

Aspen Miller
 Miller Arts Scholars
 Rising 4th Year Grant

Riptide: An Exploration of Self-loss and Abusive Relationships

Original Intent: To explore the experience of loss and abuse through multiple artistic mediums (visual, audio, movement, and written word) and study how they function as narrative tools. Viewers would be surveyed after to assess the efficacy of each style.

Changes: Throughout the process of creating this piece, both myself and my work went through many changes. I allowed these changes to permeate my piece because, no matter my original plan, I wanted my work to be truthful. Ultimately, my entire process was about the process of change, so rather than explaining the larger changes that occurred, I'll present my work in full.

Process: I would like to begin this report honestly as I believe it will clarify the final outcome. When I applied for this grant, I was in a very unstable state of mind. I was struggling with depression and an abusive, codependent relationship. This may be too personal, but it's the entire content of my final film. My original proposal was too broad and was produced from an unbalanced place. In many ways, I shouldn't have applied for the grant at all. I didn't have a plan I was passionate about and my focus wasn't clear to myself or those I explained it too. Though I believe the questions I was asking were interesting, they required time and resources that I simply didn't have. My original idea was a live performance including projections, dancing, moments of written words, and silence. This was a massive undertaking that required a large collaborative group and frankly, the style of performance wasn't my professional focus.

Over the summer, my piece began to evolve into a film. The first plan was a narrative about a young girl discovering herself again at the beach after ending an abusive relationship. Although all stories of abuse are important, I was focusing on a verbally and emotionally abusive relationship because I find that modern media would rather focus on the more dramatic relationships involving physical violence. I wrote draft after draft trying to find the right balance of visuals, audio, movement, and written word. Dialogue, silence, dream sequences, and voice over amounted to a clunky script. I was learning, but I felt like I was missing my mark.

CLOSE SHOT OF BOTH OF THEIR FACES, ALICE LEFT AND CHARLES RIGHT.

They stare at each other. They both look happy, but Alice looks as if she's not in the room. He kisses her and she quietly kisses back. They stumble to the bed and she ends up under him. This is a little awkward, its not adding up in the silence.

CLOSE SHOT WITH CHARLES ON THE TOP THIRD AND ALICE IN THE BOTTOM THIRD.

Alice looks like she is trying to say something.

AN UNDERWATER SHOT. THE WATER IS IN CONTROL.

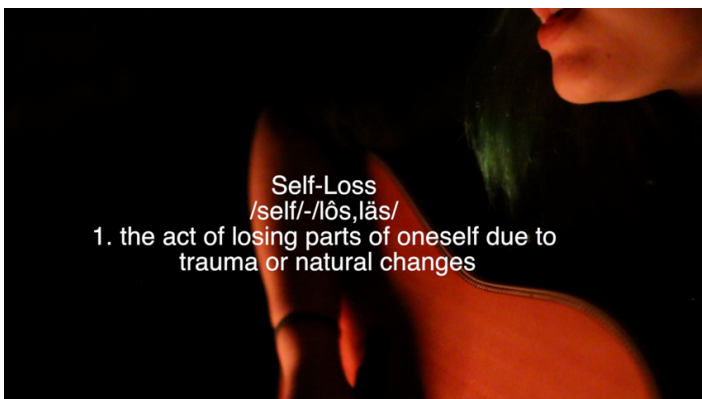
A segment of my script; Riptide

In the late fall, I met with my advisors Peter Bussigel and Mona Kasra who set me back on track. They encouraged me to play with my camera and the lenses I had purchased. They wanted me to try all kinds of different experiments, to continue writing, to focus on my experience, but without the confines of the work I had already done. I decided to start from scratch and go back to what I did know; my personal experiences of abuse with my father and ex-girlfriend and the fact that, somehow, this piece had to do with loss and the ocean.



An underwater shoot of the ocean

I began to explore the history of my abuse. To me, the controlling and violent nature of my abusive relationships had always felt like drowning in the ocean which had almost happened to me once when I was caught in a riptide. I could barely breathe while being tossed around by the waves, trying to keep my head above water while my feet desperately looked for a place to stand, hard ground to support myself. I felt lost in the deep, darkness as the waves would repeatedly beat me down. Overtime, the waves wore me down and I lost my sense of physical self and I began to lose hope. This was very similar to how I lost my sense of emotional self after repeated waves of abuse. Eventually, fate brought me back to the shore, but with my relationships, I had to either end it or wait for it to end. I used to question why I worked so hard and what did I believe in. Every project and relationship I had felt hopeless. I realized that I didn't know who I was anymore. Through all of this, I have coined the term "self-loss." To me, this is the process of losing oneself due to trauma or the natural changes that occur in life.



A screenshot from my final chapter, "Self-Loss"



A screenshot from the "Riptide" Chapter

I discovered all this through writing, filming, and talking with others about how they saw me during these periods of times. I made visits to the ocean and attempted to capture the things I felt and saw when I worked through my experiences. As I began to edit, I was advised to create chapters to better present my phases of experience.



A screenshot from my "Patterns" Chapter



A screenshot from my "History" Chapter

I wanted my piece to be immersive and engaging. When I felt like drowning, I wanted the audience to feel that too. I wanted them to feel alone. Around this idea, I have decided to present my film as 2D film viewed through VR goggles or, potentially, a 360-degree video with my film projected within a space of my design. The details are still being worked out.

What I've Learned: From here on out, I will always plan first, play second, and finalize third. I often want to jump to final decisions early on to prove I have things under control. As long as I know what I am hoping to learn or explore, it's okay that I don't have a final plan. Of course, I will budget and make a schedule, but I need to let myself adventure within that framework.

I also need to acknowledge that when I am doing personal work, I need to space my work sessions out better. I found myself completing my work in large chunks rather than bit by bit. This was really stressful and occasionally I found myself dealing with more than I was ready for. I am still working through much of what I have experienced and the pressure of deadlines didn't always help me approach it healthily.

In regards to my investigation of different mediums effecting narrative, the answer was in front of me the whole time. Film is a combination of all these elements; visuals are made up of light and the movement of camera and subject within a frame. Audio is paired with visual to enhance that meaning with score or diegetic audio. Written words are expressed as dialogue, voice over, or even text. A filmmaker must employ all of these tools to create the experience they have designed. I believe my research was intended to study each tool individually then layered together, but when you layer them together it creates a film. So that's what I did.

I would like to thank my friends and family who have supported me through both the process of creating this piece and the process of healing. Last, but not least I would like to thank all of the supporters of the Miller Arts Scholars program, with a special thanks to Sandy and Vinie Miller along with Evie and Stephen Colbert.

