

Nightingale

1

In *Design as Experience*, I made a video in response to Pablo Neruda's *Ode to My Socks* that was itself a paean to my special edition *Twin Peaks Nike SB* sneakers (which were a birthday gift from my sister Erin), featuring photographs of the shoes themselves intercut with flash frames from the series. The fact that *Nike*, 19 years after the show's brief run ended (and in the same year that I had chosen to finally watch it), released a special edition line of sneakers based on the show, struck me as odd and strangely kismet. And who makes sneakers based on a television show?

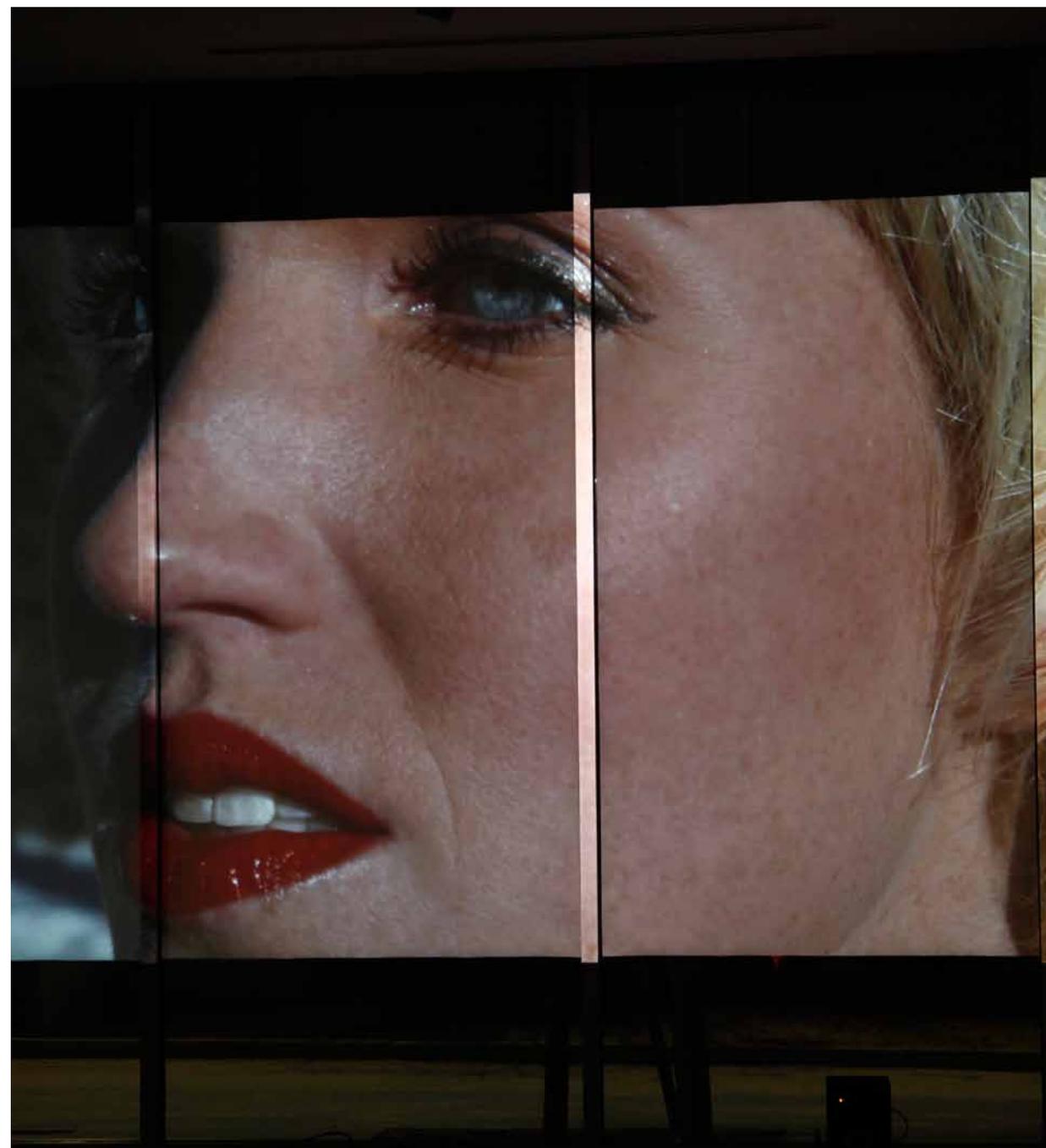
2

I dressed as Dale Cooper, but ended up looking more like the guy in *American Psycho* than anything else.



I'll admit it: I spent a good deal of my first year at DMI thinking and talking about and generally being obsessed with *Twin Peaks*. I'll admit this too: There's a good bet it was annoying. The influence that the 1990-1991, Mark Frost and David Lynch-created television series had on me ran deep, influencing everything from my project work to my footwear¹. I found the entire atmosphere of the show completely mesmerizing. This interest/influence reached its—sorry—peak, when my wife and I hosted a *Twin Peaks* Halloween party, at which those attending had to dress as a character from the show². It seemed like there was nothing I could do; the show and its world was so interesting and important to me, and I wanted people to share in my fascination. One other thing that came fluttering out of this obsessive haze was the idea to create a large-scale installation based on the mythology of the series. This installation would theoretically take place in the cavernous MassArt gymnasium, basically because that was the only place on campus big enough to hold something with the scale/magnitude that I envisioned. I had no specific ideas, other than the notion that it would involve actors dressed as the scary Bob character, in denim and stringy long-haired wigs, and feature a lot of strobe lights. I never put much thought into how or from where the money for such an extravagant exhibition might materialize. I just liked the idea on a conceptual/fantasy level.

And so my first year ended, and I spent the summer doing summer things, forgetting about the gymnasium and the installation, and not watching *Twin Peaks*. When the fall semester began, I was *Twin Peaks*-free. Or so I thought.



3

Matt Quesada, *SpamStream* collaborator and my sister's boyfriend, had to give me "ten fingers" to get on top of their garage's roof in order to get the desired camera placement for the super-wide angle establishing shot that begins the video.

For one of my *Video Sculpture* projects, I had to create an "Intimate Portrait". I had the idea to film my sister Erin in a Halloween costume (this was in October and Halloween-time in Salem, MA can be oppressive since it basically lasts the entire month). She wore her Halloween costume from the previous year, which was of the singer Julee Cruise, which she had worn to our *Twin Peaks* Halloween party. The costume consisted of a shiny red cocktail dress, a platinum blonde wig, and a lot of 80s-style makeup. But I wasn't thinking about *Twin Peaks*, at least not consciously. I was more interested in the concept of the costume, and its ability to evoke a character.

Erin lives in Roslindale, and her house has a considerably large backyard, which is a grassy field surrounded by trees. We shot there. I filmed her walking across the yard, from high and far away³, then moved the camera closer and closer to capture her expression, ending on an extreme close-up. The only direction I gave her was where to be; her expression was entirely her choice.

I edited the footage, adding long dissolves between the shots of Erin walking, so there would be multiple images of her in different stages of transparency. I also added a bit of saturation to the footage, to push up the red of her dress and the green of the grass. For the accompanying audio, I took a song from *Twin Peaks*, called "The Nightingale", which was sung by Julee Cruise's character on the show, and looped a short section of it before adding a titanic amount of "deep space" reverb to the track. It became semi-unrecognizable, but remained haunting, with a down-the-hall "I think I might know that song" quality.

My first attempt to display the video involved projecting it onto and through the notorious tropical netting with which I had been extensively experimenting. Showing it for a critique in class, I taped a large panel of it across the corner of a wall, so there were two layers of material to capture. This created an interesting effect where Erin's character sort of followed herself across the field, both through the dissolves of the video and on the layers of material, meeting at certain points and drifting away at others. It was a nice thing to look at, and I was happy with the overall effect of the piece, but I didn't have a ton of footage from the backyard, and my edit was only about forty seconds long. So, I left it as a sketch and moved on.





The image of Erin in the costume continued to linger, though. This year, when I decided to have an exhibition of some of my thesis work (*OHU*), I knew that I wanted to include this piece on some level, but that it would need to be developed or modified. I decided that I should shoot more footage of Erin in the costume in the backyard, but this time in the winter, with the hill covered in considerable snow. I could then intercut the vibrant fall footage with the winter footage, potentially creating a richer visual language. We set a date and shot, Erin being a hugely good sport, since she hadn't worn shoes in the original footage and thus was shoeless in the snow on a windy⁴ day in February. It was also a sunny day, which gave the footage a nice contrast with the fall footage, which had been shot when it was overcast and gray.

With my *Video Sculpture*-accrued how-to, I set out to edit the footage in such a way as to be conceptually synchronous with the physical means in which I chose to display the video. The Doran Gallery, which I reserved for my exhibition, has one wall that is made up entirely of floor-to-ceiling windows, divided by thin metal strips. Rather than avoiding or ignoring the glass, I wanted to incorporate it into the work somehow. After much research and consideration and a lot of dumb/implausible/expensive ideas, I found a cinema supply store in Burbank, CA that sold tracing paper in 60-inch wide rolls. I ordered one. I⁵ planned to cut the paper to fit the width of the glass panels, allowing that the height would be dictated by the aspect ratio of video, which was 16:9. The effect would then hopefully be as if I was projecting on the glass itself.

I created a video loop using both the fall (grass) and the winter (snow) footage. I again used long cross dissolves between the shots, layering Erin's image. But this time, there was more happening visually due to the contrast between the environments. I also knew that the frame would be divided into triptychs due to the metal strips on the windows, so I tried to edit accordingly, attempting to create interesting movements across the frame. I ended the loop with footage of Erin entering the frame, but reversed, an homage to *Twin Peaks*' use of backwards sequences to create a disorienting effect. The loop was about five-and-a-half minutes, so I needed a longer soundtrack. I took "Falling", which is the *Twin Peaks* theme, and altered

⁴ Getting back up and staying on the garage was particularly dodgy.

⁵ More likely my lovely wife Sarah, who has an innate ability to cut things straight, which I do not.



it similarly to “The Nightingale”, through layers of reverb. I also panned the signal across the stereo spectrum, so that someone viewing the piece and standing in between the two speakers would feel that funny sort of disorientation that you feel when physically experiencing stereo panning.

Installation-wise, the image had to be large and the color needed to be bright and vivid. In order to get the image large, the projector had to be far away from the windows, so I had to use an HD projector and have an HD video source to send to the projector. It wasn't feasible to have my laptop play the video⁶ at the show, so I had to make a Blu-ray disc at work, and borrow DMI's Blu-ray player⁷.

From a technical standpoint, the result was as good as I could have hoped. The projection was bright and vibrant. The effect of the paper mounted to the windows worked exactly as I had envisioned it would; it looked like I was projecting light onto glass, but that the glass was absorbing it rather than reflecting it. I was able to spread the speakers far enough apart so as to create the desired stereo panning effect. Again, I kept the volume low, but audible, so as not to overwhelm the space.

In some ways, I don't feel completely responsible for the emotional content of the piece. Its strength and emotional resonance comes from Erin's performance, which involves her in this fairly ridiculous costume, looking sad. I didn't instruct her to look that way or tell her how to feel. That was her choice. I simply captured it with a camera, then created sound and a physical installation that matched, or attempted to match, the mood that the performance cast. At the exhibition, watching the piece glow on the glass, I felt a little bit like an opportunist, and that people might think I was trying to create this sad or melancholic video by telling my sister to act sad and then filming her, or that I was exploiting her sadness. But maybe that's just because I now felt sad, and worried about my sister and why she was feeling sad, even though this was something that wasn't real, and which I had created and considered through every measure and step along the way. Or maybe it was because here in the space, wall-sized and luminous, this was the first time that I was really seeing it.

6

For a lot of reasons, probably the most important being that it's a 2005 *PowerBook G4* and doesn't play HD video smoothly.

7

which happens to be a *Sony PlayStation 3*.

