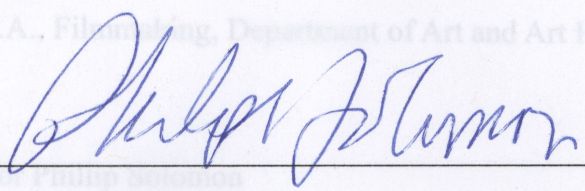
Abstract

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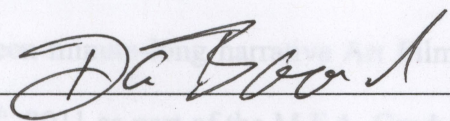
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Elegy, 2011

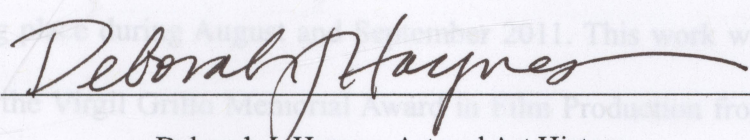
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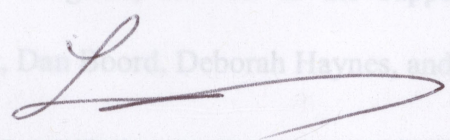
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Abstract

Hollison, Dawn L.Y. (M.F.A., Filmmaking, Department of Art and Art History)

Elegy, 2011

Thesis directed by Professor Phillip Solomon

Elegy is a sixteen-minute-long narrative Art Film, which was shown in ATLAS 102 on November 15th and 17th, 2011 as part of the M.F.A. Graduate Thesis Show. It was developed over a fourteen-month period, between September 2010 and October 2011, with principal photography taking place during August and September 2011. This work was made possible in part by support of the Virgil Grillo Memorial Award in Film Production from the University of Colorado Film Studies Program, as well as the support of my M.F.A. Thesis committee members, Phil Solomon, Dan Boord, Deborah Haynes, and Luis Valdovino.

This film is a contemplation on the nature of human relationships and the complexities that arise from emotional entanglements. It is a poetic form of allegory, placing emphasis upon the viewer deriving meaning from their direct encounter with the moving image. As such, it focuses on conveying information and emotion through both photographic quality and subtlety of gesture. *Elegy* is also a study of the cyclical nature of our ritual behaviors and an existential glance at habits that we adopt, whether deliberate or unconscious.

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Introduction

My thesis film *Elegy* is based upon the simple premise of a man and woman in separate spaces who are enacting specific, mysterious occurring rituals. These individual rituals slowly

unfold in a reveal that lasts the length of the film. By the end of the ceremonies, both figures

have returned to their original starting point, leaving a trail of ritual, and each of them

must begin again. *Elegy* is my attempt at exploring this

paradox, as well as the tragedy, futility, and existential nature of such a situation.

The project is constructed of black and white, high-definition video footage. My basic

approach to the images draws upon traditional photographic conventions, image composition,

and direction of the figures through the space of the film frame. For this work, I have focused

more attention on the cinematographic aspects than in previous works, in an attempt to enhance

the viewer's overall engagement with the piece by creating a visual world that is richer and

therefore more embodied.

As part of my process, I have an obsession with "uncovering" images—discovering them

and trying to understand their roles in my stories. In many ways I feel that the pictures I create

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Poetics of Art

Chapter I

Introduction

My thesis film *Elegy* is based upon the simple premise of a man and woman in separate spaces who are enacting specific, mysterious mourning rituals. These individual rituals slowly unfold in a reveal that lasts the length of the film. By the end of the ceremonies, both figures have returned to their original starting point, creating a circularity of action, and each of them must begin again, continuing forever in a Sisyphean cycle.

I chose this thematic content after long exposure to certain contradictory social behaviors, wherein what people say is nearly the opposite of what they do. In such circumstances there is a strong conflict between a person's intellectual desires and their emotional impulses, which end up constantly at cross purposes. In observing this type of human folly unfold, the results can be hypocritical, laughable, pathetic, or even infuriating. *Elegy* is my attempt at exploring this paradox, as well as the tragedy, futility, and existential nature of such a situation.

The project is constructed of black and white, high-definition video footage. My basic approach to the images draws upon traditional photographic conventions, image composition, and direction of the figures through the space of the film frame. For this work, I have focused more attention on the cinematographic aspects than in previous works, in an attempt to enhance the viewer's overall engagement with the piece by creating a visual world that is richer and therefore more embodied.

Poetics of Art

As part of my process, I have an obsession with “uncovering” images—discovering them and trying to understand their roles in my stories. In many ways I feel that the pictures I create

are outside of me, as though I have no role in imagining them. It's almost as if they already have a separate existence somewhere beyond my five senses. In the act of constructing this new visual landscape, the figures and shapes feel oddly familiar. They appear before me like a memory that was lost, but whose presence is simply hiding beneath an opaque surface. The process is deeply contemplative and likens itself to meditation. It is a search for images that speak viscerally and immediately when viewed, are multifaceted in their interpretations, and resonate with the observer.

In my view the arrangement of these pictures serves as a particular type of primordial language. It can stir up feelings, impressions, and instinctive responses that are only tangentially, if at all, related to our cognitive processes. These are the metaphors rooted in the subconscious mind—they play on our senses, perceptions, and desires to understand the world around us. When the images come together, their juxtaposition presents the viewer with a potential relationship and the mind strives to come to an understanding of the elements and their significance to one another. It is the mind's attempt to create meaning: an explanation of how and why we are experiencing particular sensations or information.

For me, the construction of narrative is precarious. The discovery and arrangements of the figures must be treated carefully if the film is to succeed in being authentic. It is an act of delicate excavation to unearth the skeleton, the context of how the images interact. As the framework reveals itself I'm gradually able to piece together what the pictures have been trying to say. The parts come together almost fluidly, frequently exposing me to a hidden truth or revelation, disguised in a symbolic exterior.

Mythology is another area I look to as an influence. My preoccupation with mythic forms

stems from how they operate on the human psyche. They are stories—simple or complex—whose chronologies we are logically able to follow. Yet beneath even the simplest of these narrative facades lies a huge reservoir of information that is almost impossible to thoroughly understand. The myth itself serves as merely the tip of a proverbial iceberg, with a mass of untold streams of data beneath the surface. A given myth is as a single point on a net of invisible threads, each expanding out infinitely in all directions, all at once. In this way, the underpinnings of myth are like dreams—expansive, with an endless flow of implications, if only we can decipher them.

The counterpart to myth is archetype—the individual figure, prototype, or symbol upon which all others are based. These singular representations are instinctive to us, and open up vast reservoirs of collective experience and patterns. Similarly, symbols are the objects serving as placeholders for more abstract or general ideas. But while archetype always functions as symbol, a given symbol isn't necessarily an archetype. According to Jungian psychology, "because archetypes are innately unconscious, they can express themselves only obliquely, through symbols. Furthermore, not only does every myth contain multiple archetypes, but every archetype harbors inexhaustible meaning. No symbol can convey even obliquely the array of meaning of the archetype it expresses."¹ If symbol is the oblique expression of archetype, I then believe myth to be the narrative expression of archetype—a way to arrange symbols in a linear expression that temporarily stabilizes the otherwise shifting meaning of an archetype, so that the human mind may grasp it. The narrative context thus tends to emphasize or de-emphasize particular traits of the multifaceted archetype, allowing the figure's attributes to shift from general to specific as dictated by the surrounding context and/or the arrangement of symbolic traits. For example, the archetype of Justice may have different correlated principles such as

1 Robert A. Segal, *Jung on Mythology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998) 10.

severity or mercy. A mythic narrative structure can highlight a specific aspect of Justice's general attributes and mute others, allowing the archetype to fulfill the role necessitated by the story, but still embody its other principles that sit dormant. The symbol-objects attributed to the archetype of Justice are numerous: a woman, blind or blindfolded; the scales; and the sword, to name a few. There are subtleties about the lady and the objects she employs that, if placed in narrative format, can influence how we will perceive the figure/principle, creating unspoken consonance or dissonance. The posture Lady Justice holds may be bold, she may be seated or standing firm, or she may be poised to move forward. Her blindness may be visible in her eyes, or may be shielded by a blindfold, the condition of which may lead us to draw conclusions. Her sword may be raised in righteousness (Mercy) with its tip pointed to the sky, or wrath (Severity) with its tip pointed downward toward the earth. These elements, while simple, can become complex quickly but I believe the possibilities are apparent, even in this limited example. The organizational relationship between symbol and archetype that is found in mythology provides the mind with a simpler way to absorb the information surrounding a principle too vast to explain in other ways. For me this is analogous to the relationship between image and structure in my films. The resulting experience for the audience is largely associative.

One of the great advantages of the moving image (with its seemingly infinite potential) is its ability to create a world that “permits a great number of people to dream the same dream together and to also show, with all the harshness of reality, the fantasies of the unreal. In short, it is an amazing vehicle for poetry.”² It is true that I do view my films as a type of poetic narrative. But in addition to this general poetic ideal of the filmic experience, I feel there is another parallel. My methods of image juxtaposition work to obliquely hint at the themes of my work—much like how a poet distills text, combining words and metaphor to evoke mental images

² Jean Cocteau, as quoted in the introduction to *Le testament d'Orphée*.

surrounding their subject matter. In some ways the directness of the filmic image is a boon, because there is nothing ambiguous about an image one can see (despite the fact the the *implications* of the image may be ambiguous). However, the directness is also a burden because the fantastical images I desire must actually be constructed materially in order for me to photograph them (rather than being able to allow the viewer to create it in his or her own mind).

Even the basic attempt to imagine these types of powerful images has proven time and again to be a massive undertaking. I find that it is as Jung said when speaking of the challenges a poet faces when trying to express the archetypal:

[T]he primordial experience is the source of his creativeness, but it is so dark and amorphous that it requires the related mythological imagery to give it form. In itself it is wordless and imageless, for it is a vision seen 'as in a glass, darkly.' It is nothing but a tremendous intuition striving for expression....Since the expression can never match the richness of the vision and can never exhaust its possibilities, the poet must have at his disposal a huge store of material if he is to communicate even a fraction of what he has glimpsed, and must make use of difficult and contradictory images in order to express the strange paradoxes of his vision.³

For me, the process is like diving into an unknown, bottomless ocean where I'm confronted by such an overwhelming amount of information that I fear drowning. After being submerged for long periods, small glimpses of order begin to appear—order that shifts and evolves and never sits still. If I'm lucky I'm able to capture expressible fragments. Usually, the return to the surface brings with it a tiny amount of workable material, but the spoils never manage to reduce the humbling effect of diving in again.

Lastly, I like to think of the narrative structure of my films as a sort of allegory. Allegories, unlike more recent (post-industrial) narrative forms, use a de-personalized,

3 C.G. Jung, "Psychology and Literature," in *The Spirit in Man, Art, and Literature*, Collected Works, vol. 15, 96-97.

omniscient viewpoint as the basis for storytelling. This is a central part of my form because mythic images must provide the viewer with an understanding that is greater than that of the individual personalities in the story. Poet laureate and scholar Susan Stewart describes this most eloquently when she says:

In allegory the vision of the reader is larger than the vision of the text; the reader dreams to an excess, to an overabundance. To read an allegorical narration is to see beyond the relations of narration, character, desire. To read allegory is to live in the future, the anticipation of closure beyond the closure of narrative. This vision is eschatological: its obsessions are not with origins. [...] Each turn through the text will result in the same reading. The locus of action is not in the text but in the transformation of the reader. Once this transformation is effected, point of view is complete, filled out to the edges. And wherever we look, we see the work of this closure—the image is indelibly stamped upon the world.⁴

In this way, the allegorical format forces the revelation and understanding of artwork to take place within the viewer, as a result of his or her encounter with the piece. For me it creates a more contemplative relationship between artist and viewer, a relationship that is symbiotic and requires equal engagement from both parties.

These philosophies make up the foundation of my process. It is how I've come to approach my creative genesis over time. While the theme and subject matter vary with each new work, my general excavation and my view of how each element should operate remains basically the same. My perspective on myself in the role of artist has also become more clear over the years. Despite gaining an incredible amount of understanding about my working method, I remain humbled by the realization of how small I am compared to the vast ocean that is Art. I can say with certainty that after seven years of full-time dedication to this craft, I consider myself a beginner. I'm only at the start of my journey into the forays of creating work. The more I experience, the more I realize that I know very little about what the process has in store for me.

⁴ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984) 3-4.

Presumptuous though it may sound, I believe that my role as an artist is to hold up a mirror to the culture I live in—to reflect back what I see in human nature and the world around me. I strive to do this in an honest and even-handed manner, with compassion rather than judgment. I hope to reflect the good and the bad, the beauty and the darkness that we experience in our lives, and to reach some greater understanding of our relationship to this world and to others on our journey through life.

The two personages in *Elegy* I have chosen to call Man and Woman. As with my previous works, I have generalized specific characters into universal ones. There are two reasons for this. The first is that traditionally characters in a motion picture are identified in the credits according to how the viewer perceives them over the course of the film: If a character is never named, or their name is never spoken, the audience has no way of attributing a proper name to them. Thus the gentleman they see in the liquor store who yells at a customer, but whose name is never spoken, is listed as "Angry Man in Liquor Store" in the credits as to avoid any confusion for the viewer. Second, and perhaps more importantly, I view my characters as embodying the traits of certain types of people rather than specific people. As with allegory, the roles are generalized figures with generalized behaviors and actions. In order to provide the audience with the most open range of interpretations available, I refrain from adding any specifics that might cause arbitrary connotations in their mind. Doing something as simple as naming the woman Amy or the man Dave necessarily creates associations in the viewer's mind due to their life experiences, biases, and personal preferences. To keep things as neutral as possible, I have been as broad as possible: they are Man and Woman.

Chapter II

Themes in *Elegy*

There are multiple themes that weave through the narrative in *Elegy*. The most prominent of these are Ritual, Cycles, Time, and Memory. Each theme—rather than being a stand-alone facet of the film—combines with its counterparts to create an inextricable relationship between the parts. While I am attempting to write about them individually, I can only hope that the inherent overlapping will not interfere with my efforts to describe them as isolated components.

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Ritual

By definition a ritual is a ceremonial procedure that is customary for solemn use. At its root, ritual is the physical expression or performance of the conceptual aspects of a religion or belief.⁵ In *Elegy*, I'm particularly interested in the ritualistic approach to mourning and grief—the physical embodiment of sorrow into motion and gesture. Transmuting normally spontaneous emotions into a ceremonial act allows the sentiments to become canonized and invokable. In the case of my two characters, their enacted rites demonstrate the psychological state that feeds their actions while conversely the actions maintain and trigger their sadness. By repetition, the gesture and the emotion become fused together: each time one aspect of the ceremony is enacted, the other follows.

The Man and Woman in *Elegy* are engaged in isolated, private rituals, where the driving emotions are profound and ceaseless. They perform only for themselves but their gestures express a longing for an absent counterpart.

Cycles

It may be from sorrow that the Man and Woman enact their rites, their attempt to find closure, but it is from misfortune that each of their actions somehow undoes the closure of the other. Their actions push and pull against one another, creating an ebb and flow like the tides. If the solace brought by a performance of lamentation is undone at every repetition, then like Sisyphus replaying his weighty ascent up the hill in Tartarus, the cycle of suffering closes in upon itself, never relieved. This extends grief into a perpetual space where we can no longer recognize time. It is a state of limbo where there is no relief, no mercy. It is a waiting room of in-between places whose expanse unfolds remorselessly.

5 Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) 19.

All of nature has cycles that end and begin, that die away and flourish anew. Yet, in the cycles created by humankind the contrary push and pull is usually inadvertent and without direction, ultimately leading to misery. Rilke explores this in his Sonnets to Orpheus:

Between the stars, how far; and yet vastly further:
the lessons of this place and day.
Someone, let us say a child...and beside him, another--
O how incredibly far away.

Fate measures us with the rod of being, perhaps,
so that it appears uncanny to us; Let us see:
between a maid and a man may range such wide gaps,
that, while shunning him, she fans his memory.⁶

The cycle of dualistic action and contemplation leads us in ever-tighter winding circles, whether intentionally or inadvertently. We become closed in a feedback loop, like a pendulum of indecision on a perpetual motion device. It is a great paradox of the human psyche: we create and destroy, we cling and reject, we want and we don't want, all at the same time.

Time

This never-ending limbo of repetition could be perceived as a form of Hell. A proposed lack of closure is far more terrible if one must endure it for perpetuity. In this sense, Blake was right about Time being swiftest of all things, and that its absence would lead to "eternal torment."⁷

The human perception of time results from our ability to acknowledge our own mortality. Time serves as the never-ending ruler by which we measure the brief flash of our existence. In the shadow of its massive expanse, a human life is but a single grain of sand in an interminable

6 Rainer Maria Rilke, "The Sonnets to Orpheus – Second Part #20" in *Duino Elegies and The Sonnets to Orpheus*. Trans. Robert Hunter (Eugene: Hologosi, 1993) 131.

7 William Blake, *The Prophetic Books of William Blake: Milton*. Eds. E.R.D MacLagan & A.G.B. Russell (London: Chiswick Press, 1907) 23.

desert.

Chapter III

Memory

One of the astounding qualities of memory is that recalled events feel so real, despite the fact that they are not actually occurring. It's been said for ages that the mind has no ability to distinguish between the real and the vividly imagined experience. Certainly, each of us has experienced a recollection as if we were re-living it. In evoking remembrances of others now gone, the desire is to somehow reconnect with another point in time, a point when things (presumably) were happier. This nostalgia is paradoxical, for in remembering lost happiness the unspoken understanding is that joy is absent in the present, which sustains feelings of longing.

In Tartarus—the Ancient Greek equivalent of a Hell, an expansive realm of timelessness—all souls drink deeply from the waters of Lethe (oblivion; concealment) to forget their corporeal past.⁸ Yet, concealment of a memory is not the same as erasure, especially if the soul is dependent on the experiences it had while alive. The Woman in *Elegy* has drunk deeply from the waters of Lethe, but still moves from an unconscious sorrow that drives her forward. She has no conscious understanding of her actions, she only knows there is something that she feels deeply sad about; something she has lost; something she must honor and mourn. In her, oblivion is present and memory has vanished below the surface of conscious awareness, never to be seen again. But the true source of her sorrow can never fully be drowned.

⁸ Virgil, "Book VI" in *The Aeneid*. Trans. John Conington (New York: A.C. Armstrong and Son 1881) 219-221.

Chapter III

Adapting to Reality

Between my philosophies about the themes *Elegy* and the resulting film, lies the physical undertaking of producing the work—the daunting task of dealing with the reality of photographing and editing. Three stages: Pre-Production, Principal Photography, and Post-Production, are the foundation for any film and are the moments when practice asserts itself over theory. Each of these phases requires that unique logistical elements be addressed, with each phase being intricately linked to its counterparts. The hope is that as reality and philosophy combine, the whole project doesn't come to a crashing halt. As my films have become more complex, the organization and logistics have become exponentially more challenging. I used to disagree with Orson Welles, who famously said that “a writer needs a pen, an artist needs a brush, but a filmmaker needs an army.” For better or worse, as I gain more experience I have come to the conclusion that, at least in my case, he is right.

None of the three stages of production can be addressed in total isolation. Each proposed solution to a problem is accompanied by repercussions that ripple through the other stages in very real ways. It's been my experience that in pre-production I must try my best to remain true to the concepts that I've decided to work with. But this is counterbalanced by the limitations of physical reality, including a budget on both time and dollar amount. Once principal photography begins, any and all logistical issues must be addressed with an eye firmly fixed on the original concepts (as worked out in pre-production) as well as taking into account the consequences that must be wrestled to the ground later, during the edit. Then in post-production, again the eye must be cast back to the original ideas of pre-production, but this time the major obstruction is the

actual images (footage) that you have before you.

The following highlights are just a few of the practical issues I faced in the production of *Elegy*. I have mapped them out in a somewhat chronological order, despite the fact that many of the issues were addressed simultaneously.

Pre-Production

Once the storyboards were firmly in place, I was able to get a rough idea of how many shooting days I needed for each sequence of the film, how many set changes needed to occur, and how many days I needed the actors to be on set. With this rough projection in place, an estimate of 50% additional time was added to compensate for any unforeseen mishaps, problems, or catastrophes that might occur during the shooting process.

Auditioning – With the estimate of shooting days in hand, accompanied by a general time-frame, I was then able to post casting notices in the Denver and Boulder areas using multiple online resources.⁹ I held auditions over numerous days, meeting with over a dozen actors and actresses. Auditions are always subject to the number of people who turn out, and what originally had been planned as a two-week venture, gradually expanded into a six-week trial. After not receiving a wide enough pool of candidates I had to not only extend auditions, but I had to tap into additional resources in order to find more potential talent. I managed to find and cast my leading actress within the first three weeks, but a leading actor was nowhere to be found. Despite my having met with more males than females, all who expressed an interest either were not experienced enough, or not the right type for the part. In the sixth week of auditions I finally

⁹ Online resources used were: CASA (Colorado Actors Scripts And Films: casa-films.ning.com), Craigslist, and email audition notices through the CU Boulder Theatre Department.

managed to find an actor who was an appropriate match.

Casting – Casting the actress was a simple process. I offered her the part, she accepted, we confirmed availability and I got a firm commitment from her. Casting the actor was more problematic due to the fact that his schedule was triple booked. Initially, I had planned to shoot the Man's scenes first (due to the relative simplicity of his set design), to be followed by the Woman's (which involved hauling a large amount of dirt into the shooting space, making cleanup an issue). Due to the actor's limited availability, I had to shift the schedule to begin with the Woman and continue with the Man. It involved pushing the entire shoot back by one month (from July/August to August/September) and meant I would be shooting well after the Fall 2011 semester had begun, but I was eventually able to coordinate both actors' schedules in a way that worked for everyone.

Release Forms – With every film that I intend to show publicly, the performers must sign release forms as the final step in “sealing the deal.” This is a very simple form that maps out the legalities of my being able to use their “likeness” for everything related to this project. I coordinated meetings with both my performers (usually over lunch) to go over last minute logistics, answer questions they had about the project, and have them sign the forms. Because it is such a simple task, I like to include it with other necessary items that need doing. In this case, I coupled it with meetings for costuming.

Costuming – Searching out costumes for each of the performers was something that I paid greater attention to with this project. In previous works costuming seemed to be an element that

was not quite up to the quality I wanted, so I took this opportunity to work more carefully and hopefully increase the production value as a result. I spent many months seeking out general designs for the Woman's dress, as I knew her costume would be more difficult to find. I had initially thought of putting her in an historically accurate Edwardian or Victorian type gown, but after looking through designs felt that such precise detail might be too blatant in this work. After a long search, I tracked down certain contemporary designers who create "vintage-style" clothing—clothing that is influenced by historical periods, but doesn't strictly follow their designs. I managed to locate and order some designer dresses over the internet, which was an uncomfortable prospect as there were strict no-returns policies in place. Fortunately the dresses I chose were sized perfectly for my actress, and her costuming issues ended there.

The Man's costume, while less daunting, was still an involved process. I wanted to fit him in a simple, dark suit. It sounds manageable enough, but finding a nice suit at a reasonable price is another question altogether. Unfortunately, the difference between a cheap suit and an expensive one is immediately visible to people, including a viewing audience. Like the dress, finding a suit to fit my needs was a project, but after months of shopping I was able to compile a full costume for my actor, including suit (with tailoring), shoes, tie, shirts with French cuffs, and a nice set of cufflinks for a reasonable budget.

Tests and Experiments – Numerous camera tests were necessary to approximate the distances

Real Estate – Concurrent with the audition and casting process, I was also hunting for a temporary shooting space to rent. Because of the size of this project it was necessary to seek out a large industrial space, since my garage at home was no longer big enough. Over the course of a month, I researched commercial rentals and learned a lot about how unaffordable most of them are (both in rent and in commercial fees paid for simple things like electricity and internet). The

problem with most industrial properties is just that: they're industrial. This means they are frequently located in questionable areas of town (making them unsuitable due to possible theft), and/or areas where there is a great deal of noise (making them unsuitable for recording sound). I eventually managed to find a small warehouse space (about 1500 square feet) not far from my home, that was in a "neighborhoody" area, and with a landlord who was willing to take a short term tenant (Fig. 1). She even generously neglected to require an insurance policy from me, stating on my lease that I was using the space for "photography," which meant I would be covered under her insurance policy.

Aside from camera tests, experimenting with materials was also necessary at this time. I

Designing and Building – Once in the warehouse, I was able to begin designing and building sets. At their most basic, the two set designs were: 1) an infinite white space for the Man, and 2) an "outdoor" field of dirt for the Woman. Major design issues included trying to build a temporary cyclorama, finding a way to create a large seamless backdrop (Fig. 2), building a dozen (plus) theatrical stages, designing and building a fake hillside of dirt (Figs. 8 & 9), and designing and constructing a convincing "wall instrument." Each of these problems were planned and tackled in small chunks, with much heavy physical labor involved.

I have brewed for me on my previous shoots. I also have new students who express interest with

Tests and Experiments – Numerous camera tests were necessary to approximate the distances and focal lengths needed to execute shots in the film. Quite rapidly, my gigantic 1500 square foot shooting space began to feel a bit small. I took many notes on which lenses to use for which images, how far away the camera needed to be from the subject, and what type of distortion problems were apparent with each lens. I also recorded footage for review over time to make sure the final decisions I made about gear were correct.

for the former, I recruited a recent BFA in

Film In one particularly difficult shot, I needed an overhead camera. After tests, I determined that the camera would need to be about 13 feet up in the air, over my actress. This information was useful but somewhat intimidating as I had no idea how to safely place the camera that high up, with the limited equipment I had, in a warehouse whose overall ceiling height was 14 feet. The solution came much later when I realized that the stages (weighing about 200lbs a piece) could conceivably be stacked seven high, and I could use that as a platform to place a jib arm out over the set to position the camera correctly. This solution, while less than desirable, proved to work for the circumstances.

Aside from camera tests, experimenting with materials was also necessary at this time. I did numerous ink and fabric tests to observe how to accomplish the proper blotting effect for the portrait sequence, as well as tests with glass bottles to see how reflections would behave and distort in their surfaces. Sand and dirt tests were all performed during this process, as well as researching silk plants and artificial fruit (and tracking down a way to get fresh pomegranates to Colorado in the off-season).

Crewing – I have been fortunate enough to build a small group of undergraduate students who have crewed for me on my previous shoots. I also have new students who express interest with passing semester, allowing me to recruit fresh help for each new project. These aspiring filmmakers serve as my basic production crew, and they all serve multiple roles on the set. Each crew member must be versatile in their talents and operate in more than one “production category” – that is, a crew member is never limited to one single task.

With *Elegy*, for the first time I had need for additional, specific crew members to handle special roles: a sound recordist and a make-up artist. For the former, I recruited a recent BFA in

Film Studies, Erik Klostermann. He had a fair amount of experience in this job, as he was the sound recordist for David Marek's MFA thesis film *Somewhere West* (2010), in addition to working on undergraduate student projects. He also had the right attitude toward the task as he is someone who takes a great amount of care in the sound design for his own films, which is an aspect I appreciate about his own work.

For make-up, I recruited Lydia Young, a recent MFA graduate from CU. Lydia, although not experienced in makeup artistry, had an extensive background in medical illustration and drawing. I had worked with Lydia a bit on her MFA thesis project and found that her attention to detail and work ethic were very much in line with my own. After discussing the logistics of the project with her, she volunteered to help. The responsibilities of make-up ultimately ended up expanding into hair and wardrobe as well, which Lydia also ended up taking charge of.

Portrait Design – In addition to this being the first time that I recruited crew for specific production roles, this was also the first time that I recruited another artist to create work for my film. I approached painter, Xi Zhang, to ask if he would be willing to help me design two paintings for the film, in addition to actually painting one of them “live” during principal photography. This was a type of collaborative effort that I'd not yet experienced in my work and the pieces that he created turned out beautifully for the film.

The first painting he designed was a labyrinth, which he created as an amalgam of traditional designs that I compiled for him. Xi took these multiple labyrinth designs and combined them into a simple, graphical, elegant image that we stenciled onto glass for production. (Fig. 6 & 7)

The second painting was a portrait created from photographs I took of my actress. This

portrait was then created in real time, with the artist invisible behind the canvas. We shot this sequence over a two day period, with Xi creating a total of 8 portraits—one portrait for each of the eight takes we did. (Figs. 21 & 22)

Life Casting – In *Elegy*, the counterpart to the portrait of the actress, is the statue of the actor, which was created by life casting. I initially tried to get the life casting contracted out to another artist, but after failing to find someone to work for a reasonable price I decided to do the casting myself. After researching the process, I found a local supplier of mold-making materials and did multiple tests both on myself and on friends. The two materials I opted to work with were sodium alginate and silicone rubber. With the assistance of Lydia Young, I worked with my actor over two days to produce molds and plaster casts of various parts of his body. Sodium alginate was used for his hands and feet (Fig. 4). This enabled me to produce a single cast of these elements in plaster – the alginate mold being destroyed in order to extract the dry cast. Silicone rubber was used in conjunction with a gypsum plaster bandage mother-mold to produce plaster casts of the actor’s face, shoulder, and knee (Fig. 3). The latter are surfaces that do not as easily allow for submersion (the technique used with alginate) and so were better suited to a mold-making material that is brushable and would more easily hold a vertical surface. The resulting plaster casts were successful and worked perfectly for the sequence in which we used them (Fig. 5).

Scheduling the Shoot and Booking Gear – A final element of pre-production was the actual coordination of personal schedules and the booking of film gear. While it is generally a little less stressful than the other organizational tasks during this period, it still takes a great deal of time

and attention. The combined cast and crew made for a total of 11 people, whose schedules all revolved around work, school, and other activities. After the shooting dates were fixed the crew were organized to alternate around all shooting days.

In addition, I had to reserve large amounts of film gear from the Film Studies Department. Because many of my experiments and tests involved using gear to assess problems, there were certain pieces of equipment that I had for very long periods. With other items (lights or heavy items like the dolly or jib) I was able to take them back and forth periodically. Running test and starting photography during the summer was a major benefit, as there was less competition for equipment. This became a greater challenge as the Fall semester began.

Principal Photography

Shooting Schedule – The basic shooting schedule requires careful planning so that principal photography doesn't lead to the catastrophic result of falling behind. I was fortunate that my schedule estimations were 90% accurate for *Elegy*. Two exceptions were: 1) having to add an additional shooting day for the Woman, to compensate for technical difficulties that were encountered in the first two days, and 2) having to push back the Man's starting date slightly, to address some final set dressing. The overall success of the scheduling was a big relief, with the setbacks adding a minimal cost in time and money.

Lighting – *Elegy* contains my most complicated images and my most difficult lighting setups to date. From a purely practical standpoint, I had the constant challenge of needing too much electricity for the circuits in the studio (whose maximum capacity was 10k), yet not having enough light for the desired exposure results. As a result, I ended up shooting virtually all my

footage with the lens iris wide open. Naturally, this gave me a shallow depth of field, which wasn't always what I wanted and gave me less than optimal control over my image quality. Also, lighting scenes was more difficult than I had experienced in the past, because of the simple fact that I had a shooting space that was two to three times larger than I'd ever used before. It was a great exercise for learning, but with longer set up times and more troubleshooting than I would have liked on photography days. Many of the setups took between 4-6 hours to accomplish, and were exhausting for both cast and crew alike.

Cinematography – Because I serve as my own cinematographer, there is a constant struggle between the photographer and the director in me. The decision of when to make an image more beautiful is not always straight forward, especially if it distracts from more fundamental ideas in the film. In this way, the picture must be subservient to the content, even if it means the “shot” is less lovely than it might otherwise be. I know this to be true, yet it is very difficult to accept in the moment. When I would see an image that was not all it could be, internal conflict and debate would rage inside me until either the director or the cinematographer won the argument.

Alongside this, these two parts of me needed constant awareness of the images that were already compiled for the film. Because this footage would later determine the end result of the piece, constant attention was necessary to make sure I never made a decision that would haunt the work later.

Set Dressing – Because some set changes occurred during photography, set dressing could not always be completed up front (during pre-production). Dressing sets and preparing the finer details were sometimes a feats in themselves, ranging from hanging 34 foot wide seamless paper,

to hauling and landscaping some 4.5 tons of topsoil (multiple times), to suspending numerous water-filled glasses from the ceiling (Figs. 13, 14, 15, 16 & 17). Set dressings frequently took between 24-36 hours, but sometimes took longer.

Moving Camera Heavy Gear Considerations – There are numerous shots in my film that incorporate a moving camera (Figs. 10, 16, & 20). Generally speaking, these are much more time consuming than static camera shots, often requiring the use of specialized equipment to execute them. Coordinating the simultaneous motion of a dolly or jib, a shift in focus, and the movement of a performer takes a huge amount of precision, patience, and even (to be perfectly honest) good luck. Many of these shots required upwards of fifteen takes (as opposed to the usual 4-6) and sometimes crept up past twenty. With all the variables to consider, the mistakes were usually made on filmmaking end, rather than on the performers’.

Performances – Amid all the technical considerations that are monitored constantly on set, the director also needs to coach the talent through the subtleties of their performance (Figs. 11, 12, 18, & 19). This is why I met with the actors ahead of time to discuss their characters and the overall mood of the work. With the right kind of performer, this simple conversation can inform the whole approach to their craft, allowing the director the freedom to simply coach and refine their performance once on set. With the wrong kind of performer, the conversation does very little, forcing the director to explain every nuance, ultimately causing distraction from production.

Documentation – One crew member that I was unable to recruit was a still photographer.

Frequently, a still photographer takes high quality “film stills” (as though they were excerpted from the film footage) for publicity purposes, in addition to taking general behind the scenes pictures. Regrettably, I was unable to hire a photographer and so the documentation of principal photography was done by crew members, whenever they had a chance to grab my portable camera. I was fortunate enough in that I still got a fair amount of documentation, but in the future I will allot funds for an assigned photographer to be on set.

Post-Production

Logging and Culling – I’ve found that logging and culling the final footage is best done mechanically, and with little engagement in the material. It basically involves labeling all the digital scene files to be recognizable at a glance, and removing shots that are unusable (false starts, camera failures, interrupted takes, etc). After labeling approximately 24 hours of raw footage (in duplicate for the backup copy), I then set myself to the task of sifting. Different than culling, sifting involved actually reviewing the video clips in real time to discover how good they were. Each shot was then labeled with notes describing problems and strong points, for quick reference later.

Syncing – Once the final footage selections were in place, I then organized the accompanying sound files to “sync up” the audio with the visual. Time consuming and slow, the worst part was the discovery that I was missing huge amounts of audio data, which mysteriously vanished or was omitted through error. In addition, many of the takes where the image was good had accompanying soundtracks whose quality was marginal or unusable due to background noise.

Cutting – I’m always very ambivalent about editing together a film’s visual component. On the one hand, it is the moment where I get to see my images come together, truly, and for the first time. It can be exciting, exhilarating, and very satisfying in spite of the excessive hours it demands, sitting in front of a computer. But on the other hand, it is also where I struggle with anxiety of how on earth it will ever come together. This is something I’ve experienced with each film I’ve made, and it has been no different with the edit of *Elegy*. *construct a soundscape.*

Despite the care in pre-production, the great performances from the talent, the dedication of my crew, and the improved cinematography that I strove for, in post-production everything starts to look the same and look utterly banal. I know this is largely because editing is intrinsically an iterative process—it is only natural to see all the flaws that float to the surface when viewing the footage hundreds (if not thousands) of times—but it nevertheless remains an exercise in managing one’s psychology in order to not become demoralized.

The picture was gradually cut together for rhythm, pacing, and content. The HD footage was slowed down slightly to produce a visual effect that captured the appropriate emotional tone. However, the slowed images opened the door to complications with sound design.

Sound Design

The sound was the last element of *Elegy* to fall into place. With the initial image cut in place, I attempted multiple audio designs that failed to bring the piece to life. Unfortunately, my plan to use synchronous sound as a foundation caused many problems. First, while slowing an image may produce a beautiful result, slowing audio rarely has a similar result, as many sounds become too distorted to maintain their integrity. Second, when the sync sound elements were married to the picture, the combination became firmly “grounded” in reality and emphasized

every mundane aspect of the image. Instead of adding emotional gravity to the film, the true sounds added an inescapable feeling of banality while underscoring the presence of the film set. The sync also managed to distract from the flow of the visual cut, making the gestures seem chaotic and sloppy. I initially showed the work with no soundtrack at all to test if it had potential as a silent film. But after conferring with my thesis committee and graduate advisor it was clear that the film needed some kind of audio counterpart, so I set out to construct a soundscape.

I worked through numerous audio tracks, trying to find a way to design the proper aural component for the film. Eventually I came to a mix that incorporated select sync sounds, foleyed sound, random ambience, musical pitches, and outdoor noises. A careful balance of these elements established an environment with the right balance of reality, other-worldliness, drama, and emotion.

Chapter IV

Conclusion

Any attempt to create a finished project yields results that fall short of the original concept. Every artist is keenly aware of this fact and must reassess their work at the end of each passage through their process. For me, part of the reassessment happens in post-production (when I'm faced with what images I actually have in front of me) and part of it happens long after. When the construction of *Elegy* was finished, I still had to face a period of letting go: leaving behind all I wanted and strived for the piece to be, and accepting what the piece actually was. In many ways, the film will never match the original vision I had for it. So to avoid being miserably unhappy, I must now learn to see the work for what it is.

Elegy has been my largest project to date. I feel that the increment of learning that I've gained has brought me to a new level of competence in my filmmaking. However, I'm also aware of many new problems in my craft that will require even greater attention than before. It's very humbling to know that, despite how strong my vision might be or how much I strive to breathe life into a film, the final product still depends on many factors beyond my control. This keeps me very aware that I (and therefore the project) can fail at any moment. I try to view this uncertainty philosophically and with a sense of adventure, but frequently it's impossible to remain detached from something so important to me. As I continue, I hope that by gaining more experience and producing more films I'll grow more comfortable with the unpredictable variables of my craft. But despite the discomfort and burden of the unknowns, the process and its results are certainly filled with great reward.

Figures

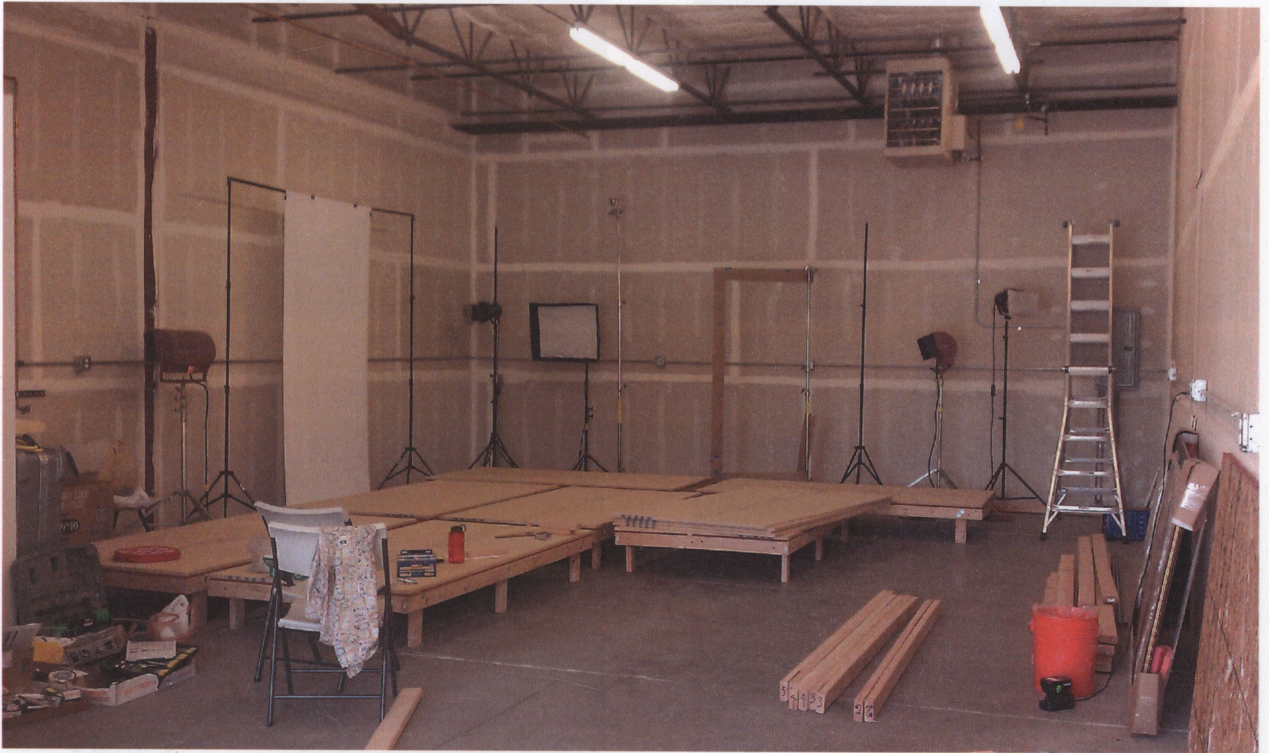


Fig. 1

6/24/11

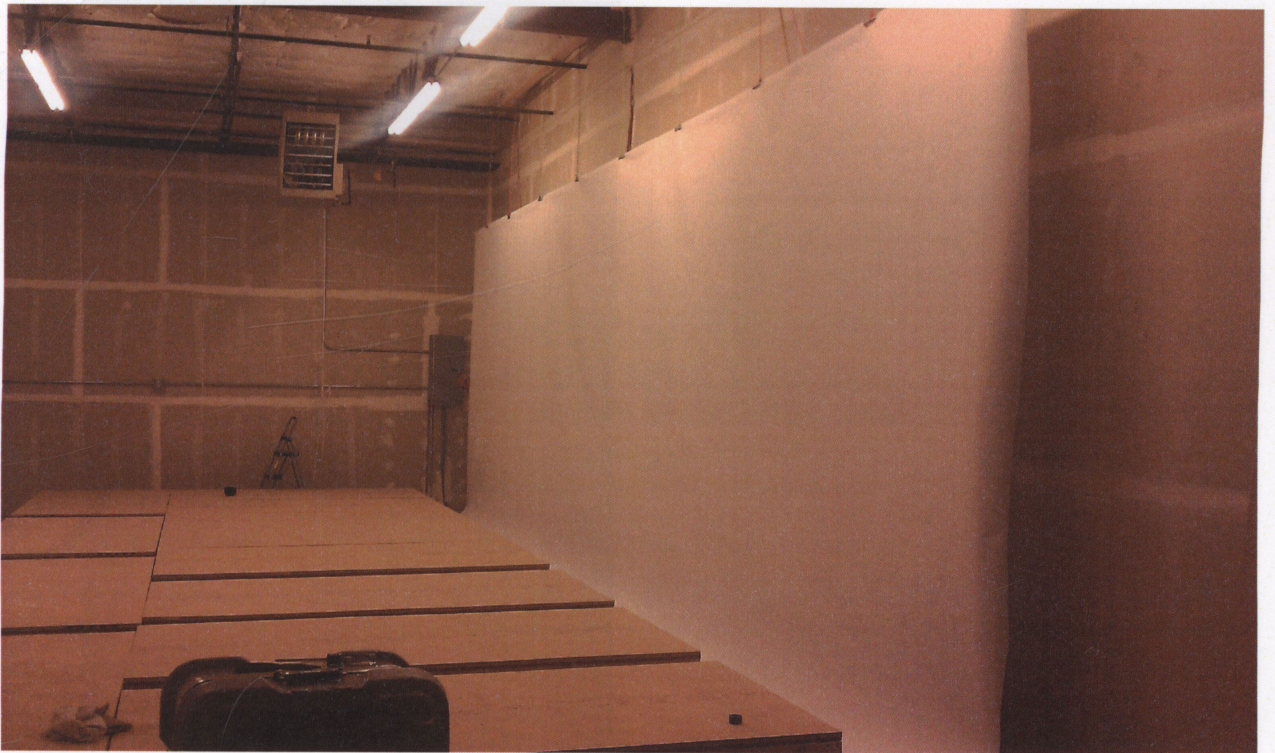


Fig. 2

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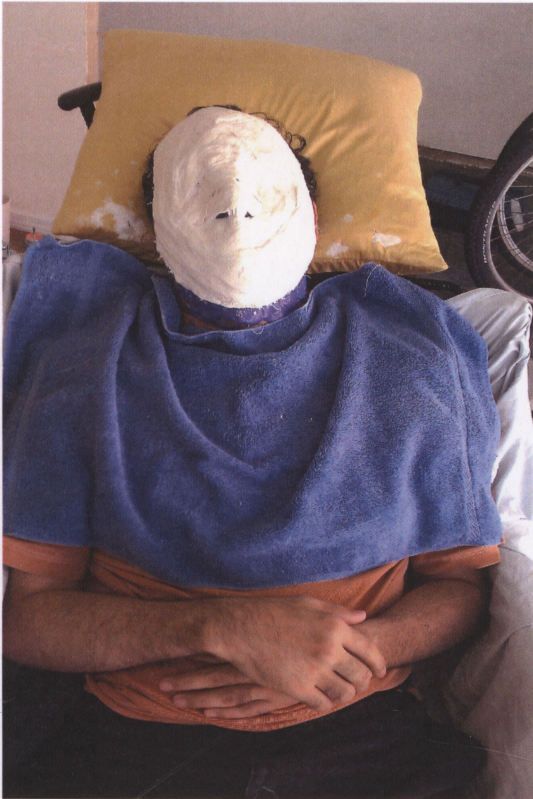


Fig. 3 7/15/11



Fig. 4 7/15/11



Fig 5 7/17/11



Fig. 7 7/29/11

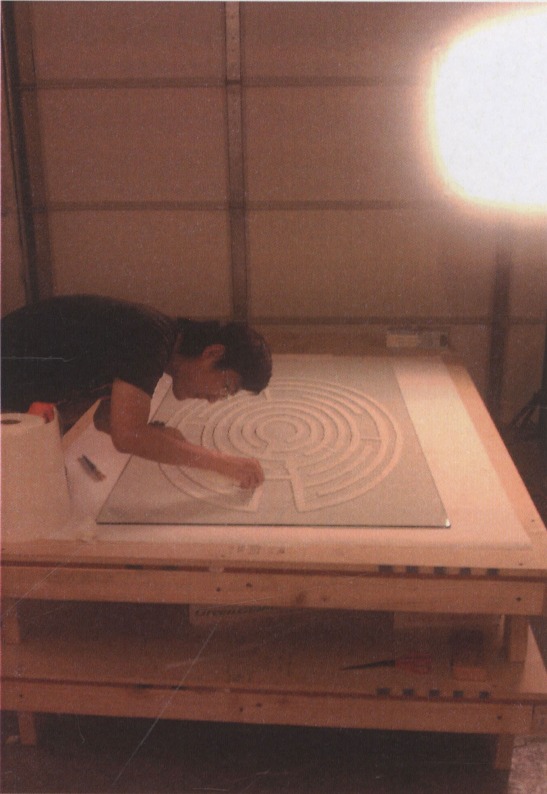


Fig. 6

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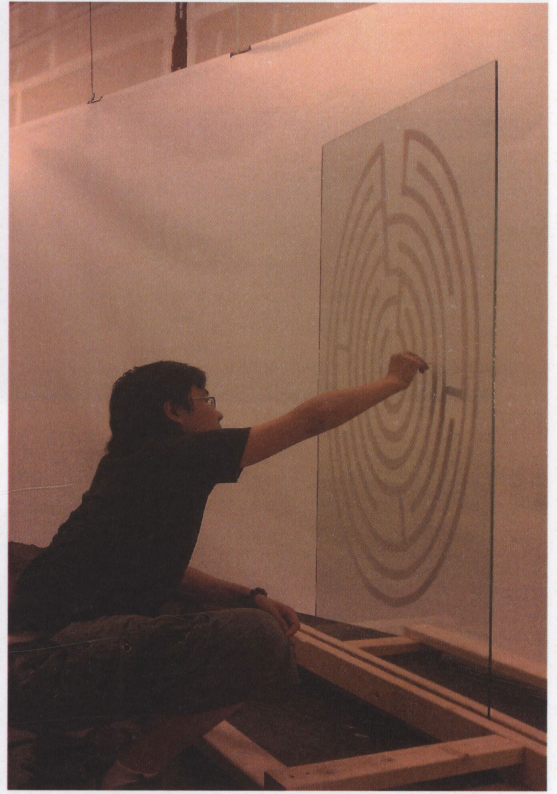


Fig.7

7/29/11

Fig. 9

8/3/11



Fig. 8

8/3/11



Fig. 9

8/3/11



Fig. 10

8/18/11



Fig. 11

8/20/11



Fig. 12

8/10/11



Fig. 13

8/28/11

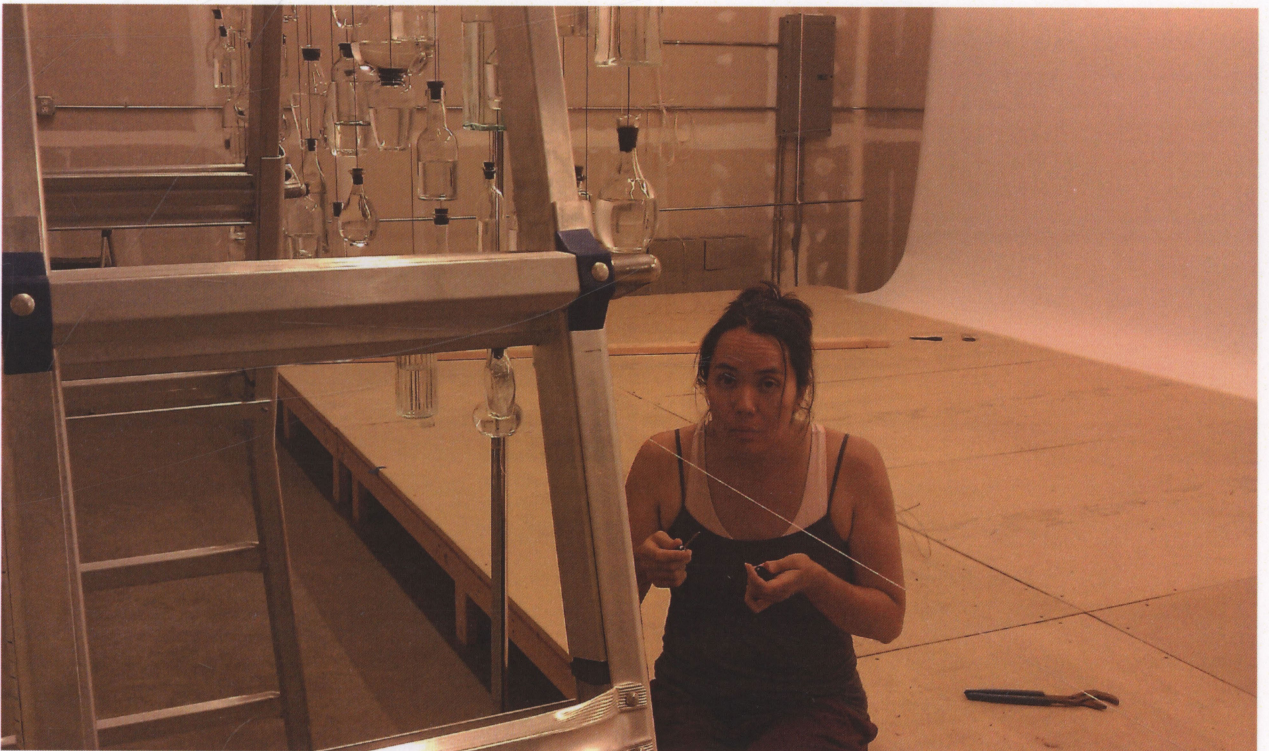


Fig. 14

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Fig. 15

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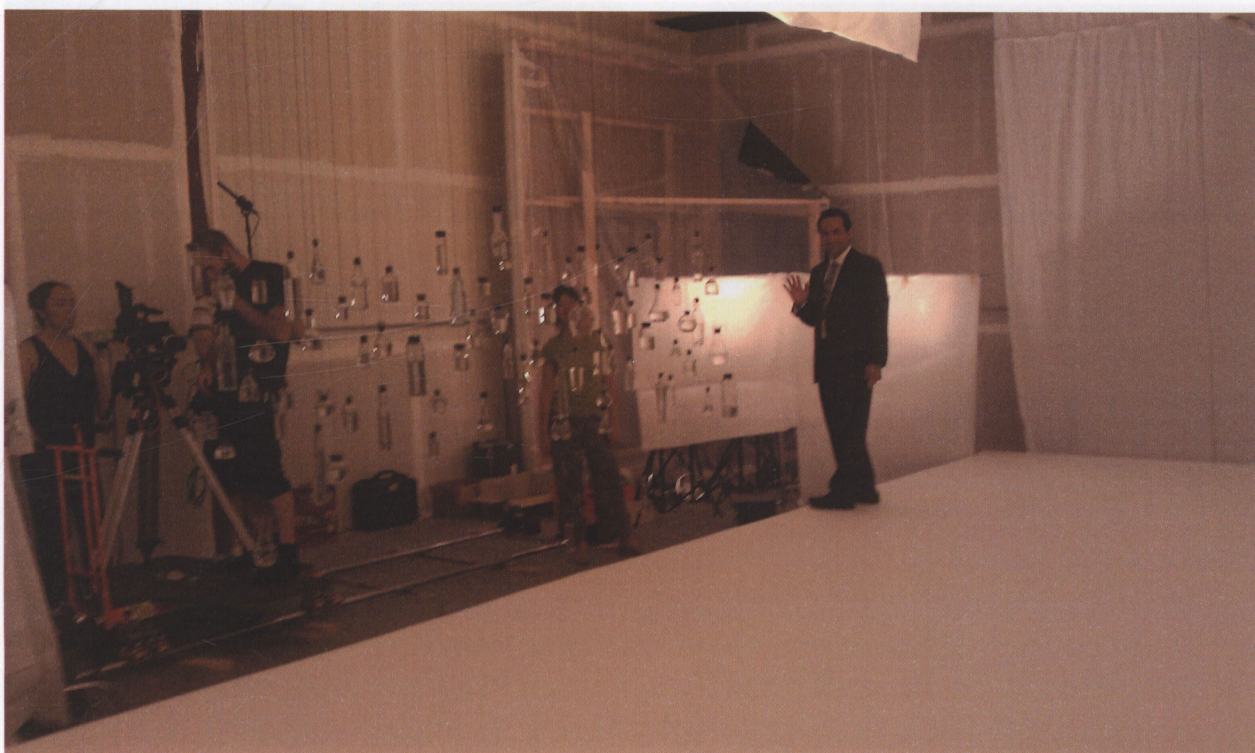


Fig. 16

9/5/11

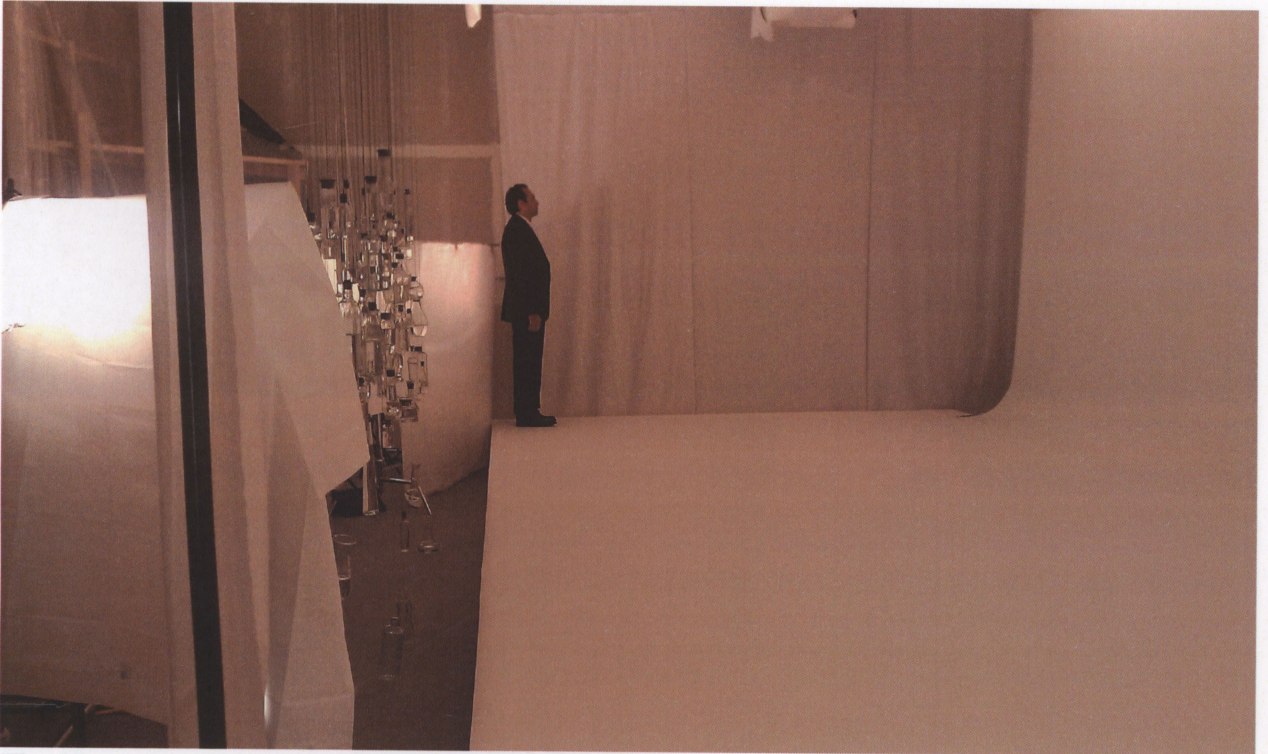


Fig. 17

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Fig. 18

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Fig. 19

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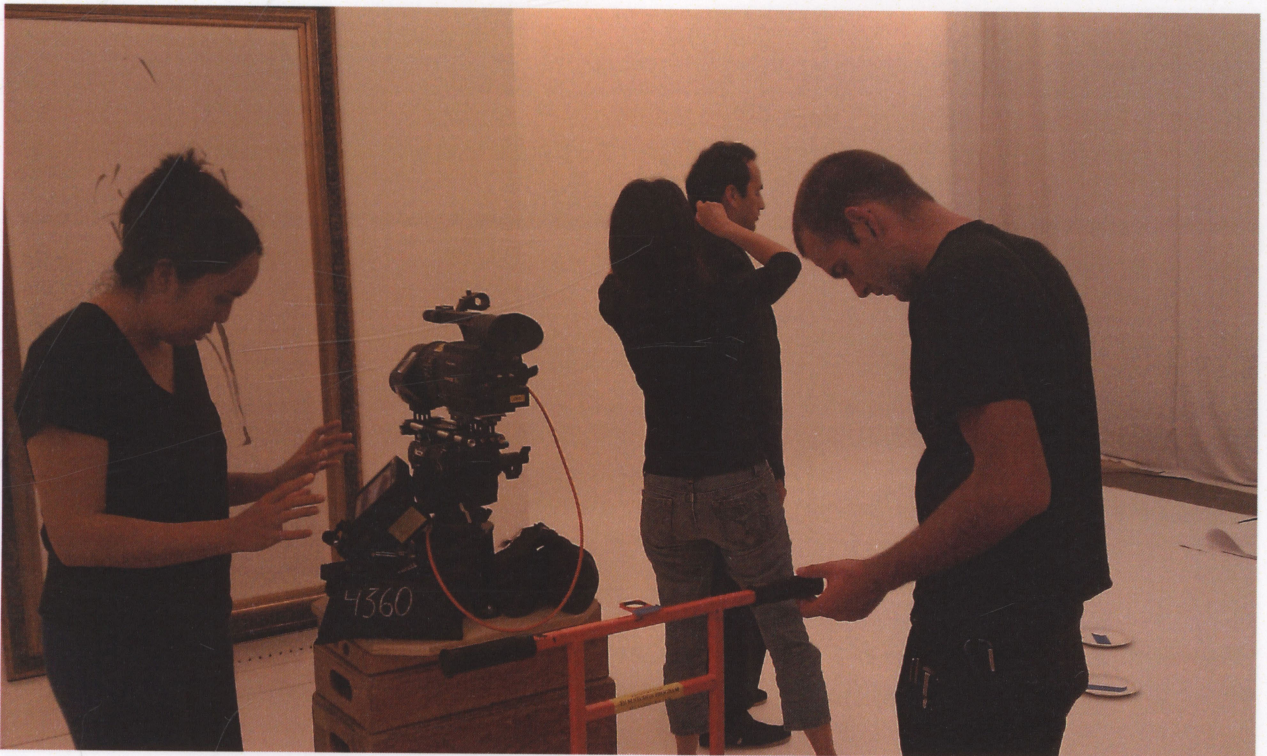


Fig. 20

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Fig. 21

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Fig. 22

9/24/11

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