

University of Alaska Fairbanks

Art Department

Art of the Mudsuckle Ritual

BFA Degree Thesis Exhibition Report

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The days of childhood seemed to be an endless supply of hours to do all the nothing I desired. To skip rocks in the lake or soak my feet in the creek. To doodle on a notepad, feed the camp robbers, or wander the woods. It is those lazy days as a child when the world felt vast and possibilities endless that I often return to in my art. It is a therapeutic exercise that enables me to process my own emotions and experiences and get them onto paper. To share them in a way that recaptures the wonder and mystery of the world that is so often lost with age.

It was a beaver pond that provided some of the greatest adventures my sister and I had as children. Taking a few old inter tubes and a beat up piece of plywood we would sail the ocean and search for buried treasure in far away lands. The family dog spying from the shoreline as we paddled through other worlds and escaped the humdrum of reality. It was a place and a time of our own creation. It is also a place I have returned to over the years as can be seen in one of the works displayed in my thesis show. A digital painting of the two main characters of my storybook balanced precariously on their “ship” as the dog eyes them from the shore. It is intended to convey the whimsy and energy of youth by drawing heavily from my own childhood experiences.



One of the earliest, finished, pieces for the storybook.

This is what draws me to art. To make sense of my own world and to bring to life adventures running through my mind. This is one of the reasons I enjoy cartooning. It is not meant to be a perfect reflection of reality, but rather an interpretation of it. It exaggerates for emphasis and can communicate truths about the world and humanity in a very approachable and unassuming manner. For example, my introduction to Einstein's theory of relativity came from Bill Watterson's comic strip.

It was from comics such as Garfield, Peanuts, and Calvin and Hobbes that I learned to enjoy art. Desiring to doodle my favorite characters and tape them to my wall. While I was having fun I was also learning new vocabulary and concepts that would remain with me as I grew older. Ethics, philosophy, poetry, and art all presented in an accessible package of fun and adventure. It is what keeps me drawing today!

Animation has also had a tremendous influence on my art style. The exaggeration in pose and expression. The approach of constructing characters from simple shapes to convey distinct attributes. The over exaggeration of features to express emotion and action. These are all things that I try to keep in mind while I draw. Yet it is not just visual art that has impacted my artistic practice. Literature has played a large part in contributing ideas and concepts as well.

As a child I loved the Bernstein Bears books. Maybe not classic literature, but most kids start with children's books and I was no different. Then I moved on to The Hardy Boys and in time I discovered Edgar Allan Poe. I was instantly drawn to the bizarre nature of his tales. *The Black Cat*, *The Tell-Tale Heart*, and *The Cask of Amontillado* are stories I have continued to revisit since that time. Also the work of H.P. Lovecraft and any number of books on all things odd and unexplainable. While the story presented in my BFA show is not as dark, it does play

with the idea of the mysterious and unknown. Where better to find mystery than 221B Baker Street.





Sherlock Holmes is a character I have enjoyed for many years and it was from one of his adventures, *The Musgrave Ritual*, that the storybook presented in my show was inspired. While making very liberal changes and incorporating many of my own experiences it was fun to begin with a seed from one of my favorite stories and tell an alternate tale set in Alaska with a fictionalized version of a community I grew up living next to.



As a kid in a small Alaskan town there was more mystery and lore than one might imagine. Such as the summer the stranger known locally as “The Van Man” spent hanging around town or the time a guy with a long beard and lean figure, as if he stepped out of a Jesus film, walked the highway pulling a cart. One of the biggest sources of mystery was the small community who lived across the river. My best friend and I would go to the river bank, climb the bluff, gaze out across the water and occasionally catch a glimpse of them. Smoke from a fire, sounds of equipment, or on rare occasions even see people on the other side. It was from these experiences that the idea of the Mudsuckle community in the storybook is drawn.

The Mudsuckle Ritual is a rhyming story set in the fictional Alaskan town of Dixon City.

The story focuses on a small P.I. office where a kid named Axel is learning the business from his uncle alongside his best friend Annabelle and his dog Rascal. The story kicks off with the arrival of Jeremiah, a member of the mysterious Mudsuckle community that lives across the river. His cousin has gone missing and he needs the Bonehead Detectives to find him. Axel and the team must face their fears and unravel fact from folklore to find their man. The key to solving the case, and forever changing the world of this mysterious community, lies in their ability to decipher the ancient Mudsuckle ritual.

 <p>THE DOOR FLEW OPEN, CLUTTERED AND CRASHED RAIN POUNDING IN AS THE LIGHTNING FLASHED THE THUNDER ROARED SOMETHING UNFORDWARD THEN MR. MUDSUCKLE FLOATED THROUGH THE DOOR</p>	 <p>HE SPOKE WITH THE VOICE OF ONE WHO'D EXPIRED "I AM JEREMIAH MUDSUCKLE, THE THIRD, ESQUIRE" JERRY RELAYED THE STORY, BIZARRE, AND SUCINCT OF HIS MISSING COUSIN AND NEVER EVER BLINKED</p> <p>"I SAW ZADOCK, THREE DAYS PAST, IN THE MORNING RECYTLING THE RITUAL LIKE SOME KIND OF WARMING HE GAVE A WINK AND A SMILE SAID NOW HE KNEW WHAT TO DO AND RAN OUT WITH A BOWL FULL OF STEW"</p>
<p>p. 1</p>	<p>p. 4</p>
 <p>"WHAT WAS THAT?" AXEL SAID, "THE SEASHORE?" SONGS OF A BIRD WE'D NEVER EVER HEARD BEFORE HIGH AND SWEET, WE EXCLAIMED, "THE GREENS!" TWEET TWEET, GRIM, GIANT MUSHROOMS, THE TWINS!</p>	 <p>"RASCAL! YOU DIRTY DOG! STOP LICKING MY FACE AND WHILE YOU'RE AT IT, YOU CAN GET OFF MY LEG!"</p>
<p>p. 18</p>	<p>p. 32</p>

One of my favorite avenues for deciphering the world around me, since I was a kid, has been to draw with a ballpoint pen. To fill pages with doodles of characters, landscapes and comics. While this is still a favorite practice of mine, since joining the BFA program I have enjoyed many other mediums, most prominently charcoal. I had never used charcoal before my beginning drawing class, but I loved how malleable it was and quickly began to try to create characters with it.



A look at my approach to a charcoal character

There are a number of examples in the BFA show of my continued work with charcoal. Playing with the soft quality of the medium and contrasting that with sharp borders created by taping off portions of the paper. This is a medium I would like to continue to work with in the future and learn to more effectively communicate with it. Working in charcoal provides a wonderful break from my work in other mediums and gives me a chance to focus on value without being distracted by color. There is an elegance to black and white images that can be lost when rendering an image in a colored medium. That being said, the other medium that is heavily represented in my show is digital, where there is copious amounts of color.

What first drew me to the digital medium was the desire to illustrate stories. On a digital device I can write a story, illustrate it, and publish it all on my own. I can create high quality images that are perfect for collecting in a storybook or a graphic novel. These days digital art can mean anything from manipulating photos to hand drawing on a tablet or “commissioning” AI to create an image for you. My approach is to hand draw and paint with a stylus. My favorite tools are utilized on an iPad using Procreate and an Apple pencil. They allow me to create in the way I would with a simple Bic, yet easily collect those drawings into a book without the need of photographing or scanning them. Regardless of medium my style and approach remain rather consistent. The medium is just the means of expression, the purpose remains the same.



A digital landscape examining the world of the storybook

The purpose of my BFA show, The Art of The Mudsuckle Ritual, is to give viewers a look at my art generally and what was involved in making the storybook, and it’s smaller spin off projects, specifically. It is arranged in a rather linear way. Walking into the gallery on the left the viewer see the artist statement which highlights some general points about my work and reasons for pursuing art. Then it moves to several pieces that highlight backstories that a reader of the book would not know from the story itself. These are fun for me because I get to explain

how my own experiences have helped shape the story, but this is not information needed by the viewer to enjoy the story or the artwork.

The first of these I mentioned earlier, two of the main characters on a raft. The second, is a look at the early inspiration for the character of Axel. The early concept for this kid with curly red hair, freckles, and a reserved excitement for life came from a childhood friend of mine named Anthony. He was energetic, kind, and a big fan of the Disney Afternoon show Bonkers. A show about an anthropomorphic bobcat who solves crime. Anthony and I spent many hours together, in and out of class, avoiding homework, sharing frustrations, and talking nonsense. Unfortunately, he passed away far too young, just in his teens. It has been many years since I last saw his smile or heard him laugh, but it was through revisiting those old memories that I found the starting point for Axel.

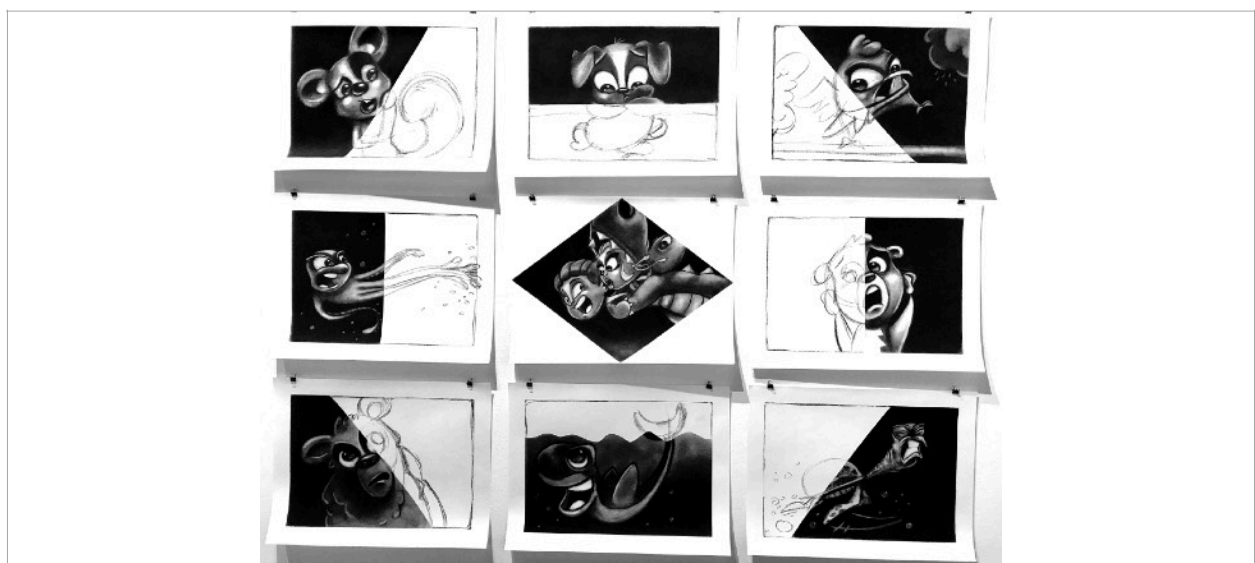
 <p>This page was the first fully constructed and colored piece for this project. While not in the story itself it is one of my favorites! It depicts Axel and Anabelle floating on a homemade raft while being spied on from the shoreline by Rascal. While the piece was designed to be a blueprint for the style of the illustrations to follow, the concept comes from my own childhood. On our many visits to a little cabin in the woods a favorite activity of my sister and myself was to throw a beat up piece of plywood on top of a few inner tubes, cut out onto the beaver pond, and go exploring! All the while being watched by the family poodle from the shoreline. It is these fond memories that make this piece extra special to me.</p>	 <p>One of the main characters of the story is Axel, a kid with curly red hair, freckles, and a reserved excitement for life. This character is loosely based on a childhood friend of mine named Anthony. He was energetic, kind, and a big fan of the old Disney afternoon cartoon, Bonkers. A show that featured an anthropomorphic bobcat who solves crime. Anthony and I spent many hours together, in and out of class, avoiding homework, sharing frustrations, and talking nonsense. Unfortunately, Anthony passed away for too young, just a teenager. It's been many years since I last saw his smile or heard him laugh, but it was through revisiting those old memories that I found the starting point for Axel.</p>
<p>Backstory of an illustration</p>	<p>Inspired by my childhood friend Anthony</p>

Moving down the wall the audience sees the early stages of the story's development. A collection of concept art, from sketches on scraps of paper, post it notes, and newsprint to gradually more refined characters and views of their world coming into shape. The idea of this section is to be presented as work area. To have loose, overlapping pages up on the wall and on

the table, random ideas, some in the book and some that did not make the final cut. It is designed to look like a creative space, filled with ideas and doodles that slowly come together as the viewer moves through the show.

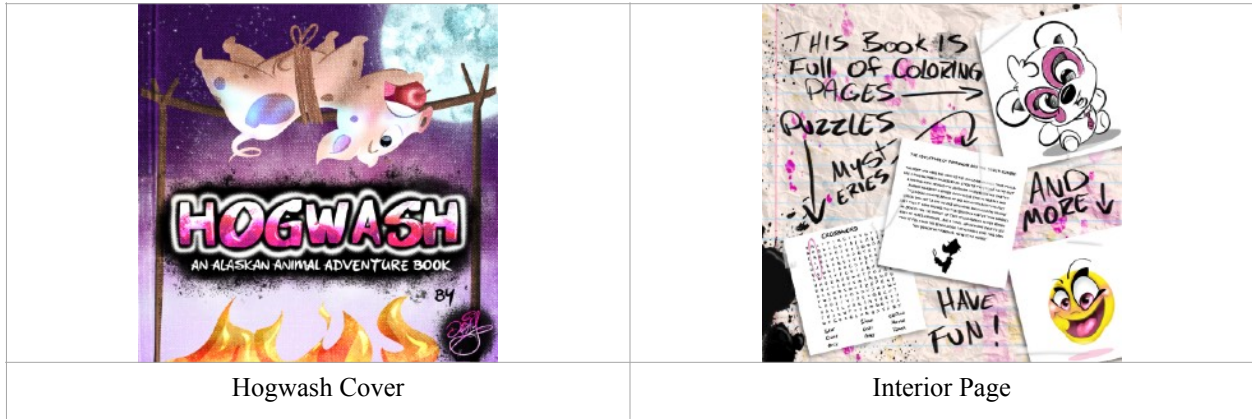
There are charcoal drawings on larger pieces of paper that explore not only the world of the storybook, but also the medium. Experimenting with light and shadows, crisp borders and soft transitions of value. As well as leaving the movement found in the initial sketch for viewers to see while refining a portions of the picture.

This leads to the first spin off project. A series of nine charcoal pieces, primarily Alaskan animals reacting to a specific event. These pieces are split so as to show a portion of the drawing more finished and the other portion left as an initial sketch. There are multiple reasons for this. First, it gives the viewer a side by side example of the first step and the last step of the process. A small nod to concept sketches that I personally enjoy immensely. Secondly, it helps to reinforce the conceptual ideas behind the project partially inspired by wab-sabi. That nothing is finished, nothing is perfect, and nothing lasts.

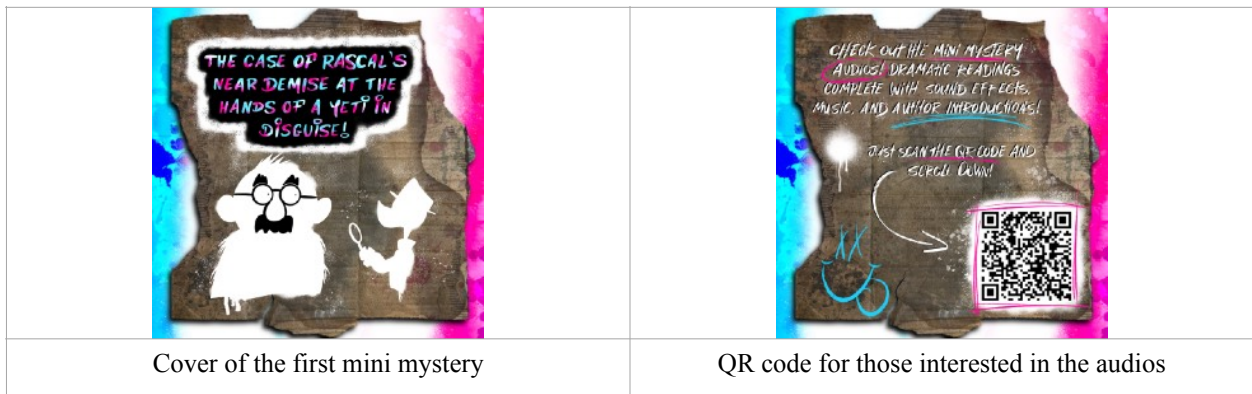


The series of animals reacting to the central image, “the abomination of affection”

A number of these animals appear, along with a character from the main storybook, in the second spin off project, *Hogwash*. This is a simple activity book with coloring pages, mini mysteries, puzzles, and other fun material. As the viewer makes their way to the far wall they find framed charcoal pieces of characters in the main storybook.



Moving around the room the view comes to the first prints of finished storybook pages on foam board. A set of mini mysteries included at the back of the book as a fun bonus. These brief accounts are each told from a different characters perspective, but relay events that happen at the same time with the stories converging at the end. An extra feature available for the viewer will be the option to listen to these mini mysteries in a dramatic reading with music and sound effects. All they need to do is scan a QR code on the wall and they can listen as well as read and find introductions to each story that are not found in the book.



Finally the viewer is greeted by a series of framed pages from the book, book posters and a copy of the book itself. There will also be a tv screen on the final wall that will play a looping six minute time-lapse video of the creation of a handful of different pieces. This gives viewers a chance to see me draw and get an idea of how I approach a piece. Finally there are the books themselves and another small table with cards, additional artwork, and a guestbook.



While this show displays my art, it is focused primarily on one project. It is about the metaphorical road traveled to arrive at the finished project, and detours taken along the way, rather than showcasing different styles or projects completed throughout my time in the BFA program. With that being said the show will give insight into the kind of work I enjoy as an artist. Each viewer will be able to capture from the show the illustrative styles, mediums, the style of writing, and subject matters that I focus on and find interesting.

When thinking about what I want people to take from my art, I have come to the conclusion that the reason I create and the reason I share are different. While it is a perfectly valid question to ask what I desire others to get from my art, I feel that this is not the way I approach art and certainly not why I create. I am not intending to communicate a certain

message to a specific audience. I take a more myopic approach. Art is a therapeutic exercise that allows me to process my own emotions and experiences and express those on the page. Ultimately I am my own target audience because the creation of art is a restorative process for me. It is reflective and introspective. That, of course, does not mean it is only for me.

As individuals playing a small part in the larger theatre of humanity we all share similar experiences and emotions that others can identify with. My artistic practice is a personal journey made available for others to see. More like the fisherman casting their line into the water than the hunter targeting a specific bull. I participate for the sunshine, fresh air, and peaceful babbling of the stream, but if something nibbles that is a wonderful bonus. When someone can identify with a situation, emotion, or experience shared in one of my pieces and get a laugh or wave of nostalgia then I am overjoyed. If they can recapture a bit of the wonder and mystery of their own childhood through my artwork then I am delighted. It may be a byproduct of why I create, not the reason itself, but it is a very rewarding experience and it is the reason I share my art.