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### Memento mori

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# MEMENTO MORI

An Animated Thesis Production

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ROCHESTER, NEW YORK  
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## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<b>ABSTRACT.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>PROPOSAL.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>PRE-PRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>CHOOSING THE TITLE.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>PRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>POST-PRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>SCREENINGS.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>APPENDIX A</b>	
<b>PROPOSAL PAPER.....</b>	<b>15</b>

## **ABSTRACT**

As with all children, cartoons enthralled me. I cannot identify any point in my life when I got out of this fascination. To this day I watch animations of all descriptions, savor them, fantasize over making them myself and derive considerable vicarious satisfaction. I never waivered from my fascination with animation. I carried my passion forward and made a decision to pursue animation....making it my reality.

My first tangible practical step in this direction was to enroll in the Master of Fine Arts program in the School of Film and Animation at Rochester Institute of Technology. It was my intention to convert my imagination and longing into reality.

During the first year at RIT, I had the desire and the opportunity to explore the animation art form and carve a niche for myself in my individual style and innovative thinking. My interest in animation grew and kindled my interest in advancing my knowledge and competence in animation.

I was given the opportunity, and as required of all MFA candidates, to create my own work in a form of a Thesis production. I stood poised between an intense passion for the field that was fueled by more mature perceptions than those I had as a girl. Additionally, now I was armed with a tremendous amount of technical know-how and I found myself more deeply attached to my goal than ever before. I knew that my firm determination, strong motivation, and background of serious, committed working in this field were my primary qualifications to undertake my thesis production.

## PROPOSAL

At the beginning of my Thesis, I had various ideas in my mind. Zeroing on one idea proved to be a difficult task. More than knowing what I wanted to do, I knew what I did not want to do. I wanted to stay away from comedy and the typical cartoon styles of animation. After successfully working on my former two-quarter-long production, *Obscura*, which had a serious concept, I knew what I wanted to do for my Thesis. I wanted to attempt something that was serious, with a lot of emotions and character.

I thoroughly enjoy the horror genre. So, I decided to work on a concept with a ‘scary’ theme. I had not seen many scary animated shorts before, and I wanted to experiment with how effectively I could convey a horror plot in an animated work under 3 minutes.

Since I had so many different ideas, I immediately thought of anthology films – “films tied together by only a single theme, premise, or brief interlocking event (often a turning point.)” (Reference: *Wikipedia*). I wrote a script, which involved three short stories to be intricately woven together to produce one short. In order to tie the three stories together, I chose to devise an overall plot that involved different forms of art. All three stories, even though completely different from each other, included some form of art (oil paintings, Polaroid pictures, canvasses, an easel,...) that linked them together.

At the proposal review meeting, I had to pitch my idea to three faculty who did not know my project. Even though the proposal committee liked the idea, they were not

thoroughly convinced about its execution. A lot of questions were raised regarding the main plot. So after a lot of thought and consideration, two out of the three committee members agreed to green light my idea, provided I go back to my drawing board and reduce the complexity of the plot.

The questions raised by the review committee helped me see the plot with fresh eyes. I realized that I had bitten off more than I could chew. Working on three different stories was going to be an impossible undertaking for me than I originally thought. I had to re-think my stories and make the work more concise. Although I was focusing in 3D during my degree coursework, doing three different shorts came with it's own technical challenges. Constructing the various characters in 3D and also getting them ready for animating seemed like an unrealistic undertaking, especially since my original idea had five different characters. So even though I had the story and my script was written, I was unable to start production. I had to go back once again to my drawing board and re-think my entire idea. After much deliberation and more realistic planning, I found a way to more concisely blend the three different stories into one story and deliver the stories as three acts.

In order for my concept to work, I decided that I had to have a particular element that tied the three stories together. So I used an oil painting canvas as a recurring motif throughout the film. I also chose to incorporate that oil painting motif into the visual style of the film itself so that the entire film would look like an oil painting. Since the entire film would be dependent on this oil painting look, I needed to let oil painting influence the pre-production of the work.



Recurring Motif

## PRE-PRODUCTION

During the pre-production phase in Fall 2011, I had initially planned to model, texture and rig all the necessary components of the movie, and I had allotted enough time for these procedures in my Thesis proposal. But the actual pre-production process took much longer than I had anticipated. This became the first hurdle that I had to overcome in my Thesis project.

The true first step I needed to take was to rework the original idea. I needed to distill the three different stories and weave them into one elaborate, but concise, plot. In order to do this, I had to restructure the entire treatment of the story.

Already having a clear idea on the visual look and feel of the movie helped a great deal in writing a new treatment from an existing script. I created a new set of storyboards and an animatic. The 3D characters and the sets were ready to go already, but I was still having problems getting the script finalized. So, handling the technical part of my movie initially was much easier than the formulating the aesthetic creative part.

Since I was trying to make a 'scary' film and trying to move away from the formulaic cartoon genre in my animation, I had to make the story airtight, especially since the visuals and the feel of the movie depended greatly on the story and the structure of the film. Some might argue that an animated film does not need a structure. But in my case, a cleanly constructed structure was very important for the work.

I had to do a lot of research on horror movie structures and how various camera angles and different kinds of shots play an important role in setting the mood for the film. I spent many sleepless nights watching horror films. I called it "research", even though watching horror movies is something that I did for fun. But it helped me a great deal to better understand and define the structure of my film.

There were many arguments raised as to why this particular script had to be made as an animated movie, rather than be a live action work. My justification was that I wanted to create an alternate universe filled with voyeuristic characters and it was plausible and would also be unique in animated form. I was trying to show the innermost thoughts and fears of a trapped person. I felt that the animation medium was perfect for conveying emotions and portraying the unease that I wanted my



characters to experience, and would also allow the audience to experience as well when they watched my film.

## **CHOOSING THE TITLE**

The initial working title was *The Hunted*. But since I had to change the character of my protagonist from a hunter to a lost camper, the title became moot. I, therefore, had to come up with a new suitable title for the movie. Finding titles has always proven to be a very difficult task for me. I believe the name of the film should reveal just enough to pique the interest of the viewer, but not so much as to give the entire plot away.

The ongoing motifs in my film, which included framed pictures, canvas paintings and artwork, as well as the Antagonist who is an artist, helped me settle on the title of my film. After considering various titles. I settled on one: *Memento Mori*. The title literally means ‘memory of the dead’.

After researching the concept of Memento Mori, I felt that it could be the perfect title for my film.

Memento Mori is a Latin phrase translated as “Remember your mortality”, or “Remember you will die”. It also refers to the genre of artwork that strives to depict death in its most primal form. It also exists to remind people of their mortality, an artistic theme dating back to ancient times.

In photographic terms, 'post-mortem' photography, which is also known as memorial portraiture or as "Memento Mori", is the art of photographing the recently deceased. This is done in order to carry on the legacy of the person after his death.

The Artist antagonist in my movie literally paints "Memento Mori" of all her victims. So, I was very happy to call my work *Memento Mori*. The title not only captures the essence of the film, but does so without giving away too much of the film.



Antagonist painting "Memento Mori"

## PRODUCTION

The production process was fairly straightforward. The routine was, get up early each morning, and get to school and *animate*! I stayed at school into the wee hours of the morning, animating each day, and catching just enough sleep to help me power through the next day.

I spent three months animating my movie. I spent long hours in front of the mirror trying to figure out how my character would react in certain situations. I started realizing that my body language as a girl started seeping into my male protagonist. This did not translate very well on the screen. So, I asked a friend, Raja Ramamurthy, if I could direct him to act as my male protagonist for my reference footage. This proved to be a very useful and time saving process.

At some point, I realized that I was not just animating the characters in my movie, I had to animate other elements as well. Since I was creating a horror film, I tried to show very little of the Antagonist lady painter to keep her mysterious and unpredictable and attempt to create the fear that she brought with her. In some scenes, I was able to achieve this using a first person camera. This was an opportunity for me to show the audience what it is like to be inside the head of my Antagonist, how she approaches her victims, and how her presence in the room affects the other, unseen, characters as well.

Also important were the three huge painting 'characters' that hung on the wall and transformed overnight. These paintings were not just used as props. They are the previous victims of the Antagonist, and they had to be treated as characters, each with their unique past, and hence given a distinction of their own. My 2D artist, Jieting Chen helped me create these characters and animated them to perfection.



Previous victims

Creating the look of the work was very important for the success of the work. I wanted to create an atmosphere (inside a cabin in the woods) that was a refuge for the lost Camper at first, but later transformed into a claustrophobic, scary place. I was able to create a growing creepy atmosphere using warm colors at first and eventually turning the atmosphere into something horrific by slowly bleaching the warm colors out as the movie progressed.

The technical production process that I personally worked on was the beam of moonlight that lights the sleeping Camper as well as the fireplace, which becomes a major source for lighting the Protagonist.



Lighting the protagonist

## POST-PRODUCTION

My post-production workflow was slightly different from the norm. Usually, the animation and lighting of the scenes are done before the rendering process begins. Since I had a render artist, Tirumalaimuttu Shanmugam, working on my thesis, I decided to use this to my advantage to save time. Tirumalaimuttu helped to set up the layers and prepare my scenes for render.

I had completed the animation for all the scenes at this point. I had begun lighting some of the shots as well. So instead of finishing the lighting for all the shots, I decided to pass on the shots that were lit to the render artist. He in turn prepared the shots and began the post-production process on them. This really eased my stress, as a project is not done until all the shots are rendered to perfection. Since I

had started my rendering process early, this also gave me enough time and flexibility to re-do certain shots that I was not completely satisfied with. This added to the overall quality of the finished film.

This back and forth way of working between the render artist and myself required a lot of good communication. In this production, I was able to delegate some of my work and therefore get a lot of input from other sets of eyes. It gave me experience working as a team, as I believe that teamwork becomes an important factor in completing any animation successfully.

The render artist helped me render all my shots. And then, I had many sequences of rendered images in my hands. They had to be sorted out and layered in order for them to make any sense. My next order of business was to import all my shots into After Effects and layer them. This way, I could develop a rough cut of my film.

I worked with a composer, Lucas Gonzalez, throughout the post-production. As soon as I had a rough cut of my film, I sent it to Lucas to review and to get a feel for the film. After discussing the work with him, it was decided that I was not going to use a background score. Since it was a horror film, we decided to use atmospheric sounds, created with specific instruments that brought out an eerie quality in the film instead. This consisted of mostly sound effects. Lucas was able to create a tonal feeling with the animatic that I had given him originally. And, he was able to start the final work as soon as I gave him the rough cut. The next thing he needed from me was a picture lock.

After Effects gave me all the tools I needed in order to put my film together. Then I made a picture lock ready for Lucas. This took a lot of restraint from my end as I was trying hard not to backtrack and get into the details and the color of the shots again. I had to purely concentrate on editing the shots and getting the picture locked down. The color compositing would come later.

Since the look and the feel were very important to me, a lot of attention was paid on the color compositing of the film. I thoroughly enjoyed making my film look like an oil painting. Since I had paid a lot of attention during the texturing, the rendered film actually looked like an oil painting. I had to do very little during the post-production to tie it all together.



Oil Painted look

## **SCREENINGS**

On the night of the graduate productions screenings, I was a nervous wreck. I knew I had chosen a unique concept, something the audience was not used to seeing in an animated film. I did not know if the audience would be receptive to my work. I felt very apprehensive. I had chosen Charles Bandla to be my Respondent for my film, in part because I had both 2D and 3D elements in my film and Charles was so well versed in both. He did a wonderful job discussing my film to the audience, and he also pointed out the significance of the title of the work. I don't think I could have done a better job in defending my film.

The overall audience response was a positive one. The film was received well and the constructive criticisms from the audiences were very helpful in reflecting on my abilities as an animator. There were some very positive remarks on the feel and the timbre of my film, and the textures and the lighting in the film that I spent so much time creating, were also positively acknowledged.

## **CONCLUSION**

Throughout my study at RIT, I always thought of myself as a 3D generalist. A person with a skill set who can perform all the aspects of animation well. I would be kidding myself if I didn't acknowledge the reason for the delay in the pre-production phase. It was because I enjoyed the texturing aspect of my movie so much that I was not able to say, "It is as good as it's going to get." I always found more areas where I could improve on the textures for the characters and the sets. I discovered more techniques for texturing as well. I was trying hard to convey the right feel for the



work with the grungy textures, and a sense of unease because of the color palette and dramatic shadows. The more I developed the look of the film, the more it tied in with the path I had chosen in order to execute it.

I have always enjoyed painting. I paint to calm myself. I also paint to make myself feel happy. Painting has always proven therapeutic for me. During the pre-production stage of my work, I discovered that texturing was an art that combined two of my passions, 3D and painting. So, I was naturally drawn into the entire process of making the film.

After finishing my Thesis production, I feel that I became well equipped with the necessary skill set in order to rightfully call myself a texture artist.

## Appendix A

### Original MFA Thesis Proposal

## THE MYSTERY (Working Title)

### CONCEPT

**The Mystery** interweaves three stories into one film. The stories are interlinked with one another using distinct motifs that re-present themselves in each story and progressively give clues on their interrelationships and the overall meaning of the narrative.

The film attempts to work on interpretative levels and has a voyeuristic quality to it. It creates a sense of unease of being watched. This happens to the characters in the story and it is hoped as that the audience will sense unease, as well.

Important motifs in this work include frame pictures, Polaroid photos, canvas paintings, a painting easel, and a Shack in the forest. As the film advances, the characters emerge in different states of portrayal (as physical characters, or as subjects in the photos and paintings). This film presents a mystery that's conclusion can have different interpretations.

### TECHNIQUE & STYLE

**The Mystery** will use 2D and 3D mixed technique approaches in production. The design style of the film will shift as the film progresses.

ACT I and ACT III take place in the daylight. The visuals will have bleached muted tones to create a surrealistic effect and appear bizarre and dream-like.

ACT II takes place in the nighttime and will have a film noirish visual style using dark tones with stark highlights and dramatic shadow patterning.

ACT IV will combine the techniques of ACT II and ACT III to visually tie the three stories together.

## TREATMENT

### ACT I

A middle-aged woman with red hair is painting in her studio. She is hidden behind her huge easel. Many of her paintings hang on the studio wall. One sequence of paintings portrays a little redheaded girl getting older through time and standing against the very same background in each painting. The background is abstract green and black lines with a white rectangular form in the middle.

Sitting next to the last painting in the sequence is a woman painting at her easel. She wears a smock and a painter's cloche on her head. She has just finished a painting and is putting on her final touches. The woman gets up and slightly smiles, admiring her work of art. She removes her smock and cloche to reveal her red hair. She is the woman whose portraits hang on her studio wall.

FADE OUT

### ACT II

A hunter is lost in the forest. He carries with him a shotgun and a backpack. He is tired and weary and is out of breath. He is trying to find his way out of the forest, and it is becoming darker.

As he moves about, he frequently stops and listens, trying to catch his breath. Suddenly, he hears the sound of breaking branches and crunching leaves right behind him and he takes off in a panic. His legs are weak and he has to stop. He pulls a canteen out and shakes it. There is no more water. He is very thirsty.

The Hunter moves on and eventually comes to a stream that runs through the forest. He falls on his knees and hastily drinks the water. The sounds are behind him again. He is afraid. He looks around and spots a rundown wooden Shack across the stream, partially obscured by trees. He approaches the Shack and finds that it is vacant. He enters the Shack. No one has lived there for many years. He decides to stay the night there.

He unrolls an old rug he has found inside the shack and spreads it on the floor. He falls fast asleep.

Suddenly, the Hunter is awoken by some loud creaking sounds. He becomes alarmed. He looks around through the darkness and waits. Everything seems safe. He goes back to sleep.

After a while, he is awoken again by more sounds, as if floorboards are creaking. He fishes for the flashlight in his backpack and pulls it out. He scans the room. For the first time, he notices framed pictures on the wall. He gets up and goes to them. They show grossly disfigured people in side view. One picture is of a middle-aged man wearing a white shirt and he is missing half his head. The second picture is of a young lady in a blue dress missing her arm. The third picture is of a little boy, in a bright orange T-shirt and he



is missing his eyes. The man switches off the flashlight, turns his back to the pictures and moves away. Suddenly there is sound of glass breaking. He rushes and picks up his gun and with his flashlight he looks closely around the Shack. He finds nothing wrong, the doors are locked and the windows are not broken. He approaches the pictures on the wall again. The disfigured people have changed their positions slightly and now seem to be looking directly at him. He is scared and confused. He lowers himself to sit on the floor and places the gun across his legs. He leaves the flashlight on, and tries to stay awake. Slowly as the night progresses, the flashlight eventually runs out of power and the darkness creeps in. The Hunter has fallen asleep.

The next morning, the Hunter wakes up and scans his surrounding in daylight. He becomes shocked to find huge glass windows in the place of what he saw the night before as the framed paintings.

FADE OUT

### ACT III

A little boy, age 7, dressed in a bright orange T-shirt, walks down a sidewalk in a neighborhood on a dull, cloudy day. He has his hands inside his pockets and whistles to himself. He kicks a stone over and over again down the sidewalk, and eventually the stone comes to rest near an old stack of Polaroid photos, half hidden by dried leaves. They are tied together by a piece of string. The boy picks up the stack of pictures and examines them, and then he slowly unties the string. The first photo is what looks like a little girl with red hair, standing in the distance in front of the rundown wooden Shack in the forest with the stream in front. The next picture and all the subsequent photos show the girl getting closer to the camera with the same Shack in the background. When the boy reaches the last picture in the stack, he finds just a black Polaroid photo. This confuses the boy. He looks up from the photos and is shocked to find the girl from the photos standing right in front of him. The photos drop from the boy's hand and fall to the ground. The photos hit the ground where the boy had just been standing with the black Polaroid on top. The Shack fades into view in the black Polaroid, the boy silently fading in afterwards. In the distance past where the photos lie on the ground, the girl with the red hair walks away without looking back.

FADE OUT

### ACT IV

A door opens to the painting studio and the red haired painter walks in. She goes to her new painting. She removes the white cloth that covers the painting. The picture is a portrait of the Hunter who has a sewn up mouth. The painter hears a knock on her studio door. She picks up the portrait of the hunter and faces it against a wall below the portraits of the aging red haired girl. She opens the door and invites the lady in the blue dress inside and has her sit on a model's stool. The painter then goes to her easel, picks up her painting spatula and begins making wild marks on the canvas.

FADE OUT