

DENDRITE

by

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## ABSTRACT

My thesis exhibition, “Dendrite”, explores the complexity of interpersonal connections by using images of tree branches and the local environment as a visual metaphor. The relationships that humans form with one another have the potential to last anywhere from an instant to an entire lifetime, and its effects can be instantly forgettable or remembered for generations. We create, maintain, and break these connections constantly. To illustrate these concepts, I use a combination of painting and digital media to explore specific relationship dynamics. The backgrounds of my images are taken from photos of my family’s ranch, which is a canyon-like environment specific to the Texas Panhandle. These images provide context for the relationship dynamics themselves. Interpersonal relationships are living, evolving creations represented by tree branches in my work. Like these relationships, tree branches are constantly growing and changing organically, but can be changed artificially. The form of a branch is dictated by a combination of intent, random chance, and predisposition. Tree branches provide a visual map of these relationship dynamics while alluding to the natural tendency of humans to form bonds with one another. By superimposing the branches over my backgrounds, these natural forms create a solid ground onto which I build my exploration of the complex web of interpersonal connections.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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SIGNATURE PAGE

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Think about every person you encountered today. Include in your considerations not only the family members in your life, but also friends, colleagues, subordinates, and strangers you may have met. The connections we have with the people around us are countless. Personal connections have the potential to last anywhere from an instant to an entire lifetime, and their effects can be entirely forgettable or remembered for generations. We create, maintain, and break these connections constantly. When I think of everyone I have met and the ways that people affect each other, I can see a complex web of interpersonal connection forming and growing across my entire reality, and though I can only experience this web from my own point within it, I understand it to be without center and without end. The goal of my thesis is to investigate various dynamics of human connection through my paintings and video work.

My work explores the complexity of personal connections by using images of tree branches as a visual metaphor for relationship dynamics. The decision to use branches as the symbol for connection was a careful one. In the past, I have experimented with different visual metaphors for the web of connection, especially with abstracted text and networks of neurons. Truly decentralized webs like these accurately reflect my view of human connection, in which each person's place within the network is equally important,

as articulated in Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome theory.<sup>1</sup> My show title, "Dendrite", is a direct reference to an interconnected web. "Dendrite" refers to a branchlike portion of a neuron that receives communication from other neurons. The show title references my view of human social relationships as existing in a non-hierarchical, deeply interconnected web—in the words of Deleuze and Guattari, a rhizome. However, tackling the infinite web of human connection is a monumental task, so I use tree branches to show smaller, more individualized aspects of the web. While the primary association of the word "dendrite" is with a rhizome-type organization, the word "dendrite" is derived from the Greek word *dendron*, "tree". As Deleuze and Guattari concede, "It's not easy to see things in the middle."<sup>2</sup> Also, the tree branch includes an element that my previous metaphors did not: visual indication of the passage of time. A tree branch begins from one point, simple and immature. As the tree grows, the branches develop increasingly complex forms; new twigs form into slender branches, while older branches grow larger, stronger, and more resilient. The form of a branch is dictated by its DNA, the environment, and random chance. Like tree branches, the connections between people are organic and dynamic. They evolve according to the growth of each person, their patterns dictated by an indeterminable mix of intentional choice, innate tendencies, and chance. Connections can grow, thrive, and die off naturally, but they can also be nurtured, forced, or severed. In my work, the branch is first and foremost a symbol of growth over time.

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<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2005), 6-7.

<sup>2</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 23.

My work is far more focused on the concept of “branch” as a metaphor for connection than that of “tree.” “Branch” starts at one point and then literally branches out, eventually intermingling with other branches and creating a canopy network if given the chance. “Tree,” while symbolizing life and evolving narrative just like “branch,” can also confer “hierarchy,” especially when treated as a map of origin, such as family trees.<sup>3</sup> A tree denotes connectivity by being a conduit between one important source point to other, less important points (trunk to twigs), as well as between earth and sky (roots to branches). My thesis concerns connection, not the individuals connected. The branch is not a conduit between “me,” “you,” or “specific someone,” it is an illustration for a type of connection that anyone could experience. By equating “branch” to “connection” as in “living and evolving entity” rather than “hierarchical conduit between Defined Points A and B,” the branch form illustrates a specific dynamic without illustrating a specific relationship. For example, the subject of *spiderbites* (see chapter 4) has a strong dualistic nature, with branches growing in ascending and descending directions. The base is not “one” connected to two “others.” Rather, the fractured, traumatized base indicates a tumultuous beginning of a connection, and the two directions symbolize the simultaneous growth and degradation that occurs in the resulting dynamic. The work is thus an authentic view of an unhealthy relationship which, while being inspired by several

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<sup>3</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 16.



personal experiences, does not exclude the similar stories of other viewers in favor of solipsistic<sup>4</sup> rumination.

For my thesis project, I use the regional landscape and flora of the Texas Panhandle. My work employs the common natural sights of juniper and canyons taken from my family ranch as recognizably local images to share with the viewer. I was born and raised here in the Texas Panhandle, and the similarities between the harsh canyon environment and the dominant, conservative culture of the Texas Panhandle are uncanny to me. The branches used in my works are exclusively from juniper trees that have been burned in a wildfire in 2018. Junipers form close-knit groves of intermingling branches when allowed, but they are individual trees that compete fiercely for sunlight, nutrients, and especially water, often choking out other trees that aren't as well-adapted and competitive as they are. Junipers are also exceptionally hardy and can survive scorching droughts, freezing winters, and even raging wildfires.<sup>5</sup> From a personal standpoint, the images of juniper branches and broken canyon landscapes convey both familiarity and fear of the harsh social environment of the Texas Panhandle, where the paradoxical ideals of rugged individualism and social conformity define the culture while threatening to “choke out” maladapted outsiders like me. Using these inoffensive images of juniper and canyonlands as symbols, I can draw upon sources of individual or collective strife without depicting the trauma in a way that alienates the viewer. Furthermore, through

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<sup>4</sup> Solipsism is the philosophy that only one's own mind and experience are certain to be true and meaningful. Stephen Thornton, “Solipsism and the Trouble of Other Minds,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 24 October 2004.

<sup>5</sup> While the branches I use are dead, the trees I take them from are often still alive.

design and technique decisions, I infuse the images of harsh land and dead branches with a hopeful, vital energy to acknowledge the acceptance and healing from social strife.

In my paintings, the duality of connection and context is illustrated by the stark contrast between branch and landscape. The landscape represents the external social environment underlying each connection, and as such, it provides a solid ground for the branches to span. For the backgrounds, I use acrylic washes and careful manipulation of the canvas to create a soft landscape. Then, I apply vinyl and draw, cut out, and paint the branches to give them a clean, sharp edge against the landscape. Aesthetically, the resulting images pull on Japanese prints that use branches to flatten perspective and force a jump between foreground and background suddenly. This perspective gives my work an observational tone rather than an emotional one.

My video work is largely concerned with the imposition of non-physical reality over a physically present relationship and the ways that these “new” realities can enhance or degrade face-to-face relationships. Instead of having the branch-image superimposed over landscape as in the paintings, the connection-context relationship is created by the video projecting through literal branches. When the “new reality” of the video overlays the branches like this, it can either highlight or supersede the reality of the branches. But because of the physical presence of the branches, their objective quality can never be escaped or fully ignored. *indiamos* (see chapter 4) uses rhythmic video to let the presence of the physical branches ebb and flow with the projected images of other branches. This symbolizes the internal reality of memory imposed on present connection. In contrast, *endemia* (see chapter 4) has a louder, more chaotic video that tries to

eliminate the several branches in front of it, symbolizing the physical and virtual connections vying for importance.

In the creation of my thesis work, I look to other artists not only for aesthetic guidance, but for communication strategies. Chief among my artistic influences is Yayoi Kusama, whose ability to make art directly referencing her mental illness without alienating viewers aligns with my own sense of ethics concerning the intersection of art and trauma.<sup>6</sup> I use branches and the canyon landscape as symbols to communicate both personal trauma and resultant philosophy in much the same way that Kusama's dots are representative of both her trauma and her philosophy of losing the sense of individuality to the infinite universe. I also take aesthetic and conceptual inspiration from Matthew Ritchie, an interdisciplinary artist known for his dense, weblike artwork that joins scientific principles and artistic exploration. Ritchie first drew my attention with his use of webs to depict social or environmental networks, since I share an interest in rhizome theory. Ritchie's greatest influence on my work is how he uses specific aspects of visual and scientific language to create his own mythology. His work was instrumental in helping me build my own artistic vocabulary so I could make design choices with greater intention. He also inspired me to begin laying images on top of one another to create dialogue between media, and I ultimately implemented this idea in video work. My video work is further inspired by Chris Marker's documentary film *Sans Soleil* because of the introspective space created by the "home video" appearance of the footage combined

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<sup>6</sup> Yayoi Kusama, "'It Feels Good to Be an Outsider': Yayoi Kusama on Avoiding Labels, Organizing Orgies, and Battling Hardships," interview by Akira Tatehata, *Artspace*, May 8, 2017.

with the observational, detached editing of a documentary. However, because of the narratives provided by the branches, I do not utilize spoken narration in the way that his documentary does.

The organic, evolving, ever-complicating forms of tree branches serve in my thesis as a visual map of connection; viewers can understand when a connection is growing, breaking, or absent based on the form of the branch in a work, and thus deduce the dynamic being illustrated. When these branches are combined with the landscape, they illustrate a complex personal connection that was formed, or at least largely experienced, within the context of the Texas Panhandle. My work uses these features to discuss connections on both a personal and collective level. Through the investigation of my technical process and my aesthetic and conceptual influences, the viewer can engage with my work, reflect on their own social web, and join me on a deep dive into the world of personal connection.

## CHAPTER 2: INFLUENCES

As briefly discussed in Chapter 1, the main influences on my body of work are the concepts of semiotics and critical regionalism, as well as the artists Matthew Ritchie, Yayoi Kusama, and Chris Marker. Regarding semiotics, I rely heavily on Charles Sanders Peirce's theory of semiotics when creating my works. Because of my personal sense of ethics regarding art and expression, I do not represent my subject matter—some of which might be disturbing for viewers—in a literal or representational sense. Rather, all my works are “signs” that signify something other than what they are (with the concession that a work of art functions as a sign as soon as it is recognized as art).<sup>7</sup>

Peirce's theory of semiotics breaks the sign down into three parts: the sign itself (that which signifies), the object (that which is signified), and the interpretant (the interpretative response).<sup>8</sup> In my thesis work, the image, the “branch,” is the sign itself, the connection is the object being signified, and the viewer response is the interpretant. When the work functions as a sign, the viewer sees “branch” and interprets “connection.” I explore what gives “branch” its “branchness:” growth, natural evolution over time, iterative complication, innate tendency toward patterns, and “branching out.” Then, by treating the artwork as a sign, I illustrate the “branchness” inherent in human connection.

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<sup>7</sup> Alex Potts, “Sign,” in *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. by Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 21.

<sup>8</sup> Potts, 22.

I explained in Chapter 1 that when I depict a branch, I mean in part “branch.” However, branches come from trees, and the choice of using tree branches carries the historical and symbolic weight of “tree” in many ways. Here, I draw on semiotic theory using tree as a sign. Trees function in art and culture as a symbol of life, connection, and the cosmos, especially as the ancient archetype of the Tree of Life. In fact, depictions of the Tree of Life are recorded as far back as 3,000 BCE.<sup>9</sup> Trees even form a cosmological model in some cultures, like the world-tree Yggdrasil in Norse culture that “contains within its roots and branches the worlds of the gods, the giants, the dwarfs, and the people.”<sup>10</sup> Finally, trees function as a symbol of seasonal death and rebirth. While I do not mean “tree” as much as I mean “branch,” these “tree” concepts of life, rebirth, and world construction—in other words, interpretants of tree as sign—are relevant to my work. Humans are a social species whose survival relies on forming connections, and though individual connections may die for good, we can always branch out again and continue to create our own place within society.<sup>11</sup>

Although the “branch” or “tree” is a more global symbol, the imagery in my work is taken specifically from canyons in the Texas Panhandle, and therefore draws on theories of critical regionalism. My work is a product of the region. The Texas Panhandle, like much of the United States of America, has historically been ignored in

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<sup>9</sup> Nikki Gamm, “The ‘tree of life’ – an enduring symbol,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, May 3, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Renata Maria Rusu, “Yggdrasil and the Norns – or Axis Mundi and Time,” *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai - Philologia* 53, no. 2 (2008), 85-97. Accessed October 20, 2021. <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=254496>.

<sup>11</sup> “The cooperative human,” *Natural Human Behavior* 2 (2018): 427–428.

favor of centers like New York and Los Angeles.<sup>12</sup> My focus on the region of the Texas Panhandle is partly in reaction to the treatment of the region as “culturally irrelevant”<sup>13</sup> or as an end branch on an origin tree, rather than as one point in a web or on a map.<sup>14</sup> However, my work does not fully praise the region, either. Regional artwork in the Texas Panhandle tends to glorify its frontier roots, relishing the politically and socially conservative aspects of the dominant culture.<sup>15</sup> Many aspects of the dominant culture, including the pride in its right-wing Christian values and whitewashed history, actively hinder my ability to form the very connections that I illustrate. The idea that the Panhandle is “a regressive origin from which progressives are continually in flight”<sup>16</sup> is perhaps an unfair generalization, but it is not entirely untrue. Anyone who differs from the white Christian settler in race, religion, ethnicity, citizenship status, sexual orientation, or gender identity is “othered” and treated as an outsider. One must be resilient to survive in such a harsh climate.

In addition to these theoretical concepts, my work is also influenced by several visual artists on a conceptual and formal level. A key influence on my use of sign and symbol is Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama. Kusama is best known for her installations and paintings that use polka dots to engulf and eliminate forms, such as her *Infinity Mirror Rooms* (fig. 1). These polka dots are sourced from her hallucinations in which patterns

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<sup>12</sup> Louise Siddons, *Centering Modernism: J. Jay McVicker and Postwar American Art* (Stillwater: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018), 1.

<sup>13</sup> Siddons, 2.

<sup>14</sup> Siddons, 18.

<sup>15</sup> Alex Hunt, “Staging Western-ness: Critical Regionalism and Texas Panhandle Heritage,” draft, shared with me January 2021, 2.

<sup>16</sup> Siddons, 2.

overtake and obliterate the universe.<sup>17</sup> She uses the polka dots both to express her fears and her philosophy of life: no one exists alone, but as a part of a universe of accumulation.<sup>18</sup> In a sense, Kusama uses a source of fear and trauma to create art that transcends her experiences.<sup>19</sup> This use of polka dot as sign of “individual,” and the dots together as a sign of “accumulation” or “obliteration,” inspires my own use of symbol and sign, as we have a similar avoidance of direct representation of trauma. Rather, by using variations on a given symbol, I can explore many aspects of my subject matter, including negative aspects, without risking the direct representation of trauma or, worse, the traumatization of the viewer. Using Kusama’s inoffensive approach, I increase my chances of connecting with the viewers in a safe way.

Connectivity has been a theme or goal of my work since I began my studies at graduate school, and no one has influenced my ideas of connectivity more than Matthew Ritchie. Matthew Ritchie is a British multimedia artist who uses line, web, and overlay to investigate “the idea of embodied information, explored through a shared universe of interconnected stories and images,” as well as diagrammatic systems and systems of knowledge in general.<sup>20</sup> Because of the large scope of the concept of his works, his visual vocabulary contains aspects of history, architecture, and science. For example, his site-specific multimedia installation *The Demon in the Diagram* (fig. 2) depicts the evolution of our systems of knowledge and the simultaneous collapse of said systems under the

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<sup>17</sup> Tate, “Yayoi Kusama – Obsessed with Polka Dots | Tate,” YouTube video, 7:23, February 6, 2012.

<sup>18</sup> Tate, “Obsessed with Polka Dots.”

<sup>19</sup> Yayoi Kusama, “‘It Feels Good to Be an Outsider’: Yayoi Kusama on Avoiding Labels, Organizing Orgies, and Battling Hardships,” interview by Akira Tatehata, *Artspace*, May 8, 2017.

<sup>20</sup> “Biography” on Matthew Ritchie’s website, accessed October 12, 2021, <https://www.matthewritchie.com/>.



weight of a vast amount of knowledge.<sup>21</sup> In this work, Ritchie uses scientific and architectural vocabulary to build art on the concept of systems and their breakdown. His mature depictions of interconnectivity help me examine my own interest in human connection in a deeper sense. His use of concepts from outside the art world validate my own use of symbols taken from the environment, as well as references to biology, especially in my show title. Furthermore, his multimedia approach is the main inspiration behind my inclusion of digital works and installations in my show.

The final major artistic influence on my work is the documentary essay *Sans Soleil* (1983) by videographer Chris Marker, who was a French writer, documentary film director, and video essayist about whom little is known. *Sans Soleil* uses home video aesthetics as a low-tech way to connect memory and its record. *Sans Soleil* was shot with a silent film camera, while the audio was recorded with a tape recorder.<sup>22</sup> The shot composition, asynchronous audio, and occasional use of a video synthesizer evoke the detached mood of a dreamer quietly observing the blend of the mundane and the bizarre (fig. 3). Marker's approach in *Sans Soleil* creates a paradoxical space of confession and secrecy where "it's the sincerity and lucidity of the thoughts and feelings rather than the individual ego behind them that counts."<sup>23</sup> The contemplative tone of *Sans Soleil* has inspired me in the creation of my own work. His low-budget approach of using whatever

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<sup>21</sup> Houston Public Media, "Arts InSight: Matthew Ritchie – The Demon in the Diagram," YouTube video, 4:32, accessed October 17, 2018.

<sup>22</sup> Chris Marker, "Notes on Filmmaking," essay in booklet made as part of the Criterion Collection DVD release of *La Jetée* and *Sans Soleil*, 2007.

<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Personal Effects: The Guarded Intimacy of Sans Soleil," *The Criterion Collection*, June 25, 2007, accessed October 12, 2021, <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/484-personal-effects-the-guarded-intimacy-of-sans-soleil>.

tools are available also inspires my own method. My video work differs from *Sans Soleil* in that my videos lack both spoken narration and the 80s aesthetic, largely because my tools are more advanced than the ones Marker had access to in 1983. Overall, though, *Sans Soleil* has had a significant impact on the way I conceptualize and execute my video work.

The concepts of semiotics and rhizome theory and the artists Matthew Ritchie, Yayoi Kusama, and Chris Marker inspire my use of symbolism, my imagery selection, and my multimedia approach in my thesis work. They influence my work from the initial idea to the final execution of each piece.

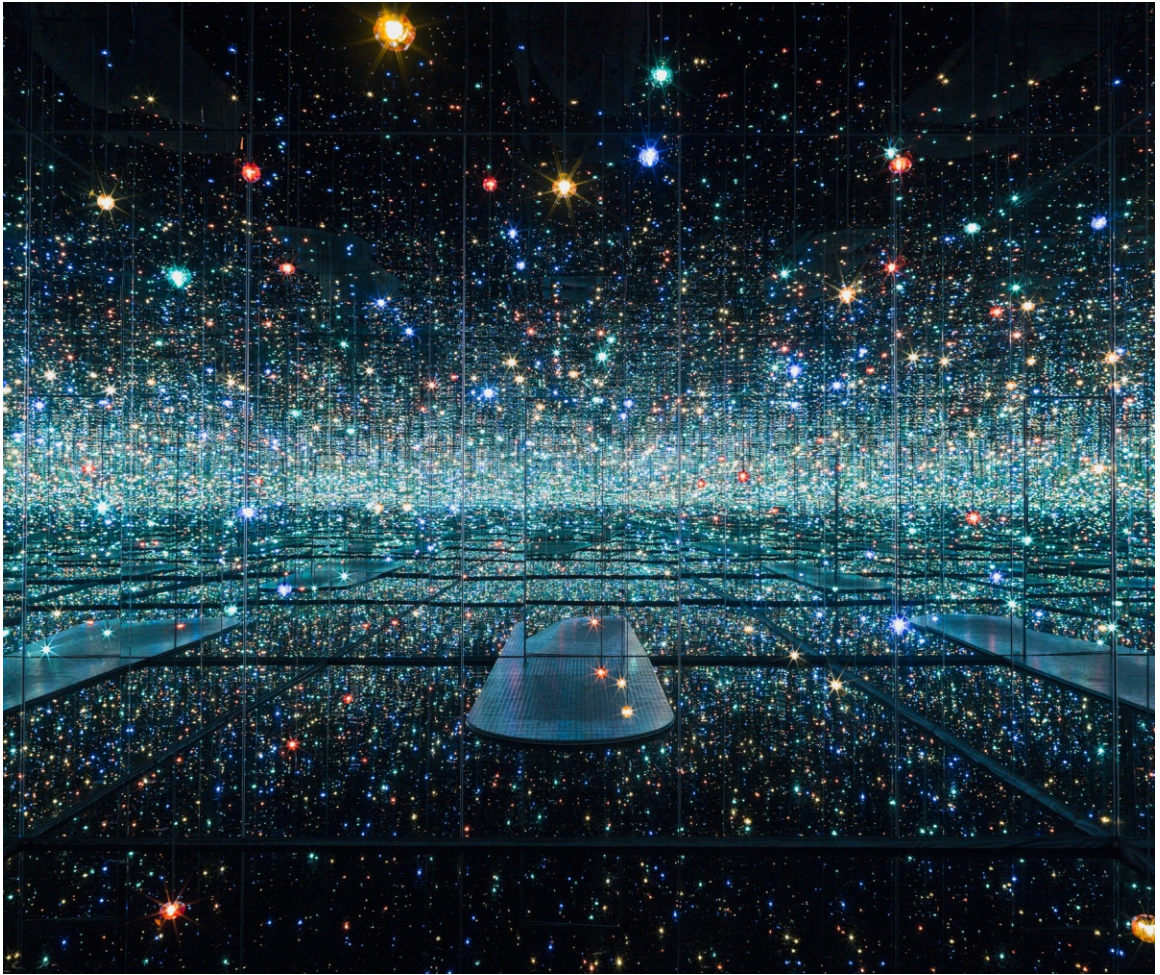


Figure 1: Yayoi Kusama, *Infinity Mirrored Room – The Souls of Millions of Light Years Away*, 2013. Wood, metal, glass mirrors, plastic, acrylic panel, rubber, LED lighting system, acrylic balls, and water, 287.7 × 415.3 × 415.3 cm. Los Angeles, The Broad. Accessed 22 October 2021. <https://www.thebroad.org/art/yayoi-kusama/infinity-mirrored-room-souls-millions-light-years-away>



Figure 2: Matthew Ritchie, *The Demon in the Diagram*, 2018. Installation. Houston, Moody Center for the Arts. Accessed 18 October 2021.





Figure 3: Chris Marker, still from *Sans Soleil*, 1983. Video, 1:39:46. Accessed 18 October 2021.

### CHAPTER 3: PROCESS

The process that I use to create my work reflects the approach I take toward its conceptual origins. Though I may begin with emotional subject matter, no part of my process allows emotions to take primary or total control of the work. Rather, my process requires careful observation and meticulous attention to detail, which allows me to treat each work as an engaging analysis of human connection rather than as a diaristic reflection of my personal struggles. I am a multidisciplinary artist, and for my thesis exhibition I have made paintings, drawings, video works, and an installation involving actual tree branches. In this chapter, I describe the steps I take to produce work across these media.

Before I begin my work, I identify the relationship dynamics I want to explore and compile them into a list. This list is extensive and vague, which allows me to adapt my general ideas to the specific imagery I use in my works. For example, the items “instant, life-altering connection” and “doomed relationship” eventually became *millisecond* (see chapter 4) and *ya lo sé* (see chapter 4) respectively. Each relationship dynamic is taken from a personal experience (or several). This personal experience primarily inspires the title, which is always lowercase. I am a digital native and maintain many of my personal connections in a digital space, so using all lowercase for the titles of my works naturally reads as a “default” tone, whereas capitalization confers a degree of

emotion or personal emphasis that does not match the tone of my thesis. I determine whether each relationship dynamic can be depicted by a branch, and how that branch might generally appear. For my show, I tried a new strategy of making diagrams of the gallery walls with dimensions for the work I planned to make. I intend to continue this practice for future shows, since the predetermined dimensions of the work helped me to acquire source material and compose my images more mindfully.

My process truly begins with a visit to the family ranch in search of juniper trees that had burned by recent wildfires. These trees become source materials for my thesis works. I stop at certain locations within the burned areas for the specific quality of branches I seek. Branches at the edge of the burn are generally in better condition, with smaller, more complicated twigs preserved from the blaze. Branches from areas further within the burn area are significantly more damaged. Huge portions of the branch or trunk may be destroyed by the fire, and the more delicate twigs are completely burned away. The heavily scorched branches have unique silhouettes that are distinct from the intact branches at the edge of the burn. I use the various states of injury to contrast healthy and unhealthy dynamics. In all cases, I try to choose branches that are sufficiently “branchlike” to function as a sign for “branch,” that is, I choose branches with an appropriate but not excessive number of offshoots. Once I collect the photographs, videos, and literal branches that I need, I return home.

At home, I use my iPad to create mockups or sketches of the work. First, I choose a connection from my list to illustrate. I create a palette loosely based on the natural colors of the area, though as mentioned above, personal connections may influence my

color choice. Then, I select my source “branch” for each work based on how closely its form matches my envisioned aesthetic of the chosen connection. Using the landscape from the source material as a guide, I digitally paint a background to give me an idea of the layout and palette of the painting. I then overlay the branch source material over the background and adjust the composition as needed. If the image of the branch is high enough contrast that the edges are distinct, the sketch is complete. If not, I mask or carefully draw over the desired branch with white. This way, I can clearly see the branch during the projection phase later. These digital images become sketches for my paintings.

Once I determine the composition of each painting, I prepare the background. I stretch the canvas and apply gesso, which I always color so that it can double as a base coat of paint. This base color helps unify the rest of the palette. Once the gesso is dry, I use water to thin several colors of acrylic paint to different viscosities, making sure to mix enough of one “main” color. I set the canvas horizontally on my floor and gently pour water onto the surface. I use a paintbrush to guide the puddle into the shape of the landscape, lifting or lowering corners of the canvas to prevent the water from collecting in the middle of the canvas. During this process, I also pour in the thinned acrylic paint and allow it to diffuse across the wet part of the canvas. The different colors of acrylic paint interact with each other in unpredictable, yet subtle ways, creating a complex color field that changes as it dries. Because of the tendency of the water to either collect in the middle or run off the edge of the canvas, I cannot abandon the canvas at any point during the drying process. I continue to gently manipulate the canvas until the paint is no longer mobile. Then, when the paint is dry, I repeat this process for each new section of the



background, mixing new colors and being careful not to let the different areas run into one another. Once the background is complete, I allow the canvas to dry before continuing to the next step: projection.

I project the image of my sketch onto the canvas, adjusting the placement if necessary. Once I am satisfied with the layout, I apply adhesive vinyl to the areas where the branch will be, then I draw the branches with a marker. I use this opportunity to make small edits to the branches, leaving out or moving elements to improve the composition. If I had to make a mask or drawing of the branch in the sketch phase, I edit the form at that point instead. After I complete the drawing, I cut the vinyl and remove the branch-forms, a step that requires great care and concentration so as not to cut the canvas itself. I use matte medium to seal the edges of the vinyl to prevent bleeding. When the matte medium dries, I paint the branches using acrylic paint with no emphasis on texture. I sometimes mix two similar colors and direct mix a slight gradient if I feel it is aesthetically warranted; but otherwise, I paint the branches in one flat color. When I finish painting, I immediately remove the vinyl. The result is a graphical branch form with a crisp, clean edge that contrasts with the subtle complexity of the background.

My drawings are created with a similar aesthetic approach of hard line against subtle background. I make sketches of my drawings in a similar process to the paintings, though I always draw over the branches during the sketch phase. For the backgrounds, which are images of the sky, I tape off a piece of Bristol board. Then, using cotton balls, I collect pigment from hand-rolled chalk pastels and move over the Bristol board in light, circular motions. This creates a gentle color field with few visible marks and a very soft

edge, perfect for gradients. I layer several colors together to create the gradients of the sky. Then, I project the sketches onto the drawings and draw the branches onto the paper. I cut the branch shape out, removing this section of the paper. I adhere the background to black mat board and carefully return any “floating” pieces of negative space from the removed branch shape to their appropriate places. The absence of the branch becomes evident not only in the deep black of the mat, but in the visible edges of the missing paper. This missing connection is my attempt at a simple, yet effective depiction of grief.

The installation piece *feverdream* has a unique approach built from the same aesthetic and conceptual base as the paintings and drawings. The background of *feverdream* is similar to the background of the paintings except that *feverdream* uses a nonfunctional door instead of a canvas. A light on the back of the door creates a warm glow, inviting viewers to open the door. However, juniper branches cross in front of the door, making access impossible unless the viewer is willing to move, damage, or break the branches. The inclusion of literal branches forces the viewer to acknowledge the presence of connection in a way that the two-dimensional art does not.

The video installations *imdiamos* and *endemia* both consist of videos projected through branches mounted or suspended in front of them, blurring the distinction between foreground and background, image and object. The video of *imdiamos* fades in and out, letting the branches enter and leave the focus of the viewer, mimicking the way that present connections can override or be overridden by memories. The branches in *endemia*, meanwhile, battle for relevance against a video of branches being projected through them. Virtual branches and loud audio distract from the physical branches,

though the video is never able to erase the real branches or the shadows that they cast. In this way, *endemia* shows the struggle between maintaining face-to-face and virtual connections in the current age.

By using the concept of “branch” as connection and “background” as context, I explore many aspects of human connection across several media, from the disciplines of painting and drawing to experimental installations which include 3D and 4D aspects of space and time.

#### CHAPTER 4: WORKS



*dawn*, 2021, chalk pastel on Bristol board, 18" × 24".



*day*, 2021, chalk pastel on Bristol board, 18" × 24".



*dirt*, 2021, chalk pastel on Bristol board, 18" × 24".





*dusk*, 2021, chalk pastel on Bristol board, 18" × 24".



*indiamos*, 2021, video and juniper branches, 4:04.





*spiderbites*, 2021, acrylic on canvas, 48" × 60".



*millisecond*, 2021, acrylic on canvas, 54" × 84".



*endemia*, 2021, video and juniper branches, 6:19.





*feverdream*, 2021, acrylic on door, juniper branches, and light, 36" × 80".



*ya lo sé*, 2021, acrylic on canvas, 60" × 60".



*sleeping dogs lie*, 2021, acrylic on canvas, 36" × 48" each.





*now what*, 2021, acrylic on canvas, 72" × 72".

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

My thesis explores the complexity of human interactions by using branches as a symbol for human connections. The title of my show, “Dendrite,” refers to part of a neuron, which further references connection. I investigate aspects of relationship dynamics through acrylic paintings, chalk pastel drawings, and installations. Clean-edged branches stretch across landscapes rendered in soft acrylic wash, which represent for me the personal connections formed in the cultural context of the Texas Panhandle. My work is influenced by the concepts of semiotics and critical regionalism as well as the artists Matthew Ritchie, Yayoi Kusama, and Chris Marker. These influences inspire me to make contemplative observations of human connections using symbol and sign rather than direct representation.

As I affirmed in my thesis defense, the choice of branches and landscape is important to the overall concept of my show. All of the imagery is sourced from my family ranch, which has a canyon-like environment common in the Texas Panhandle. The landscape backgrounds are chosen from this geography as well to reference the region—and therefore the individualistic, politically conservative culture—of the Texas Panhandle. The branches are all juniper, a ubiquitous and resilient tree, to represent the resilience of relationship dynamics. Furthermore, I only selected juniper branches which had been burned by a wildfire, which I chose for the unique shapes that fire damage



creates. Also, the wildfire is a reference to a natural process that can be at once devastating and transformative, but that makes no comment on morality, much like the natural tendency of humans to connect and the potentially life-altering consequences such connections can bring. These references come from a lifelong connection to the specific environment I have grown up within. Moving to another locale would necessitate my study of a new local landscape to treat those places with the same consideration.

Though my thesis contains works of several media, all of the pieces in my show follow the same basic format of branch as foreground and landscape as background, and they all investigate human connection in different ways. “Dendrite” contains seven paintings, four drawings, and three installations. To show the different ways that I explore relationship dynamics through these media, I will discuss one painting, one drawing, and the two video installations in detail.

The acrylic painting *millisecond* (see chapter 4) represents the simplest concept in the show: an instantaneous but life-changing connection. To accomplish this, *millisecond* features a dark landscape overlaid by bright branches radiating from one point near the center of the painting. I chose a gentle, rolling landscape for the background of this piece before rendering it in dark colors. I use deep red and hints of yellow over the purple-black base to create a turbulent, stormy ground. Then, I paint the branches in a bright, off-white color at the base and fade them to a light cream near the ends. Against the stormy background, the white-hot branches strike like lightning. Thus, *millisecond* captures the exact moment that an instant connection begins.

All of my drawings concern different kinds of missing connections and the grief that accompanies their loss. The first in the series, *dawn* (see chapter 4), is about the grief of losing a new connection, especially in one's youth, and is primarily inspired by the deaths of my young cousin and one of my childhood friends. I create the gradient sky with colorful chalk pastels. The orange, pink, and yellow colors of the sky are taken from the Texas Panhandle sunrise, though I saturate the colors more to create a vivid image full of life and potential. After rendering the sky, I cut out the form of a branch. The missing branch is small and simple, tapering down and terminating within the picture plane. This form represents the short time the connection could grow before it was lost. When I place the sky background over black mat board, the absence of the branch becomes a visible void. Finally, I put *dawn* into a black frame to mimic a memorial photo, commemorating a connection that ended almost right after it began.

The first of my two video installations, *indiamos* (see chapter 4), is about the relationship between present connections and past memories. The title, the two branches, and the structure of the video both reference EMDR, a type of therapy that allows the brain to reprocess memories through alternating left-right stimuli. The video is composed of steady shots of the environment, both the land and sky. Over a period of three seconds, one half of the video fades to black before fading back in while the process repeats on the other side of the video. The visibility of the video continues to alternate between left and right for the entire runtime. During the fading cycle, scenes that I associate with trauma are revealed and subsequently erased, blending in with the normal shots. This video is projected onto the wall through two large branches, one on either side of the wall. As the

video fades in and out, the focus shifts from one branch to the other, as well as back and forth between the branches and the video behind them. Overall, *indiamos* illustrates the way that present connections can supersede past memories or vice versa.

On the opposite side of the gallery is *endemia* (see chapter 4), the other video installation. Like *indiamos*, *endemia* is a video projected through branches mounted in front of it, but unlike *indiamos*, *endemia* is visually and audibly chaotic. The video is constructed around the narrative of a computer screen forming and severing virtual connections, with videos, photos, and drawings of branches blinking in and out of view. Blips of audio signal to the viewer whether a connection is coming or going amidst the indistinct chatter of the rest of the audio. Bright colors and layered conversations distract the viewer from the real branches. In turn, the real branches cast shadows onto the projection wall, interfering with the virtual branches. The virtual and physical branches exist in opposition to each other, symbolizing the struggle of balancing face-to-face and virtual connections. Though this piece was initially inspired by my experience of maintaining virtual friendships while avoiding face-to-face interactions, *endemia* speaks to the collective struggle of people who were forced by COVID-19 to maintain connections in the digital sphere.

In essence, “Dendrite” is an investigation of human relationships using branches and landscape as a metaphor. Because of my focus on branch as a symbol, the viewer can enjoy the unified aesthetic of nature on the surface, or they can connect with me in a shared contemplation, if only for a while.

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