

UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA FAIRBANKS  
ART DEPARTMENT

Hypnagogia  
BFA Thesis Exhibition Report

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## Introduction

I have suffered from nightmares for as long as I can remember. I regularly woke at 3:00am to the silence and deep darkness that coaxed hallucinations out of an active imagination. I would anxiously wait for the light of day, but once there would involuntarily slip away into daydreams, becoming lost for long periods of time before even realizing that I had been gone. I lie awake at night, my thoughts circling the real and imagined, resisting sleep for the terrifying forms these thoughts took in my dreams. Locked in this cycle, I found myself increasingly stuck in the place between asleep and awake, hypnagogic, never really sure which side I was on. During the day I would try to carry on conversations that had never begun and to look for things that had never been there. At night, I wondered what was real.

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Art and I were estranged for nearly fifteen years when I began taking courses at UAF, but to say we ever really knew each other to begin with wouldn't be entirely accurate. In the traditional sense of the word, my background extends only so far as the Art Enrichment program I was in from the fifth through eighth grades where I completed exactly one acrylic painting per year. Occasionally I drew when I felt the need to escape for a while. It did not happen too often, but the act of putting pencil to paper was cathartic.

My introduction to the UAF Art Department was through basic digital photography. I signed up a few years after receiving my first official camera for Christmas in 2012. As I began to make sense of my camera and become acquainted with Photoshop, I found enjoyment in the act of manipulating images originally created via an inherently "truthful process." It mirrored the blending of the real and imagined I experienced during my troubled sleep.

The next few years were like a deluge; series after series of pent up stories flowed out of me, vying for their turn to be told. I experimented with new techniques, embracing both spectacular successes and epic failures along the way, never satisfied until I got a gut feeling-driven green light. Since joining the art department in 2015, I have contributed more than ninety images to over seventy group and juried exhibitions in the United States and abroad. My work has also appeared in several publications including *ArtAscent Art & Literature Journal*, *The HAND Magazine for Reproduction-Based Art*, and *Photographer's Forum Best of College Photography*.

I eagerly took a role as an officer in the Frozen Lenses Photography Club in 2016 when presented with the opportunity, ready to share my new-found excitement with others at the university. Over the next few years, Frozen Lenses branched out to incorporate the community outside of UAF, as well as hosting multimedia exhibitions to reinforce the idea of photography as art. In my time with the club, I co-coordinated five exhibitions and led several workshops on toy photography, free-lensing and light painting.

Seeking out employment that would provide experience in different areas of interest, I spent a summer as the assistant photography instructor for the Summer Arts Academy. I also took on the graphic designer position for UAF's College of Liberal Arts. Alongside creating digital and print media, I was also the design director of CLA's annual publication, Clarity Magazine, for two years.

While these last few years were the most demanding in my life on many levels, they have also been the most rewarding. I once believed that art could never amount to more than a hobby for me but have since come to realize that it is not just studio time or full-frame DSLRs that "make" the photographer. Carving out one's place comes from a willingness to speak up, to tell a

story. The honesty I saw while working among other artists in Alaska, each with their own story to tell, was a gift; it gave me courage to tell my own.

## Inspirations

Leading up to the spring of 2017, a sense of unease had been growing in the pit of my stomach, bringing about panic attacks- and more sleepless nights- with a vengeance. While trying to make sense of what I was feeling, I turned to the photography studio, which had been a growing source of comfort over the past two years. Lost for words and unable to reach out for help, I found escape by creating and analyzing motion-driven self-portraits. As my mental stability further deteriorated, I became convinced that the answer to what was happening was somewhere in the photos I was taking. With the afflicted mind controlling how one subconsciously presents themselves—such as with body language—it made sense that clues would exist in the trails of light my body left behind.

I became fixated on the process as my tenuous hold on sleep ebbed, leaving me overtired and my neurons over-firing. As I lay in bed, half awake and half asleep, thinking of nothing and everything, it occurred to me that this is what my photos were: a manifestation of my consciousness nearing its most low-spectrum point. They were illustrations of the swirling mass of thoughts and hallucinations that would creep out of seemingly nowhere, turning my idea of reality on its head. I decided to approach my time in front of the camera as though it was the time between asleep and awake, letting my subconscious dictate the movements.

Throughout this revelation I began looking for companionship in the work of other photographers. I wanted to know how others used movement in their photography to present insights on the human condition. I first came across the work of Japanese photographer Shinichi

Maruyama. “Nude” is a series of time-lapse photography done in collaboration with dancers (Fig. 1). Each image consisted of about 10,000 frames of a dancer in motion stacked afterwards in Photoshop. The dance was choreographed purposefully, sometimes taking up to five months to perfect. Maruyama described the resulting image as “the accumulation of distinct events” ultimately leading to the illusion of a fluid whole (Bierend). I was struck by the idea of the human as a sum of its parts, built from something not immediately recognizable save for small glimpses of a heel or the curve of a calf.

Bill Wadman is another contemporary photographer focusing on the forms created by dancers’ bodies. Though there are many fundamental similarities between Wadman and Maruyama’s work, Wadman’s work adds color and is shot using a long exposure rather than stacking images (Fig. 2). Instead of focusing on defined shapes, he catches brief glances of the body in movement across the frame in the same way a comma pauses a sentence.

I was also drawn to Francesca Woodman’s softly focused, ethereal long exposure photographs (Fig. 3). Most of all, I was inspired by her parallels between the concept of the long exposure and life itself. She saw “living as erasing”- the longer one lived, the more likely that life was to erase away the notable things they did when they were younger (Gumport 13). Similarly, long exposures are like an eraser, too. Quick exposures fix a subject in its place, but as the exposure grows longer, the moving parts of the body became blurrier until they disappear altogether. As one author put it: “In the end, her camera captures not the girl but the long moment it looked at her.” (16).

Though I don’t share Woodman’s glorification of death, I am inspired by the way she links the use of a long exposure with its own meaning. She uses it as a tool, strengthening the meaning behind her photographs, whereas Maruyama and Wadman used it as more a means to

an end. I began to look at my own use of the technique as a way to represent the odd nature of the passage of time in hypnagogia and the dream state beyond.



*Fig. 1. Shinichi Maruyama, Nude 9, 2012*



*Fig. 2. Bill Wadman, Motion #30, 2012*



*Fig. 3. Francesca Woodman, House III, 1976*

## Technical Details

I experienced hypnagogia as though it were a run-on sentence spoken through a single continuous breath. For this reason, I felt long exposure, rather than image stacking, would lend itself best to the representation of the concept. For the sake of practicality, I made the decision to use a digital camera. I would have more freedom to experiment and incorporate color without the inevitable costs of additional film looming on the horizon. I used a tripod to allow for more use of the whole frame, as well as to mitigate the possibility of camera shake that can occur during long exposures. A remote shutter release also gave me the ability to be frozen in a starting spot for a little longer. Holding a pose for even a fraction of a second more would dramatically alter the final image.

Longer bouts of stillness during the exposure yielded opaque, identifiable forms. Quicker movements gave way to semi-transparent ghosts of shape and form; the quicker the movement, the fewer artifacts of the body remained. Each exposure used both types of motion, a dance in its own right. The average exposure lasted ten seconds, however this could vary widely from three to twenty seconds based on a number of factors, including the color of the backdrop in the studio, the number and nature of lights being used (sometimes one or two soft boxes, sometimes a simple overhead light), and the color and material of the fabric chosen. The aperture was generally small—usually set to  $f/22$ —to ensure the deep depth of field would capture more details in the still seconds of the exposure. This was important because I was not moving only from side-to-side, but also back and forth. A wide-open aperture would have sacrificed the recognizable glimpses that become key areas of focus and interpretation in the ink blots.

When opting for a white or gray backdrop over black, additional challenges presented themselves. The light reflecting off of the white background meant that quicker shutter speeds

were necessary to balance the exposure. A three-stop neutral density filter allowed me to add some additional time to some of the shots without overexposing the image.

This latitude was especially crucial because of the extra time needed to capture blur on a light-colored background, in general. The camera's sensor records light, causing brighter objects to overtake darker ones throughout the course of a long exposure. When I walk in front of the black background, my skin and the fabric that I carry "catch" the light, erasing the dark background to varying degrees based on how long my collected light pauses in one place. When things are reversed- when trying to overpower the white background which already has collected a huge amount of light with a piece of fabric that has *also* collected light- a bit of a conundrum occurs. Staying too still meant there would be no motion in my motion-blur portrait. Too much or too quickly, I would fail to register on the camera over the white background. On the other hand, if an exposure went *too* long, the movement that was caught on camera would begin to be overtaken by the bright white backdrop again.

I wore black clothing while using the white backdrop, as well, to provide a dark canvas for the fabric to show up against. It also minimized distractions from additional colors and textures of everyday clothes. Movements against the white backdrop were smaller and slower in comparison the ones against the black backdrop. These images became more about shapes created through contortion rather than mist and sweeping movement.

The story that emerges in each photo is reflective of spontaneous decisions that are made at something closer to the subconscious level. The lack of pre-planning was the most crucial element in the series. This is unsurprising when one looks at the intent of the series in context with the hypnagogic state's location on the spectrum of consciousness. It stands to reason that in order to photograph something resembling one's inner monologue, one ought not to try to



consciously direct it. Therefore, decisions such as which color fabric and backdrop I would use, as well as how I would move and “paint” with the fabric, were not predetermined beyond what simply felt right in that moment.

## Virtual Exhibition & Book

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and a cross-country move, I opted to complete this thesis virtually. Hypnagogia itself is a multi-sensory experience so I embraced the virtual aspect of the show as an opportunity to present it in such a way.

First, I compiled a 102-page book using Adobe InDesign and Acrobat containing photos taken throughout the development of the series. Believing the series to be best represented by the process rather than a standalone end product, I included photographs that I considered to be “studies” of different color fabrics. These were explorations of the visibility and best exposure times of the different colored fabrics in relation to the speed of movement. I have featured photographs as both double-page spreads and as pairings, as well as some of my own analyses of the stories I read in several of these “ink blots.”

Also included are excerpts from different journals I kept throughout the years. On the nights I could not sleep or woke up suddenly with some nonsensical vision, I often felt compelled to write. Many of these are quick thoughts—or fragments of thoughts—scribbled in the margins of various notebooks or on junk mail that had been collecting on the nightstand. In the book I pair some of these photographs with the excerpts I feel speak to them.

Drawing became an important part of practicing mindfulness every day, so I included some of these, as well. I particularly liked to draw trees and hands, not only for their comfort, accessibility and familiarity but for the attention required to capture their detail. This was an

effective measurement of mental clarity which, more than once, alerted me to an oncoming panic attack. Subtle symptoms would begin manifesting several days or weeks before boiling over; when I started to notice that I was consistently struggling with proportion or depth it signaled to me to be watchful.

Combining these mediums that I explored at that time helped paint a more complete, personal picture of the events taking place over those few years. Given the ambiguity of hypnagogia, in general, I felt the personal aspect was important for the exhibit. While I want viewers to ascribe their own experiences to the images they see, it is important to me to be open and honest in sharing the origin of the project.

I am also presenting highlights from the book in a custom-built 3D virtual gallery using Artsteps. The gallery is designed as a labyrinth with two entrances in opposing corners of the gallery; one can theoretically start at either end. From there, the viewer follows long hallways, twists and turns with the two paths eventually meeting in the middle. I unofficially call one path the “darker” dreams—this is the path the guided tour begins on—and the other one, “lighter” dreams. The designations refer not only to the general palette but the overall feeling I personally attribute to each path. At the starting point on either of these sides, the photos have a surreal quality to them. As the viewer approaches the center of the labyrinth, the images are less fractured and, arguably, more representative of the “aware” conscious. The colors reflect the colors of the natural waking world as we see it rather than the dark, vibrant folds and simultaneous movement felt in the subconscious states. The central point is marked with the photo entitled “Where She Begins and Ends,” which also features drawing and text. It is the cross-over point where the paths switch, continuing on until they reach the opposing start point.

This design was purposefully created around the idea of the existence of consciousness on a spectrum. Rather than reaching terminal points, the gallery can be traveled back and forth, much like the mind sliding up and down this spectrum, almost always at some point between the extremes. The labyrinth also follows the concept of the non-linear structure of time and thought in the mind. Regardless of the time of day, our thoughts are constantly darting in all directions, often all at once. Some come and go quickly, like turning the corner of a short hallway; others find a hidden spot and choose to stick around for a while. The hallways in the gallery make space for this spontaneity with random corners, alcoves and blank spaces on the wall. In creating an immersive representation of the states of consciousness, it would have been inauthentic to utilize the wide-open spaces and symmetry typical of a traditional gallery setting.

I chose to paint the walls and ceiling black to represent the mind as its own universe with space to receive whatever comes its way; thoughts come and go, traveling within this big black void. I wanted to paint the floors black, as well, really digging into the feeling of disorientation but ran into a problem: the black floor erased any sense of grounding. This would have been great in theory, but in practice it actually distracted from the purpose of the exhibit's layout. It became difficult to discern the carefully constructed and arranged walls and corners. The meaning behind the labyrinth was lost. This is something I would like to explore and address going forward as I believe this was mostly the result of the technical limitations of Artsteps.

## Hypnagogia

I began shooting *Hypnagogia* at the onset of a long-churning deluge into deep depression. This early period was marked by a sense of desperation above all else; my time in the studio was self-prescribed therapy. I enjoyed the “ink blots” produced during the shoot, even if their shapes didn’t necessarily make sense to me at first. There was a comfort in their creation that I returned to week after week. I find that I often refer to myself in the third person when describing the figures created in the photos to others, despite every one of them being a self-portrait. I find this to be the most appropriate way to approach the work; it represents the idea that my body and face are almost inconsequential to my identification with myself. The movements’ translation of my subconscious state of mind are much more indicative of who I am, thus these images reflect an identity that is highly fluid.

I felt an immediate connection with the ambient quality of the images and the fleeting nature of the figures that inhabited their frames. This impermanence pulled at me as I reflected on their personal significance. A strange kind of déjà vu would manifest in the pit of my stomach and it weighed on me for some time while I contemplated the direction of the series.

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This terrible feeling had been escalating for months with no end in sight. I began to retreat into my thoughts, embracing their role in my past as a vehicle for analysis and escape. I withdrew, distancing myself from everyone and everything, not so much in an effort to be alone but to hide from this terrible specter that seemed to be following me. I couldn’t see it, but I could feel it, persistent and insidious. As the days passed, I slept less and less, instead watching the swirling shadows creep around my bed. Day and night began to blend into an indiscernible mass. I felt as though I was existing underwater with sounds muddled and distant and the pull of my

limbs slow and heavy. I was drowning, being pulled into a dark, velvety void. I saw life beyond the surface, but the skin of the water was out of my reach... I almost didn't mind this slow disappearance, though. The sun was distorted and too bright and the words of the people around me were hollow. They sounded happy, though, and I knew that to reach out would risk pulling them down with me.

It wasn't too long before my specter found its voice. It whispered, at first, here and there. It tugged at insecurities like the loose thread of a sweater, unravelling a little further each time. Gradually, the voice became louder. Where it had once sat on my shoulder, it had now found its way inside, wrestling for my undivided attention. There were times when I would struggle to have a clear, coherent thought over all the yelling. It became unbearable. I was riddled with a potent mix of guilt and paranoia. More than once, I wondered if I was crazy. My head was no longer a safe place, it was no longer *my own* space.

I had been standing on a precipice until one day I was unceremoniously pushed over the edge. It was as if all the sorrow that had ever existed was tearing a hole in me and burrowing right through. When it passed deep red marks streaked my arms from where my nails had desperately dug in, trying to keep some hold of this reality. I hadn't felt it at the time but I remember reaching, searching for a familiar landmark, a foothold in the material world that would keep me from slipping away completely.

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Earlier images in the series often show the fracture of facial features which is an expression of desperation while trying to reconcile the loss of my sense of self. As the series, and the untreated illness, progressed, the faces often became heavily distorted or were missing altogether. The focus of the figures shifts to fragments of the torso emerging out of thin air and

disappearing back into nothingness, pointing to increasing aggression and confusion. Limbs are exaggerated and do not appear to have a beginning or end. Skeletal patterns are sometimes formed, such as in *Creator* (Fig. 4), where a ghostly apparition connects with the central figure, calling to mind the *momento mori*. The forms dissipate, blending into the shadows so seamlessly as to make the viewer question its very existence.

Later images in *Hypnagogia* show the immediate aftermath of these episodes each time this cycle of panic occurred. In *I Would Go With You* (Fig. 5), a careful look shows a woman who has passed the brink of hysteria and is moving into hollow acceptance. The head is transparent compared to the torso, indicating that despite this acceptance, there is still disconnect between the corporeal and metaphysical bodies. However, not all is lost. There is positivity here, too. Breaking through the dense fog is a bright circle of light in the upper right frame, just behind the head, where the sun is poised to break through an otherwise bleak landscape. She is still disoriented, but the light shining on the back of her head begins a hopeful solidification that will tentatively grow to encompass the whole thing, returning her to her home, her sense of place and self.

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About a year after I finished shooting *Hypnagogia* and amidst steadily declining health, I was admitted to Providence Alaska Medical Center psychiatric ward. For weeks, I tried to find the words to describe what I was feeling, hearing and seeing but they never seemed *right*. One day, one of the doctors—an art aficionado—wanted to talk about a drawing he had seen me working on. I explained that in the past, art had helped immediately relieve some symptoms during difficult times. When the conversation turned to *Hypnagogia*, we found a common language in art analysis and began to finally be able to dig into the roots of what was going on.

There is one particular photo in the series—*Growth* (Fig. 6)—which I had initially bypassed while determining the final lineup. Shot in the fall of 2017, it hadn't held much meaning for me at the time; however, I now look at it in a new light. So many symbols of positivity and hope appear in this photo. Given that interpretations of ink blots are determined by personal experience and state of mind, these positive things would have been impossible to see when this image was created. Years later, though, with new eyes and new experiences, I can see a woman who, despite struggling, had been fighting to get to the surface all along.

In this photo, we see the silhouette of a torso featuring a bone-like structure that appears to contain a rib cage and a spine. Visible are two ribs on the body's right side and three or four on the left side, wrapping from the spine around to the front of the body. The shapes of and the shadows cast on the bones are the result of twisting and bunching the fabric for most of the relatively short exposure time of three seconds. During this time, the movements used in handling the fabric must have been very small and centralized in order for the "skeleton" to collect enough light to render such a solid, opaque form. There is an overall pink hue to the whole silhouette which suggests that for a very brief period, the entire length of fabric—about six feet—was waved in front of the body. The light caught on the light pink fabric would have been enough to cast a slight hue over the black clothing.

The bones sit just in front of leaves and blooming flowers. These floral impressions were created by using plastic foliage found in the photography studio prop cabinet. Their color and texture are subtle while behind the rib cage, but grow brighter as they poke through the spaces between the bones and work their way around the sides. The heaviest concentration of foliage is in the upper limits of the torso and in the neck.

The figure's right arm is bent; her stance suggests that her hands may be clasped behind her back. A ghost of a head gazes downward, leaning sharply to the right, and her long hair cascades around her right arm, almost reaching the bottom of the frame. There is a second semi-transparent head held high, looking left towards something off in the distance. One can see several facial features, including a mouth, part of a nose and a bright white glow where the eyes ought to be.

The two positions of the head convey her level of attachment to her space. Neither pose is more prominent than the other, giving me the impression that she is still locked in a struggle of "here versus there." The head looking off in the distance to the left is not present with the viewer. She is wrapped up in her thoughts, her mind existing outside of where her feet are. Her glowing white eyes could also symbolize this; she is not seeing what is in front of her but perhaps something significant far off. The emotional distance she emits feels more like a curiosity in something outside of herself than any kind of negative detachment, though. The head bent to the right is looking down, as if in reflection of her own body. It is possible that she is contemplating the growth occurring internally.

Also significant in the interpretation of this photo are the bones of the spinal column and rib cage. The movement performed during this photo was not intended to have a specific result, so it is particularly interesting to me that such potentially overt symbols would appear here. The rib cage is a protective structure and the spinal column is linked to sensory functions through the nervous system. These two symbols are profound focal points given the importance of self-preservation and the interpretation of one's environment in the role of consciousness.

The mass of flowers blossoming in her vocal chords is the perfect representation of growth. Growth begins when one is ready and able to speak. The abundance of life beginning to



come forward in the body is a positive sign, as well. Though the flowers have not entirely skirted the bone, they press insistently against them, hinting at the inevitable change to come.

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It has been a year since I started down my road to recovery. It continues to be hard work and there are many checks in place to manage my PTSD and OCD. Panic attacks are fewer and further between. My sleep has dramatically improved and I am beginning to grasp its boundaries. Over the last few months I have begun to reclaim the things I used to enjoy and who I used to be. Slowly but surely I am patching the foundation which had begun to crumble away, turning it into something that will be even stronger one day.



*Fig. 4. Kathryn Reichert, Creator, 2017*



*Fig. 5. Kathryn Reichert, I Would Go With You, 2018*



*Fig. 6. Kathryn Reichert, Growth, 2017*

## Conclusion

The process of completing this thesis work has offered countless benefits. From the most basic, technical standpoint, *Hypnagogia* fundamentally asks “what happens when your (camera’s) eye is open longer?” The camera shows what our own eyes belie us; the interruption of light as we move through it. The longer we choose to exist in one place, the greater an impression is left.

On a more complex level, I have been able to experiment with the visual effect of ebb and flow and its relation to the psychological landscape. The idea of the persona sliding back and forth on a spectrum has been around in various iterations for some time. More recently, work has been published describing the states of consciousness as existing on a continuum rather than in separate stages. The fluidity of time, intrapersonal experience and consciousness are concepts that are near and dear to me given my own volatile relationship with these spectrums. The opportunity to translate these ideas into a universally understandable, *visual*, medium was not only cathartic to me personally, but allowed for the opportunity to have meaningful conversations with others who struggled, as well.

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