

REFLECTIONS

## ***Dénouement*: A Subjective Reflection on Death, Loss and Grief through Animation Practice**

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Death, a universal human experience, has been represented and understood in numerous ways throughout time and across cultures. *Dénouement* is a practice-based research project that engages with the emotionally fraught and complex experience of losing a loved one. The research positions the medium of hand-drawn animation as rich territory for exploring visual expressions of the internal, psychological, and abstract dialogue when grieving. As a personal reflection of in-articulable feelings, the aim is not to show the world as it is but as it is travelled through psychologically.

The final short film underpins the practitioner's passion for drawing the world (as they see it), moving it in time and moving those who view the work, emotionally.

### **The reflective *dénouement* of my Masters journey**

A safety concern often arose because of *Dénouement*'s emotionally draining subject. An autoethnographic framework was the building block of the making process, reinforcing truthful musings to the forefront. Throughout my research, the feelings, contemplations, aesthetic discoveries, navigation and anxieties weaved firmly within the discussion. I travelled across melancholia to land in celebratory discovery and back again, constantly questioning if the project was sustainable as my health declined.

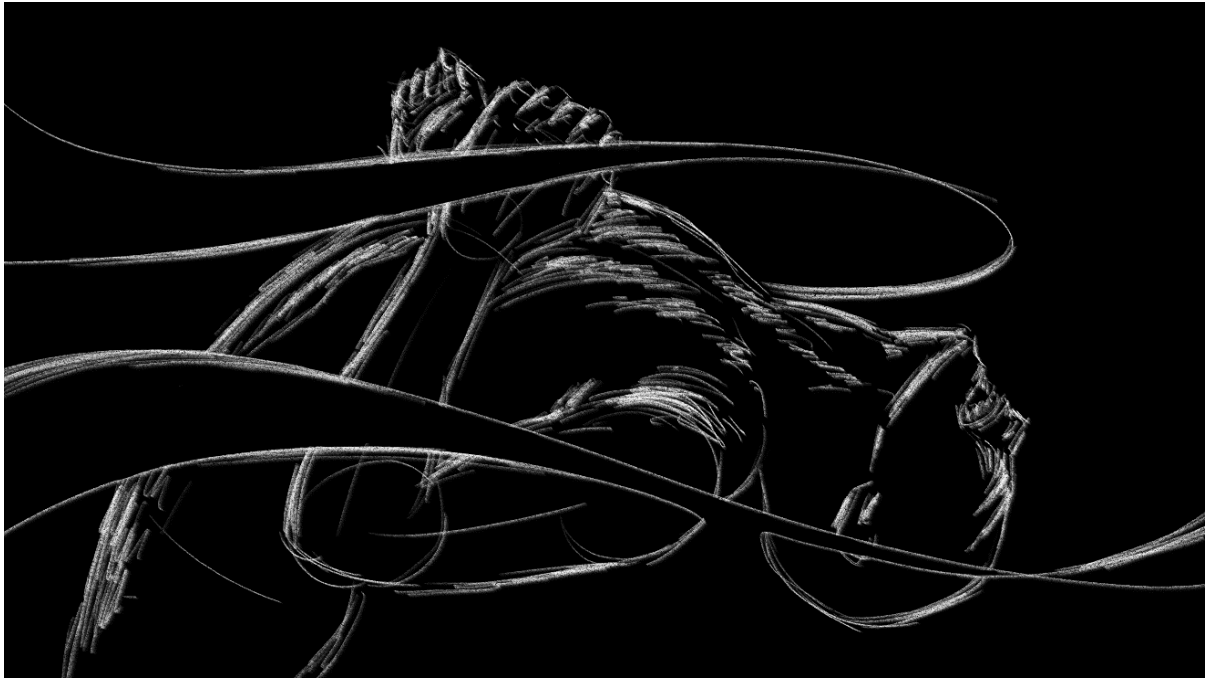


Figure 1. Lesley Ung. *Iterative Drawing - Pain*, 2021, digital illustration, Auckland

There was a reluctance to overshare, and I could not articulate or compartmentalise my ambivalent feelings to people around me. These observations ignited the exploration of my own anxieties and this personal discomfort around loss, using a medium that comforts me. However, in doing so, the personal contemplations created a daily ritual — to think, feel, and dream about death, loss and grief.

Heightened by COVID-19, the subject tossed me into a deep emotional space where death, fear of losing loved ones, and life's fragility came forward. Due to mass isolation and increased health awareness (collectively and individually), I believe people had to grapple with complex feelings unfamiliarly. I certainly felt the pressure and struggled with understanding why I felt so hopeless, inarticulate and debilitated.

My nightmares were at a pique during this time, vividly fabricating a world to support my rising fears. I lacked sufficient sleep, and the daily encounters of loss (within a dream state) made unreal things feel real. These painted illusions appeared during my expected resting hours, creating tangible-feeling sequences that reaffirmed subconscious worries. While not concrete in reality (or happening in real-time), I woke up believing I had experienced loss. Months passed where this repeated, and unwillingly, I experienced the death of people I could not fathom being gone. As a result, I drained out emotionally, physically and mentally, while keeping a front for contentment.

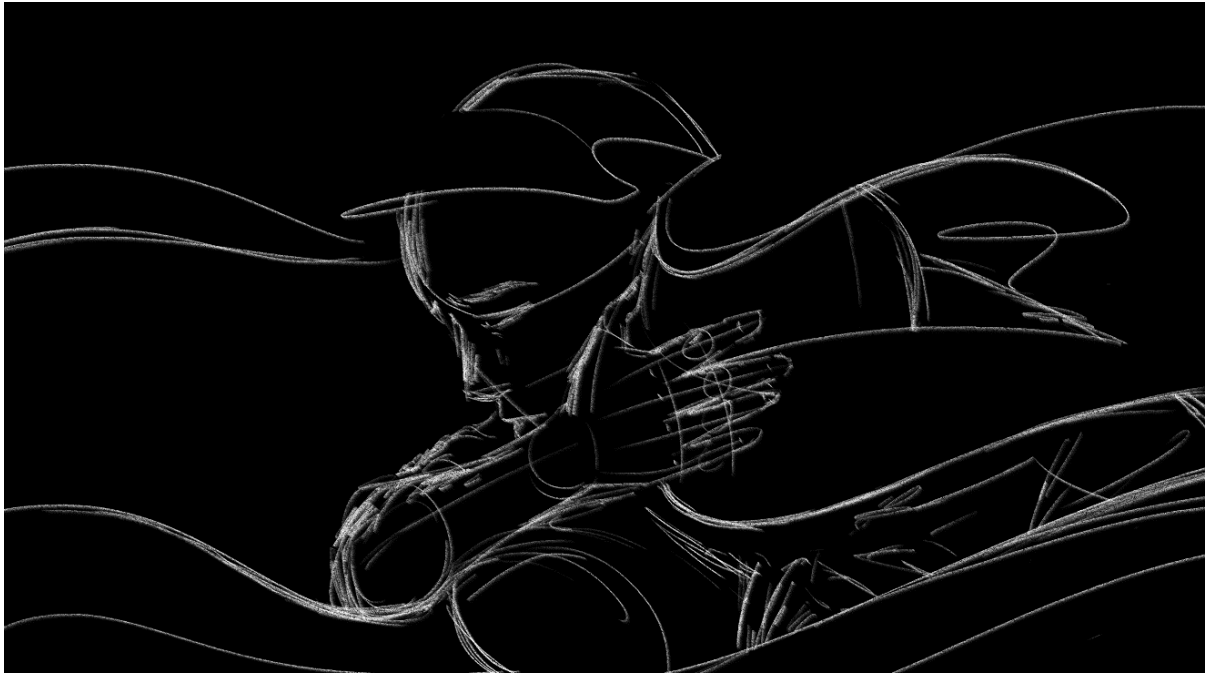


Figure 2. Lesley Ung. *Iterative Drawing - Embrace*, 2021, digital illustration, Auckland

As I have moved away from the project for some time (since its completion), I realised the emotions I grappled with throughout this journey never left, nor did the nightmares truly disappear. It is as if they are waiting to be called on daily, teasing its presence in my mundane life. Recalling these memories, emotions, and nightmares remains a challenging conversation I have yet to share with those around me. As potent as it is in my artefact, the vulnerability was something I did not prepare for during my Master's exhibition of *Dénouement*. The best way to describe it is, standing anxiously in a cold room, opening up your metaphorical heart and mind to let an audience see your most fragile self.



Figure 3. Emily Parr (photographer). *Shot: Enter – Exhibition*, 2022, photography, Auckland

I remember pacing back and forth, wondering, “what do people think of my work?” and “what do they think of me?”. I refused to walk into the space, almost afraid to interrupt the immersion for the audience. While I was extremely grateful for the celebratory support around me, I was deeply uncomfortable seeing my work. My contemplations on a large scale made me face those feelings again, but now in public. While animating the film, I was in the privacy of my home, with tears washing over my desk. At the exhibition, tears glazed over my eyes while I stubbornly refused their release.

As people embraced me with loving support, I realised how inarticulate I was, especially in being questioned, “how do you feel?”. I struggled with giving a clear answer, defaulting to being glad I had finished the project. It eventually struck me that what I felt played on loop in Gallery 3 — whatever I visualised in the animation was how I currently (and previously) felt. *Dénouement* captured a specific combination of feelings not solely constrained to a particular time in my life. Essentially, to explain how I felt (or will feel again), I direct people to my film. It became a tool that communicates difficult feelings more effectively for myself, through visual language, abstraction, drawing and animation practice.



Figure 4. Emily Parr (photographer). *Illustrations: Tired – Exhibition*, 2022, photography, Auckland



Figure 5. Emily Parr (photographer). *Illustrations – Exhibition*, 2022, photography, Auckland

Though it still feels quite odd, I have concluded my most significant project to date in terms of quality, scope, and emotional weight. My vulnerability, while being uncomfortable to discuss, allowed for an open space to validate feelings as they are, without needing labels to articulate what they are. As a milestone, this has allowed reflection on my interest areas and my growth as a person. I expect my understanding to evolve as I revisit the project one day, and I am excited about more life experiences that will shape my thinking. As its own dénouement, this reflective piece becomes another farewell and I hope the work propels thoughtful conversations, igniting your own contemplations of the humbling human experience.



Figure 6. Lesley Ung. *Shot: Reach – Still Frame*, 2022, digital animation, Auckland

