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Pulse

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PULSE

A Thesis,

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in partial fulfillment of the
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Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by

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ABSTRACT

This video is an abstract audiovisual narrative. It relies heavily on its lush compositions to seduce the viewer. “Pulse” depicts humanity not as the strong rational rulers of the earth but instead as a tormented figure that struggles to find security in an uncertain world. The three characters, Blood, Lava, and Electricity, represent the human animal, the natural world, and civilization respectively. Blood struggles against both Lava and Electricity in their rivalry for control. The plot shows humanity developing a relationship with civilization, all the while being harassed by unpredictable nature. Civilization at first is a path to security. As the story unfolds, however, it becomes apparent that civilization is just as erratic. Humanity is losing itself to the very arrangement which we constructed to liberate ourselves from the chaotic animal world. My video is concerned with the false sense of control that civilization has created. This is portrayed by actors wearing costumes that embody the traits of each of the three characters. All of the sculpture, the costumes and the set, relate to the story’s themes in form, texture, and color. These aspects are heightened further by video editing filters that are superimposed over top of the action in post production. There is no dialogue. Instead, the narrative relies heavily on the body language of the actors, and the editing of the sequences to relate its story. The sound track underscores the mood with piano and linguistic textures to produce an overall haunting atmosphere.

PULSE

The themes of control and chaos are prevalent in my work. As an artist, attempting to control my viewer's perceptions, video is my chosen medium. Art is a form of visual communication so it seems apt that I use video, a tool used by the media to control the world's visual information. This form of presentation is more comfortable to the audience. For most people, the television and movie screen are a larger part of their visual culture than a gallery installation. My video, "Pulse", is a critique of civilization. It has a highly staged science fiction aura. This is intentionally in contrast to the media's production of authentic reality.

The three characters, Blood, Lava, and Electricity represent the human animal, the natural world, and civilization respectively. Blood struggles against both Lava and Electricity in their rivalry for control. "Pulse" shows humanity not as the strong rational rulers of the earth but instead as a tormented figure that struggles to find security in an uncertain world. This is depicted by actors wearing costumes that embody the traits of each of the three characters. All of the sculpture, the costumes and the set, relate to the story's themes in form, texture, and color. These aspects are heightened further by video editing filters that are superimposed over top of the action in post production. There is no dialogue in the video and Blood is completely masked. This allows the narrative to rely heavily on the body language of the actors and the editing of the sequences to relate its story. The sound track of "Pulse" enhances the mood with piano and linguistic textures.

The plot shows humanity developing a relationship with civilization, all the while being harassed by unpredictable nature. Civilization at first is a path to security. As the story unfolds, however, it becomes apparent that civilization is just as erratic. Humanity is losing itself to the very arrangement which we constructed to liberate ourselves from the chaotic animal world. My

video is concerned with the false sense of control that civilization has created. It depicts a bewildered humanity tormented by both nature and civilization.

At the start of civilization, humanity coped with the unpredictable events of life by utilizing their newly acquired intelligence. Lewis Mumford describes this awakening as a neurotic land of ambiguous dreams and haphazard natural events. Without language or daily rituals, primitive humanity might have suffered from the inability to distinguish reality from dream. He depicts an animal that uses its creativity to foster ritual and other systematic daily controls.¹ Mimicking certain processes in nature our creativity envisioned a world “where randomness gave way to organization and organization gradually embodied purpose and significance.”² Our purpose became to create systems of order and control over our surroundings. Our conquest of fire is our first energy triumph. We began our division with nature there. We view ourselves to be the chosen animal because of our ability to “exploit energy sources outside of our bodies and beyond wild food and ambient heat³ Once we realized that we could manage an existence outside of the haphazard events of nature, we began to cling to ever more elaborate systems of security. We began to farm, we created cities, and eventually we created a global system of information and distribution.

Despite these triumphs, humanity still cannot fully grasp the complexity of nature. Civilization, our systematic management of our world, now rivals nature’s intricacy. We find ourselves ruled by the ever increasing need for energy and control. Our global systems are becoming increasingly more elaborate and difficult to manage. We have been divorced from nature for so long that we continually look to our own technical progress as the solution to any

¹ Lewis Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966), 71

² Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine*, 36

³ Earl Cook, *Man, Energy, and Society* (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1976), 1

problem, and continue to ignore our relationship to nature.⁴ This could have overwhelmingly negative results. A natural disaster such as an Earthquake not only directly damages the immediate local, but has world market implications that are immediately felt. However, we are daily involved with a much more complicated devastation that is not so instantaneous, pollution. David Watson believes that only when we pollute the world so thoroughly that it will not sustain any of our lives will we begin to notice the damage humanity has wrought upon it.⁵ We have sought to control nature with magic, religion and now science. Now our current technologies are not only controlling but destroying nature. However, we are so enmeshed within our structures of civilization we can not see that we are out of control.

This paradox is portrayed in the video using fantastic characters in an imaginary situation. Blood is the protagonist caught between the two antagonists, Lava and Electricity. The antagonists are rivals for control over Blood who is simply trying to survive. Electricity represents civilization with its promise of security. He offers the transformation of raw material into technological hope. Electricity is duplicitous. He is appealing as a companion and as a magical way to combat the detrimental affects of natural disasters, but he also has his own agenda. He wants to be indispensable. Throughout our history, we have used ritual magic to counteract nature. Magic is a way to force nature to do our bidding against her wishes.⁶ With civilization, we not only stand up to nature, but we feel that we are in control of nature. The more Blood depends on Electricity the more she is lulled into a false sense of security. At the climax of the video Blood realizes that she is trapped in a conflict with both Electricity who is controlling her, and Lava who has always had the control over everything. Unable to do away

⁴ David Brown, *Cybertrends: Chaos, Power and Accountability in the Information Age* (London: Viking, 1997), 30

⁵ David Watson, *Against the Megamachine: Essays on Empire and Its Enemies* (Brooklyn, New York: Autonomedia, 1985), 47

⁶ J. Bronowski, *Magic, Science, and Civilization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 21

with nature, her very surroundings, she instead topples Electricity. Having been so thoroughly enmeshed with Electricity she becomes alarmed and begins to be hypnotized by Lava. She realizes her shock and retreats once again to the crater where the narrative started. This time however the camera spins out of control instead of the stage set. The realization that nature is ultimately the superior power is the resolution, but instead of the certain demise of humanity at this point in the story, the viewer's perspective is spun. The audience is placed in Blood's situation. There is a choice whether or not the story gets repeated or ends. They can stay and watch it again or they can leave. They can also imagine a new story to replace this one. The power to decide is given to the viewer.

Energy symbolizes power, and power is control. Since each of my characters is concerned with the struggle for control, energy seems an appropriate symbol. Each character is a type of energy distribution system. Their symbols help to explain the story. Creating systems of symbols based on the natural elements is a human coping mechanism. For example, the Chinese symbols for nature are "Water, fire, metal wood and earth, their relation is circular, given that water extinguishes fire, which melts metal, which destroys wood, which subdues earth, which absorbs water."⁷ We rely on metaphor to decipher the mysteries of life.

The stage set and costumes are all created with individual treatments which reflect their symbolism. They are constructed such that they inhibit or encourage particular actions. In this way the costumes help shape the action of the plot. Their compositions of forms and surfaces, including textures and color contribute to the overall dynamics of their struggles and relationships. Some visual forms have been repeated to link characters together while other motifs are set in direct contrast.

⁷ Leslie Lipson, *The Ethical Crisis of Civilization: Moral Meltdown or Advance* (Newbury Park, London, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1993), 19

Blood's costume reflects both her position in the story and her viewpoint. It is a combination of soft bulbous forms that flow around her in a warm palette. She is seemingly easy to damage. She is also encumbered by the parts of her costume. The blood droplet is continuously in her way, her vision is limited, she only has one arm, and her legs are fettered by a ring. Her costume helps to create an awkwardness that belies her identity. This is a metaphor for the contrast between our mental concept as superior animals and our physical reality of weakness when compared to other natural entities.

Lava is the dominant force in the video and it surrounds Blood not only as the stage but as anthropomorphic manifestations that appear randomly. Lava's colors are garish. The intensity of the bright colors is heightened by the black. The forms are both organic and angular. These shapes push and pull at the characters as they move around through Lava. Nothing about the environment is restful, even the volcano crater in which Blood seeks refuge can spin out of control. The ground moves and smokes and caverns loom below. All of these qualities define Lava as a superior and chaotic force.

Electricity is both alluring and scary. His costume is representative of security and progress. He wears three consecutive costumes. As the technology advances in the plot, his costume goes through a metamorphosis. The changes in his costume reflect transformations within society as it grows. The first costume has a highly textured volumetric form. It has disproportionately short legs and fiberglass cones for arms. His limited leg movement makes it difficult to move very quickly, his gait is therefore cautious and non-threatening. He also needs Blood's help to perform certain tasks, which makes him seem at a disadvantage to Blood. As Blood and Electricity form a relationship, his costume is less clownish, although similar in form and pattern. The jagged points are streamlined and the color and lines are stylized. At this point

in the narrative, Blood realizes that she is not just helping Electricity but is doing his bidding. As his apparatus extend over the landscape he becomes immobile and nearly inanimate. He is becoming part of the landscape which is symbolic of the entrenchment of civilization.

Certain sculptural motifs hold the visual composition together. Some forms are repeated throughout the costumes and set to form a sense of overall unity. The circular parts of both Blood's and Electricity's costumes are echoed in the crater of the set. There are branching capillary details within all three. They also have a repetitive pattern as part of their make up. The forms also make direct connections between characters. Blood is related to Lava with similar curvilinear patterns found in the lava flows and in Blood's shawl. Electricity is quite different from both Blood and Lava at first. His strong jagged patterns, and a cold silver and blue color scheme set him apart from Blood and Lava. This is because he is a cultural construct. As the plot develops and his technology becomes more complicated and unpredictable his costume begins to resemble Lava in both form and material.

This video is intended to be an obviously staged story. The fake quality is reminiscent of early silent films. This is an intentional action on my part to show video media for what it is: non-reality. Cable and satellite dishes deliver increasing amounts of entertainment and information. We are content to watch increasing amounts of television, and our lives become increasingly passive. Instead of being out in nature, we watch nature on television. From "reality" television shows to the news, we take everything that is so carefully staged to look real as just that. It is difficult to tell what reality is anymore. Guy Debord terms this phenomenon as spectacle. "Understood on its own terms, the spectacle proclaims the predominance of appearances and asserts that all human life, which is to say all social life, is mere appearance."⁸

⁸ Guy Debord, trans. By Donald Nicholson-Smith, *The Society as Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 14

This artificiality cloaks the real dilemmas facing society at large, such as the devastation of our planet.

Humanity has placed itself as the rulers of this planet. We believe our culture and technology will solve any problems facing us in the future. To avoid the actual reality of the world we cling to spectacle. “Pulse” works within the realm of spectacle to show an alternative view. My video shows us at the mercy of chaos that we cannot control. Although there is resolution depicted in my video, it is an unlikely choice. Our identities are intertwined with our civilization. We will not likely destroy that part of ourselves. Our culture and technologies instead need to be transformed so that they are in harmony with the seeming chaos of nature. My video merely points out our need for such a transformation so that we do not have to make that choice between civilization and nature.

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APPENDIX
VIDEO STILLS



1. Blood Crouches in Crater



2. Blood on Lava Flow



3. Lava Menacing Blood



4. Lava Chasing Blood



5. Electricity Giving a Speech



6. Electricity Before the Fall

VITA

Janet L.U. Rudawsky received her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1995, in ceramics at The Ohio State University. Upon graduation she moved to Cincinnati, Ohio. As a practicing artist there, she exhibited her work in group shows and juried shows. She had a one woman solo show at Xavier University, and earned an individual artist grant from the City of Cincinnati in 1997. She also participated in three different cooperative galleries. In 2001, she moved to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, to pursue her graduate degree in studio art.