

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

# ~~Magic~~

Oscar Barber-Wilson

2023

An exegesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for  
the degree of

Master  
of  
Fine Arts

at Massey University, Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand



# *ABSTRACT*

Magic is an online collection of eight digital hand drawn animated short films focusing on small, ordinary moments. Made through the repeated production of animated shorts, these films fuse fantasy, nostalgia, and experiences of my everyday life. Navigating a raw visual language, these sketchy lines, low frame counts, minimal colour, and soundscape have rekindled a love for my creative work, myself, and for my transition process.

Imaginary creatures that interact with their worlds have formed the basis to explore my own identity, the world around me, and to tell the story of this process. It has resulted in films with mundane, yet resonant narratives and the kind of stories that evoke the ineffable and compelling stuff of my life. Together, they offer a subtle guide to other people and creatures who are experiencing similar transitions in their life, and to re-finding one's voice.

## *Who am I?*

I am a special person. My practice spans animation, music composition, sound design, programming, and more. I have grown up with computers and the internet as central tools in my work. My background is vast and varied, with Māori, Samoan, and Lebanese feeding into me as a New Zealander. I have MARFAN syndrome, which comes with a variety of physical traits, such as being taller than most. I am queer, and have known that since I was a kid. And I am also transgender.

I have been navigating a difficult time during this project. It started on the heels of dissatisfaction with my creative industry focused undergraduate degree. It also started at the same time I began taking gender affirming hormone treatment. This led to a huge upheaval of how I relate to all my identities, not just my gender. I quickly realised that hard and fast answers weren't going to present themselves. It wasn't something I could solve or perfect. Instead, to peel back the layers of myself and reach for vulnerable, personal, and raw creative work became the way to move forward.

So, I ended up navigating that difficulty through my research. While reconsidering my practice, I've unpacked my understanding of my identity. Feeding off that process has led to finding a surer voice. Doing so has opened many questions, and I feel okay not having certain answers to them. What is my relationship with animation amidst my other skills? How does gender fit alongside my many other identities? How do I rekindle a love for my creative work? The re-understanding of my gender set the ball rolling, until I realised it was taking up so much room that all these other aspects of myself were being pushed back. This informed my process of filmic storytelling through animation. I used the making of films as a way of reflecting on these realisations, which in turn led to further reflections on my practice and self.

I've kept a deliberately loose, almost conversational tone, and structure throughout this document to more closely represent myself and mirror the raw nature of the work the exegesis talks about. While this risks the work not being taken seriously, it allows me to explore new ways that diverge from the beaten path. In the same way Halberstam speaks to in *The Queer*

*Art of Failure*, "Yet this is my goal. Being taken seriously means missing out on the chance to be frivolous, promiscuous, and irrelevant. The desire to be taken seriously is precisely what compels people to follow the tried and true paths of knowledge production around which I would like to map a few detours" (Halberstam, 6). The exegesis is structured around a series of key questions I interrogated as part of my exploration of my practice and process. I utilised this structure because these questions offer entry points to the various areas of discussion while maintaining my loose, raw way of working.

# *What have I made for this research project?*

I have made eight short digitally hand-drawn animated films using a selective graphical and audible language. They have been collected in a website, which was coded from scratch, that attempts to emulate the experience of the now deprecated web format Flash.

Throughout this document, I am going to refer to each film by their filename on my computer,



*Magic*. Oscar Barber-Wilson, 2023.

From left to right, top to bottom:

- *Vignettes* shows three creatures and their experience around the city together.
- *Water* is the exploration of two characters of the unknown in a vast concrete and water centric world.

- *Dark* has three characters meeting and exploring the darkness.
- *Four* depicts the antics that come with my experience of living with others.
- *Transit* speaks to moments of escape I've had on public transport while looking out the window.
- *Broken* recalls moments during the graveyard shift and the people who are awake and inhabiting public places during those times.
- *Tool* shows further experiences in and around the city but with the characters from *Water*.
- *Streetlines* serves as a conclusion to the work and this chapter, and is a mirror of *Vignettes*.

The collection is hosted online at <https://obw.neocities.org/ani/>.

This project began during the 2022 48HOURS furious film-making challenge ([www.48hours.co.nz/](http://www.48hours.co.nz/)) which I participated in unofficially. I created an animated short called *Fergus and Erstwhile* over a weekend in the company of friends. At that point it was the first time in several years that I had made a complete thing. I got to the end of the weekend and could see something that I had made in its entirety. Prior to this weekend, I had been starting personal projects which demanded several years worth of work when measured against my industry-influenced expectations. It was also the first time I'd explored the "rough" animatic inspired style in my own work, and it was at that point I knew I wanted to explore it further. The nature of my non-raw, industry-influenced work that I had been attempting to do warranted full colour painted backgrounds, hundreds of drawings with clean lines to animate the characters, with accurate and consistent anatomy and proportion in motion. Each character drawing was also to have fully coloured and shaded fills. Anything less than that was deemed incomplete.





A frame from *Fergus and Erstwhile*. Oscar Barber-Wilson, 2022.

## *What non-hierarchical questions guide the project?*

Animation is an incredibly laborious and time consuming process that chokes out time for my many other talents, and yet I find its results so compelling. There are many steps involved: ideation, storyboarding, animatic, backgrounds, character drawing, fills, cleanup, sound, and editing. Each step requires heavy thought and foresight to bring the film into existence. The relationship I have with my work is complicated, as Batkin puts it, "The animator gives life to the animated – the two surely cannot be separated; their relationship is complicated, frustrated, enlightened and enlightening" (Batkin, 1). By giving life to these animated characters, I have been sitting static in front of a graphics tablet for hours, days on end. It is such a clash to me. No single central question formed this research, in fact it's ended up being as twisty and complex as this transitory time for myself. What is vulnerable work, full of warmth and joy? How do I bring it back when it had become locked away? And what changes to my practice will allow that? The relationship between myself, my process, and the resulting work are tightly bound together.

I was deeply unhappy with how I was making animations before starting this MFA. Making, as a whole, hadn't been clicking and I couldn't figure out why. I got good at talking about what I wanted to do, but could never bring myself to do it. Everything was unsure; everything had gone cold. I set out to make this project around the same time I had started gender affirming hormone treatment. However, everything was further thrown into question at the start of this year when I stopped taking the hormones. It wasn't that I was permanently swearing them off, but for the time being they had reached a dead end. Even so, my exploration continued alongside my identity as Māori, Samoan, Lebanese, queer, and having MARFAN syndrome. In my work, I was holding myself to impossible industry influenced standards. It took the extreme time pressure mixed with the warmth of being with friends while making *Fergus and Erstwhile* to forge the path away from them and towards a raw way of animating. Further strategies then emerged, such as re-animation, embracing the

inconsistency of my visual/audible language across the films, and reaching for intimate, personal narratives.

I've found many parallels to my process in writings about animation as autoethnography. Autoethnography is defined as “a form of research in which the researcher belongs to the culture or community that they are researching and uses their own personal life experiences as a form of “data,”” (Merkel, 4). In *Drawn Animation as arts-based autoethnography* the short-animated films analysed were “examples of autoethnographic research that provide self-understanding, empathy towards vulnerability, and stress the interrelational dimensions of an ever-changing identity” (Madrid-Manrique). However, while my works can be read as autoethnographic, I didn't specifically apply this methodological lens throughout my making.

Artistically, Victoria Vincent's animation work spoke to similar questions that I had raised in my response to my own making. In her interview with *Muse's Milk*, she mentioned how her film *Cat City* “parallels my own experience of growing up and leaving home to pursue what I thought was my dream, and then slowly realizing it wasn't what I thought it would be” (musesmilk). Austin Holcomb's webcomic *Night Physics* emphasizes “that people are always capable of change — sometimes its great, sometimes it's painful, but it's always possible,” (Frances) which really spoke to my experience moving out of my industry funk into the mode of this project.

Re-animation in this work has been the process of putting my old, incomplete ideas to bed. I had so many projects I wanted to make when I was still locked up in my industry mindset. I wanted to set them free from spinning around my head. The ideas were stuck in my old mode, but by bringing them to this project I transformed them into something new. By putting them through my new process, I can finally look at them and say they're complete. *Broken*, *Four*, *Water*, *Dark*, and *Tool* are major examples of films with elements taken from old ideas of mine brought into this mode. *Broken* was the most extreme case of this, where I had a thirty seven pre-existing shot storyboard from 2021. That factor made it one of the hardest films to make because in the interest of time, I had to drop so many shots and ideas that I loved. I thought that using the old boards would

make the making easier, but instead it felt like dead weight. By cutting shots out, I had to find new ways to make it make sense of it as a whole. The characters and world in *Four* are an old idea from 2015 that I've carried with me since, and *Water*, *Dark*, and *Tool* are from early explorations of the first year of the MFA that I wanted to give another crack at.

Interrogating my inner child has been another tenet while making. I have an exceptional memory, so casting my mind back to early key influences that still have an impact on my work and bringing them to the fore is intuitive. I have a deep feeling of nostalgia for these key artists, as they call back to parts of my life where making and existing was full of joy and weightlessness. I've attempted to grasp that once again and use it to push the work forward. Shaun Tan, a painter and illustrator from Australia, and his picture books, most notably *The Lost Thing* (Tan), are a persisting influence and have been since I was five years old. Newgrounds animator Adam Phillips, with his Brackenwood world, is similarly influential - in particular, the film *Waterlollies* from when I was eight. Worth noting though, the copy of *Waterlollies* available online right now is a video recording of the original *Flash* (Phillips). And then there is Jeff Smith's graphic novel series *Bone* (Smith) when I was nine years old. These sources are three amongst a litany of smaller, less significant bits of inspiration.

I ended up making a difficult decision not to refine the films beyond what they were when I first showed them throughout the year. Letting my work be as it is allowed the films to display the language as it evolved and changed. One exception was some refinements made to *Vignettes* which I didn't remove. Would removing them after making that decision also be refinement? It was freeing to let go of the idea that I needed to make the visual and audible language totally consistent across the films, which was my original goal with refinement and something that my industry training instilled in me.

Intimacy is prevalent throughout my work in many forms. The narratives I've created are from the heart, with a focus on friendship, moments of warmth, and love between these characters. But even the nature of these narratives as vignettes, peering into the lives of my characters, is intimate.

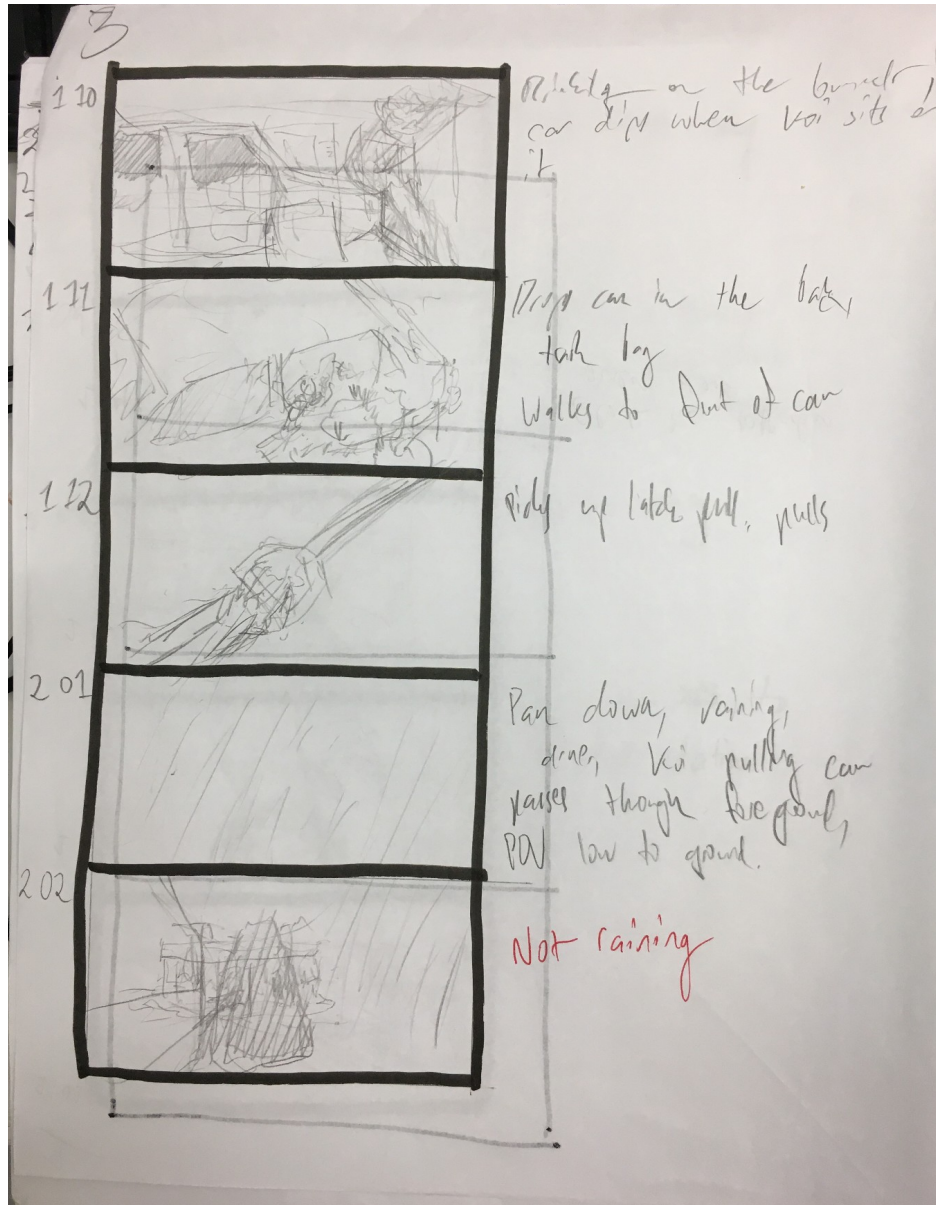
There is intimacy between process, creator, and reader. These works look into me and show how my process has morphed through the year. As the characters' bodies were created by me, do they reflect feelings I have for my own body? Or could the viewer see themselves in the characters?

While the worlds created in the films are rooted in my personal experience, there's room for other experiences to be read into them by other people. The worlds depicted were chosen because they had the potential to link with others on this journey I've been on. As an example, *Vignettes* is grounded heavily in my experience around Wellington. However, even the more fantastical worlds like those in *Water* or *Dark* were influenced by my personal, lived experience. These films have marked the continuing saga that is exploring my identity against all the elements that pour into it such as my mixed ancestry, gender transition, queerness, and body. My use of sentimentality and nostalgia and how it links to this process has been intimate. *Tool*, for instance, was my response to *Tales from Outer Suburbia* (Tan), a book I read when I was eight. I fused my memory of it, and its explorations of odd and mundane things around the city, with my own memories of similar things from my upbringing. This has been a process of peeling back my layers, to bring forth works from childhood that still influence me, and using those close joyful memories to rekindle a new image, without locking myself to labels. The medium and presentation of my animation is intimate as well.

Even with the raw lines and low frame count, the creation of these films is all-consuming, especially when paired with sound, music, and website creation. So much work goes into my films that isn't shown in the final product. I'm striving for a raw presentation that my audience can engage with the meaning that comes through it. I'm encouraging the viewer to put on headphones and sit with the work in an effort to bring them closer by showing it as a one person desktop computer setup. And then, because the work is online, it lives in the pockets and rooms of anyone's place of viewing it.

## *What is my making process?*

For each film, I brought together the ideas, characters, and worlds into a storyboard. Each storyboard panel was then placed in a timeline to form an animatic, which I then put sound to, added movement where it was needed, and exported out for the website. The language of this transition has been moulded through repeated making.



Page 3 of the storyboards to *Broken*. Oscar Barber-Wilson, 2021.

The method for making each film has largely been the same, despite morphing haphazardly over time. Storyboards are the first step, in particular the backgrounds. To get the idea down I'll make a quick text description, and number each panel so I can reference it to myself. The background environment comes first so that I can fit the characters in. If the shot is a close up of a character's face, I'd sometimes leave that panel blank until I got to drawing characters. At this point in time I'll leave

everything black and white with minimal shading, save for a colourful highlight to differentiate characters.

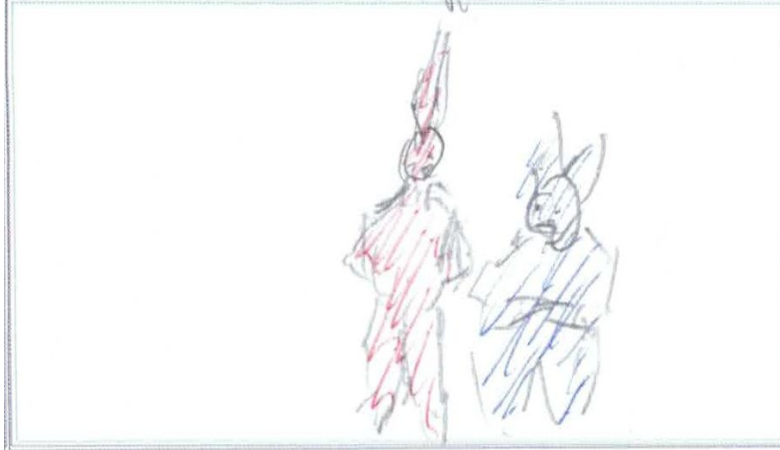
I have used the conventional Japanese storyboard format which is presented vertically, as opposed to the western format which is horizontal. It always reads better to me. These storyboards are the core of my work. They are the magic space where lines and shapes don't have to make sense to anyone but me. It's where storytelling comes first and foremost above anything else. The quality of the sketches is just enough for me to understand what I put down on the page.



The vending machine shot from *Dark*. 00:00:29, Oscar Barber-Wilson, 2023.

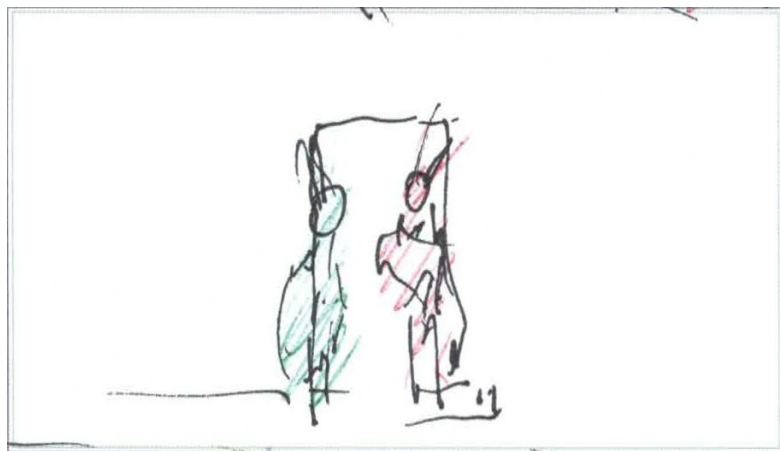
Even if characters move in a shot, I didn't need to draw it in at this point. So long as it showed all the characters present for that shot, I could get a sense for the story. Repeated backgrounds like those in *Four* could be omitted, because it was already known where they were.





A shot from *Four* with the background omitted. 00:00:18, Oscar Barber-Wilson, 2023.

Characters started out fairly amorphous, sometimes even lacking key features like the signature ears/horns.



Shot 4 from *Water*. 00:00:06, Oscar Barber-Wilson, 2023.

Initially I switched freely between digitally drawn storyboards and paper, but I found that tracing the paper ones into digital ended up losing a big chunk of that rawness. So, I tried to stick purely to digital for the latter four. Where I had old boards like with *Broken*, I used them as a loose guide instead of something to trace.



The couch shot from *Vignettes*, which had a digital storyboard.  
00:00:27, Oscar Barber-Wilson, 2023.

When I have the boards done and the number of shots down, the shots are then timed. For the first four films, I was timing the boards using a stopwatch and picturing it in my head, which always led to really fast cuts. I found that creating the soundscape at this point in production allowed me to better nuance the timing.

If the background has an animated element, I would add it at this stage aiming to use as few frames as possible, to convey the sense of the movement. Characters and any foreground objects that move are then drawn in. Similar to the moving background elements, I try to get just enough frames to understand what the character or object is doing so the viewer will get enough of a hint at the characterization and movement. There's a balance I try to strike here because it's easy to get caught up adding extra frames to a motion that already has enough to be understood, but the more frames you add, the more you get to see the nature of their being. Add too few, however, and you risk the shot feeling underdone, or not making sense.

Only at this stage would I add the fills and shading to everything. I try to keep it simple, white to grey with black lines. If there's a reflection in, say, water, I'll tint the lines lighter. The backgrounds need to be simple enough to let the characters stand out, but detailed enough to get the message across as to what it is portraying. In films where light or colour plays an important role I'll push the boundaries a bit more, with starker shades and contrast.

Every single sound I have used is from *Freesound* (*Freesound*). I built up a library of a couple hundred different sound files over the course of the project by making big lists. I would go through each shot and envisage every sound that could be happening in the scene. Then, I would trawl through various searches on *Freesound* until I found what I needed.

Music was something I used sparingly because I want people to listen to the sounds more than my music. I feel like I'm directing emotion by putting music over anything, and prefer that the viewer finds their own emotional response in the soundscape.

Finally, the exported sound and animation comes together in a video editor, and is rendered out for use in the website. I programmed the website from scratch in Hypertext Markup Language (HTML), Cascading Style Sheets (CSS), with the use of three different JavaScript (JS) libraries: *howler.js* (Simpson), *video.js* (*Video.js*), and *anime.js* (Garnier). It is hosted by the independent company Neocities, which encourages the creation of DIY websites (“Neocities - Tutorials”).

The above description presents a general, idealised version of the process of making which was far more chaotic in reality. Throughout the year I made huge lists of proposed changes to the films from which I gradually, gently, weaned myself off. The films from *Water* through to *Transit* have what I felt to be “broken” audio. Plans were made to trace over all the lines in a fixed brush size on canvases resized to be the same resolution throughout. I was tempted at one point to trace the entire batch of films in Adobe Flash Professional when options for self-hosting video on the web was looking impossible in the face of programming errors. Letting go of these allowed the development of my process to show in the films.

# *What is the aesthetic nature of my work?*

Letting go of perfection has been a large part of this work. How do I master a process that acknowledges and focuses on imperfection? How do you master un-mastery? It has been far too easy for me to be disappointed in this raw work I've created through what has been a vulnerable process, especially in the face of my industry based animation training. To grant myself the permission through my own authority to say "Yeah! I am enough!" has been hard fought.

Moving away from my training in a media industry context was the initial drive for this graphical language, but I found that I was never truly free from it, primarily because my visual cues are from storyboard art and animatics, standard practice within the animation industry. I didn't need to completely undo my industry training, or run away from it, because it's a part of me. After holding so many in-progress projects at once, belting them out with all their flaws and to call them done has given me a lot of joy.

Animatics are usually seen as a means to an end. According to the definition by Chandler and Munday, animatics are "A series of still images, taken from a storyboard, with a rough soundtrack, functioning as a simplified mock-up to assist people in visualizing a proposed commercial or a film sequence involving animation..." (Chandler and Munday). Instead, this was a whole work in itself.

The design for my characters comes from a long-running interest in anthropomorphic creatures and representation of human experiences through nonhuman beings. My creatures have human elements- they have two legs, they walk, they emote. And yet their creature features always shine through: pointed ears/horns, pointy and clawed limbs and digits, with wide set eyes and big silly grins. Seldom do I depict them in clothes. Where there are similar characters in the same space, I tend to have a clearly distinctive trait that separates them out. None of them talk audibly, but they move their mouths in a way that gives a sense of talking.

I have been making creatures like these longer than I can remember; it's intuitive to me. Friends have told me that the "goblin ears" are a signature of my work and characters. I find that I'm striving for charm when I make them. Why these creatures though? The pointy eared ones in *Water*, *Transit*, and *Tool* use a similar visual cue to the rat creatures in *Bone*, in which their ears are cropped; I see my own ears as being their natural ears. The creatures in *Vignettes* have sharp toothy grins also like rat creatures or sharks, or Bitey from *Waterlollies*. What unites them all is that they represent me, an important transformative quality. This is something I have learned from my experience with online "furry" subculture. Representing one's self through an anthropomorphic animal or creature is commonplace (Heinz, 22). Doing so has allowed me to explore my expanded identity while not burdened by my "real" self. Freedom comes with depicting my experience through these creatures. It's not too far fetched to say that all these creatures are the same character or merely different versions and depictions of me.

I've been "writing" slice of life narratives for these pieces as views into these characters' lives, a small vignette. Using the term "writing" feels wrong as there's never a script. I don't have humour or sadness or comedy in mind, instead I evoke an atmosphere. Mundane narratives lend themselves to being gentle and slow, allowing the viewer to really take things in like the compelling, evocative stuff of everyday life. It's interesting showing others the work. More often than not, people are searching for humour that they expect to see in animation, reflecting Saint-Oyant's observation of how "the animated medium can be understood as a marginalized medium - one that is not taken seriously" (Saint-Oyant, 1). What are the creatures doing? Parallels can be drawn to my precedents. Taking *The Lost Thing* as an example, there is a large, unknown, red creature lost in a big, heavily urban environment (Tan, 4). The "thing" is found by a boy who was out collecting bottle tops. They play for a while but the boy realises that the thing is lost, no one was coming to take it home. They venture through the vast city, until finally they find a place where the thing can belong, say goodbye, and go about their life. As the boy says afterwards: "Well, that's it. That's the story. Not especially profound, I know, but I never said it was" (Tan, 29). And yet despite that, I found this

short, sweet, mundane yet fantastical story so profound and impactful. The city, and the world that these two creatures inhabit is harsh and unforgiving. And yet, they found warmth between the two of them against the vast concrete walls and buildings, hard geometric shapes and structures, and the few and far between organic shapes. The repetition of elements such as a series of rusty pipes and mechanical gears, hazard lines run from page to page. For me, shot to shot, these environments and their stories are what I've seen my entire life. My worlds of the films reflect this, and I find they make moments of warmth stand out more.

The background environments in my films are more than backdrops to me, they morph with the characters and what they are doing. They matter to these characters' existence. What are these worlds equipped to deal with? I've focused only on my main characters, as I haven't drawn extras in. This creates the effect that the city environments which should, in theory, be full of other people, are completely empty. They could take more background characters, but I don't feel they are needed for the kind of stories I'm telling. In *Broken* there are extras but in that case it was deliberate, as I was calling upon experiences with 4am people. They almost become main characters as a result, even if the interactions are more distant and brief compared to my other films. Similar to my question on characters, if these worlds are all based on my experience, are they in fact the same world? Even though I initially created them as though separate, I could see them overlapping. If the main character from *Dark* bumped into the group from *Four* or *Vignettes* on the street, or any mix of characters, I could see it working.

What is permissible in this graphical language? What is omitted? I have left many gaps in detail for the imagination to fill in. I haven't stuck to a specific brush size or canvas resolution for any of these films - in fact, it varies throughout. Generally, I tried to aim for thick lines reminiscent of jazlyte's storyboard work, or Steve Wolfhard's visual development work (@wolfhard). There's a pragmatic side to it in that the lines are thick at that early phase in production to get ideas down fast. Despite being refined through years of experience, their work has a childlike quality to it as well. For me, it gets closer to that raw storytelling for the sake of storytelling that I thought I'd lost. The same can be said of low framerate animation. The

more frames drawn, the more time it takes. As a child I was using Microsoft Paint and Windows Movie Maker, applications that came bundled with the Windows XP operating system, to create animations that timing-wise felt the same. A useful tool now, I'm inviting the audience to fill in the blanks. Maybe, while the films come from my own memories, perhaps the viewer can relate these works to their own experience? The space left by being selective with my detail leaves room for atmosphere to form. Even now, there's still a part of me that is disappointed that I didn't detail these to kingdom come, but I've accepted they don't need that detail to be compelling. It was a learning exercise though, because there is so little visual information. I have had to make up for it with decent sound work and slow enough cuts to enable understanding as to what is taking place. This method fell short on *Water*, *Dark*, and *Four*, which prompted me to switch away from using a stopwatch to time the films and instead use sound to set the pace.

Characterisation is another challenge with so few frames. On a highly crafted film I was taught to aim towards animating “on-two’s”, in which any character is exposed for two frames of film. This ends up in 12 drawings at 24 frames a second. In most cases, I've been exposing my drawings for 12, 16, or even 20 frames at once. If you read all the characters as the same, there's quite a few frames to work off. Nuance framing like this can be revealed through the films played back to back. Selecting the detail, keeping it minimal while still keeping it proved to be an ongoing balancing game. Playing with light and colour, as powerful emotionally it can be, took a back seat for the most part. I tried where I could, but found that it was craving more detail than I was permitting. A potentially endless time sink.

How about the audible language? *Freesound* (*Freesound*) has long been my favourite place to find audio for projects, even if it is user generated and sometimes unprofessional. Ambience and background recordings were the most important next to key actions/movements that were being depicted visually. Footsteps were seldom needed so I went without them for the most part. There were some brief notions of recording voice work for *Four*, but aside from being another time sink, it would have stood out against the other films which have no voice work. While the English language could

have been used in my films, I much prefer the symbolic nature of having no spoken language. The closest I got to using English language was the animated onomatopoeia of the creatures giggling at the end of *Vignettes*. Even if it's the only time that words clearly appear in the films, it didn't feel out of place after the other films were made.

*Flash* animation, hosted online and played through Adobe Flash Player, has had such an impact on me for most of my life that I wanted to present this work in a similar way, but using up to date web technologies. Flash itself is ostensibly dead: "In 2017, Adobe announced that Flash Player would cease to be developed and supported by the end of 2020" (Bedingfield), only kept alive by emulation and archival efforts (Lawhead). Made in the style of old flash that influenced me, a good example is Tokyo Plastic's website from 2004 ("menu"). Viewed through the Internet Archive Wayback Machine using the Ruffle browser extension (Welsh). In this scenario, one selects what you want to play; the whole thing is loaded in advance, and sounds play on interaction. Will I ever be able to fully recreate that old experience? No, Flash emulators are emulators. Flash expects a mouse for interaction, and in general is a technology of an era of the internet that is now gone. My website breaks in ways that Flash sites never did, but requires no Flash Player plugin and works with newer tech. The web is ever changing, just like me and my work. The eight panel presentation of the website's menu is a direct mirror of my first explorations into this project which were made in Flash. Back then I didn't know the depths my work held, but I'm still deeply attached to this way of showing animation. Nothing for me has yet matched its specifics. It lets one make DIY hand-drawn animation, sound, and programming all in a single place to export to the web. My process and outcome have evoked the memory of this, but it was through several different pieces of software and cobbled together. For these stories I'm telling, the ability for the viewer to choose how they manoeuver through the films became an important aspect of the overarching narrative too. I've noticed that everyone I show this work to makes their own choice as to which they watch first.

To physically show this work, I've put together a simplified desktop computer setup consisting of a monitor, a mouse, a pair of headphones, a small table, and a comfy chair. I want the reader to be close to my



experience of making, and also close to my memories of viewing online animation, and to bring that intimate experience to the gallery space. It has its issues, in theory only one person can sit, interact, view and listen to the work at one time. And yet, I felt it was important not to have more than one. Whoever views it in space has their own, personal moment to find their way with the work.

## *Who are my creative and intellectual heroes when it comes to film and animation?*

The spark that set me off to make work like this was *a waffle ritual* by Kalen Whitfield, known as jazlyte online (@JazLyte, “a waffle ritual”). He's an industry storyboard artist based in Los Angeles, USA, who I found through the user created animation site Newgrounds when I was twelve years old. The animated film *a waffle ritual* features two queer anthropomorphic rodent characters get high and make waffles together.

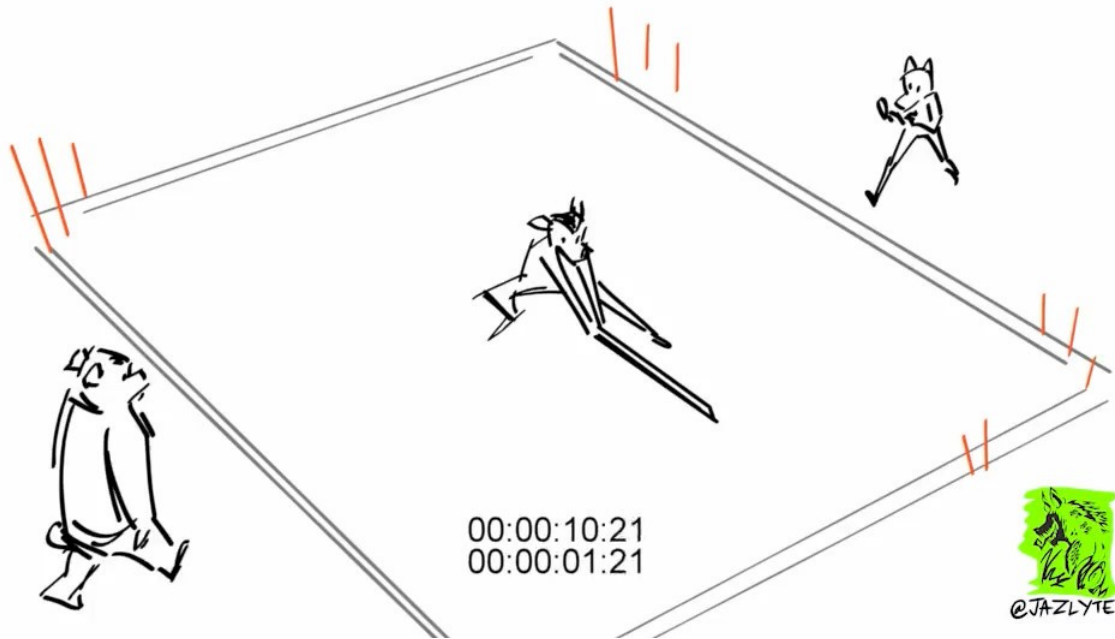


Frame from *a waffle ritual* (@JazLyte). 00:00:48, Kalen Whitfield, 2022.

It opened my eyes to this, in his words, “rough” (@JazLyte, “Rough/scratch scene”) way of animating. Previously, he’d been working on one film for four years (Vlog 00:03:05-00:03:20). I found that I was far more touched by his rough work. I have heavily pulled from this “rough”, storyboard and animatic-inspired aesthetic for the quality of line, and type of motion in my films.

I shed the need to create incredible detail across the board, and let myself be rough, and it is still an ongoing process of letting go. I have found much more freedom in creating works where my industry-wrought ideas of quality can take a back seat, and that I can begin to accept myself through

this work. In those stories jazlyte is telling he is showing the ways in which he is black, American, on the autism spectrum, with anxiety, and "cringe". Finding his way back to what matters most to him.



“Rough/scratch scene from Punk Ass” (@JazLyte). 00:00:10, Kalen Whitfield, 2022.

The word "cringe" is a sincere expression of love for what matters most. I'm finding my way to myself. I started out calling my work rough, but learnt that it is a term tied to industry context, and that a raw DIY ethos resonates with others, makes it feel real and imperfect, just as jazlyte's work did with me.

## *Who is this work for? What impact do I hope it will have?*

I see this work offering a hand to those going through a similar transition in their lives. It could be one moment, or several, or the entire collection that helps them understand it better. Maybe it could help voice those things not easily voiced. Where are these characters going? And in that, where do such transitions lead? For everyone it'll differ. Even without a voice, these characters and their interactions with each other and their world has the potential to give insight, or to guide. Especially those without a voice of their own. Even though the cultural, social, and political registers the work contends with originates from my own personal lived experience, enough room is left for it to meet wider relevant experience. Or maybe it won't help with understanding better, but instead could help one be okay with not understanding, and to explore questions and unknowns.

## *Who am I now because of this project?*

So if I was unhappy with my work(ing) prior to this project, am I happy now? Did it work? Can such a simple question even be asked? My answer isn't a simple yes or no. Creating this project has opened up so many interesting questions that I will continue to explore as time goes on. Drawing a line in the sand and ending this project after making these eight films has felt like closing an important chapter of my life. In that, I feel it's important to bring it to a close too. With the vulnerability of the process has come a lot of pain. I've found a way through it, and learnt from it, but I don't want it defining me or my future work. I find at the end of it here that I'm ready to let go. I've held onto some of these worlds and characters for the better part of a decade. I've given myself the permission to say that my raw work is enough. Maybe the next step is to say that I'm not bound to this all consuming medium, or, maybe it's to twist it even further. This closure can be seen in the way I finished the collection of films too. Without realising it, we come back to the characters from the second film *Water* in the second to last film *Tool*. The characters in *Vignettes* come back in *Streetlines*, albeit without their eye colours. Save for *Water*, the first five films I made don't end up somewhere at the end, whereas the last three do.

I'm more sure in myself than I was when I began. Compared to a time back when I was so scared and unsure, I no longer need answers, and am content to let myself be with my questions and explore them freely. Even if I let go of animation as my primary mode of creating beyond this project, I'll find new ways of mixing the many threads that fed into it. It's interesting to me looking back at how I have been using and twisting the "dead" medium that is Flash. Even with my efforts to recreate it with current tech, that too will become obsolete. The desktop paradigm of a mouse with a cursor on screen has been challenged by touch screens, and VR headsets, and will continue to be challenged as tech evolves. It's a reach but there's a chance that some people viewing this work won't have used a desktop computer. Or, their experience of the web may only be constrained to huge websites and social media, with the idea of websites as an art form totally lost on them, and Flash being a total unknown. Not everyone will bring a queer or trans reading to this work either.

To me, there is still magic in these films, in the making of these films, and in animation as a whole. But also, it is and has been a hell of a lot of hard work. There was no magical wand or incantation or snap of my fingers to get this work made. For all the unwinding, unlearning, and exploration, I couldn't shake that title of *Magic* even though I wanted to. So I've let it be, with a strike through it, to set the scene. Yeah it's magic, but not only magic, and not free from magic either.

---

## Works Cited

- a waffle ritual*, Kalen Whitfield, *Twitter*, @JazLyte, 2022, <https://twitter.com/JazLyte/status/1488573429527695360>. Accessed 22 Oct. 2023.
- Batkin, Jane. *Identity in Animation : A Journey into Self, Difference, Culture and the Body*. Routledge, 2017.
- Bedingfield, Will. "The rise and fall of Flash, the annoying plugin that shaped the modern web." *WIRED*, 18 Sept. 2019, <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/history-of-macromedia-flash>. Accessed 22 Oct. 2023.
- Chandler, Daniel, and Rod Munday. "animatic." *A Dictionary of Media & Communication*, Oxford University Press, 2016. *Oxford Reference*. <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191800986.001.001/acref-9780191800986-e-3074>. Accessed 1 Nov. 2023.
- Frances, Rory. "Sometimes Painful, But Possible: An Interview with Austin Holcomb (Night Physics)." *Medium*, 13 Oct. 2015, <https://medium.com/mammon-machine-zeal/sometimes-painful-but-possible-an-interview-with-austin-holcomb-night-physics-d496d8f9de3f>. Accessed 1 Nov. 2023.
- Freesound*. Music Technology Group (Universitat Pompeu Fabra). <https://freesound.org/>. Accessed 22 Oct. 2023.
- Garnier, Julian. *anime.js*. <https://animejs.com/>. Accessed 22 Oct. 2023.
- Halberstam, Judith. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Duke University Press, 2011.
- Heinz, Mary. "'There's A Little Bit of That Magic Where I'm Becoming Something Else': LGBT+ Furry Identity Formation and Belonging Online." *The Journal for Undergraduate Ethnography*, vol. 10, no. 2, Oct. 2020, pp. 21–37.

JazLyte. "[Vlog] Kill Wolfy 2 at the end of the year." *YouTube*, 22 Aug. 2022, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UL167Wcoi\\_4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UL167Wcoi_4).

@JazLyte. "Rough/scratch scene from Punk Ass. This is how I start every cartoon, just temp dialog of me talking to myself to some thumbnails lmao. Ya'll interested in shit this rough?" *Twitter*, 4 May 2022, 5:20a.m., <https://twitter.com/JazLyte/status/1521540097534951424>.

Lawhead, Nathalie. "A short history of Flash & the forgotten Flash Website movement (when websites were "the new emerging artform")." *The Candybox Blog*, 12 Nov. 2020, <http://www.nathalielawhead.com/candybox/a-short-history-of-flash-the-forgotten-flash-website-movement-when-websites-were-the-new-emerging-artform>. Accessed 22 Oct. 2023.

Madrid-Manrique, Marta. "Drawn Animation as Arts-Based Autoethnography." *Society of Animation Studies Annual Conference 2022*, Teesside University, June 2022, <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/32118/>.

"menu." *tokyoplastic v.2*, Tokyo Plastic, 3 Jul. 2004, <https://web.archive.org/web/20040703063618/https://www.tokyoplastic.com/menu.html>. Accessed 22 Oct. 2023.

Merkel, Latesha. *Embrace: Exploring Asexuality Through Autoethnographic Animation*. 2021. Ohio State University, Master's thesis. *OhioLINK Electronic Theses and Dissertations Center*, [http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc\\_num=osu1629463529428671](http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc_num=osu1629463529428671).

Muse's Milk. "Victoria Vincent." *Tumblr*, 27 Apr. 2017, <https://musesmilk.tumblr.com/post/160020999350/victoria-vincent>. Accessed 1 Nov. 2023.

"Neocities – Tutorials." *Neocities*, Neocities, <https://neocities.org/tutorials>. Accessed 1 Nov. 2023.



Saint-Oyant, Melanie. *Queering Animation: the Animated Aesthetics of Queerness In the Works of Satoshi Kon*. 2017, U of Colorado Boulder, Masters thesis. *CU Libraries*, [https://scholar.colorado.edu/concern/graduate\\_thesis\\_or\\_dissertations/dr26xx81d](https://scholar.colorado.edu/concern/graduate_thesis_or_dissertations/dr26xx81d)

Simpson, James. *howler.js*. <https://howlerjs.com/>. Accessed 22 Oct. 2023.

Smith, Jeff. *Bone: The Complete Cartoon Epic in One Volume*. Cartoon Books, 2004.

Tan, Shaun. *The Lost Thing*. Lothian Books, 2000.

Tan, Shaun. *Tales from Outer Suburbia*. Allen & Unwin, 2008.

*Video.js*. Brightcove Inc. <https://videojs.com/>. Accessed 22 Oct. 2023.

*Waterlollies*, Adam Phillips, *Newgrounds*, chluaid, 5 Nov. 2007, <https://www.newgrounds.com/portal/view/408967>. Accessed 22 Oct. 2023.

Welsh, Mike. *Ruffle*. <https://ruffle.rs/>. Accessed 22 Oct. 2023.

@wolfhard. "Fionna and Cake episodes 8 and 9 visdev. haha it's not news that I'm very attached to Shermy, Beth, and the 1000+ era." *Twitter*, 3 Oct. 2023, 5:09 a.m., <https://twitter.com/wolfhard/status/1708876839186481243>. Accessed 22 Oct. 2023.

Bibliography (excluding works cited)

Drake, Kyle and Victoria Wang. *Neocities*. <https://neocities.org/>. Accessed 22 Oct. 2023.

*Fergus & Erstwhile*, Oscar Barber-Wilson, *Newgrounds*, Rhinctus, 2022, <https://www.newgrounds.com/portal/view/885929>. Accessed 22 Oct. 2023.

*Newgrounds*. Newgrounds, Inc. <https://www.newgrounds.com/>. Accessed 22 Oct. 2023.