

Title: “Untitled (mindscape)”

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INTRO

This project stems from a long-held obsession with the loss of identity and how we can become trapped by what once was. A memory that fades more and more each time it's played back.

In 2020 I made a short photo series (<https://emiliovela.com/melt>) exploring the mental decline and distortion of reality my senile grandma was suffering from, exacerbated by isolation during the pandemic. One of the techniques I used in one of the pictures involved erasing the faces in a family photo with acetone to represent how dementia had stolen who she was. Later in 2023 I revisited this technique in a new experimental set of pictures (<https://emiliovela.com/abuelita>) using photographs I had stored away on my hard drive—mostly landscapes. However I felt the human element was missing from these images, so I wanted to explore this subject further.

IDEATION

My initial idea was to distort and deform faces as a way to show the blurred, paling memories of a senile person. I was struggling to connect to that specific experience since I'm far from being senile myself. So I turned inward and reflected on how some aspects of that tangled experience could be reflected in my own life, giving the project a more personal approach..

I began by researching different methods, mostly analogue, for distorting an image in order to tackle this project differently from my previous works. I was drawn to works such as Seung-Hwan Oh's *Impermanence* with his microbe-mauled portraits, Angela Garcia's *Emptiness*, which explores themes of loneliness and loss with images that seem to melt away, Bill Morrison recovering nearly disintegrated archived material, and Hollis Brown Thornton's images, where he erases the identities in his family photos, creating half-remembered ghosts.

Yet the technique that caught my attention the most, and which I decided to adopt, was how Peter Tscherkassky takes a pieces of found footage and projects them onto unexposed film stock to craft a heavily altered and captivating re-composed story. Instead of taking just one movie, as he does, I would gather fragments from various films and other videos—both from my childhood or more recent—that hold a significant importance to me and who I am.

Link to the artwork: <https://emiliovela.com/mindscape>

MEMORIES

Once I settled on replicating the latter process, I had to figure out how to transfer the images onto film since I don't have access to the print master of any of the films I chose. This is when I came up with the idea of printing all the frames on clear acetate sheets, which I would then cut into film-like strips to project onto a roll of film stock. This would add an additional layer of deterioration to the image, helping represent the impermanence of memory. Like a tape, every time we recall something, this memory can get distorted and eventually starts to fade.

I wanted to create a kind of apocalyptic vision, an imaginarium on the brink of destruction, but at the same time being reborn again and again. The imagery I looked for included fire and explosions to represent chaos, destruction and transformation. Collapsing buildings as a symbol for an eroded home, sanctuary, and the mind. Insects and animals standing for instinct, childhood, the wild, curiosity, and wonder. Missing or distorted for an erased identity, and depersonalization. Water as a feeling of suffocation, oblivion, and the unconscious. Most significant, however, was the inner monster. A creature my parents warned me as a child not to be consumed by.

Once I had selected all the material I would use, I extracted thumbnails from each clip. On a digital board, I began grouping each image by theme or symbol in a collage, creating a preview of the video timeline. I stacked one clip over another, trying to create a form of chaotic continuity, in the process creating new imagery. For example, the cricket man—seen for only two frames—that once appeared to me in a dream as a teen.

With this collage complete, I was now able to assemble all the video clips in an nearly two-minute loop. The film opens with a spiral, taking us down the unconscious, we see a man sinking in a dark void, then grasping for air, reaching for life. Next is more images of suffocation followed by roots taking over a house, animals and insects—such as a whale, a moth, and a fox—all dead. A house and a church falling apart—the disintegration of the familiar. Explosions, fire, and unrecognizable faces lead us to the final image, the all-devouring monster, bringing destruction but also renewal. And so what was lost can resurface again and the loop restarts.

The next step was to calculate how many frames I could print considering I would use a 17-meter black-and-white 35mm film. I exported each frame of the video (at 8 frames per second)

and then arranged it into 8 pages, each divided into 7 columns of 17 frames each (877 frames total, contained in 49 strips). I then printed these pages onto transparent acetate sheets and meticulously cut and labeled each strip to keep the sequence organized.

Using cardboard and pin tacks, I built a simple “track” to hold the unexposed film roll in place, allowing me to expose the images from the transparent strips onto the film using my camera’s flash. After exposing the strips of film, I developed them myself using coffee, vitamin C and washing soda (Caffenol Delta-STD recipe). It took several tests to find the correct exposure and development time until I could start contact printing each strip. This process had to be done entirely in the dark and took around 8 hours, as I could only expose one strip at a time and then develop in batches of four.

Having all the film strips developed, it was time to scan them. Again, using cardboard, tape and a handle-less magnifying glass I made a contraption to slide film over my night lamp, manually scan each frame over the course of 6 hours. I then reassembled and aligned all the images in my editing software and overlaid this new distorted video layer on top of the original movie clips. Using adjustment layer, I keyframed the opacity and saturation of the original video layer to either bring back or hide detail under the scanned film layer.

For the sound I decided to keep the leftover audio snippets from each clip that I had in the timeline, simply modulating the volume randomly trying to resemble a scratched record.

OBSERVER

Parallel to the previous process, I began to think about how I would present the looping visuals and came up with the idea of playing it through a head sculpture with a projector inside it’s eye. A skull dripping with memories. Initially I wanted it to be half-human, half-skeleton, decorating the bone parts with a shattered white plate to form a mosaic. I modeled the base using papier-mâché on my own head to shape it. While cutting and readjusting the jaw section, I realized it would look better if it was all skeleton. I reinforced the structure with wire and built an inner “scaffolding” using a box of cereal to secure the projector inside the head. To close the back, I made a pair of crude latches with wire that secure the two pieces that give access to the inside of the sculpture. During this shaping process of the skull, I was marking and doodling on it’s surface

which I originally intended to cover. However, I liked how these schematic lines gave this unfinished being a sense of being a work in progress—like any other human.

What does this creature—frozen in stasis, reliving its memories—represent to me?

The skull could be a representation of myself, haphazardly and crudely constructed; its gaze fixed on visions from a haunting past full of icons and symbols that once offered comfort. But like a worn-out tape, these memories have become blurred and difficult to interpret. A life left behind, in another country, in another world. A disfigured ghost I cling to while heading into an uncertain future in this new land. It's the fear of losing who I think I am and becoming someone I won't recognize.