

ECO-OBSESSED

By

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Abstract of Project in Lieu of Thesis Presented to
the College of Fine Arts of the University of Florida
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the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

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“I have been diagnosed with eco-obsession,” the narrator says, introducing and contextualizing the subsequent visual and aural information in the video installation *Eco-Obsessed*. This work expresses my beliefs about greenwashing and the current state of the environmental movement in a consumer-based culture. *Eco-Obsessed* is a nine-minute video installation comprised of three separate videos projected onto adjacent walls. Each video is distinct and shows different aspects of the character’s eco-obsession: collecting compostable materials, buying eco-friendly products, communing with nature, and performing compulsive rituals. The audio consists first of a narrator making confessional statements about her supposed affliction, then partway through the piece transitions to the ambient sound of her ritual performances.

My artistic voice has always been a voice for environmentalism. This work explores the current trend in environmentalism toward an ethic of personal responsibility. *Eco-Obsessed* takes both a humorous and cynical look at this trend by introducing a character who has taken this ethic of personal responsibility to heart so that it consumes her thoughts and behaviors – it has become an obsessive disorder. Or has it? One is left to wonder if this is an unhealthy

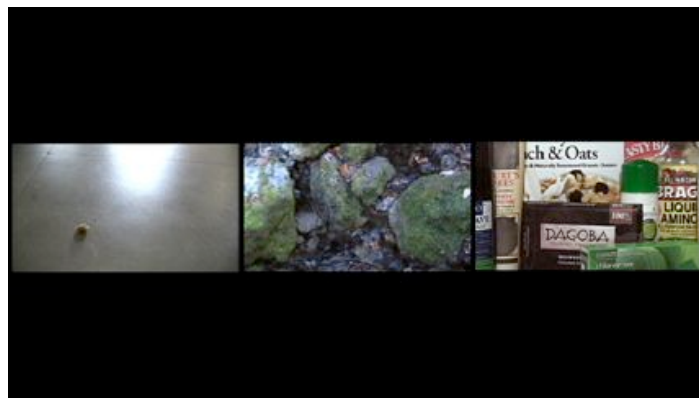
amount of concern for one's environmental impact or if it is appropriate. It would depend on the viewer's stance toward environmentalism. In this way, one is forced to consider their own behaviors as well as to make judgments upon the character. One must consider if she is psychologically disturbed and if her actions are fruitless.

This work introduces a character that is plagued by recurring thoughts, guilt, and ritualistic attempts to gain control over the cause of her affliction. Because her disorder is based solely on environmental issues, it brings up questions of how we define a psychological disorder and the contemporary idea of a consumerist culture "going green" by merely modifying products rather than consumption practices. While by no means attempting to discredit the importance of reducing waste and maintaining eco-conscious buying habits on the individual level, my work serves to question and accuse this strategy of shifting responsibility for environmental problems away from corporate and political entities to the individual consumer.

INTRODUCTION

“I have been diagnosed with eco-obsession,” the narrator says, introducing and contextualizing the subsequent visual and aural information in the video installation *Eco-Obsessed*. This work expresses my beliefs about greenwashing and the current state of the environmental movement in a consumer-based culture. *Eco-Obsessed* is a nine-minute video installation consisting of three separate videos projected onto adjacent walls. Each video is distinct and shows different aspects of the character’s eco-obsession: collecting compostable materials, buying eco-friendly products, communing with nature, and performing compulsive rituals. The audio consists first of the narrator making confessional statements about her supposed affliction, then partway through the piece transitions to the ambient sound of her ritual performances. The narration and each of the three videos can be considered separate elements of the work that come together to form a comprehensive representation of my outlook on the subject of green consumerism and the state of environmentalism today. This paper will examine each of these elements that comprise the video installation separately as well as how the elements work together visually and conceptually to form a cohesive whole. I will discuss my art practice and how it has led me to this project, and I will offer the reader information regarding the critique of

environmentalism put forth in the piece as well as how this work relates to contemporary and historical art practices with an emphasis on activist art,



environmental art, and performance art. For practicality I will hereafter refer to the three videos

in the installation as ‘left video’, ‘center video’, and ‘right video’. One should understand that all three videos play at the same time and these designations refer only to the spatial organization of the piece.

The term greenwashing has two main uses: to describe a corporation’s attempts to present itself or its product as environmentally friendly (while in fact the reverse is true) and to describe green consumerism - the marketing of so-called eco-friendly goods. My work focuses on the latter definition. *Eco-Obsessed* examines the idea of greenwashing not only as a strategy designed to sell products – which would describe all types of advertising – but as a practice that endangers the public’s perception of the condition of the environment. The danger of greenwashing is that by placing a strong emphasis on consumers’ choices as a solution to environmental problems the model of consumption is allowed to perpetuate and changes to this model will not be demanded by a public so long as they are appeased by their supposed ability to ‘do less harm’. The major environmental organizations also play into this by offering solutions to their members that focus exclusively on the individual’s behaviors and shopping choices. My argument is not that these are bad or pointless practices, nor that environmental organizations should not be advocating for them, but when put forth as the only solutions it seems to suggest that we can go on maintaining our current lifestyles indefinitely as long as we make efforts to conserve resources and reduce waste along the way. It seems to propose that the only change that needs to happen to get us off the fast track to environmental devastation is in the *way* we do things, rather than the *things* we do.

In the scenario presented in *Eco-Obsessed*, the speaking character has taken the idea of personal responsibility put forth by green advertising and environmental organizations to heart, and it has brought her to the point of an obsession with the ecological impact of her actions.

Conversely, one might perceive the character's oration to describe actions and thoughts that are not so far-fetched and reflect an awareness of the environment in all of her decisions. The audience is left to decide for themselves if the character should be considered psychologically unstable and if "eco-obsession" is a new condition that should be evaluated and treated by psychiatric professionals or if the statements she describes should be considered to reflect a normal amount of concern for the environment.

GREENWASHING

In Brian Tokar's book *Earth for Sale: Reclaiming Ecology in the Age of Corporate Greenwash*, the author defines greenwash as:

...the co-optation of environmental concerns by convincing millions of people that ecological problems will be adequately addressed by means that lie entirely outside of the political sphere. (Tokar, xiii)

In other words, green marketing and corporate claims of sustainable practices (i.e. carbon offsetting, eco-initiatives) are leading to a false sense of responsibility on the part of the consumer. The consumer is led to believe that her product choices can make a significant difference in the environmental problems we face. This is not merely a marketing ploy propagated by corporations; in fact even the major environmental organizations (Sierra Club, National Wildlife Federation, Environmental Defense Fund, Natural Resources Defense Council, World Wildlife Fund, etc.) advocate actions on a personal level regarding conservation of resources and lessening the waste stream as the major solutions to the environmental crisis. Examples of suggested eco-friendly behaviors include composting your organic waste, putting a brick in your toilet tank, turning off the lights when you leave the room, unplugging electronics when not in use, using public transit, biking or walking instead of driving your car, washing laundry in cold water and bringing reusable bags to the grocery store. They also suggest a

multitude of ways to amend your buying habits: buy in bulk, buy goods that use less packaging or compostable packaging, use products that are biodegradable, buy organic, buy fair-trade certified, shop local, buy only in-season produce, etc. Additionally, each of these organizations advocates purchasing goods from companies that tout their green initiatives as a way to do your part. Greenwashing attempts to divert the public's attention from political and corporate responsibility through complacency by offering the individual a pretense of control. While by no means attempting to discredit the importance of reducing waste and maintaining eco-conscious buying habits on the individual level, my work serves to question and accuse this strategy of dodging and shifting responsibility for environmental problems away from corporate and political entities and onto the individual.

Artist Amy Balkin's work *Public Smog* (2004-ongoing) is a satirical jab at the concept of carbon offsetting, a practice in which a company or individual can fund a reduction in carbon emissions elsewhere to compensate for their own emissions. Balkin purchases these carbon credits and puts them out of use, creating what she calls "clean air parks" in the atmosphere (Greenwashing, p56). The work is presented as a slideshow that documents the project and promotes the parks she has created. *Public Smog* draws attention to the practice of carbon offsetting by creating a fictional park that cannot exist because air is not divisible. In this way her work points out the flaws in the system of carbon emissions trading, a practice that is commonly promoted as one aspect of a company's green initiative. Balkin's work questions the credibility of this claim. Similarly, my work doubts the effectiveness of green consumerism as a means to slow down ecological destruction and accuses it of being merely a method of public sedation.

Complacency with the way things are is one negative consequence of greenwashing, while another possible outcome for the individual in our society is guilt. The narrator/performer in *Eco-Obsessed* displays all of the characteristic signs of an obsessive disorder, which it should be presumed was brought on by her interpretation of green culture; complete with films, websites, magazines, junk mail, t-shirts, emails, posters, brochures, bumper stickers – all reminding her of her responsibility to the earth. Her guilt has caused her to obsess over her every action and assess its ecological consequences. One of the questions raised by this work is whether or not this should be considered abnormal behavior – perhaps everyone should consider the ecological consequences of their every action? Another question raised is how much difference these behavior modifications can really make? One observes that the character, though afflicted with guilt about it, still maintains a fairly typical Western lifestyle. She is not living off the land, her home is not off the grid, she doesn't make her own soap, or go without pantliners (as evidenced by the panorama of eco-products at the beginning of the video). She is representative of the complicated effort to do less harm in a country built on opposing values while still reaping the benefits of those values.

PREVIOUS WORK

My artistic voice has always been a voice for environmentalism. I create artwork in response to my immediate place in the world. Because I – like the character in this work – am extremely conscious of the ecological issues, my interpretation of my place in the world is always filtered through the lens of environmentalism. In the last few years, the focus of my artwork has been on my perception of contradictions in the green lifestyle. One experience that has helped shape this focus was the three years that I worked for Wild Oats/Whole Foods Market. Green products and eco-conscious shoppers surrounded me forty hours per week. This

experience led to an interest in looking closely at the claims of green consumerism.

Biodegradagarden (2010) is the first major work I created in this vein. I planted different types of biodegradable take-out containers and cups that I had collected from various restaurants into a garden plot and examined their decomposition rates. I wanted to test the claims of these



containers. The result was an informative slideshow about each type of material and the outcome of my experiment. However, when the experiment failed to see positive results I inserted a fictional conclusion in which one of the materials – biodegradable foam – grew into little plants that turned out to be a brand

new herb chock full of antioxidants and great in soup. One of the lines in *Eco-Obsessed* refers directly to this work: “He sometimes comes home with plastic bags from the store, at least they claim to be biodegradable bags.” The wording of this line suggests the character’s doubt on the part of this eco-friendly claim.

Kitty’s Litter Cat Toys (2010) is another project in which I took on the role of the greenwasher to an even greater degree. It began as a slide show business proposal and later grew into a trade show display. The proposal is to clean up the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, where billions of pieces of plastic float in a giant whirlpool in the middle of the Pacific, and create eco-friendly cat toys with the collected material. Both of these works are very satirical and represent attempts to appropriate the rhetoric of greenwashing and subvert it into what amounts to be actually a didactic tool. In other words, I was using this method to disseminate information on important topics by supplementing the educational components with humor. The theme of these

two works is very present in my thesis project but the tone is quite different. *Eco-Obsessed* is much more personal and uses less didacticism and slapstick humor.

In the last two years I also began exploring some of my more eccentric habits, such as collecting bugs. *Bugs that Died in my House* (2009) is an installation that resembles a shrine, with a slide viewer atop a clothed table. The slides that sit next to the viewer are images of dead insects and spiders that were photographed on a lightbox so that the background is transparent and glowing with light when looked at in the slide viewer. This work centered on my habit of not wanting the organic bodies of these creatures to go to waste in my house after their death and honored the role of the bug in the ecosystem. *Bugs that Died in my House* relates to my thesis project in that I am again collecting dead insects (and one lizard) from throughout my home instead of throwing them in the garbage, where their bodies would not decompose properly and subsequently be wasted.

The Eco-Friendly Girl (2010) is a three-minute video piece that depicts a girl washing her face and putting on makeup. Nearly transparent images of products slowly scroll down the screen until it is filled up, fitting together like puzzle pieces. The narrator talks about the eco-friendly girl's product choices, what she does and does not buy and why. This work explores the contradiction of eco-friendly consumerism by showing all of the products one might use for one activity (a beauty ritual) piling up. It is also critical of beauty products in general and the percentage of marketing directed toward women and women's bodies. As in many of these works, a voice or text pretends to be advocating for something, while the evident satire of the imagery suggests otherwise.

My most recent purely photographic work, *Snapshots of the Floridan Aquifer* (2010-present), is an ongoing project documenting aquatic systems in and around Gainesville, Florida.

The images are close-up views of water samples from different waterways. The depth of field is shallow so that the background is abstracted into color fields and the only thing in sharp focus is the top of the water line in the jar. The prints are large and the images utilize beauty and abstraction to draw the viewer in. The title of each piece– the name of the waterway along with



a description of the ecological problems it faces – serves as the punctum; it interrupts the beauty of the image and recontextualizes the viewer’s aesthetic experience. This series uses beauty to seduce, much as the other projects I have described use humor, as a way to draw people in and to soften the blow of the message

I am trying to get across. The somewhat manipulative use of natural beauty relates closely to the center video in my thesis project, in which shots of nature serve as a visual break for the obsessive rituals dominated by the presence of the character.

All of my artistic body of work is activist on some level. While *Eco-Obsessed* is not an activist art piece per se, it and much of my previous work borrows heavily from that rhetoric. Often an activist art piece points out or analyzes a situation with the hope that 'knowledge is power'; in this way the work could be considered activist, though it does not actively intervene in a situation. I am inspired by the potential of art to be socially engaged, to interpret and re-interpret the world, to offer new ideas and provoke thought. I use my artistic practice to explore, analyze, express, and disseminate my views on the environment and environmentalism. The concept of my thesis project centers on the current trend in environmentalism toward an ethic of personal responsibility. One of the activist strategies represented in this work is that of using one’s personal narrative to make a statement. A good example of this strategy is Kip Fulbeck’s

piece, *Lilo and Me* (2003), in which the artist tells his story of growing up Hapa (part Asian) and his search for identity in Disney movies. He uses humor and autobiographical strategies to make a statement about identity, ethnicity, culture, and media representation. In a similar way, *Eco-Obsessed* takes both a humorous and cynical look at the eco-friendly trend by introducing a character that has taken this ethic of personal responsibility to heart so that it consumes her thoughts and behaviors, a character closely related to the artist herself.

Another activist strategy used in this work is that of the symbolic ritual or gesture. Dominique Mazeaud's *The Great Cleansing of the Rio Grande River* (1987 – 1994) is a performance piece in which the artist spent one day every month on the Santa Fe River, which is a tributary of the Rio Grande (Sanders, p80). She would pick up trash or just spend time there as a ritual act of cleansing, an act with relatively little impact on the river itself. However, as an artistic gesture the potential for impact is far greater.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles is another artist known for performances involving symbolic gestures. *Handshake Ritual* (1978-79), one of her most well known works, was a year-long performance in which the artist shook the hand of every sanitation worker in New York City. The gesture of shaking hands is not an activist endeavor on its own, but because the artist performed it as a symbolic act with the intent to “honor and confirm the dignity of maintenance work as a life-sustaining, life-enhancing activity” (Felshin, p183) the work draws attention to the importance of the sanitation worker in the preservation of a metropolitan area. Similarly, the gestures I perform in my work have little impact in and of themselves, but when presented in an art context, the metaphorical implications have the potential to make a powerful statement.

LEFT VIDEO

The left video begins with close-up shots of crumbs, dead bugs on windowsills and a hairball, all being picked up by an unknown hand and taken to an unknown place. As the video unfolds, the shots widen and it is revealed that all the materials are being collected into a brown Tupperware bucket. It is also apparent that other materials that have not been seen (bok choy leaves, apple cores, and other unidentifiable materials) have been collected in said bucket.

The narrator's words relate to several of the images in this section specifically: a figure peels an orange and she talks of 'food miles', a hand



picks up a matted hairball and a line is spoken about living with a cat, an accusing voice speaks of witnessing coffee grounds being thrown in the trash while a spoon is used to scoop used coffee grounds out of a French press. The imagery does not illustrate the spoken lines so much as supplement it. The correlation between these two elements lets one assume that it is the same character acting and speaking. Some of the items she collects for composting are ridiculous, such as the cat claw, the pepper crumbs on the stove, hairs from a razor blade; the video bears witness to her absurd compulsive ritual acts. These images also show important contradictions in the character's affliction. She speaks of all these things that trigger her obsession – using electricity, wasting water, using fuel to transport food, plastic grocery bags, and creating garbage – yet there is visual evidence that she is a person who still eats apples, shaves, drinks coffee and tea, and uses Q-tips. These contradictions are used intentionally to paint a picture of a character who maintains a relatively normal Western lifestyle and suffers from guilt because of it.

The last clip of collecting items in the left video goes blank and the audio switches from the narrator to the ambient outdoor sounds of the next scene. The figure of the character is depicted performing a ritual with all that she has collected. She kneels on the ground, takes the now familiar brown Tupperware bucket, dumps it out onto a plot of dirt and starts tearing at the larger pieces of material. Then she pounds it up with a rock and coats it all in soil. A cat makes a cameo, presumably the cat that was referred to in the second line of narration, and then the mess is put into a rectangular glass vase. The character picks up the vase and walks in front of the camera to the right out of frame, at which point the left video goes blank for the remainder of the piece and the glass vase appears coming into frame in the center video.

Time is an important factor in the editing choices I made in all the videos. The left video begins with quick cuts, utilized to speed up the pacing of the acts taking place (collecting compostable materials) for efficiency's sake. This goes along with the audio at this point, which



is spoken in short statements and is not a natural way of speaking. The aforementioned last scene of the left video performs a switch in the pacing. This scene is shot in real time with its accompanying ambient sound also in real time.

The switch is a deliberate method of differentiating this act from all of the other acts seen thus far. It places a hierarchy into the video: the other gestures are made to seem less important because they were not shown in their entirety nor with their accompanying ambient sound, rather only the “action” was shown. This gesture and the following one in the timeline of the videos – the combining of the torn labels with the organic materials – are both elevated in importance

because of this difference. The other shots relate more to photography; they could almost be slideshows of snapshots.

The editing of the video mirrors the obsessiveness being described through the visual and aural information. Then the switch occurs, the pace begins to slow down and there is time for contemplation. The left video now studies the absurd act of smashing up organic material with and into the earth. The viewer is made to see the entirety of this scene. When this gesture is completed, the left video goes blank as the figure moves into the center video, which now becomes the focus of the installation and is also depicted in real time and with ambient sound. The real-time imagery is most distinctly videographic. It relates to early video art in which artists used the medium to document an act, a ritual, a gesture, or a performance, and the documentation would be presented in real time. One does not have to search far into the annals of art history to find evidence of this. Artists like William Wegman, Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, John Baldessari, Chris Burden, Martha Rosler, and Pipilotti Rist all used video as a documentation medium and as a means to disseminate their performative work past the immediate present audience. Furthermore, the perspective and scale of this last shot of the left video – full figure in scene, fixed camera position, angle of view pointed downward toward the earth – recall the photographs that document the works of performance artist Ana Mendieta, in which she would press her nude body into the earth.

CENTER VIDEO

The center video is a compilation of natural scenes that last for durations ranging from 25 to 55 seconds with 5 second cross dissolves between them; the natural scenes give way to the final ritualized act in which the smashed materials in a glass vase and the ripped eco-labels are

combined and seeds are planted into it. The natural scenes serve several purposes in the context of the other two videos: they offer a visual break from the picking and collecting in the videos on either side, they represent a personal visual relationship to nature, and they reference the problematic of visual representation. One's eyes must pass by these scenes to go back and forth between the videos, in this way the center video is a respite from the sometimes frantic behaviors and fast-paced editing of the left and right videos. This quality is reflective of the sanctuary that nature can offer.

Most of the nature imagery in the center video is not of expansive vistas one would have to travel to find, but of the scenery around me daily. In fact, the bulk of the scenes were shot in my backyard or within a five-block radius of my house. No scene is from a site farther than a



forty-minute bike ride from my home. The places depicted in the work represent my personal visual relationship with nature. As images, they also reference a more universal relationship with nature – one that takes place

through visual representation. The *Planet Earth* and *Nature* series of television shows, Animal Planet or Travel channel, *National Geographic* magazine, billboards and magazine advertisements, even screensavers on our personal computers are all typical places to find this kind of imagery. As visual representations of nature, the images in the center video cannot help but refer to the problematic of landscape representation. In the context of the whole of the installation, this problematic is one that is at once criticized and utilized by environmentalism. Environmentalists have two main issues with the representation of beauty in nature: first, that portrayals of pristine landscapes could give a false impression that the natural world is not in

danger and not in need of protection, that unspoiled natural beauty is plentiful; secondly, that by using this type of imagery for the purposes of protection of natural resources, it could be taken to mean that we should protect nature for only the aesthetic pleasure we get from it, leaving behind less visually appealing areas and creatures. Thus, I use the images of nature as a break in the installation and, conceptually, in reference to the problematic of visual representations of nature. The slow cross-dissolves refer specifically to the *Planet Earth* series and to computer screensavers.

The second part of the center video begins with what appears to be another nature scene but instead becomes the site of a ritualized performance. The vase from the left video and the collection of ripped labels from the right video both come into frame and a pair of hands work the labels into the mess in the vase. A close shot shows seeds being strewn into the top of this concoction and then the shot returns to the



vase. The last line is then spoken “I want to create a happy ending,” and the video fades out. This performance is really the crux of the work; it is where all the rituals seen thus far come together into one. The last line refers to the idealism of the green lifestyle. This line is intentionally vague and left open to interpretation. To me it means that I, the artist, want to create a happy ending for the narrative in the work and it also means that the character wants her life to have a happy ending for the environment, she wants her rituals to achieve their goal. It is unclear whose voice speaks this last line. It is also unclear if there is a happy ending or not. The video shows that seeds are planted but does not show if anything grows from them. All that is left is a glass vase full of muck, labels, and seeds.

RIGHT VIDEO

The right video begins with a panning shot of different types of household goods – food, cleaning and personal hygiene products. Each of these items is marketed as a green product as evidenced by the labels. Signifying text appears on all the packages: “all natural”, “organic”, “green”, “biodegradable”, and so on. The visually cramped panorama of products give a suffocating feeling to the shot, though the slow panning of the frame is reminiscent of a vast panoramic scene in a movie. This shot gives way to the first visual introduction of the character,



who comes into frame with a reusable grocery bag. She sits down and begins pulling items from the bag and examining them, reading the labels and then tearing pieces of the packaging off which she places in a pile near the camera

lens. The first package she performs this ritual on is shot in real time and then the editing is sped up so that only the active parts are shown. Next a close shot of the table in which the frame fills up with the pieces of text she is ripping off, and then two hands gather the pile and carry it off frame.

This video refers specifically to green consumerism, as the eco-friendly products are the dominant subject. The performance in the right video reveals not only the character’s buying habits but also the specific signifying text that directs her shopping choices. The symbolic act of isolating these words and phrases is a direct representation of the manner in which one who adheres to the green lifestyle searches for these signifiers when shopping. The terms and phrases are fetishized visually and conceptually in the piece in the same way that they are fetishized by

those who seek them out. These products are chosen by those who purchase them because of these signifiers – the text or symbols that make reference to the ideals of a green lifestyle.

The ultimate outcome of this fetishization of eco-signifiers is rendered meaningless in the last portion of the piece when they are planted into the vase with the organic materials, as if these labels have some magic power that will transform the contents of the vase. These words and symbols can do nothing for the ‘plant’; only the base upon which they appear will eventually decompose if it is paperboard, however, if the label is a plastic sticker it will simply lie powerless and unchanged in the vase of muck for many, many years. The ritual represented in the right video is perhaps the most absurd.



The character is shown ripping, searching for, collecting words that signify the lifestyle ideal she is trying to reach, only to then mix the signifiers with the organic materials collected in the left video and plant seeds into the mix. This is apparently a completely futile act – nothing is shown to grow out of this, and one can assume that the materials will only rot slowly and probably become a mosquito nursery, rather than decompose and become organic material for a garden as it would have had it been composted properly. This final act is purely symbolic, purely visual, a ritualized gesture with no practical beneficial outcome in reality. The viewer may then consider this as an artistic gesture made by the artist as well as a part of the character’s reality. One may wonder for whose benefit this ritual is performed - for the art audience or to satisfy an obsessive-compulsive desire. The video holds the feeling of a confessional; of a true reality akin to television shows on hoarding or eating chalk. But this is not a reality show, it is a fictional

character performing deliberate acts and speaking lines. One must then consider the artist's agenda. In this way the fourth wall is broken.

OBSESSIVE-COMPULSIVE DISORDER

In the first line of narration in the piece the character states that she has been diagnosed with eco-obsession. This gives an air of authority to the term and many viewers have asked if this is a real, defined disorder. It is not. To my knowledge, it would simply be considered obsessive-compulsive disorder; the focus of the obsession does not change the psychological designation. The weight of the word "diagnosed" in this first line leads one to believe that the character has been evaluated by a psychiatric professional; that she sought out or was forced to undergo treatment. This, along with the tone of the narration, suggests that she feels this is an abnormal way to live, which should help to connect the character with viewers who probably also think this is an abnormal way to live.

The seemingly pointless acts depicted in *Eco-Obsessed* are a cynical representation of my feelings toward the current state of the environmental movement. Even though I do actually carry out many of the behaviors that are described and depicted in *Eco-Obsessed*, I feel that it makes very little difference in comparison to the larger ecological issues we face. Yet this little difference is the only thing over which I feel I have control. Obsessive-compulsive disorder is very much about control. The sufferer's obsessive thoughts are frequently visions of some type of disaster event and compulsive behaviors are performed as a way to prevent this disaster from happening. In *Eco-Obsessed*, the disaster event is ecological destruction and the rituals are performed as an unrealistic method of control. In *Abnormal Psychology: Core Concepts* the authors state:

The performance of the compulsive act or the ritualized series of acts usually brings a feeling of reduced tension and satisfaction, as well as a sense of control,

although this anxiety relief is typically fleeting, which is why the same rituals need to be repeated over and over. (Butcher, Mineka, and Hooley p169)

Greenwashing on the part of green organizations, products, and companies offers just that: a false sense of control. On the one hand, the green lifestyle fad can make people think about the ecological impact of their actions – which is a positive step – but on the other hand, it stops there. It ends at the individual level and that is simply not enough for the kind of massive change that needs to occur. Therefore, my work criticizes the green lifestyle model by equating it with these obsessive-compulsive rituals.

BEARING WITNESS

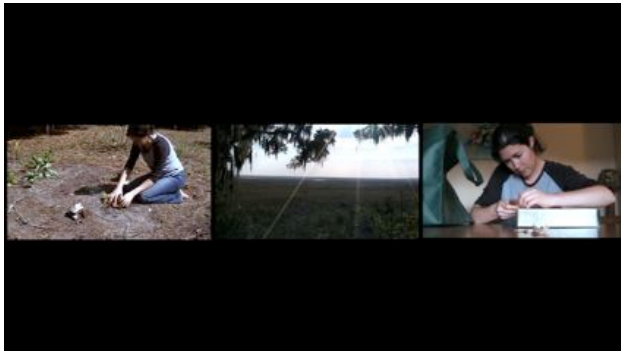
The inherent property of video to bear witness is utilized in this work. Though the piece is highly edited and not presented in the style of a documentary, it does seem to bear witness to the world of the eco-obsessed. The medium of video can be regarded as proof of something's existence, some event's occurrence; we tend to believe it. I used this property to my advantage in the work. Even though the character is actually a slightly exaggerated version of myself, the audience can perceive her as real. The prevalence of video diaries on youtube and reality television helps to solidify this perception. One need only turn on the TV to find an example of a reality show about someone's obsessive affliction: *Hoarders*, *Fatal Attractions*, *Obsessed*, *True Life*, and *My Strange Addiction* are just a few examples. Obsession is a popular topic in contemporary television programming and each of these shows gives the viewer a voyeuristic experience of other people's afflictions. These types of series, as well as most every other reality show, have in common the strategy of confession. Whether it takes place as a voiceover, in the presence of the authority figure that was sent to help the person, or in the confessional room (in shows such as *Jersey Shore*, *Big Brother*, and *The Real World*), reality television utilizes video for its witness-bearing properties. I borrowed from these pop culture influences to create a

familiarity for the audience.

The fictional narrative presented in this work can be likened to the actual narrative of the artist creating it. Whether or not every act represented is something I do when the camera is not rolling, I did collect these images and perform these acts, sometimes in multiple takes, which means I repeated the tasks over and over. In this way, the perception of the artist's life and the character's narrative are one and the same. This helps make the character believable and many viewers have stated that they believe this work to be diaristic.

VIDEO INSTALLATION

Visually, the large scale of the videos relates to the character's thinking about the acts she performs: she feels that these tiny acts are making a big difference, even if that difference is only temporary relief from her obsessive thoughts. The objects in the left video are magnified (tiny bugs, a cat claw, etc.) to signify her conviction that these materials must not take up space in a landfill, though in reality the space they would require is miniscule. The video shows a collection of materials that adds up to fill a small bucket. In this way, the objects are collectively



larger and more important so that one can actually see that there may be a point to her madness. The installation space is set up so that the viewer must choose between which video to watch. The viewer's gaze must pass

by the center video to go back and forth between the left and right videos. The center video is essentially overlooked by most viewers as they try to capture the action in the side videos, reflecting the way nature is overlooked in most of our daily lives. The installation encompasses and possibly overwhelms the viewer, who is immersed into an intimate space created by the

proximity of the four walls to their body. The scale of the projections in the installation space is used to create a tension, reflective of the obsessive content of the imagery.

The three videos are synchronized so that I have complete control over each of the them at all times. The left and right videos oppose each other in their pacing. The left video begins with quick cuts and moves into real time, while the right video begins with a slow panning shot and real time video and moves into faster pacing. This is a deliberate method of allowing the viewer to capture most of the visual information on all three videos. The left and right videos relate to each other in the actions they depict. Both show the character picking at something with her hands: peeling apart labels and picking up organic materials, and then deconstructing these items. Both videos slowly reveal themselves as well. They start out with the viewer not knowing exactly what is happening but eventually divulge what the character is doing. The two side videos carry over into the middle one near the end of the piece. This metaphorically represents an attempt to get at the center or the core of the problem and make sense of it by the performance of the final act.

CONCLUSION

The seemingly futile acts performed in *Eco-Obsessed* reflect the futility I feel trying to live a low-impact lifestyle in Western society and my frustration with mainstream environmentalism. Many of the larger environmental organizations ask their members to help the environment by recycling, purchasing green products, being slightly less comfortable in their homes (regarding heating and cooling), driving less, etc. I know because I receive the emails and brochures these organizations send out. In the book *Cradle to Cradle*, the authors call for a complete redesign of manufacturing industries as a possible solution for a more sustainable future (McDonough and Braungart). While many of these environmental organizations have this

book on their must-read lists, I do not see them actually pressuring government or industry to follow any of these practices; rather, they tend to compromise their values in an attempt to appeal to more people who they think might be turned off by calls for such radical change. Aside from my disappointment with these organizations' ability to make political and societal changes, I am also quite disillusioned with their solutions for individual members to ease their guilt and feel that this is actually a type of greenwashing all its own.

One is left to wonder if the character in *Eco-Obsessed* has an unhealthy amount of concern for her environmental impact or if it should be considered an appropriate amount. It would depend on the viewer's stance toward environmentalism. In this way, one is forced to consider their own behaviors as well as to make judgments upon the character. One must decide if she is psychologically disturbed, if her actions are fruitless, and just what she accomplishes with the ritualistic behaviors she performs. I want the audience to reflect not only on their personal ecological footprint, but also on their views regarding the environmental movement and green consumerism. Environmental art can sometimes be critiqued as "preaching to the choir," since the typical art audience and the typical environmentalist both exist in the privileged sector of society. I believe this critique to be completely unjustified but nonetheless I will address it. *Eco-Obsessed* is directed to both those that are involved in environmental efforts and those that are not. Each member of the audience is different and I don't expect everyone to get everything out of this work that I have discussed here, however I think anyone can get something out of it. Viewers can walk away from this work with ideas of how to reduce waste in their own lives; they may think about their actions in new ways; they may even be inspired to become more attuned to the environmental movement. Audience members who already consider themselves part of the green movement may contemplate ways to go beyond the lifestyle changes they have

already made. My thesis project is directed toward a broad spectrum of people, and my hope for my audience is that those who are not doing anything begin to think about their individual role in the environment and that those who think only of their role begin to look at ways to go beyond that, to change the model of consumption rather than merely the self as consumer.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jill Mullins was born on August 13, 1981 in Nashville, Tennessee. She grew up in Antioch, Tennessee, graduating from Heritage Covenant High School in 1999. She earned her B.F.A. in Photography in 2007 from Watkins College of Art and Design in Nashville, Tennessee.