

TURRITOPSIS DOHRNII:
SKEPTICISM AND THE IMMORTAL JELLYFISH

A THESIS

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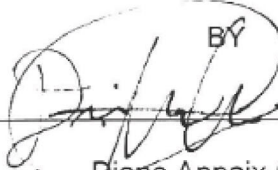
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BY


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Introduction

In this paper I will be discussing the concepts of skepticism and perception. I will also touch on the ways in which my life as a multicultural child and person has influenced my understanding of perception and how it allowed me to see that no two people see things the same way and therefore, we cannot assume how any other thing sees either.

Throughout this essay I will be using the word "partaker" in the place of the more common word "viewer". A partaker is one who chooses to engage with the work and exchange with it. Without them the work does not exist.

Part I:

i. Diane

In my junior year of high school, I took a class that completely altered my reality. It was called Theory of Knowledge (TOK). Predisposed to skepticism as a kid, TOK expanded that predisposition. Once I found TOK, I never stopped thinking about it. I remember my teacher, Monsieur LeCompte, asking, "how do you know that you weren't placed right here five minutes ago and that everything in your mind, all your thoughts and memories weren't just placed there too?" I think about this all the time; the idea that we can never truly know what is true or not, or if truth even exists. This deliberation propels my artmaking.

I was born in Paris, France to a French father and Spanish mother. We spent much of my childhood living and travelling to countries in Latin America for my parent's jobs. Cambridge, Massachusetts was our base from when I was four years old. This created a multi-hyphenated identity in me that played a formative role in the development of my skepticism. Each culture had such different customs and ways of thinking of about their relationship to the Earth, Cosmos, and other beings. Similar situations could play out in sometimes opposite or conflicting ways. The idea that there are multiple ways of doing or seeing one thing has embedded itself into my art and worldview. I am often scolded by friends for giving everybody the benefit of the doubt, but I think it is a sort of empathy that I have for other perspectives, for other's truths. This empathy extends itself to places, beings, objects, *things* in lands undiscovered or impossible to imagine. Could there be existence(s) in proximity or parallel to us that we simply don't have the perception to be aware of?

ii. Turritopsis dohrnii

The idea of discovery seems innate to the human experience. Western and empirical methods of analyzing discovery have led to anthropocentrism and egotism by making us believe that we are more intelligent and therefore best equipped to interpret our world and should therefore be the benchmark from which other life is measured. Other cultures have not centralized the human and individualism in this same way. I have been making work which questions the Western and empirical belief system by using my knowledge of it to push back against it. I hope to persuade the partaker that there might be more beyond their minds and bodies. This effort aims to humble us and create a sense of empathy for the unknown which includes the minds of other humans, living beings, and even those that we cannot be aware of or do not consider conscious.

Western and empirical institutions have sold the idea that knowing is how we are, as crystallized in the Cartesian, "I think therefore I am". But I would posit that not knowing is more human, more real. Of all the things that there are in the entirety of existence, we know so little. I argue we know nothing for sure at all. We barely know our own bodies, constantly discovering new aspects of our brains and other organs and their functions. If we can admit to this not knowing, maybe we become more aware. I strive with my art to introduce this concept of not knowing, of our modes of perception, our senses, not being sufficient in perceiving the whole *thing*. Each of my works informs the next because I layer questions with more questions. My work never seems to reach a destination or conclusion, preferring to remain an open quest. This is maybe the only thing I feel certain of.

I used to make work from my own perspective. I was the main subject of each piece and called them all self-portraits, but this is so contrary to what I want to do. I realized at some point in the first semester of grad school that I was far more interested in the way a viewer, or "partaker" engages with the work. I want to create an exchange between the work and this person, one that is symbiotic. One where the art and partaker grow together. In TOK we discussed the question of "if a tree falls in a forest and nobody is there to hear it, does it make a sound?" There are numerous ways to answer this question and I believe this concept applies to art as well. Without the partaker, my work is just vapor, floating in the air - or nothing at all.

At some point in undergrad, I realized that sculpture can be far more than materiality; a three-dimensional experience can be constructed from anything, and this includes the partaker's presence. A photograph could be a sculpture if someone is truly engaging with it as the experience of that photograph moves into the body and therefore into the third dimension. This notion allowed for me to experiment more with sculpture when I got to grad school because I was not so concerned with making objects. The first evidence of this is *Subsiste*, or "the fog" as many peers informally call the piece. This experience was initially conceived as a response to a dissatisfaction I had with the sci-fi comics and movies of my youth. I went to them for inspiration as they had opened worlds for me as a kid. These books and movies mostly involved space exploration (and colonization) and they spoke of life forms on other planets. But when I turned to them again, I saw human worlds; worlds made of recognizable things. I felt that these narratives remained anthropocentric, and I began to test whether I could make a work that had nothing to do with human beings at all. As previously discussed, I knew

it would be eventually seen, or consumed, by human beings. But I wanted the place itself, as much as is "humanly" possible, to be devoid of humanness. To do this, I decided to put into question two main elements: aliveness and perception.

I began this line of questioning with writing, something that is invaluable to my art practice. I wrote question after question about the definition of "alive". Eventually I concluded that it could be anything whose absence affects another thing's existence. I knew then I would need at least two elements.

Through much experimentation with materiality, I arrived at two elements which would build this new "universe". One would exist as a solid, and the other as a vaporized liquid. This universe would be comprised as one being which could morph into these two forms, and with this perpetual transformation, share its knowledge and recycle itself always. This idea came to me from the immortal jellyfish, *Turritopsis dohrnii*. This jellyfish is supposed to be immortal because of its ability to continuously transform back into its original "baby" state, or polyp. As a polyp, the immortal jellyfish regenerates its cells, all the while keeping its genetic makeup. It can regenerate indefinitely as far as we know, and therefore live forever so long as nothing eats it, or it encounters something deadly. Essentially, it has no "lifespan."

In a piece entitled *Subsiste*, I married the immortal jellyfish and my new definition of what it is to be alive with a desire to introduce skepticism to the partaker's perceptive faculties. *Subsiste* has taken place in my studio but can be recreated in any space whose walls and floors are not susceptible to humidity. When a partaker walks into this place, they are

immediately confronted with a dense fog which alters their ability to determine their place. If one stretches their arm to length, their hand nearly disappears. I've found that often partakers first try to identify what is going on with their vision and bodies, wrestling with how this new obstacle interferes with their ability to function sensorially. After an indefinite time, they begin to explore their surroundings. In the fog lies solid forms, illuminated from within. This blinking of light acts as a beacon in an otherwise landmarkless world. It is so faint, however, that one must first be willing to overcome the trepidation of walking further into the unknown.



Subsiste, 2021, documentary image of experiential installation

Given the inherent anonymity of being in a space where no one can see you (even if they are standing a few feet away) partakers often feel the freedom to touch the solid forms found throughout. Although I don't explicitly allow this, I don't discourage it. I love watching people exit this space with the residue of an alien on their fingertips. This means they have dared to exchange with the work. The fog creates a similar

exchange. It permeates one's porous skin, seeping into the body, changing the way the participant feels on their way out.

Recently someone walked into the space and became aware of the floaters in their vision they otherwise don't see. I have this same experience, squiggly lines that look like dust or small transparent dots. The partaker said later that they noticed the floaters in other situations and that this experience had changed their certainties about perception. This is an almost extreme version of coming to a new awareness, but it touches on my larger goal of making the partaker aware of the limitations their bodies and senses have when it comes to perceiving and what they could be missing.

Into the Dark was inspired by an experience I had with a work by James Turrell, the Ganzfeld psychology experiment. Also influential is an interest in periphery and the limited information our eyes can take in. During a visit to Mass MoCA, I was able to see a huge portion of Turrell's work. One of the pieces was called *Perfectly Clear* and it provided an experience that moved me deeply. I, and a group of about ten people, stepped into a room with rounded walls whose color changed regularly. I noticed that if I stepped forward far enough and got the other people out of my peripheral vision, it felt as though I was surrounded by color, like I was bathing in it. A friend called out to me, and I was snapped back into the reality of my surroundings. I was not floating alone in blue then green then yellow, and so on. I was surrounded by other people. I was mesmerized by what the effect of concentrating on vision could do to my experience of space and body.

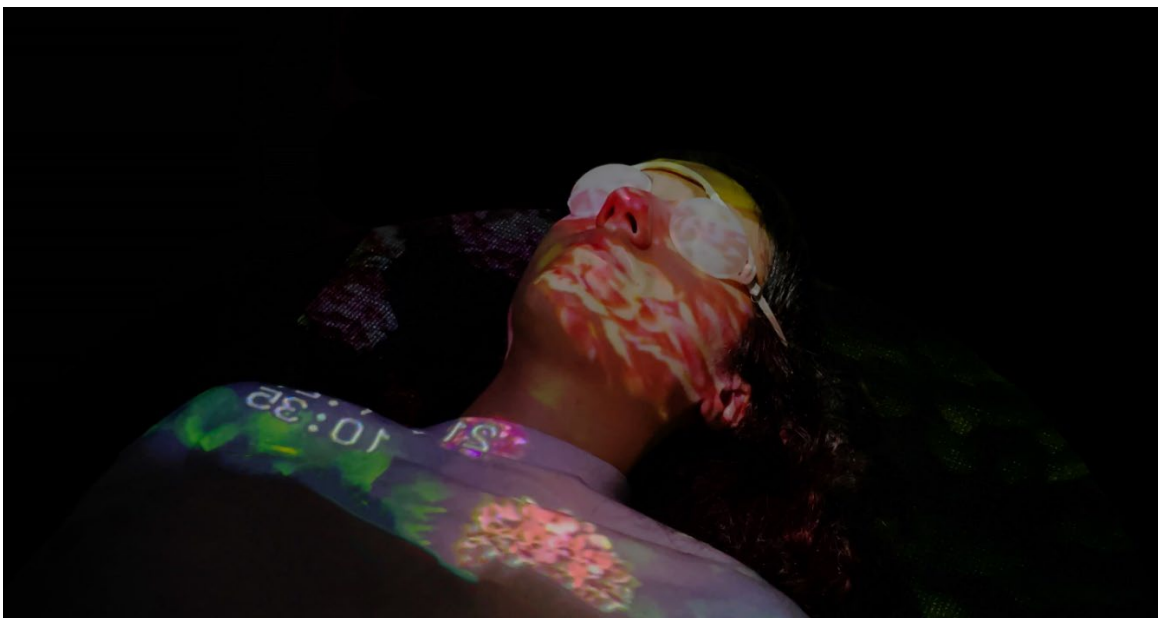
A couple years later, already at Tulane, I needed some inspiration. Since James Turrell had altered my reality so much, I decided to do a deep dive into his career. I found a video of a public interview he did at the Guggenheim Museum in New York where he said, "our vision is formed from the context of vision more than it's formed by what's out there."¹ This was in reference to the Ganzfeld experiment, where halved ping pong balls are placed over the eyes and a red light is projected over them, at the same time white noise is listened to through a headset. Over the course of 30 minutes, one is meant to have audio and visual hallucinations. I attempted and recorded this experiment with an undergraduate student. I observed her expressions and then interviewed her on the experience. There seemed to be a beginning, middle, and end to the experience. This got me thinking about ways that I could use this mode of viewing, through a lens placed over the eye, and control the experience of color one had through an isolated view of a film.

During the summer between the two years of my grad program, I filmed colorful scenes of places from my childhood in Spain on an analog camcorder like the one my French grandfather had used to record my sister, cousins, and I as kids. This collapsed my experiences of summers with my family. I created a color narrative and journey. Upon my return to New Orleans, I edited this film and added sounds which occasionally feel like they coincide with the imagery, and at other times seem deliberately removed from association.

The final rendition of this experience places the partaker on a viewing platform in a dark room, to which they have just been guided by an

¹ Guggenheim Museum, dir. "Artist Talk: James Turrell with Michael Govan". *YouTube*. July 12, 2013.

attendant with the use of a flashlight. They are asked to lay down on a viewing platform and put on 3D printed goggles which have been modeled after the experience of placing ping pong balls over the eyes. Shortly after, the experience begins with a reddish light covering the eyes and the beginnings of a vibration throughout the body. As the audiovisual experience progresses, the sound seems in perfect sync with the visuals, allowing one to settle into it, and then the audio is pulled away, removing the anchor and comfort of knowledge, and understanding.



Into the Dark, 2022, documentary image of experiential installation

I have had many conversations with partakers about their experience after they leave *Into the Dark*. Many think they were seeing blurry color blocks that were not associated with any sort of imagery. What is interesting about this is that the film is played perfectly in focus and is almost exclusively full of subject matter. I recently spoke with someone who told me they felt trapped in their body, like things were happening around them but they were only allowed to see a bit of it and were not able to determine what it was, so they began to construct a narrative around the

sounds and colors. While a few people have told me something similar, I have noticed that no two experiences are exactly the same.

This piece aims to question what they are experiencing and their eyes, ears, and body's abilities to quantify the experience. They are left with doubts, wanting to know more about what they just saw, heard, and felt. I can only hope that they carry this with them into their lives and perhaps realize how their experience of something is exclusively theirs.

In order to generate the contrast needed to be able to realize the individual experience each partaker has, I decided to create a website where partakers could recount their experience of *Into the Dark*.² They will then be able to see how others experienced it. I hope that seeing how others have come out of the work will humble them to the idea that a being's experiences can only be qualified individually. I hope that if we can become aware of this, we can recognize that there is more beyond our personal interpretations. In *Into the Dark*, the partaker is only given so much information, but there is more to the experience than what they can perceive given the parameters and the limits of their own minds.

This only scratches the surface of my larger goal of being open to the idea that there is more beyond us. Together with my other thesis pieces and future body of work I will continue to push this question. Ultimately, I want partakers to leave questioning their reality.

The final piece in my thesis exhibition is *Chez Vous, Chez Nous*. This installation is comprised of three sculptures and a projection. The

² www.shareintothedark.com

sculptures are birthed and rejected from the first piece I discussed, *Subsiste*. These fragments of something larger, outside of their natural environment, become merely props in our world. They divulge the secrets of my artistry by allowing one to identify their makeup, all the while concealing just enough to keep the viewer guessing. The video played on a loop is of my experience in their place of origin.

The installation is presented as a theatrical scene where the projection illuminates the sculptures, and their resulting shadows create a dramatic tension between reality and fiction. The space is set up as an attempt to place the objects back into the home they were removed from, like animals in a zoo. Depending on the day, the objects weep or sweat or become very inanimate, responding to the loss of their environment and new conditions with the language of the environment they left. The more time one spends with them, the double-edged sadness of this desperate reality becomes present. Not only is the falsehood of a projection not sufficient to bring them home, but the video also displays my image over them. It is not their home, but my *vision* and interpretation of it. My body has colonized their place of origin and deemed this perspective a sufficient replacement.

Viewers are immersed in this recreated landscape, their shadows appearing alongside those of the forms, beckoning questions of displacement, reality, where we and they belong, and what exists beyond the limits of our imaginations and perceptual worlds. The title, *Chez Vous, Chez Nous* roughly translates to "Your Home in Ours".



Chez Vous, Chez Nous, 2021-2022, documentary image of installation

iii. The Show, the Jellyfish

I have decided to title my thesis show after the immortal jellyfish, *Turritopsis dohrnii*. Not only did the jellyfish specifically inspire one of the pieces in the show, but my research on this animal lingered within me for these last two years, and still does. The discovery of this creature has made scientists confront their previous beliefs about life and life cycles. So many humans have tried for a cure to death, while this little creature has “known” how. This goes to show how we, humans, do not know everything. Our perception has limits beyond which lies the unknown and undiscoverable. I just hope that through my art I can create a greater awareness of this and in so doing, humble us to our inner and outer worlds and those beyond us.

iv. Aesthetic decisions

I want to briefly discuss my aesthetic choices as they are indeed specific. As previously discussed, I have been very inspired by French sci-fi comics. Another source of inspiration is old sci-fi, space exploration, and "science" based movies like *Back to the Future*. There's something endearing to the ways these genres portrayed the future and I'm particularly interested in the stream-lined aesthetic many of these references use. The viewing platform in *Into the Dark* is in part inspired by the cryogenic and rejuvenating tanks seen in many of these movies and books. Additionally, almost everything in my work is made by hand. The paradox of trying to create something perfect by using my imperfect human body to execute it points back at the impossible task of my work.

The sculptures in *Chez Vous, Chez Nous* are made of a material that I have created by mixing various ingredients. I realized over time that the material wept. The soap that is the main material already tends to bead up when in a humid environment, but I also add water to the mix which creates a more dramatic liquid excretion. The other materials added, tapioca starch and agar-agar, ensure that the material sticks to itself. I also add live yeast to the mix which is both a poetic gesture and recognition of the forms' aliveness, as well as a subtle natural dye. The colors obtained are purely due to material use.

Part II: Resources and References

Artists:

- James Turrell
- Marguerite Humeau
- Anne Veronica Janssens
- Stan Brakhage
- Mariko Mori

Scientists:

- Lynn Margulis
- Stephan J Gould

Philosophies:

- Theory of Knowledge

Literary Authors:

- Luis Eduardo de Oliveira (LEO)
- Roald Dahl
- Bill Watterson
- Kurt Vonnegut

Films:

- Star Wars by George Lucas
- Mission to Mars by Brian De Palma
- Back to the Future by Zemeckis
- Dune by David Lynch (1984 version)
- The Iron Giant by Brad Bird
- Hayao Miyazaki films
- Fantasia by Disney

(And many more)