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## DEFAULT BLUE AND CLEANSING LIGHT BY NATALIE WOOD

For two years I worked as a custodian where I mostly cleaned carpets but also stayed in the building until midnight, locking all the doors and turning off all the lights. It was a tedious and lonely job going through the largely empty seven-floor structure, so often I entertained myself by exploring the building and filling my phone storage with photos of humorous/beautiful/unexpected moments that I would run across. Ultimately my cleaning actions became a two-year extensive study of the space, noticing the unnoticed and recognizing beauty in the banal. This way of examining objects and surfaces directly connects to the treatment of materials and space in my work and to my process of creating an installation. This experience is a foundation for the work present in my thesis.

As a custodian of the building, I knew it in a way most people did not. I knew the unseen crevices where dust tended to collect, where all the outlets were hidden to plug vacuums in, and which stairwells and doorways were used most. With my set of master keys, I had access to places most people never went. A half-size door in an office led to a ladder that took you inside a massive air duct pipe. Through an unremarkable beige door in the basement was the central air system chamber, which looked straight out of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Those

were large and remarkable discoveries, however, after a while it was about finding the small ones, readily available for anyone as long as they took the time to notice. The way the carpet crunched after drying from a deep cleaning. How sometimes plastic bags would drift around an empty trash can in the air conditioning. And how at particular times of day when the sun showed through the glass catwalks, rainbows refracted and scattered throughout the atrium.

Some of my favorite moments happened at night while locking the building up. Every once in a while I would stumble across rooms consumed in blue. Professors would forget to turn off the projectors, causing the machines to sit quietly and eventually fall asleep, the projection defaulting to a blue screen. This discovery could be minute and unexceptional or it could be large and remarkable depending on if someone took the time to notice it.

The blue, encountered at midnight, was potent and enveloping. The blue light bathed the tables, chairs, trashcans, ceiling tiles, carpet, and whiteboards. My skin, hair, clothes, and being soaked it up. It transformed the entire classroom into something otherworldly. Familiar yet entirely new. The room was a portal and the blue was the gateway. An entryway to another world, or from other worlds into ours. It was unexpected in the way that Sigourney Weaver unexpectedly found a lightning-filled dimension inside her fridge in *Ghostbusters* (Reitman, 1984) –

except the blue wasn't startling or scary. It was inviting and pleasant, physical and digital, strange and exciting.

The more I came across the innocuous blue projections the more I wanted to know about them. Why do projectors turn blue when they go to sleep? Why blue and not another color? Why that blue? Who made this decision? These are questions I can't find the answers to. Andrew Norman Wilson's 2011 piece, *Why is the No Video Signal Blue? Or, Color is No Longer Separable From Form, and the Collective Joins the Brightness Confound ~ A Guided Meditation* ~ , asks these same questions, also with no definitive conclusions. Narrated in a mechanical voice is an email exchange between Wilson and Sony inquiring after the history of the color. After dealing with multiple people and various levels of office hierarchy,



GHOSTBUSTERS, 1984.



Wilson is told that they are not able to find the answer to his question (Wilson, 2011). But how hard did they really look? Someone must know, right?

The blue is a material so mundane and overlooked that even companies like Sony, producing it, do not know its origin (or care to look hard enough to find it). The blue doesn't matter. It's an in-between space. It's not the screen you want, it's the screen you wait with until you get the screen you want. It's a placeholder. But when given the time to fill up a room with its light and given the opportunity to purposefully sit with it, Default Blue is more. Default Blue has powerful abilities. Abilities to transform, consume, envelope, alternate and affect the bodies and spaces it's cast upon. Default Blue opens portals into other dimensions.

Default Blue is able to reveal qualities previously unseen, create mystery and generate a new narrative. It shares a similar quality with black lights that cause, and allow, neon colors to shine brightly as if a light bulb were embedded within. Exposing an inner glow. Default Blue and its powers are often neglected due to lack of consideration, but given the proper attention, it can be harnessed and applied purposefully – as I have done in multiple installations, including *Ultra Light Bath*, where a single projector filled a small space with the blue light, effectively mutating the other materials in the room – a jar of green liquid, concocted from water and highlighter fluid, glowed with life. The single-room gallery became the chamber of a shut-in scientist or the set of a low budget space movie.

The discovery of Default Blue and the use of its abilities serve as a metaphor for my practice and embody the crux of my experience as an artist/custodian. It's finding the potential in a material so ordinary, so overlooked, that its history has been forgotten. It's highlighting remarkable/unremarkable design decisions in objects and architecture. It's taking the time to appreciate placeholders, utilitarian objects, the everyday, and gathering materials from commonplace sources. It's entertaining myself at doldrums jobs, having a child-like imagination, experimenting, playing and taking the time to discover.



GHOSTBUSTERS, 1984.

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While in the studio, I work with no end goal in mind, relying heavily on intuition, always hoping to find unexpected conclusions. I am interested in playing with materials by pairing items that do not usually go together, turning on and off different colored lights, and merging corners of a room with projection mapped videos. All the while, I am looking to get somewhere surprising. Where a material reacts unexpectedly or in a way that I have never seen before. I am playing.

I have discovered that a long roll of hot pink scrim vinyl is translucent enough to let a projected video be visible on the backside but opaque enough to keep the video from casting onto any surface after it. I have realized that if you shine a flashlight on a piece of cheap holographic poster board, it creates an array of rainbows. Trimmer line for a weed whacker can fit into cracks in the wall. Blue painters tape can be a drawing tool. Emergency blankets refract light in glorious patterns. There are no failures in the studio, only tests. These tests eventually become a toolbox filled with ideas, tricks, and material possibilities that can be combined together in infinite ways in a final installation.

Jessica Stockholder says of this, *“It’s odd to be in the studio and not know what you are going to do. Being an artist and choosing to put yourself in a circumstance where you don’t know how things are going to work out and what you’re going to do, is rich and exciting and difficult”* (Stockholder, 2005).

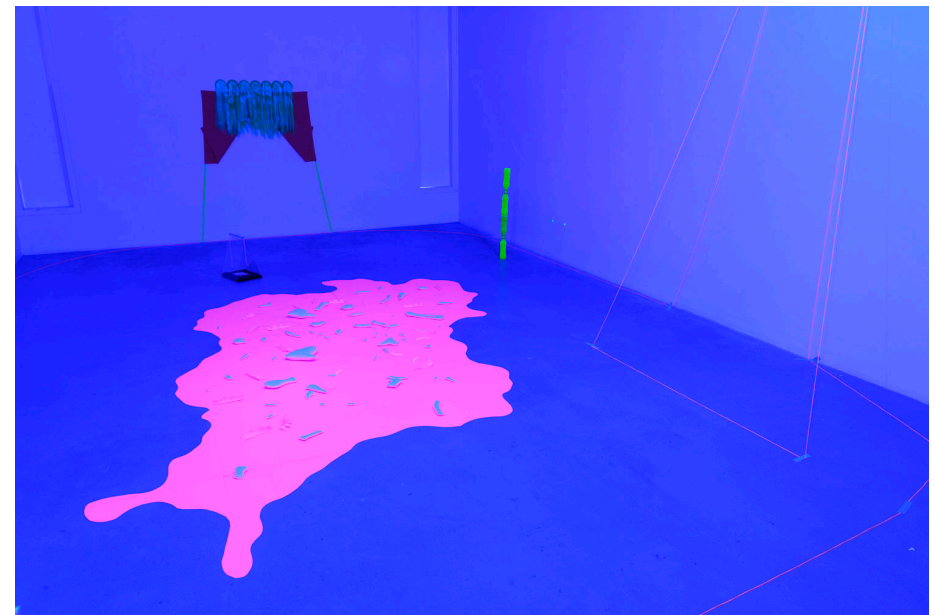


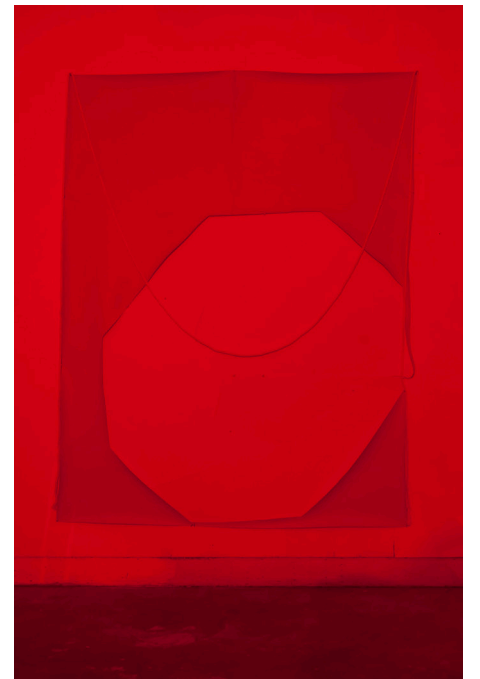
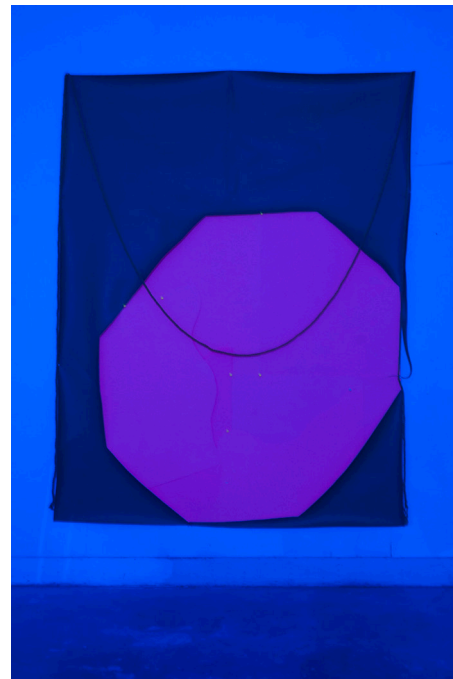
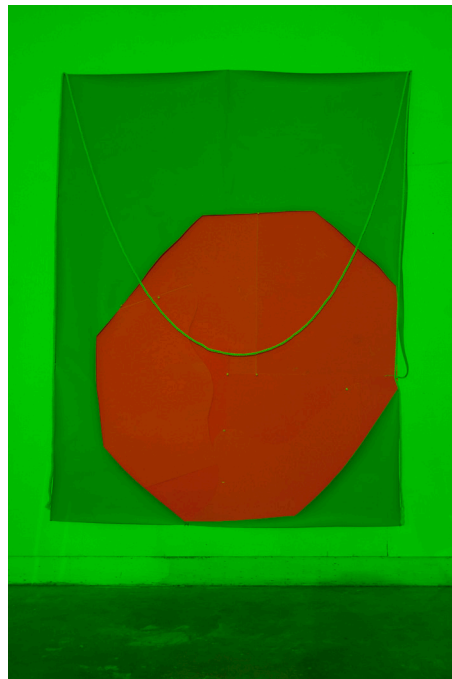
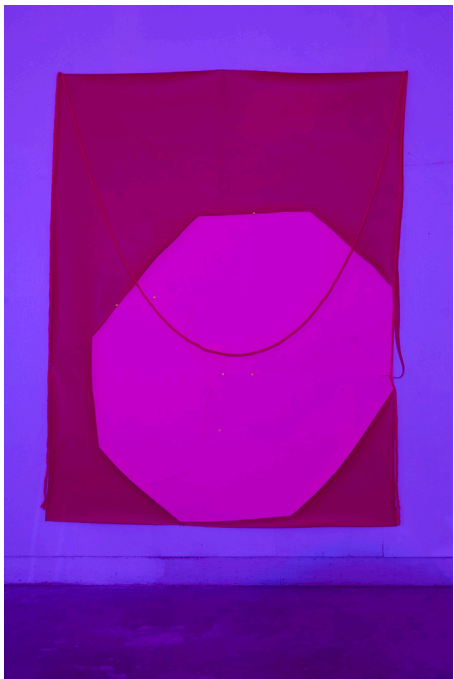
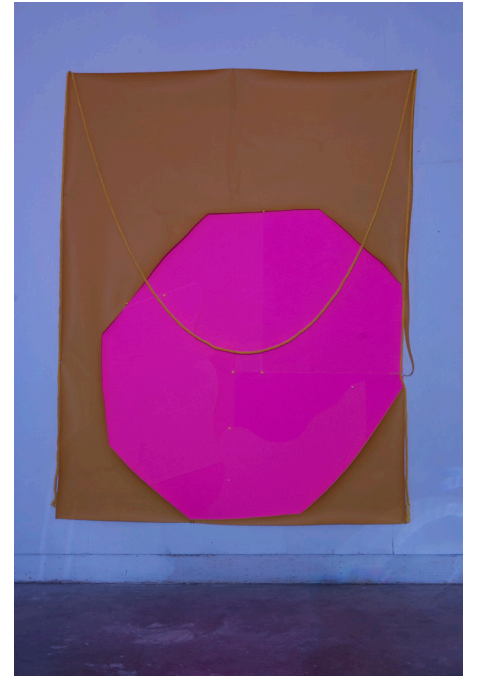
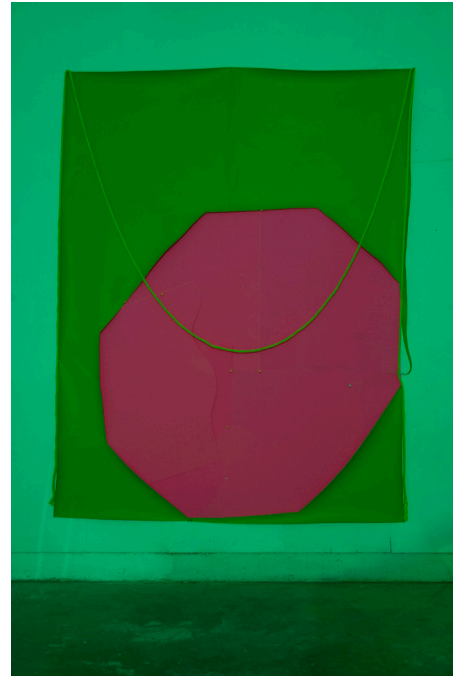
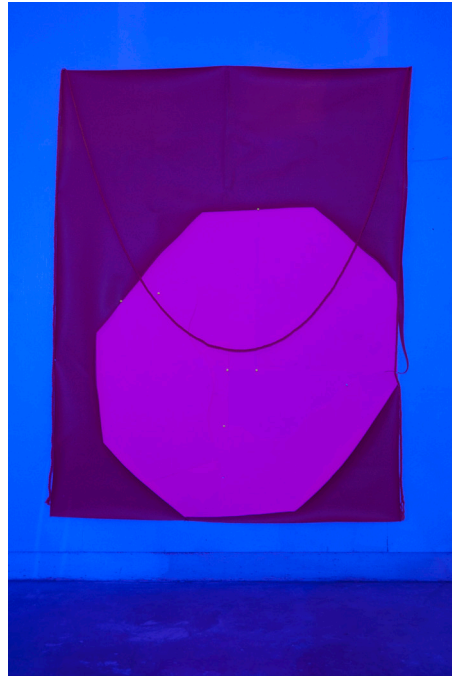
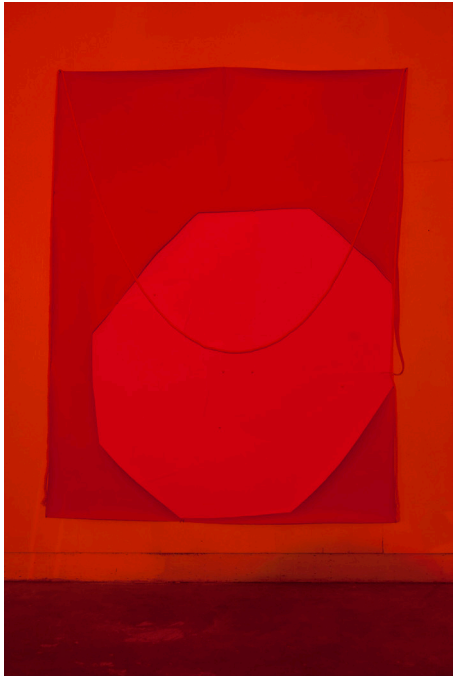
Henri Matisse stated, *“My choice of colours does not rest on any scientific theory; it is based on observation, on sensitivity, on felt experiences... I simply put down colours which render my sensation... Until I have achieved this proportion in all the parts of the composition I strive towards it and keep working”* (Batchelor, 2008).

Intuition and lack of expectations are key elements in my studio practice. When Stockholder talks about experimentation she references to how children play, they have no end goal; it’s just about the process of play. It’s about the journey. She states, *“There are lots of kinds of thinking. Your hands learn to do things that you could spend a whole day trying to write about and articulate. What’s intuition? It’s a kind of thinking. It’s not stupidity. There is a discomfort associated with trying to put all those different kinds of brain waves together. I like to avail myself of that kind of discomfort”* (Stockholder, 2005). I agree that your hands can figure things out in a different way, and sometimes a quicker way than your brain can. I see this as I make work and toy with objects in the studio. I also believe in letting yourself be surprised as to where your hands take you by focusing on the process and not the final product.

In one experiment, I combined some excruciatingly bright pink poster paper (which hurts to look at because it’s so neon) with colored LED lights to discover how they affected one another. When shown under blue light, the pink paper color glows, transmits energy and demands attention. In green light it

is unnatural and grimy, while in red light it flattens, dulling to a sameness with everything else around it. Alternating through these three colors in rapid succession creates an animated effect, causing the paper to jump forward and back, glowing and flattening, pulsating and compressing. I used this paper to create *Lagoon*, a paper puddle that sat at the center of a larger installation called *Course*. *Lagoon* was static under a constant blue light, glowing and transmitting, functioning as a loud centerpiece and situated so that people had to revolve around it in order to see the other works. The light-animated potential of the paper was not released until I created *Pink/Yellow*, the same neon pink paper paired with yellow vinyl which expanded and contracted, in and out from the wall as different colors were projected onto it. *Pink/Yellow* consequently affected other materials in the room when installed in the show *Home and Garden*, as it sat opposite a wall of blue masking tape wallpaper that reflected the projected light and created its own animated effect.



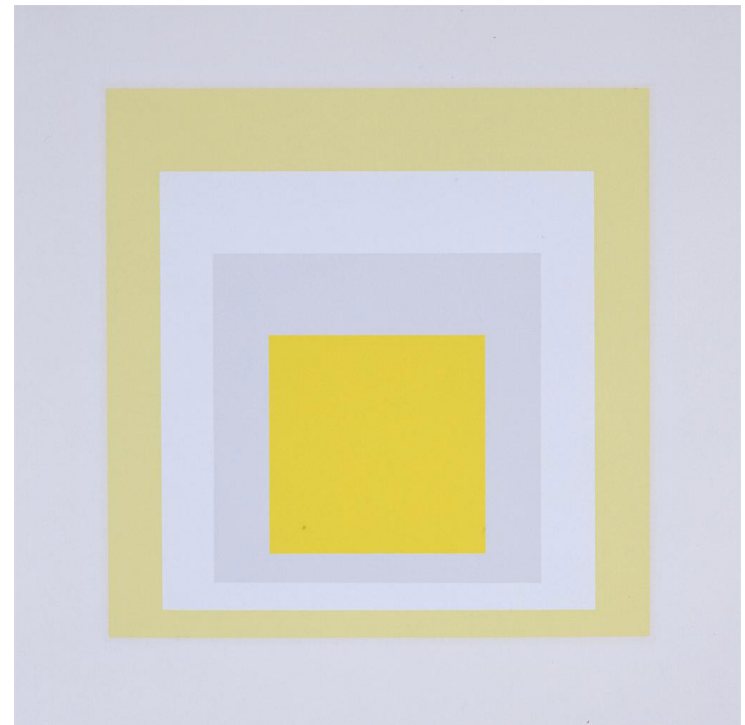


These light experimentations are connected to color discoveries that painters have made. Paul Gauguin describes the same light phenomenon saying,

*“...The sky is blue, the sea is blue, the trees are green, their trunks are grey, the ground on which they grow is slightly indefinable. All of this, as everybody knows, is called local colour, but the light comes and changes the look of every colour at will. And the sea that we know to be blue, which is pure truth, becomes yellow and somehow seems to take on a fabulous hue that you can find only at the clothes-dryer”* (Batchelor, 2008).

Gauguin is saying it's not just about the light; it's about the light in relation to the surface – the surface in relation to an object – an object in relation to the light. My tests with light/surface/object are a stone's throw away from my freshman year 2D design class talking about Joseph Albers and gluing together squares of Color-Aid. But instead of sheets of paper, it's a plastic green bucket sitting on an off-white cushion. It's a pink video reflected in a mirror on a picnic blanket of red gingham. It's blue yarn sewn down the seam of an 8 foot cushioned pole in a room with light slowly alternating between red, blue and green. The color of every object fluctuates depending on the surface that surrounds it and the light easily affects the surface and object's color. Toying with these three components (light/surface/object) leads to unexpected and mysterious results. The shifting nature of the blue yarn and orange fabric on my cushioned poles are confusing and mesmerizing.

JOSEF ALBERS, HOMAGE TO THE SQUARE, 1970S





Under the changing light, their “local colour” (as Gauguin called it) is altered. This is most dramatically demonstrated with turquoise light, which turns the orange fabric a dark grey and the blue yarn appears white.

In the same way that my phone storage would frequently be consumed by images from around the building I cleaned, my phone currently serves as the main way to document these color experiences and experiments. I save videos of my hands pushing glowing flower vases across a mirror or demonstrations of holographic paper tilted in front of a projected orange video. These videos and images serve as a reminder to me of what materials can do. A digital sketchbook. Sometimes they go on to become part of a final installation, such as with *The Blue Room*, where documentation of my moving/glimmering hand was subtly included amidst the blue from four projectors filling each wall in the room. In *Pepper's Prisms*, a small, slender video displaying a spinning, dangerous-looking cocktail, was reflected inside a three-sided prism. Most the time, however, the documentation is a way to remind me of material tests and something to learn from long after the tests have been disassembled. Ultimately these tests are in pursuit of installations where lights, surface, and objects are in conversation, shifting, pulsating, looping around one another, in a symbiotic relationship.

Hours are spent in the studio playing, finding material potential, testing out ideas, discovering what the

light is capable of, and documenting before I show work. Each of my installations is a combination of half-formed ideas from experiments, a bagful of materials and an entire weekend spent fussing in the space. This eventually adds up to a finished product, one that is not completely cemented in though. For *Room 114*, I converted a classroom in the art building Millrace 4 (which had already undergone some transformation from its previous life as an office building) into an installation by expanding on the unusual elements of the room and architectural decisions made originally and during its remodel. This classroom has a section of ceiling lower than everywhere else in the room and structural beams that jut out from the wall. These “quirks” and pre-determined architectural elements were taken into consideration with the installation and were a key component in deciding where projections should be cast and objects should be placed. It led to displaying video in ways I had not considered and using sculptural objects in ways unique to the space. For example, a projector came with the room, securely bolted to the ceiling. I was able to rotate it slightly so that its edges lined up perfectly with the corner of the room and the section of ceiling that protruded out from the rest. This allowed for the ceiling to become part of the piece, creating a dynamic trapezoidal projection.

*Room 114* only existed for three days, and while the same objects could be used again they would be in a different, site-specific arrangement. Pipilotti Rist talks about the flexibility and fluctuation of her



ROOM 114, 2017



installation work saying *“the good thing about installation: you can always change it the next time. You can do things differently, you can improve it.... I can revise an installation in ways I could not if I was a painter. Actually, painters can overpaint or add something, but with the video installation things are always in flux”* (Rist, 2011). I see each installation as one version or iteration but there would be more if the same work were installed in a different space. The physical boundaries and limitation of each gallery space are taken into account and incorporated into the work. This creates an interesting challenge and limitation to my process and allows for unexpected outcomes.

In addition to the found objects that fill my studio, I sift through videos online – “How to Clean an Office”, “check out my holographic shark goggles”, “Demonstration of the Rotovac 360i” – I then transform and abstract them similar to how I treat physical materials. One found video shows a woman in disposable purple gloves quickly wiping a round table with a yellow microfiber cloth. Around the table are four bright red plastic chairs. The complementary purple gloves and yellow cloth are a bright contrast to the plain table that is encircled by spots of red from the chairs. It’s a lovely composition made without the intention to be lovely. It was definitely made in-house, maybe by someone’s niece who took a computer class in high school, with bumpy camera work and stock music. It’s not trying to win awards; it’s intended to train. I’ve taken this scene and dissected it, slowing down the frames and masking

out the background, emphasizing the beautiful moment that it is. The yellow cloth dances up and down as it is folded, forming a variety of unique, organic shapes. The wiping motion is pleasant and hypnotic. In my altered version, this moment is highlighted and purposefully consumed. This video was present in my thesis installation at Disjecta Gallery, cast onto a translucent plastic tablecloth curtain so that the video could be seen on both sides allowing viewers to examine it from multiple angles.

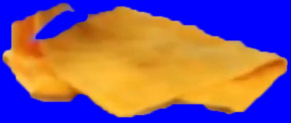
An additional, even more, abstracted version of the training video was also present at Disjecta. I removed all of the original scene elements except for the yellow rag. The different shapes of the rag are separated out as still images that scroll upwards. The video is projected, cast on the floor, wall, and ceiling, moving upwards in a mesmerizing pattern, mapped so that each cloth disappears behind edges in the wall and reemerges as a slightly different shape. The cloths wipe the wall, mimicking a cleaning action but are only light. The pixels have no physical effect on the space but they point towards light’s sanitizing abilities. As I projection map in a space, picking specific edges, cracks, and corners to line a video up against, I am developing an awareness of that space in a similar way to the awareness I had of the building I once cleaned. It is a close examination of all the bits overlooked by most people but not by the one who needs to clean the dust and spider webs. My mapped projections draw attention to those bits, making them crucial components of the installation.














With every studio experiment, with every installation, I am seeking the material potential of banal, off-the-shelf items, attempting to find purpose in them beyond the original intended design. Materials bought at the dollar store, the grocery store, found in a recycling container or in an overflowing bin at a thrift store. Materials common and everyday but with the ability to be more than common and more than everyday. How can a yellow highlighter be dissected and reused? How can a mountain dew bottle radiate? What happens when a nightlight is broken in half? Simple gestures with extraordinary outcomes are what I seek. Small alterations so that the materials are still recognizable but performing in an unexpected way is the sweet spot (a power cord that traces a shadow or a roll of tape that becomes wallpaper). One technique is, pairing together materials that are not usually friends (a flower vase with an unidentifiable liquid that props up a blue garbage bag). Using one material to draw out the qualities of another is an additional way (Default Blue summoning a glow out from utility string and fishing lures). I want viewers to question the reality of the materials and projections, and question their perception of the space. I want them to learn to cherish the banal like I do, to be playful, and feel inclined to explore. I want people to see how with a little TLC (tender loving care), the most ordinary of objects can become extraordinary. I want people to swoon, gasp, and reflect.



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