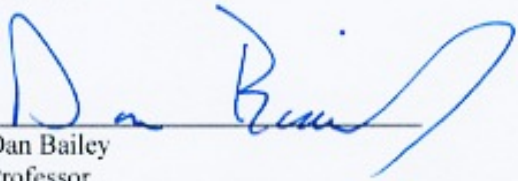


APPROVAL SHEET

Title of Thesis: Fret & Focus: worry explored through observation, projection, display, archive, and documentation

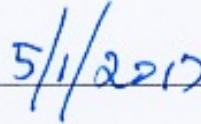
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abstract

“Fret & Focus: worry explored through observation, projection, display, archive, and documentation” is a time-based work made up of 365 microscope slides that physically sample worries allowing them to be observed and archived. Viewing devices are borrowed and hand-made from various found objects and optical devices and fragments. Fret & Focus was comprised of photographs, drawings and installation of the artist’s studio space into the gallery for process to be made clearer for the viewer. The written thesis and gallery installation explore the limits of observation, even when enhanced by technology, as a source of knowledge.

Fret & Focus:

worry explored through observation, projection, display, archive, and documentation

by Melissa Penley Cormier

2017

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, Baltimore County in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

2017

copyright statement

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preface

I make sculptures that make images.

I also collect, capture, and hoard digital images and objects from my surroundings, filling up all available memory and space.

The Fret & Focus project and installation is divided in two parts, and each is home to particular kinds of vision, different types of looking, and varied observations. In this project and exhibition, I explore dichotomous modes of working using worry as source material.

On display in the front of the gallery, is a light table that holds slides that contain a year of worries. Each slide samples and records a daily concern. Physical samples of debris or items related to worry are mounted to the glass slide and marked with the date on the top-right corner. Hanging close to this work are large photographic prints that enlarge the contents of some of these tiny specimens.

The slides and photographs are scientific evidence, records, and data.

Near the back of the gallery, one of these worry slides is projected onto a long translucent film that is suspended from the ceiling. In a darkened space behind this projection, portions of my studio are installed. This laboratory-like space lays bare the questions and

materials of my worries, and remains integral to understanding the process behind the work on display.

Sketches, prototypes, notes, specimens, calculations, cardboard, lamps, lenses, razorblades, pens, pencils, traces, and tape build a working environment centered on possibility. A few of the worry slides are placed in viewing apparatuses cobbled together (*figure 1.*) from discarded equipment and faulty machines. Lamps and lenses cast apparitions and shadows across walls and papered surfaces. On a heavy table, a ladder acts as makeshift shelving to hold some of the fragile objects just out of the viewer's reach, while others remain at table height and near fingertips.

Fret & Focus began as a yearlong experiment in visualizing worry. It was my way to find out what was it like to look at worry. What was it like for worries to be seen? How could worry be displayed? What could be gained by looking closely?

In science, even failed experiments have merit.



Figure 1: Studio prototypes, 2016

dedication

for all who worry and who I have worried about

acknowledgments

Carefully placed and hidden throughout the installation of Fret & Focus are remnants, objects, and bits of ephemera from those who have affected me and my work. By including them in the work, I intend them to be love letters to those who have kept me making, writing, and moving. The work would not exist without the support, inspiration, and illumination from the many people in my life. I owe so many people such a debt of gratitude. I have been given so much.

Many thanks to my thesis committee, Dan Bailey, Timothy Nohe, and Calla Thompson, you kept me on track and focused but let me still follow my path. You have been a source of joy, courage, and endless support.

I am honored that Dr. Rebecca Adelman, Kelley Bell, and Sarah Sharpe agreed to be questioners. Your keen wit and depth of knowledge made me seek you out for this very formal and formidable conversation about my work. Thank you for being a part of this process.

Without the help and enthusiasm of Christopher Peregoy and the endless technical expertise, discussions, articles, diagrams, readings, drawings, bits of random and hidden knowledge, lenses, gadgets, equipment, and interest in antiquated methods, this project would have never have come to light (no pun intended, but I'm leaving it in there). It was wonderful finding camaraderie in a fellow collector of objects, knowledge, and stories.

To Mark Alice Durant, for your direction and guidance with the act of writing my thesis. Without your love of quirky scientific writings and your encouragement, this effort would have been an entirely different beast. Thank you for reminding me of my love of words.

For reading and rereading and editing my thesis, thank you to Cindy Brown, Christian Conrad, Joanna Conrad, and Wes Stitt. Without you, I would make much less sense. Your marginalia and generosity are gold.

Thank you to graduate director, Lisa Moren, and department chair, Dr. Preminda Jacob. Your strength and vision for the graduate program was a tour de force. It was wonderful to see the growth and development happen under your leadership. And to the department of Visual Arts at UMBC for the opportunity to spend three years in a transformative program. Thank you to Michael Woodhouse for all of his help during the installation and to the Center for Art Design and Visual Culture for hosting the exhibition.

Although this thesis situates my work in relationship to the work of a few well-known artists that have guided my practice, many of the most influential art was created by my fellow graduate students, faculty, undergraduate students, and local and visiting artists while I was in this program. Seeing your work, having conversations, and witnessing your struggles and approaches to making art has had a deep and lasting impact. I have

been very lucky to count many of you as friends and can't wait to continue watching all of your careers.

To my partner, Drew Cormier, thank you for every moment you have spent supporting this project and being there for me. The fresh pasta and amazingly well-crafted dinners, notes on the fridge, caring for our pets while I was toiling away on campus or in the studio, and the texts of encouragement kept me centered and moving even when I was otherwise completely overwhelmed. Always know that I am very grateful and love you dearly.

And to anyone who has given me anything: If it was to borrow, thank you for the use, please gently remind me what it was, and be patient as I look. If it was to keep, thank you for the gift. I hope I have given you something in return or can someday.

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Figures 1, 3, and 7 were taken in the studio by Dan Bailey and are used with his permission.

Figures 10-15 are on view in the Center for Art Design and Visual Culture at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County from April 13th-28th, 2017 in the MFA thesis show titled Glass Oil Blood. Photos are by Dan Bailey and are used with his permission.

don't worry

*worry: verb \ 'wər-ē, 'wə-rē 1. to touch or disturb something repeatedly 2. to change the position of or adjust by repeated pushing or hauling 3. to subject to persistent or nagging attention or effort 4. to move, proceed, or progress by unceasing or difficult effort 5. to feel or experience concern*¹

I often don't do what I'm told. I worry. I worry often and I practice it like an instrument, rehearsing the notes and rhythms. I am told that I should not. Just try not to. Don't let it worry you. Don't. Just stop. I have been directed to read numerous self-help books whose pontifications would like to sooth me into apathy or convince me that these worries are not based in reality and then let me in on the secret of simple steps to recovery. Most involve just not worrying.

The bulk of my worries are small, personal things; things that I am told to look away from, or to ignore. Just stop. Just don't. Focus on something else. Just focus. I have spent most of my life trying to let the worry lie in the background of my mind, a dull hum, an emotional tinnitus, aware that I was worrying, but trying to not let it catch up to me. Would it overtake me if I turned to look at it? In the biblical story of Lot's wife, she worried about what befell her home as God destroyed it behind her. Maybe she worried the destruction would also overtake her, or her family, maybe she wanted one last look, or maybe she was just found undeserving. She looked. She was turned to salt.

¹ Edited version of the definition of "worry", taken from multiple dictionaries and rearranged for this project.

Perhaps she was punished for worrying? We are told not to worry. But how and why do we follow this advice? Who is successful? Who measures this success? And who benefits?

A chapter of *Ugly Feelings* by Sianne Ngai entitled “anxiety” explores how anxiety and worry are “expectant emotions” which are less connected to specific objects or goals and are derived more from a lack of power or perceived loss of control². While working on and after displaying this project, the role of gender, and the perceived lack of power of those identifying as women was raised in connection to the theme of worry, especially worry in direct juxtaposition with the more masculine structures of science. Aware that my own gender plays a role in how the project is received, I realized very early in my decision making process that work based on worry had to be presented in a way that would armor it against the quick dismissal of an institution obsessed with research. To be accepted within the gallery space, certain requirements had to be met, but to be accepted into the gallery of a research institution heavily swayed how I chose to present this work. It was this realization that I threw myself into thinking about my work as research.

Thinking about work as research taught me that some learn not to speak about their worries and to not infect others with concern.

But, for me, it seemed important to find the space and dedicate time to focus on something that consumes large portions of my days and nights. By attempting to create

² Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p.209

tangible objects from worries and present them as something scientific to be observed and studied, there was a hope that deeper understanding of the nature of worry might result. Consisting of 366 prepared microscope slides (*fig. 2.*) which were observed, projected, and photographed, *Fret & Focus* is the product of this yearlong research and an attempt to fully explore the worry.



Figure 2: Cicada wing on a microscope slide

Although the work has reached a culmination point, it does not seem to be concluding, but rather, opening new possibilities, new modes of working, new paths, and always more questions (*fig.3*).



Figure 3: Objects and lenses arranged in the studio

looking & knowing

I can't remember when I was first allowed to use the microscope. Like many things from my childhood, it was my brother's hand-me-down, on loan, and to be used carefully. Styrofoam cradled the mechanics and glass slides in an important looking black box, usually stored in the attic. I believed every word on the pamphlet tucked inside which told me that I'd be "able to understand the world" by peering into the eyepiece. It came with, and I exhausted staring at, the prepared slides of dyed onion skin, a bee's stinger, and plant cells. The microscope wasn't allowed to leave the protection of the house, so I would fill the pockets of jackets full of dirt, bugs, feathers, and leaves and sneak through the house up to my bedroom, dumping the contents onto the floor. Then, adjusting the mirror, and carefully placed the specimens under the lens, sometimes crushing them under it as I zoomed in too closely. The images were magnifications of fragments. They were fleeting and the slightest breath or movement would jostle them out of sight. The light was always too dim, the specimens never transparent enough, and the glass seemed dangerous to childish hands, but the infatuation with the ocular device held steady. Notes were made, drawings of the images filled every scrap of paper, and I would stare for hours.

William Burroughs once said, "Nothing exists until or unless it is observed. An artist is making something exist by observing it. And his hope for other people is that they will also make it exist by observing it. I call it 'creative observation. Creative viewing.'" ³What

³ Sobieszek, Robert A., and William S. Burroughs. *Ports of entry: William S. Burroughs and the arts*. Los

was I creating by observing worry? Perhaps Benedetto Croce has the answer? “Art is ruled uniquely by the imagination. Images are it’s only wealth. It does not classify objects, it does not pronounce them real or imaginary, does not qualify them, does not define them; it feels and presents them- nothing more.”⁴ Both notions seemed correct as I worked on *Fret & Focus*.

There is often duality to truth. Can observation lead to great discovery? Perhaps it even brings beautiful things, or truth, into existence.

Observation is essential to research, as is a primary source of gathering data. It is touted as a path to truth and leaned on to support our understanding. The slides in the center of the room are offered up as a primary source for others to see for themselves and behold the origins. The presentation methods of the worries are meant to suggest an empirical⁵ knowledge, even as the subject matter is based on emotion instead of logic. Yet, the information omitted and withheld from the viewer suggests that this work holds more questions than explanations or answers. By coopting methods from western science, there

Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1996.

⁴ F. A. Christie and H. Wildon Carr, "The Philosophy of Benedetto Croce: The Problem of Art and History," *American Historical Review* 33, no. 4 (1928): doi:10.2307/1838399.

⁵ It is important to note that the origin of the word “empirical” is derived from "in the manner of an empiric." An empiric was a member of an ancient sect of doctors who practiced medicine based exclusively on experience, as contrasted with those who relied on theory or philosophy. The name *empiric* derives from Latin *empiricus*, itself from Greek *empeirikos* ("experienced"). It ultimately traces back to the verb *peiran*, meaning "to try, attempt, or experiment." -Merriam-Webster

is an implied truth or authority to the work. This perhaps, although I've not fully explored this notion, seems to be a defense mechanism, akin to a sheep wearing wolves' clothing. Artist Mark Dion uses similar methods of co-opting scientific presentation, often creating large displays of empirical objects and artifacts. Although some of the installations and wunderkammers use traditional scientific display techniques and adopt the language of science and bureaucracy, what viewers find instead is a skillfully curated experience of wonder, often with a narrative element for good measure. His cabinets of collected specimens placed within art galleries/museums from a far look as if they have been borrowed from natural history or archaeology museums. They were an inspiration for how to think and manipulate the gallery space into a site for many different kinds of observation and optical experiences.

Similarly, Dario Robleto's work and writings offer a path for me to think about the importance of objects and materials. His sculptures are composed with care, each item bringing with it a story and its own integrity. Robleto doesn't shy away from science, history, nostalgia, or emotions, usually confronting them and exploring them outright. Although, based on meticulous research, he has admitted to beginning projects by writing questions, by writing poetry and/or by writing fake band names and then searching for the physical objects that can hold answers or echo the text.⁶ Fret & Focus started with a question to myself "What would it look like if I let myself worry?" and the project grew and was influenced by the definition and etymology of the word "worry", that definition I

⁶ Krista Tippet. "Transcript: Dario Robleto - Sculptor of Memory." On Being. July 21, 2014.

then modified to suit my understanding and needs. For the exhibition this modified definition was printed onto the gallery wall.

In his work at the Baltimore Museum of Art, Robleto's "Setlists for a Setting Sun" were presented as large photographs taken from the covers of record albums. The images are samples of closely cropped concert lighting, but instead read as celestial bodies. Their size and colors remind viewers of images released by NASA depicting our nearest planetary neighbors, but the wall text reveals otherwise, questioning what can be known without context. In the center of the room were two large vitrines filled with objects and a pair of sound installations on headphones. Looking through the glass cases filled with blue-dyed objects, news clippings, whale ear bones, and artifacts viewers get a sense of larger forces being referenced by these curated fragments. Like Robleto's work, mine also grapples with scale, history, and a sense of wanting to preserve what can be lost or hidden. Particularly objects and the nostalgia those objects illicit from viewers with similar cultural ties are used to build the work. Just as paint or projections are used, nostalgia is part of the medium as well as its content.

Although we do not work in identical ways, there is a similar love of research and the role of the "citizen scientist" as well as an adaptation of the scientific modes of displaying imagery. There is something seductive in the methods of science, in the presentation of information. Science predicates that if we observe closely and carefully, we will obtain truth.

Observation is tied to sight, even though it is defined as using any of our senses or using tools that interprets data so that we can then perceive it with our senses. Yet for most, to observe implies looking. So much of my adult life has been given over to training myself to look carefully, but this act still often confounds me. And, the more I have read about sight, looking, observation, and the gaze, the more I realize that it seems to still confound many of us.

In *Techniques of the Observer*, for Jonathan Crary's assessment of the distinction between passively looking and actively participating in seeing, he uses the terms observe and observer. He states, "Vision, rather than a privileged form of knowing, becomes itself an object of knowledge, of observation. From the beginning of the nineteenth century a science of vision will tend to mean increasingly an interrogation of the makeup of the human subject, rather than of the mechanics of light and optical transmission."⁷ In *Fret & Focus*, I push at the limits of that statement just a bit. While the project is, at its heart an interrogation of the self, it is as much a celebration of the "mechanics" of sight and observation as anything. The objects which we often rely on to aid in our sight and the means to which we try to record what we have seen often go overlooked.

Some of the objects in the *Fret & Focus* installation may move observers to read them as singular, identifiable objects (i.e. the wasp's nest, the microscope, or the workbench), while others form new relationships and new meanings within their archive and presentation by becoming part of an overwhelming collection of items. Still others,

⁷ Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, p.5

particularly the photographs, know that they are being looked at. Photographs seem to know that they are made to be looked at, and they signal to the viewer that there is something to be gained by viewing them. The frame is a separation, between observer and object. It signals an invitation to look and to know the world, or be known. The framed works also seem to signify a final product, while anchoring the project as something always intended to be displayed in a gallery.

In comparison, the projectors and darkened installation space hint at something more akin to the darkened camera obscura experiments also described in Crary's *Techniques of the Observer*, which made aesthetic, almost mystical experiences using common objects in radical combinations with light, shadow, and observer. The two spaces make reference to a living, changing, and creative space of the studio (*fig.4*) versus the fixed, archived, and preserved space of a gallery. There is much death trapped within the slides.



Figure 4: Lenses and discarded glass organized and traced onto drawing paper

objects, stories & their people

Even fragments of objects can be full and loaded. The slivers of dust, hair, cork, spiders, petals, and string that are trapped between glass seem to carry volumes of associations and thoughts. Displaying these fragments as projected or photographed images might add to these layers. Displaying them within a gallery instead of their original studio setting (*fig.5*) might remove and add still more layers. Perhaps too, every person who views them might bring some new meaning that they might share with me.



Figure 5: Desk in the studio, with optics and found objects

The display of the studio is meant here in the gallery as a window into the working process. It could be seen as some sort of archive itself, or dramatization of an authentic space for discovery. There is a sense that I meant to actually inhabit the gallery as a

working environment. There is always a level of artifice in installation, but then, so too is there a level of drama in working in a studio space.

As the collection of worries and constructed projectors grew, and others were invited to view them, friends returned with objects from their attics, basements and storage lockers. Handed down from fathers, grandfathers, uncles, and great uncles. So far, women originally owned none of these objects, although, sometimes the daughters and wives are now the keepers. Whoever the current owners⁸ are, all have archived these bits of once treasured equipment in their homes. Never or rarely using them, sometimes covered in dust and molds, they moved them from house to house, room to room. They shyly admit that they have no use for them, but could not just throw them away. Sometimes they describe them as an onus.

They learn that I could use it, or make it something else, make it a part of something. That I might care for it, even by taking it apart, but it could continue on and transform or have a home. So they bring all sorts of things to me. They have given me so much that it overwhelms me and the studio. Notes about where each object comes from are made. Each story about the object's owners roll around in my mind as I set up the neglected machinery and puzzle about how to make the best use of them.

⁸ This reinforced my research and personal experience that observation has been sequestered as a purely male activity. That objects and tools for display, such as projectors and cameras, were engendered as male tools or fetish objects. Because science is itself based on observation and within male dominated structures within western society, it presents problems and limits when exploring feminine ideas and experiences. While science offers a path to knowledge and truth, it is not without its own set of prejudices and objectifications.

Often, I think of the work of Diana Shpungin who covers objects, sometimes even entire houses, by hand with graphite. She remarks that her work is about empathy for the object itself and a longing to cover and protect it, even while obliterating its surface. Many times in my own work, I feel torn about whether I am being a good steward of these objects and their stories. I am uncertain if this comes from a traditionally feminine interest in caretaking or mothering or if it is simple animism. I can trace my deep feelings for objects, as many people can, back to a teddy bear given to me and cherished as if it were a personal friend. This affinity for object empathy seems to be both a boon and a burden, and raises questions of how items are given status or personal value.

The gifts were an unexpected bonus of Fret & Focus that kept the work exciting and gave me the opportunity to talk to others about the work, even when it was so personal. There are many people that I would have never otherwise known. The notion that others entrust me to “do something awesome”⁹ with these objects is important to the work. Not that the stories are scandalous or sensational. So far, there were no government secrets or heirloom closet skeletons. There are the smallest of details, triggered from the images on film or the objects, like almost forgotten haikus that distill a moment or describe a fine detail of a person.

“She made all of those hats herself, had all colors. Never to be out done in church.”

⁹ Kelley Bell, when giving me lenses and various accouterments.

“He took meticulous care of his equipment.”

“That was just him. He’d study and research and build the perfect replica of a Japanese meditation garden, but he didn’t meditate a day in his life.”

“He had a pet ocelot. There’s a photo of him with it sitting on his head.”

“She always had on that bright red lipstick.”

“It was the only thing he’d asked for Christmas.”

Even now, I worry and am careful about how much of the stories to keep to myself, and how much to write down. What to give away? What to hold onto? Even putting the quiet words into print seems to betray the gift.

Many of the objects included in the installation are gifts. Notably, artist Mitchell Noah gave me handmade blown-glass spheres that I used as condenser lenses in two of the projectors. Three spheres are included in the installation. Also, a lens from professor Kelley Bell’s grandfather is used in one of the projectors that project a wet-plate image made from one of the worry slides. Finally, the large hornet’s nest perched inside of the ladder holding another projector used to hang above my grandparent’s mantle for over 45 years, before I asked my grandmother if I could possibly have it, which, although visibly confused, she gave to me.

In their white boxes, each glass slide is a sculptural object, a sample, and a data point, as well as a story of a worry.

When describing the project, about documenting worry and viewing it with discarded optics, questions are asked. Very rarely “What does that look like?” or even “Why would you do that?” The conversation is usually “What do you worry about?” “Where do the objects come from?” “Why did you choose this worry, item, or date?” Many are curious to know the secrets behind the images, behind the constructions. There is a great deal of uncertainty about what to reveal. Privacy aside, mostly, it is because I love to watch and listen to others guess. There is joy in mystery and ambiguity.

When I have named or explained a worry, I have found that it often invites an unwelcomed response. What follows then is a very well-meaning list of suggested ointments, salves, and remedies for these ailments. The word “anxiety” itself has medical intonations, which is why, most often I used “worry” or “concerned”. It is important for me to separate this work from anything that could be seen as an illustration or example of anxiety disorders. While I realize that worry and anxiety are linked, I do not equate the two and take issue with how the term anxiety is sometimes used to turn feelings into a disease and remove power from the individual who worries. Anxiety is something a subject “has” like a “cold” or a “headache” while a person actively worries. Named or explained worries are open to diagnosis, healings, salvations, and judgments. For now though, and after much deliberation, they are arranged by date, with little else

explained. Using ambiguity through the lack of true labels or descriptions of the worries offers viewers a chance or opening to be curious and think of their own instances of worry, instead of considering or judging the validity of my specific worries.

glass, light, ladders, tables, drawings, & shadows

After looking at the slides in the microscope, and trying to document them, I plopped one into a 35mm slide projector, just to see if it would make photographing it easier (*fig.6*). An ill fit, it flopped about in the unintended carrier, casting a blur onto the studio wall. I then pushed it into place with my finger and focused the lens, looked up, and caught my breath. This. This is what it felt like to worry, to be caught worrying. Not to be peering into a tiny eyepiece to glimpse a peek, but to have it engross the walls surrounding you, to block your vision of the room, to have it arrest you. Every detail becomes clear if focused correctly, but don't move or else the slightest breathe or jostle and everything is gone.

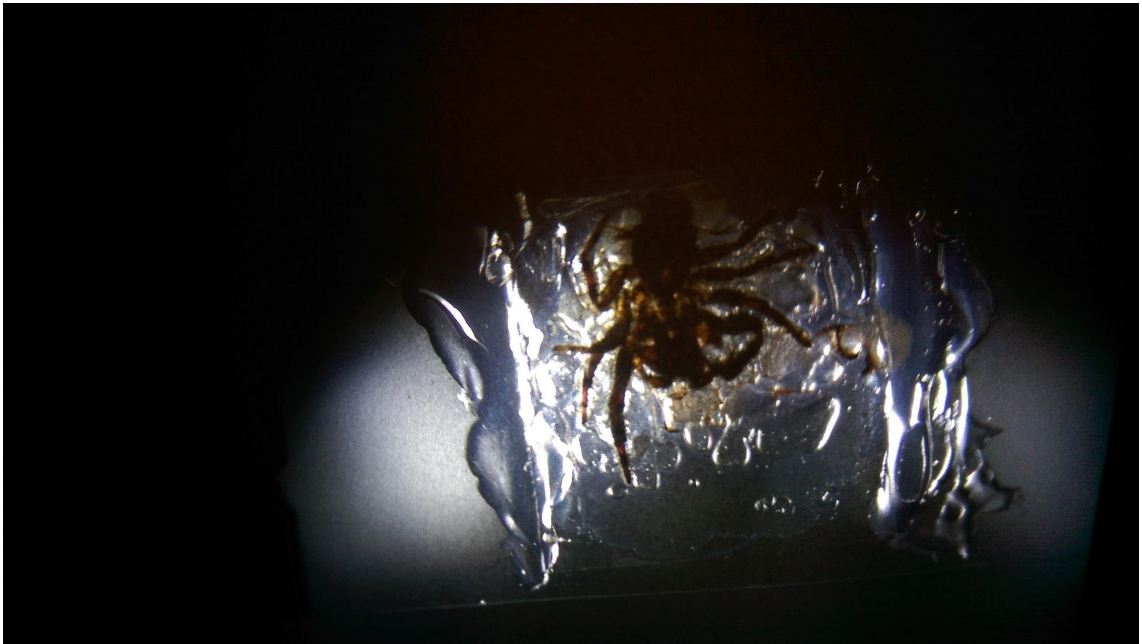


Figure 6: Documentation of one of the first slides projected

The shape of the microscope slide made fitting it into the readymade 35mm projector precarious. So I began deconstructing and reconstructing new projectors from the glut of broken and discarded machines. Once staples in every classroom, they were long obsolete and being removed from dusty closets.

LED lamps were used, making these strange projectors silent, patch-worked, interchangeable, more playful and much less flammable. By removing the burning hot halogen lamps and fans, their elements could be exposed, making them seem just as fragile as the glass slides they were projecting. Found objects were used to shore them up or situate them in the right configurations composed of light, subject, lenses, and surfaces. Making these multiple combinations and witnessing their produced images seemed magical, when they worked.



Figure 7: Constructed projector with microscope slide as subject, in studio

Although *Fret & Focus* is about attempting to measure and record something personal, the work by artist Sarah Sze, *Measuring Stick* is the best example I've seen that captures an obsession with looking and measuring. Her affinity with banal objects also gives me courage to bring the working space into the gallery, and display it with equal importance as the more traditional works.

In *Measuring Stick*, glass, fans, water, mirrors, and paper used as screens display information gleaned from scientific websites. Sze's work was influenced by documentaries such as Charles and Ray Eames's "Powers of Ten" along with other

scientific image-makers¹⁰ in much of the same way that my work considers how scientific images convey instances of truth. This sense of vastness, and of data's ability to overwhelm as easily as it offers insight, is one of the threads running through my work.

Sarah Sze has beautifully explained that "Scientists frame their labs this way - their experiments are always based on a question which guides the initial direction of the research, although the discoveries they make are often quite different to the initial questions. In each space there is the creation of a kind of landscape or field for the mind and body to inhabit, even if for a precise, fleeting moment."¹¹

The installation of the studio in *Fret & Focus*, while modified heavily by its relocation to the gallery space, and despite being tidied for public viewing, deals with this sense of a creative space that others are welcomed into so they can explore. Throughout the show I add to, and move some of, the objects around, because it was still my studio space. I responded to other observers and continued to work and test. Even though the installation was considered a finished work, much like science, it is never final. There is room for hypothesis, research, and new conclusions.

¹⁰ YouTube. April 01, 2016. Accessed April 29, 2017. Sarah Sze: "Measuring Stick" | ART21 "Exclusive" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kaGB5vx1wpw>.

¹¹ <http://www.phaidon.com/agenda/art/articles/2016/april/13/why-sarah-sze-s-words-are-as-intricate-as-her-art/>

science & research or myth & ritual

On preparing a microscope slide, ritual as research:

I get up in the morning. I drink coffee until I can get my legs to step into the shower. I think about the dreams from the night before as I brush my teeth. Sometimes I dream that I have lost them all. They fall out of my mouth and into my hands like marbles. I am told that means that I fear aging, which I worry about all the time.

Awake. I pull the mint floss through the narrowing gaps between my crowded teeth. As it is worked it back and forth, up and down, below the gums just the way I've been shown over and over since I was a child, counting each one, and visually inspect it. The images from dreams are still lingering in the part of my brain that knows it just saw this mouth differently only moments ago. It feels like the same part of the brain that now sees this new complete image, both feel real. These teeth hide behind lips pulled back into a forced smile for the inspection. Everything is intact, healthy, and brushed white with fluoride, triclosan hydrated silica, water, glycerin, sorbitol, PVM/MA copolymer, sodium lauryl sulfate, cellulose gum, questionable flavor, sodium hydroxide, carrageenan, propylene glycol, sodium saccharin, and titanium dioxide¹². I slide the floss out and stare at the gunk on the string. Keeping an eye on it as I walk down stairs and then further down into

¹² <http://www.colgatetotal.com/health-benefits/toothpaste-ingredients>

the basement to a table filled with glue, glass slides, slide covers, and various tools for cutting, pinching, poking and preparing (*fig.8*).



Figure 8: Setup for creating slides

A clean glass slide is placed on the table. The floss is laid on a paper towel, out of the way for a moment. First the date is written on its top right corner, using a Ultra Fine Point Sharpie permanent marker. The fragile glass cover is taken out of its stack in a tiny clear box and silicon based glue is applied in controlled dots. Experience tells me how much glue is enough, but sometimes the tube has other ideas.

I look at the string of floss, choose a section with impressive gunk and use sharp chrome scissors to cut it into a length that fits under the cover. Tweezers from a blue dissection kit help to place it in the middle of the slide then squeeze the glue and cover down over the specimen. Holding it between my thumb and pointer finger for a few seconds so the

clear silicon will set, or working the pressure carefully to get the air bubbles to make their way to the edges.

What was the worry? My father lost most of his teeth to a periodontal disease when he was younger than I am right now. I pulled out all of my baby teeth myself and can still remember the sound. When I had five wisdom teeth surgically removed, the dentist said I had “horse teeth” because the roots were so deep and twisted around the jawbone. I have multiple crowns and a mouth full of fillings. At night I clench my jaw and rock my teeth back and forth against each other, wiggling the roots away from their bases. Also at night, I also chew long scars into the insides of each cheek.

Any of these could be the subject. Many of the slides are centered on the fragility, unreliability, and complications of the body.

And yet, each microscope slide isn’t this easy, straightforward, this illustrative, or immediate. Sometimes I’d walk around all day with something in my pocket to take home and glue down to glass. Sometimes I avoided recording a worry because the right thing couldn’t be found, the right souvenir. There doesn’t seem to be a lack of worries to pick from, so something else was chosen that day. Later I’d find the perfect bit or sliver that allows me to record that particular care.

The intent for Fret & Focus was to continue for a full year, and then reevaluate. The year began on my birthday, and ended on the following birthday. It would be a record of one

revolution around the sun. The samples collected physically acknowledge the presence of a particular worry on a particular day. This was a leap year.

It was helpful to use some sort of structure or order, to keep a hold of the project and give it some boundaries. So I adopted the scientific method I'd been taught in grade school, collecting data, observing, and making a hypothesis, then reevaluate. I decided I would collect daily data points, instead of attempting to collect every worry. The sampling needed to be robust, but not overwhelming. The daily act of identifying and collecting these specimens became a ritual, a way of marking time with a physical object and action to recognize a phenomenon. During the day I would use my own body as an instrument to "read" a moment that was filled with worry. As I became better at recognizing the feeling, the slides then became more precise, less general, and often more abstracted from the signified worry. While I admit to being enamored with science, it is a field that I have turned away from for many years because of its shortcomings and biases towards privileging the masculine and logic while diminishing the felt or intuitive experiences.

chaos and clarity

After a year of worry, allowing myself to worry, and allowing others to witness it, this is what I have observed:

There was no end to the worry.

What was not worried about, and what was not included in this set of worries, is just as important as what was sampled and studied. There have been times in life when I would have worried about where the next meal was coming from, if the electricity bill was paid, or how to address health issues during the times I was uninsured. This project would have proven impossible, due to the chaos, instability, and lack of resources. I am thankful for the opportunity and support from my family and community.

I am not an unbiased observer, collector, scientist or human. I cannot be.

Fret & Focus is as much a sampling of the surroundings and environment as it is anything else.

Had I been still teaching or keeping bees, how would the samples have changed? Had I still been a florist, or occupied at a desk job, how they would have changed? Had I been in any other family at any other time, in any other part of the world? Had this been any

other year. Had I been less educated or more. Had I been in a different economic class?
Had I been any other race, ethnicity, or nationality. Had I been a man.

This is not an indexical representation of all worries ever. It cannot be.

Yet, I have enjoyed looking and listening, receiving and giving.

The work itself has begun to move back towards the nest (*fig.9*), the lab, and the process of gathering materials and delighting in new combinations. I hope to work more with others and their stories, to research and to observe, and to explore new sites, spaces and emotions, even while continuing to worry.



Figure 9: Installation view of process wall, an installation of the studio in the gallery

additional images from the gallery installation of Fret & Focus:

On view in the Center for Art Design and Visual Culture at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County from April 13th-28th, 2017 in the MFA thesis show titled *Glass Oil Blood*. All of the following images are by Dan Bailey and used with his permission.



Figure 10 Light table, photographs, projection



Figure 11: Projection and photographs



Figure 12: Work station, projection, and shadow



Figure 13: Worktable, projection, print

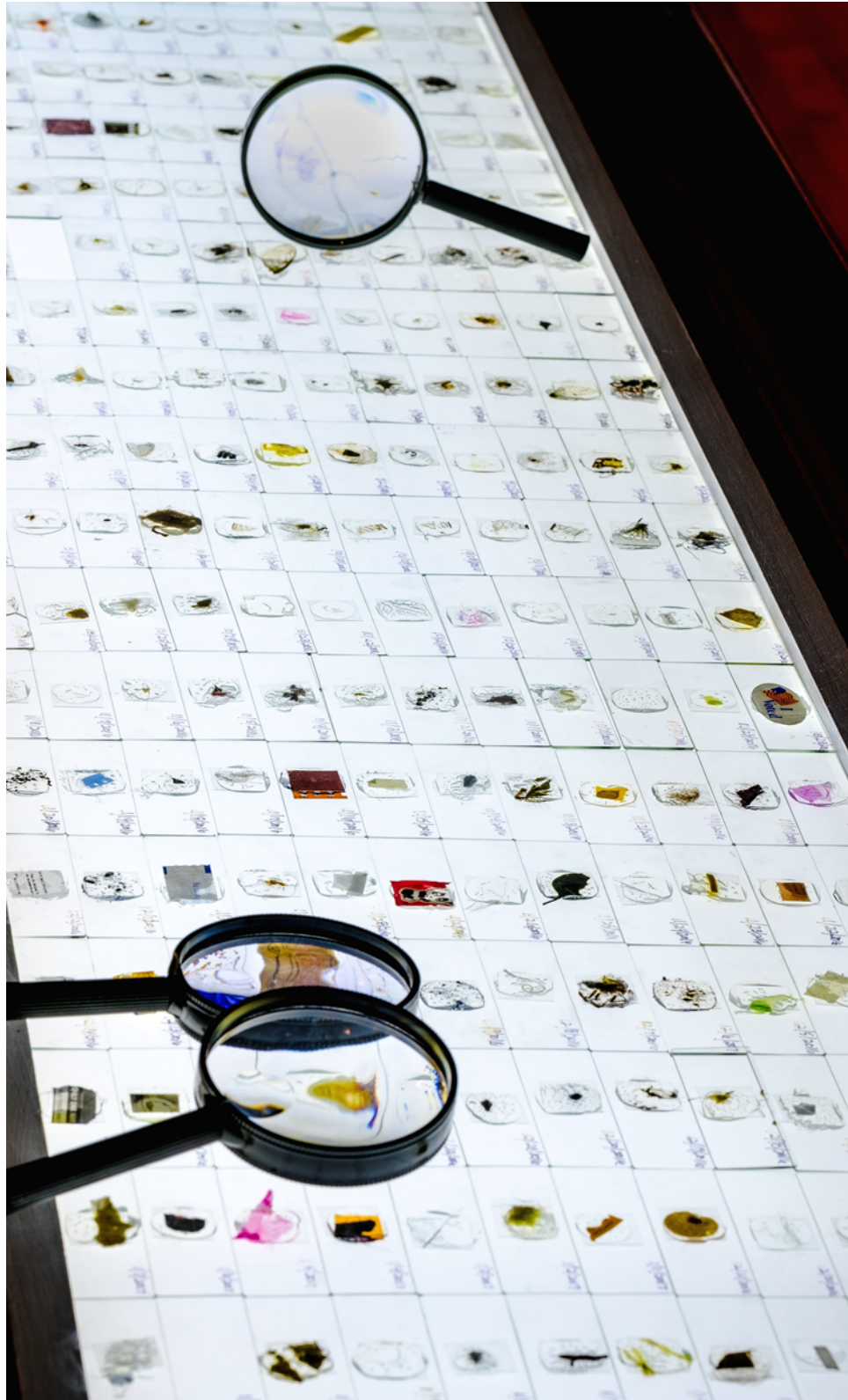


Figure 14: Worry slides and magnifying glasses



Figure 15: Light table, worry slides, and projection

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list of artists, influential work

Abigail DeVille, Only When It's Dark Enough Can You See The Stars

Adam Fuss, Ark

Ann Hamilton, Indigo Blue Books

Chris McCaw, Sunburn

Christian Marclay, All Over (Gospel Songs)

Colin Ives, Vibrant Landscapes

Diana Shpungin, Ghost Limb (Split)

Dieter Roth, Wait, Later This Will Be Nothing

Dario Robleto, Setlists for a Setting Sun

Hiroshi Sugimoto, Seascapes

John Wood, Fall Creek Rock Drawing Portfolio

Kiki Smith, *Constellation*

Linda Connor, July 23, 1903 (Glass negatives from the Lick Observatory Collection)

Maggie Nelson, Bluets

Mark Dion, Tate Thames Dig

Paul Sharits, N:O:T:H:I:N:G

Pauline Oliveros, Deep Listening

Sarah Sze, Measuring Stick

Susan Derges, Moons

Tacita Dean, The Green Ray

Walead Beshty, Passages

