Moosa Khan

Siyah Kalem
2023

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introduction

Siyah Kalem is an animated montage that explores the narrative of an ordinary world merging with a surreal one. The narrative echoes themes from the popular children's poem 'Humpty Dumpty'.

The primary aim of this thesis is to promote spontaneity and impulsiveness as a stepping stone towards discovering my own method of making imperfect marks in a digital era.

I used Humpty Dumpty as a metaphor for modern life. How one might reach a breaking point due to the negative impacts of alienation, technology and capitalism. This might represent the individual or society as a whole while the wall symbolized the failing systems we have create to support ourselves.
My aim is to create a series of black and white GIFs exploring the daily struggles of my character Hamza (humpty dumpty). My aim was to make a montage taking us through Hamza's journey. When Hamza goes to sleep, he is confronted by nightmares depicting a crying egg used as a metaphor for Humpty Dumpty. The story of Humpty Dumpty and the symbol of the egg is a recurring theme representing a personal breaking point. (contextualizing influences from the German Expressionist Films).
In Sergei Eisenstein's book Film form he describes a rhythmic montage as 'a method of film-making which connects to the intuition of the artist.' This principle has been a recurring theme in my illustrations and drawings. Therefore, for my thesis, I want to infuse my personal sensibilities of rhythm, beat and structure into the art of animation.
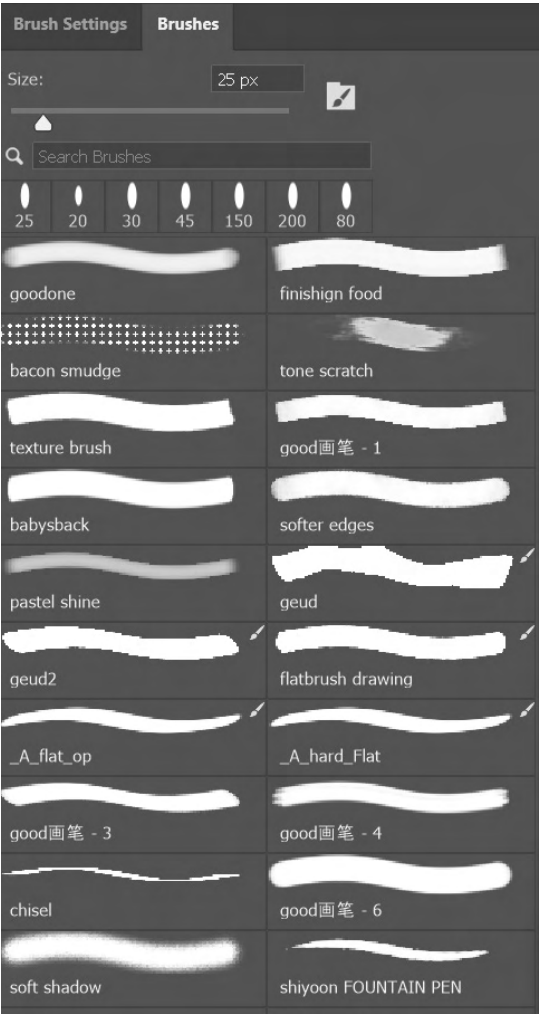
The animation will be edited according to a symbolistic, abstract point of view to elicit an emotional reaction from within the audience.
The final piece will be a series of archetypal images as described by Carl Jung that will be interpreted through my own artistic sensibilities and creative voice. I envision the process to reach the final chapter to be like solving a puzzle where some parts are clearly defined, and others will find their way through rhythmic intuition where abstract moments overtake the animation. Having a process that is experimental will help to come up with new and innovative methods of image-making which has been an exciting part of my journey as an illustrator at MICA.
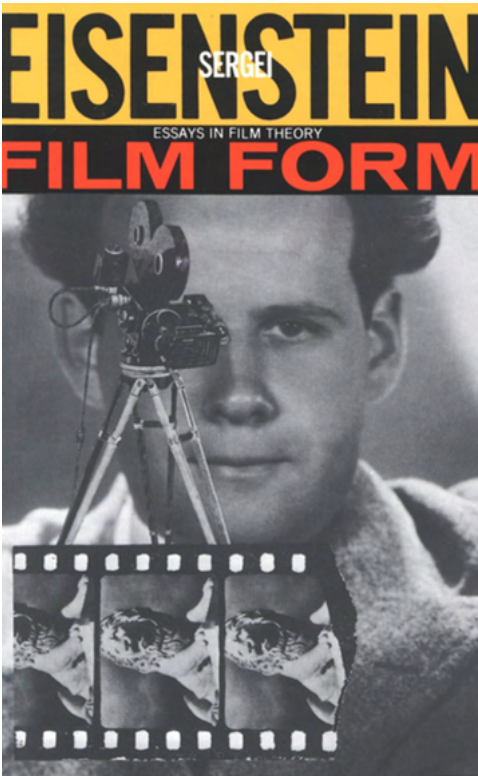
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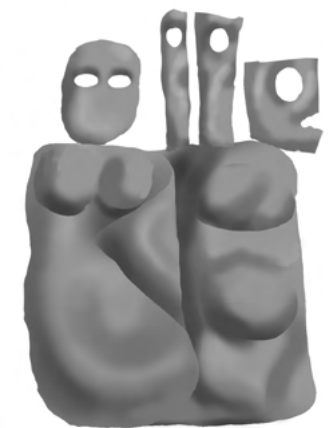
exploration

influences and technique

01.

Using an assortment of brushes which mimick the chisel-like quality of german expressionist paintings. I assorted my brushes and made some new one specifically for my thesis project. The brushes had a sculptural effect on my work.
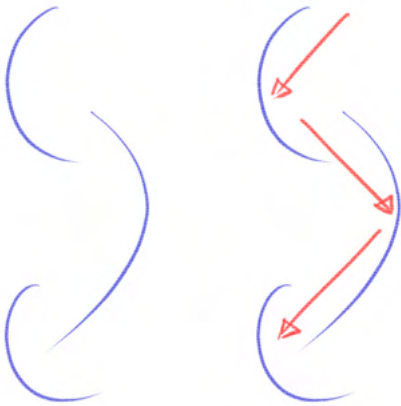

02.

Sergei Eisentein's book 'Film Form' was essential in understanding the process of making a montage, editing and animation. I used this book as a resource for my storyboarding end editing phase. His essay on rhythmic and tonal montage helped me find my own voice as a film-maker.

04.

The jagged expressionistic nature of german expressionist films was an influence on the art direction and look for the film. On the right is a still from the famous german expressionist film titled ,' The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari.'
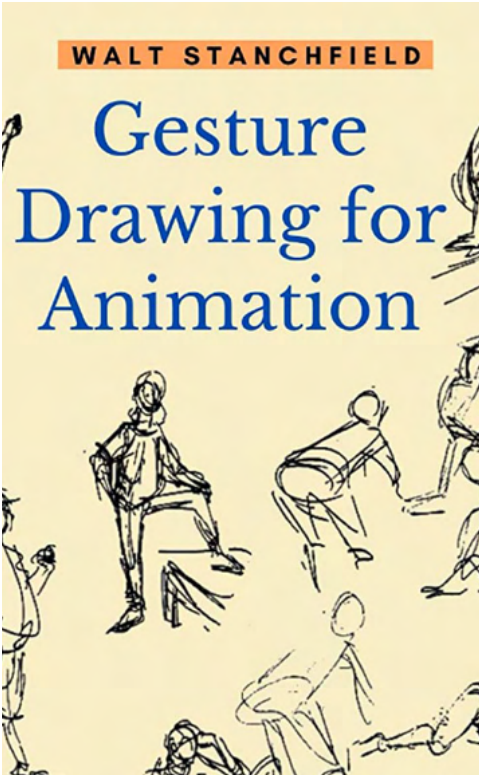

03.

Experiments in Zbrush build a good foundation for solid drawing skills which helped me during the animation process of the montage. I tried to mimick the sculptural brushes from Zbrush to photoshop analyzing things like depth, perception, hard and soft edges to discover my own method of sculptural mark-making using gesture.

05.

Music is an important part of whatever I make or do. I made a playlist to capture the mood of what I was trying to make. This playlist would be on blast in my room to guide me back to the right kind of feeling I trained myself to draw with.

06.

Walt Stanchfield was an important part of my journey in my attempt towards 2D animation as a medium. I was not able to cover all of his advice or tips, but it was important to the decisions I would make during the animation process.
I would recommend this to any budding animator instead of the survival kit to animation, he explains the process in a more organic manner. Where its less about numbers and more about the feeling of animation.

07.

This is one of the results of experimentation with different photoshop brushes and textures. I was pleased with the result. Borrowing textures from Jackson Pollock and Francis Bacon but I had to lessen details for the final look as they would prove to be difficult to achieve each time.

08.

This is a 6 by 6ft Charcoal drawing that would be important in informing the experimental abstract nature of the film later on. This took a week to complete and creating a large piece of work prepared me to make a film that could be blown up large on a projector and look good as a final product.

drawing, drawing, drawing

The initial phase involved a lot of sketching, prototyping an concpeting. I was playing with a lot of digtial brushes.

Playing with brushes that felt painterly and hand drawn was imperative to the project. Taking influences from german expression-ism I was able to come up with a unique visual language that I found personally very appealing.

Using my character design and painting electives I was able to come up with a new style of making images personal to me. The use of the chisel inspired me to come up with unique brushes personal to me that helped me form an interesting line quality. During my classes at MICA, I learnt that there are two types of painter: dabbers and slash-ers. My professor asked me to be true to my own way of looking at the world which was slashing.

Creature design was one aspect of anima-tion/illustration I became very fond of during my time at MICA. I tried incorporating this in my research and methodology.

The drawings came out in a sort of stream of conciousness method citing influences from surrealism, german expressionism and british soap sink drama.

My main method was to dsicover an emo-tional method towards mark-making, drawing and animation.

For the art direction of the animation, I will consult a collection of old black and white silent films and animations made from the Fleischer studios Era (Creators of Betty Boop). This era of animation was flexible to add comedy and morph shapes into one another. My strengths lie within my ability to deconstruct the world around me and present it in my style, which is why I feel like this would be important to study. Being dubbed as 'Rubberhose' animation, the shapes they used were relatively simple but this allowed them to create a higher sense of moveability and storytelling. I appreciate how flexible this style of animation is where
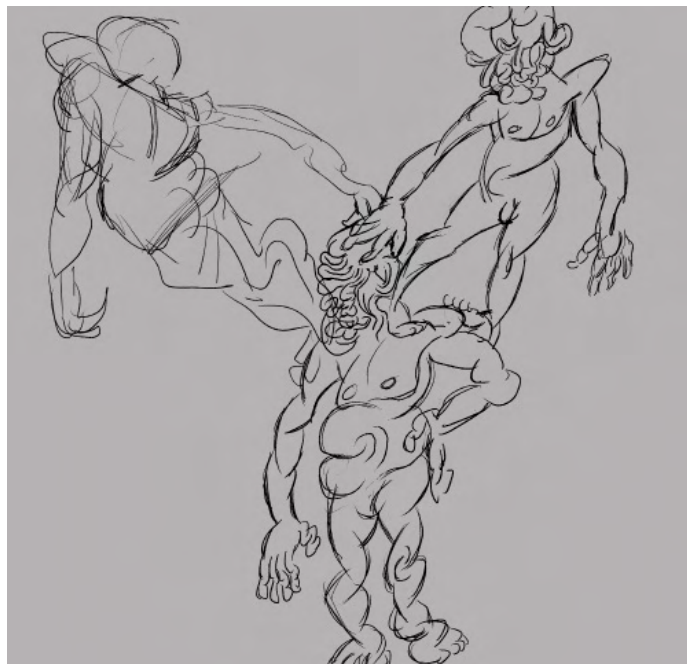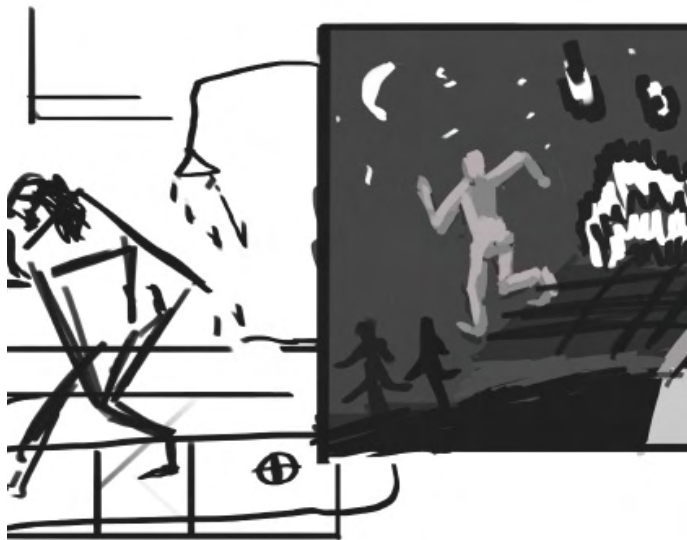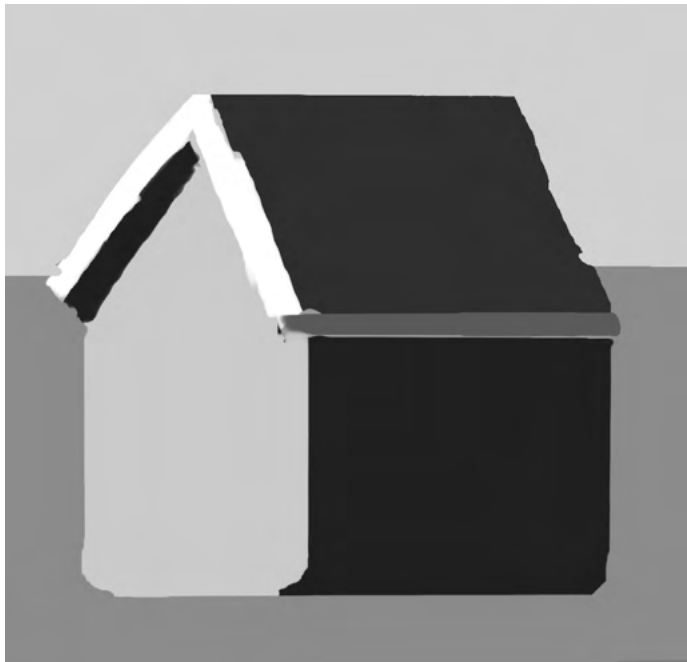
You're missing every moment but never a
second,
Let me count the seconds I've spent moving
around,
To park next to the house,
Which had wild beasts living claustrophobically,
And they spat fire and they drank tea,
And drank tea with lavender scented piety,
They yearn for simpler times,
When it wasn't so simple,
They yearn for emotions cloaked By privacy,
They walk into every room,
Searching for cameras,
They scratch their names in wet cement History,
They whisper truths and lies in vanity,
They burn fire in the summer heat,
And I sit here thinking anxiously
I hope the sequel is as good as the first movie,
But I scanned the reviews carefully,
Erased you from my memory,
You're a cautious revolutionary,
But I was careful so carelessly.

I wrote this poem as part of the creative
process which led me to the next steps of
the creative process.

Exploring the breaking point of Hamza
(Humpty Dumpty) where he has to fight with
his inner beasts. This led to new creature
designs, giving a visual form to Hamza's fear
anxieties.

The process of creature design was inspired
by Francis Bacon's approach to gestural and
fluid mark-making. Where the mark repre-
sents each feeling or emotion throughout a
painting.

Each emotion eventually turns into a
geometric puzzle, where you try to fit in
what one feels in an inconspicuous location.
The magic of poetry is that it tells you
truths. You can't think twice about it, you
have to trust the process and move on to the
next step!

process

For the art direction I consulted black and white films. I kept the animation process relatively straightforward without much planning for keyframing or inbetweening.

Francis Bacon, Lovis Corvinth and Jackson Pollock were important influences. I liked the dirty yet fresh approach to their work. The caricaturized display of emotions in their work was something I gravitated towards. Character expression and emotional caricatures became a prominent theme in my thesis. There is something about drawing from references and real life that infuses an artwork with believable details and helps enrich visual vocabulary. One of my interest in art is creative expression and I hoped to develop that through my thesis.

The triangular, jagged nature of Lovis Corvinth's work and german expressionism in general led me to explore mark-making in a slashed manner. The slashed effect of painting represents the tipping point of Humpty Dumpty where everything turns into fragments. A collection of fragmented emotions through fragmented painting.
My painting professor Mark Karnes critiqued my work and commented 'there are two

types of painters: 'Dabbers and slashers. you are definitely a slasher.' This was an important influence on how I saw myself as an artist and trained myself as an illustrator. I do find myself being jealous of dabbers as it is something that does not come naturally to me, but for my thesis I decided to stick to my strengths.
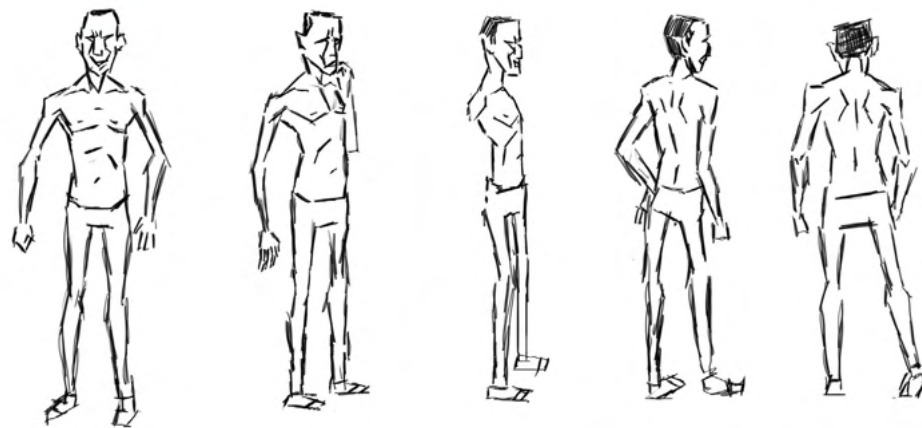
With the fast paced nature of social media and the images we see in our daily lives animation has become an important tool for creative expression and artistic development. I tried to use this medium to my advantage while hoping for a unique visual language.
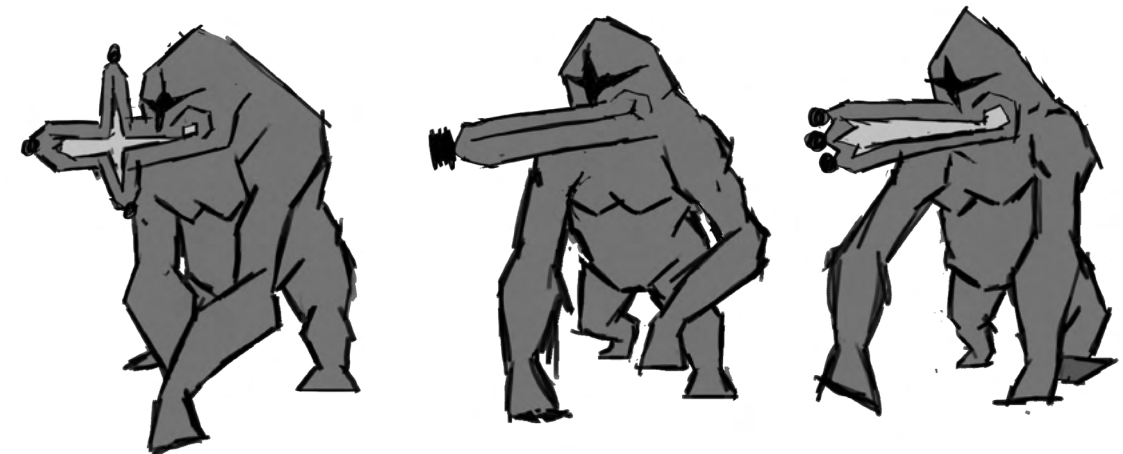
character design

creature design

01. The storyboards were concieved with my collection of images and artists I was looking at while trying to reman intuitive to my method of making marks.

designing humpty dumpty

01.

I perceived Humpty Dumpty as a sort of mask. One of my favourite subjects is looking at interesting masks and the dual nature we put up as social beings. I was thinking of german expressionist set design while perceiving these.

02.

I chose the font Zangezi for the title sequence as it had the jaggedy edges of german expressionist design while keeping it complimentary to my own vision as a film maker.

03.

The various steps you go through while discovering forms inside forms is especially pleasing. The aim was to find a balance between work and play.

'Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall'

film

background design

For the background design I try to keep it fairly simple and geometric. The reason for this was so I could incorporate an element of fragmentation in the designs. Each background painted has a cracking sort of effect like humpty dumpty. One of the important aspects of painting experimentally on a software is understanding the materiality of oil painting. I had done some oil studies of how I could approach background design and then incorporated it in my final designs. The final effects is a combination of looking and feeling. Noticing details important for example the crack like qualities of the bed in the lower left image. Once a plane of tones has been establish , one starts chiseling out the details in a sculptural manner. I kept it black and white to focus more on design and playfulness. At a certain point, you feel like a DJ artist borrowing ideas from you're favorite painters, designers or musicians. The main brush I used had a good tilting ratio, where the brush would rotate with the movement of your wrist, without painting vertically, one does not understand the importance of this feeling.
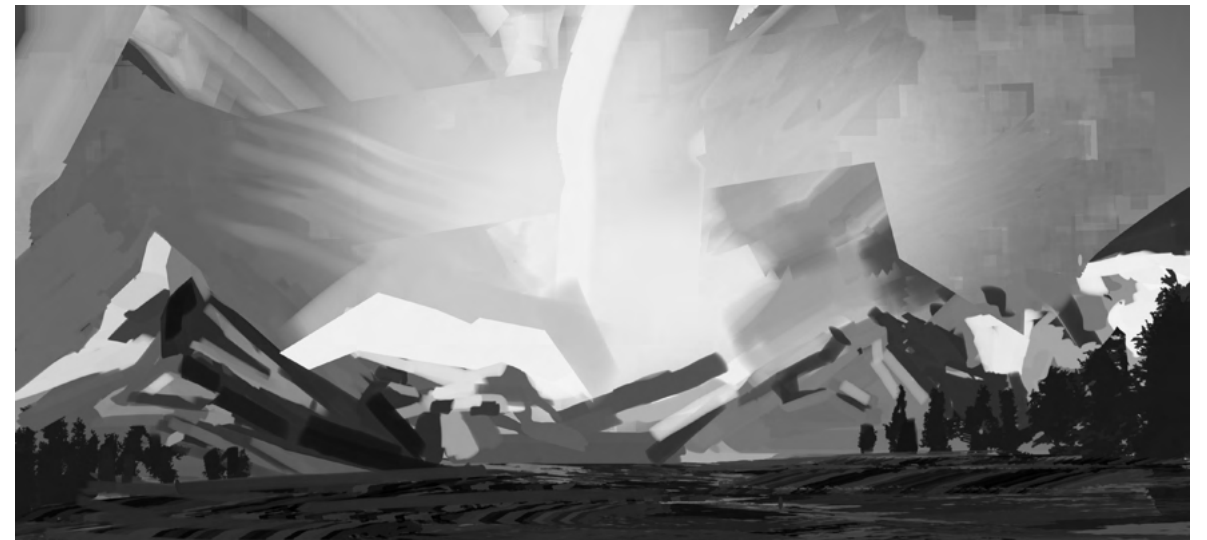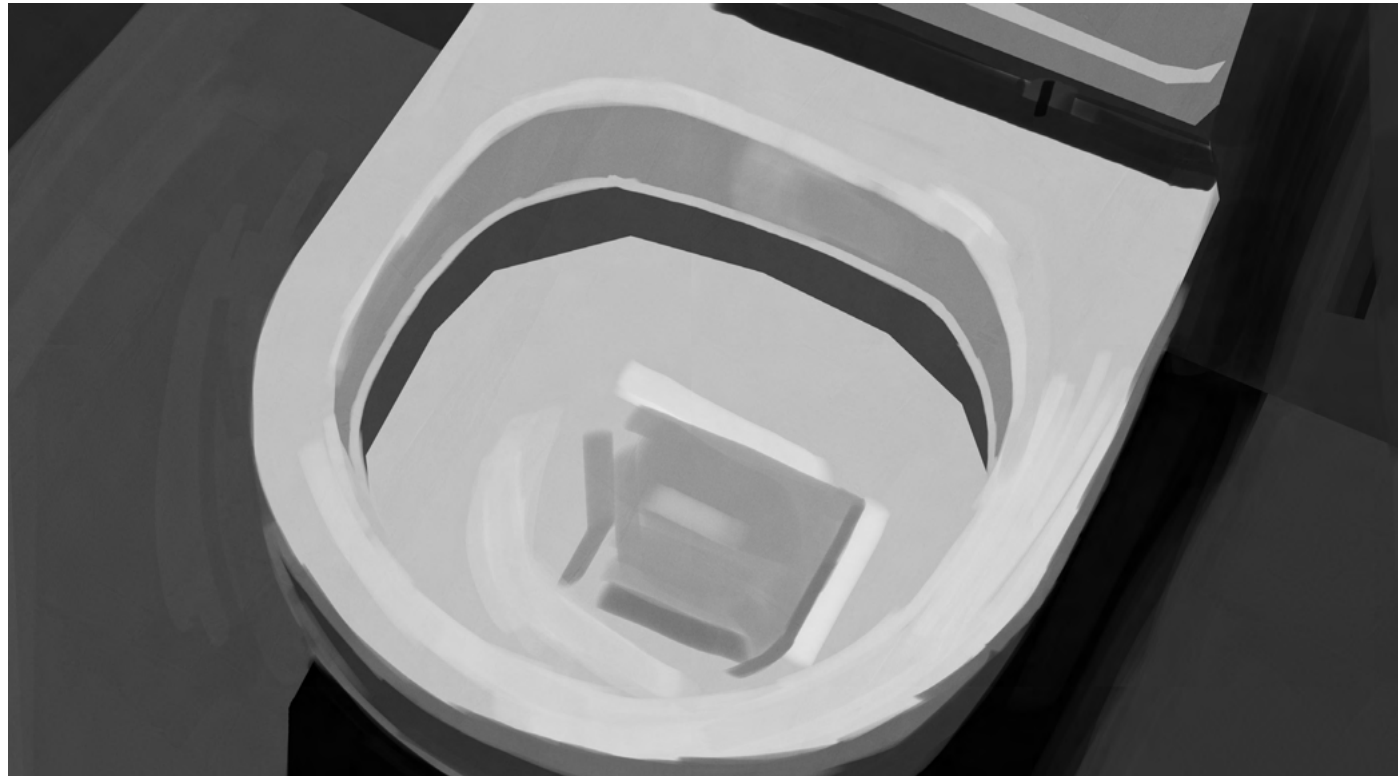
Painting vertically forces you to make bolder, more interesting choices and that is the technique I tried to encapsulate while painting these backgrounds digitally.
Having worked with background designers before, I was amazed at their ability to notice details. My work is usually about expressing myself and having a voice but for the backgrounds I tried to practice more silence. Where looking takes over feeling.
But as soon as you've looked enough, feeling takes over and that is where the exciting stuff happens. The creative voice takes over, which is truly unique to everyone's sensibilities and histories.

When each piece is treated more like a study than an illustration I feel like one is able to internalize the knowledge that any image presents us better. Most of the work I produced during my thesis was dealt like a study to come up with new ideas rather than focusing on results. The process was the most important and enjoyable aspect of my thesis!
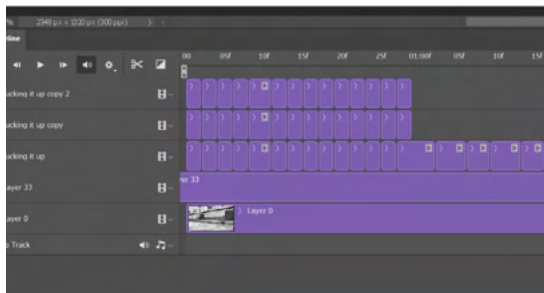
background design

animation process

01.

The animation process was fairly loose and gestural. I used photoshop's video layers to make it. The first part was rough thumbnails, then clean up and flats. I tried to keep the looseness of my drawings to give a painterly expressionist effect to the animations.

02.

I assorted my folders into PNG sequences, Backgrounds and After effect files. The editing process involved going with gut feeling rather than a clinical approach. I felt the animation was impulsive and spontaneous, therefore the editing process should adhere to that.
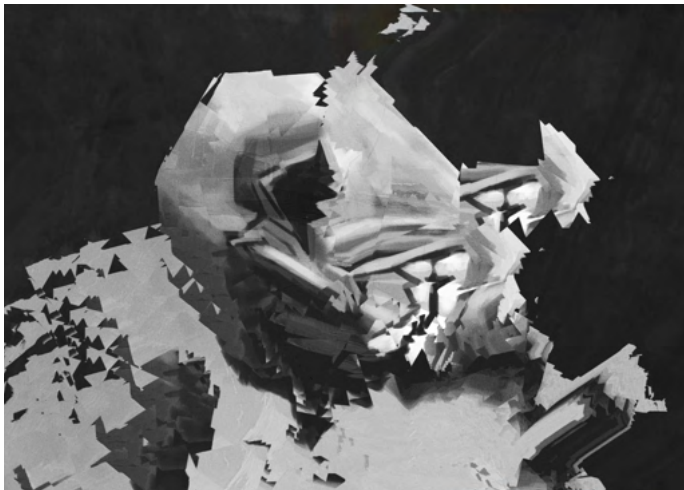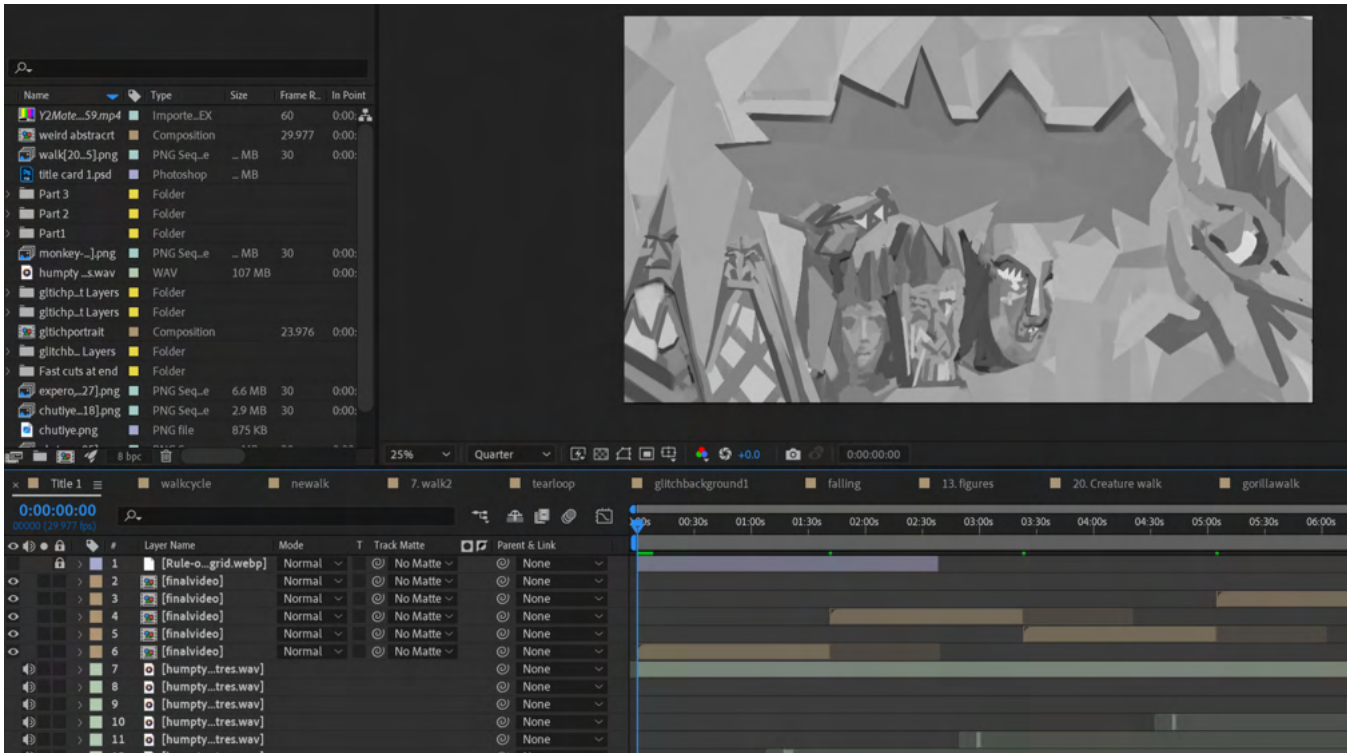
03.

I initially tried to add some effects to the animation by adding painterly brushstrokes as overlays but it seemed to give a cheap effect. The VFX I realized needed to be drawn rather than borrwed from templates.

Siyah Kalem

final film

SIYAH KALEM

This will lead to my film the password for
which is '111'.

exhibition

01.

After it's completion, I submitted 'Siyah Kalem' to a lot of film festivals on FilmFreeway.
I am grateful that it got selcted for it's first screening and hope to get acceptances from more festivals.
The fact that 'Siyah Kalem' was a solo project competing with films with entire productions was a proud moment for me!

02.

For the display I showcased my drawings and 6 by 6 ft charcoal drawing which led to the production of this film. I was happy to get great feedback from peers and audiences. One of the feedback I got was that it made them feeling 'uncomfortable but in a good way' which is the feeling I was going for.

04.

Some stills from the final film. I was relatively happy with the final product and the next step for me now is to figure out how these visuals will work in a CGI format.
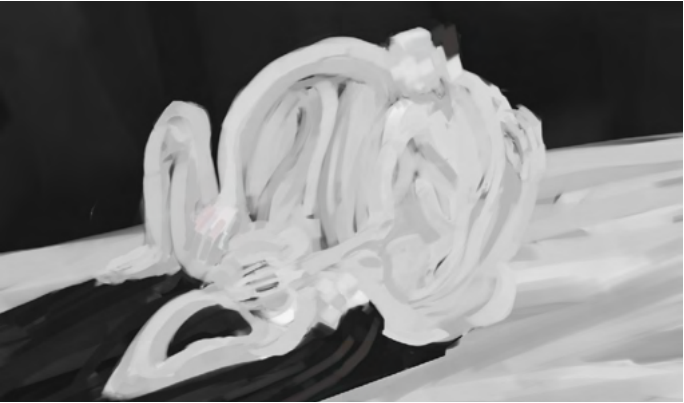
post exhibition work

01.

For my post exhibition work I tried to attempt making masks out of the facial Humpty Dumpty experiments I made during the thesis. I took the character designs for Hamza's face with a smile carved into his face connecting to his eyes as a reference.

02.

For the treatment I tried to keep a white egg shell like treatment for the masks. Hinting at a sense of fragility and shell-like qualities that an egg has. One the next page you can see the final renders of these experiments.
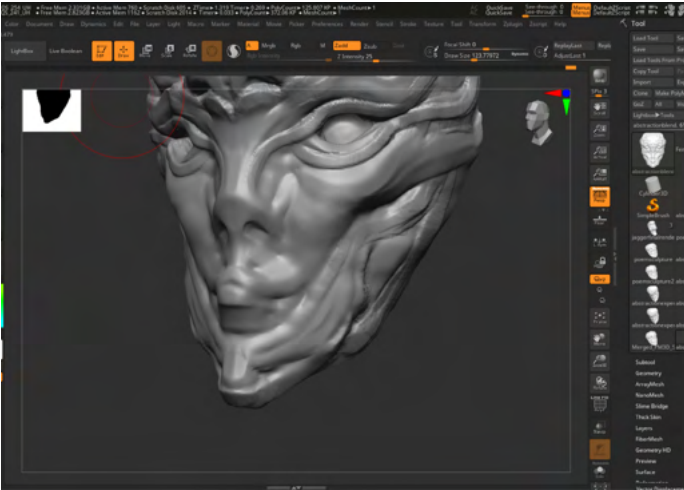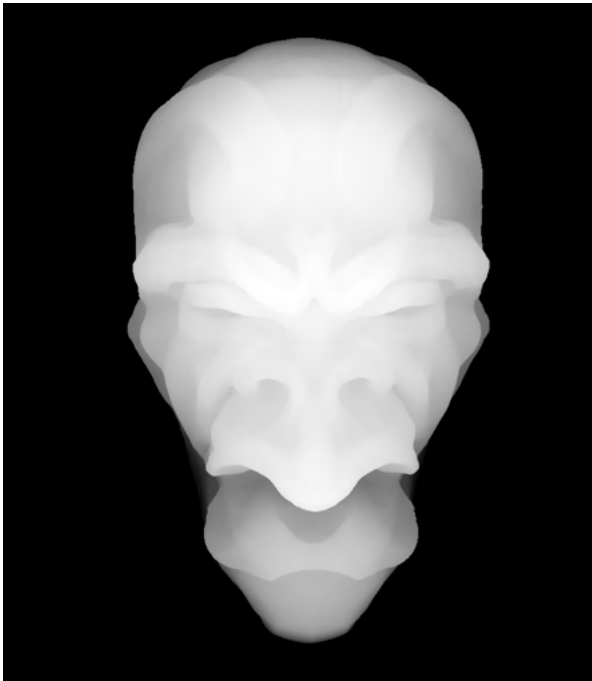
03.

I started to have a lot of fun with these sculptures. During this I realized I was passionate about creature design and that is where I want to train myself next.
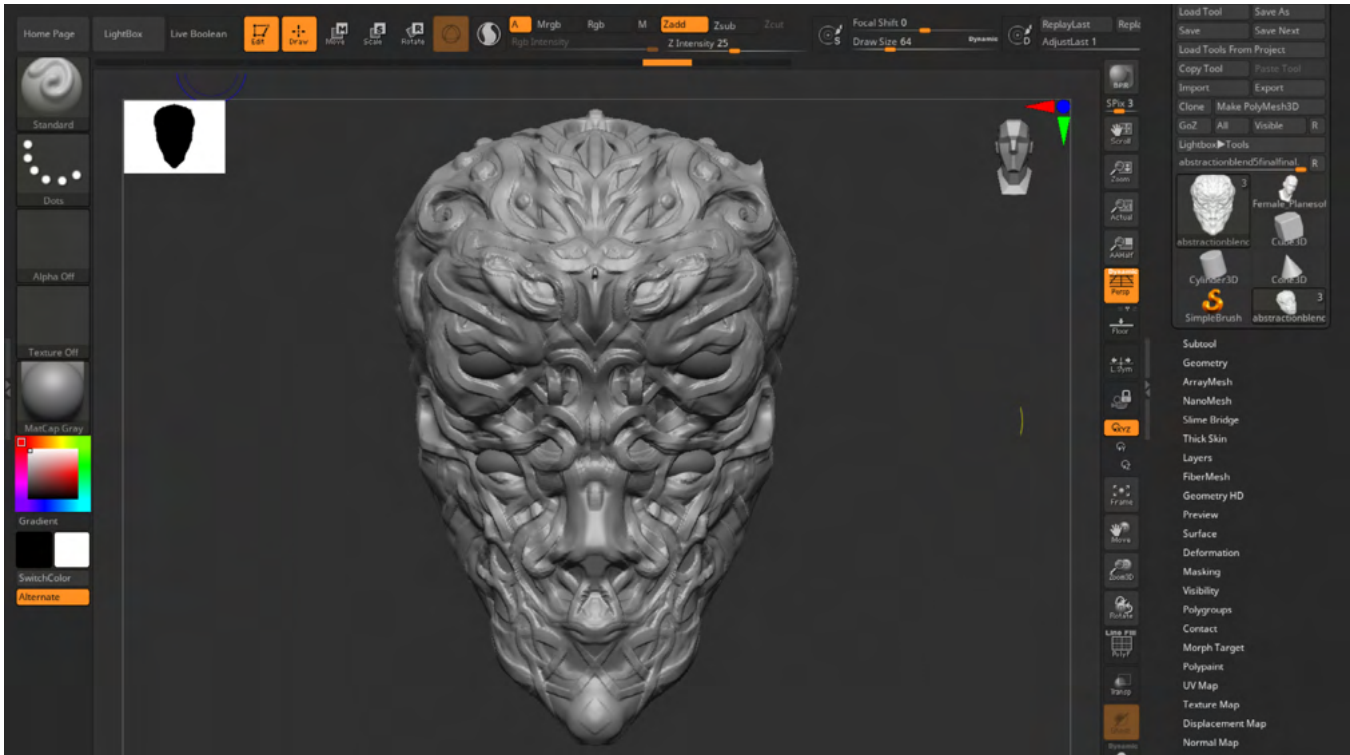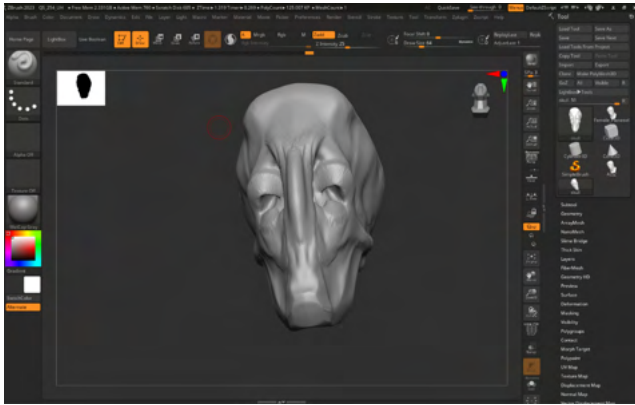
conclusion

My thesis project has aided me with technical and artistic vision to pursue further in my goals, dreams and hopes of making something weird. It was successful in it's attempt to make a unique visual language. The next step for me would be to create functional unique visual language where I can translate my designs for film, music video, ill ustrations and personal work.

The two years at Maryland Institute College of Art were vital to my journey in becoming a better illustrator. I would like to thank my teachers Whitney Sherman, Maily Degnan, Sean Miller, Mark Karnes, Jimmy Giegerich and LaToya Hobbs. The fact that they all were from different fields for example illustration, painting, game design and etching made MICA a melting pot of interesting ideas and approaches to image-making.

The next steps for me are applying for film festivals, jobs, galleries or anyone who likes the kind of work I make. Ideally my plan is to establish an animation studio for music videos, experimental album cover designs and collaborate with artists that inspire me. In the meanwhile I will work on my skills and try to expand them beyond 'painterly'. Maryland Institute College of Art along with my personal research has given me an archive of knowledge to acquire which will probably be a lifelong endeavor.

My aim is to reorganize and create a digital archive of my research and findings from MICA. One of the greatest lessons I learnt was that one needs to play with traditional materials in order to get an organic approach towards digital illustration. I lacked that traditional background in Pakistan where I studied graphic design but tried to compensate for it in grad school. I have to say that was one of the best decisions I took for my professional, creative and artistic development. MFA ILP's focus on playing with traditional craft forces you to think in different ways which is vital to an artist's development. A lot of student approach graphic design or illustration thinking that the software might make their work look 'cooler', but without the traditional practice it won't be able to stand.

The courses at MFA ILP were designed to make us think laterally and that's how it influenced me and my cohort's work for the better. I was very grateful to be a part of creative like-minded people and the opportunity to pick their brains. I learnt a lot from my cohort mates and hope they get what they're looking for and more. Every person you meet becomes a part of your work if you listen close enough and that is the poetry and magic of MFA ILP/life.

ode to eggs

broken spines incite fear and empathy

one has little empathy for the dead
invertebrate as you swallow it whole

to be a dead invertebrate is to be
stripped of human identity

to be perceived as spineless therefore
lacking empathy or respect

to be seen as worms in a child's play
ground

and be squished in a nuclear fashion

An egg:

 is just a chicken without a spine.

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2023

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