The Tale of Prehistoregg

An Exhibition Statement Submitted to the College of Graduate Studies and Research in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Art & Art History University of Saskatchewan Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

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‘The Tale of Prehistoregg’ is the show for the first chapter of an illustrated book about a gender neutral and non-descript egg with legs, its adopted brother a giraffe dinosaur dragon hybrid named Giraffadon, and an anxiety riddled bird named Bernard. The narrative is told in a simple way with simple characters that allow people to empathize with and project themselves onto the characters. The support paper expands on this and talks about my drive to tell stories from the age of 3 till today, and follow the evolution that happened in my artwork to get me to this point.
Table of Contents

Permission to use.................................................................i
Acknowledgements............................................................ii
Abstract................................................................................iii
Table of Contents..............................................................iv
List of Images........................................................................v

Chapter 1: Thesis Support paper.................................1

Works Cited..............................................................................17
List of Images

Fig 1: Feheregyhazi, Andrei. Untitled. 2015. Animation.

Fig 2: Feheregyazi, Andrei. Untitled. 2015. Animation.


Fig 8: Feheregyhazi, Andrei. Andrei With Hair. 2007. Digital Photo.

Fig 9: Feheregyhazi, Andrei. I'm Bald, and I'll Never Smile Again. 2016. Digital Photo.


Fig 13: Feheregyhazi, Andrei. 100 Videos. 2015. Animation.

Fig 14: Feheregyhazi, Andrei. 100 Videos. 2015. Animation.


Fig 16: Feheregyhazi, Andrei. Cigbot Stills. 2016. Animation.

Fig 17: Feheregyhazi, Andrei. Cigbot Stills. 2016. Animation.


When I started my Masters I had the expectation of expanding my film work through the use of interactive installation and projection. The goal was to engage all five senses and create a truly immersive experience. What happened instead was something very different and more valuable to me as an artist. What I’ve come to realize over these two years is that I’m a storyteller. When I think back to the tender age of two, when I first started creating images, everything I did had a story to it. The earliest documented story I have is from the age of three. It was a drawing of a forest on fire and a small bird diving into the fire to save his mother. Of course, in the logic of a 3-year-old, a mother is much too heavy to carry out of a burning forest, so sadly they both died. This was a preview of the dark stories and strange humor to come.

Storytelling would continue to be the impetus for all my creative activities moving forward. This wasn’t rare, since children often imagine when they play, but I would insist on narrative, character, and world rules when we did. The obvious thing, and that which I only truly realized at the end of my final year of school, is that as an artist more than anything, I am a storyteller and tell stories through my artistic work. Anytime I’ve created work that I am happy with, in both the process and the result, it has incorporated a story. Stories I naturally gravitate towards sharing are those that both a child and adult can enjoy. These narratives reflect the respect I have for early imaginative curiosity and engagement. That said, I also do not shy away from tackling deeper issues, or avoid being self-reflective, and I recognize that life experience can be both messy and challenging. In this paper I hope to explain: the process of coming to realize more about the complexity of my work and working process, the work that has led to this current exhibition, and my decision to choose watercolor illustration as my media for this series of works in lieu of what I am more accustomed to, and known for, which is animation.
My initial goal was to engage the senses, and involve my viewer beyond the capacity that simple single channel video alone could accomplish, in order to expand my audience's experience of the stories I tell. My hope was to project them into a world of the fantastic, and into creative places beyond what I have been capable of in the past. I was inspired by the works of Olafur Eliasson, as well as the collaborative team of Janet Cardiff and George Burres Miller. Cardiff and Burres Miller, and Eliasson use light and audio to fill a space and engage the senses audibly, visually and physically, in ways that are mesmerizing and moving. I thought to myself, 'I want to create experiences as powerful as this.' Inspired by these artists, I approached my first year absorbed with experimentation. I explored various animation techniques that I hadn't tried before and sought out new processes that were multi sensory in a quest to take my storytelling to new places.

I was also inspired by the printmaking class I had chosen as my studio elective. I was fascinated with the texture that comes naturally from stamping techniques. I found that the variation that is inherent when you hand print rather than using a press could be combined digitally to create a look and feel that I later referred to as breathing. The texture would undulate and felt more alive than the static textures I had been using up to that point. By combining various shapes created in this method of hand stamping I managed to create characters that I could animate which had a life that I hadn't been able to create before. Utilizing this methodology and basic projection mapping techniques to project on the surface of prints I had already made using stamps, I was able to create fascinating layers that were new and refreshing. This process gave the impression that the physical object of the prints came to life and blurred the line between printed and projected. Further experimentation included incorporating the filming of ink drops which formed into various shapes when dropped on both water and paper. I later combined the filmed footage to create ephemeral environments that my characters could move through.
These filmic pieces were interesting, but they still felt empty. They weren’t encompassing, or filling the space in the same way that Cardiff and Eliasson’s work did. They were largely confined to the surface of a screen, or the small rectangular prints on paper on to which I projected. They also appeared to have little narrative and were merely a linear progression of visual images moving in sequence. When people asked “why did you do that?” my only reply would be, “to get to the next part.” This always left me feeling like my work was somewhat hollow, and my aspirations for them not yet as resolved as I had hoped for. The difference between my work and the works of Cardiff and Eliasson is that their work reached out to me and pulled me in. Pieces like ‘40 part motet’ by Janet Cardiff and George Burrs Miller, and ‘Beauty’ by Olafur Eliasson forced me to engage with them and move through the space they created. This was something I still aspired to achieve with my own work. At the same time I desired to use narrative, build worlds, and create interactive environments through installation to create a more immersive narrative. My earlier attempts to do this always felt clichéd and forced. However, eventually I realized well-crafted characters and an engaging world were what I truly enjoyed creating. By simplifying my process to narrative and watercolour illustrations, I found I had a freedom to explore in a way I could not with animation.

To contextualize this new work, I wish to reflect on the work which lead me to this point. Before returning to school I was working on two bodies of work. One was a series of illustrations about depressed steampunk robots and the other an egg exploring a strange world (Feheregyhazi 2013) (fig 3). I enjoyed exploring these characters and their worlds but never combined them into anything more than little vignettes about the characters existing in their environment. There was no transition and no development of plot beyond the one paragraph windows into their worlds. The other body of work consisted of several animated music videos and short films I had been commissioned to do for various bands and production companies around the world. The first animation I ever did was a short film about the Anglerpod1 (Andrei Fehereghazi 2009), an angler fish type creature with feet that loved watching crime dramas and smoking cigars (Fehereghazi 2013) (fig 4). Through experimentation I created a unique form of animation that utilized the flat nature of paper and cardboard. ‘Anglerpod’ was created completely using cardboard and lighting effects. However, it wasn’t long before I started using other textures including paper and fabrics. This created a more robust look than cardboard and lights alone. Sometimes the animated textures were placed in the real world, sometimes I would bring actors into a world created out of textures, and sometimes everything would be animated using textures.
Of all the textures I worked with I was especially attracted to those with water damage and patinas. For example, the stains created by water dripping on a book left under a leaky pipe, mould growing on cardboard in a humid basement, or an abandoned scrap of paper torn and creased by it's time in a puddle or snow bank. The random damage that came from a difficult life gave the textures a surprising color, character, “used” or old visual quality, and history that was mysterious that sparked endless possibilities. I discovered of all these materials that those affected by water were the ones that inspired me to create the most. With this in mind I started incorporating watercolour media, where I could create my own textures of wet, dry, soft and sharp and could manipulate the textures to a greater extent when creating my films. Though I was excited at the possibilities, I wasn't entirely sure how using watercolours would translate into animation. Fortunately, around that time, I was part of a collaborative animated film called ‘Iterations’ with artists from around the world (Fehergyhazi 2012) (Fig 6). The sets and animations were created by me, but all the textures, scenery and characters to create the worlds were the work of other artists. Many of them used watercolours to create the various elements, and the results were magical. For the next music video I worked on (Fehergyhazi 2012) (fig 8), I tried watercolour to create the world and main characters. It allowed a type of control that I hadn't had when working with other media or types of textures alone.
It is difficult it is to get a handle on watercolours. However, by this time, I had learned a valuable lesson from life that led to a philosophy that served me well when exploring watercolours for the first time. When I had hair (Fehereghazi 2016) (fig 7), it was curly and unruly. Whenever I tried to style it, I would always have to fight with it to make it do anything and it would look awful as a result. One day I realized the best I could do with my curly hair is get a decent haircut, guide it a little with styling cream, and let it do what it wanted to that day. That was when I started loving my hair, embracing its quirks, and unfortunately, it was then it started to leave me (Fehereghazi 2007) (fig 9). Watercolours work best when I give them a little bit of guidance and let them do what they want. Finding the right watercolour paper is like getting a good hair cut, styling cream is adjusting the amounts of water and where it sits, and like unruly hair you just let a watercolour do what it will. I discovered this leads to the best results. The media of watercolour has also forced me to let things go, to be exploratory, and to use my formal/visual skills, but also to allow for spontaneity, to not obsess, overwork or fuss.
Video Art is something with which I have always had a complex relationship. Even though I often create video and film works, when I see a video simply played in a gallery I often wonder ‘what’s the point.’ If the experience of a piece does not benefit from the open ended experience of a gallery it should not be in a gallery. If I was going to do video in a gallery there had to be a reason for it, as there was with ‘Paradise Institute’ by Janet Cardiff and George Burrs Miller (2001) (Fig 10, Fig 11). ‘Paradise institute’ was shown in a small theatre, housed within a gallery and experienced through headphones. There was audio relating to the filmic image on the screen, but through the use of binaural microphones, Cardiff played with the audience with characters who interrupted their viewing experience through whispers and sounds that seemed outside the projected reality. Crinkling bags, discussion of the film, and eating popcorn are all tools used to change the encounter.

Another film artist Amalie Atkins’ work is important in terms of its experiential context, and seeing it in a theatre allowed the audience to experience the world she created uninterrupted by the world outside. This was how I first saw her work. Amalie, however, has experimented with how the viewer has access to her work and has managed to expand the viewer experience by creating small spaces and viewing rooms for her two films ‘Three Minute Miracle’ (Atkins 2008) and ‘Scenes From a Secret World’ (Atkins 2009) (Fig 12). By creating tents and forcing the viewer to remove their shoes and put on boots to enter the space, she turned a static viewing experience into one that requires interaction, even submission into the world she creates. By filling the space with soil and sculptures she manages to add smell and touch to an experience that before only engaged sight and sound to create a “full” and fulfilling experience. However, my films by and large work better on a screen than they do in a gallery, so I tried to figure out ways to move the type of narratives I wanted to tell into something that could work in a gallery space. I thought of adding interactivity, shaping the space and creating circular story loops. All my ideas ended in narratives that I found clichéd and forced.
By the beginning of my second year I had decided that my continued avoidance of making a film was counterproductive. I was a storyteller, and film was the medium with which I had the most experience. So I sat down and started writing a short film. This, however, did not go as planned. I don't know what causes creative blocks in others, but in my case it had nothing to do with not having enough ideas. It was the vast potential of different paths the story could take that froze me. I wrote pages upon pages every day and hated it all. After 2 months of this I realized I needed to create something, rather than just thinking about what I might create. With this in mind I began a self-induced marathon where I would experiment with various short narratives with the idea of brain storming. Thus began 100 days of creating daily animated videos. The 100 daily videos served me in a similar way that the painting in watercolour did in previous working sessions, where there's no time or ability to overthink. Again I had to learn to let go, accept the things I didn't like, learn from it and fix them for the next time. This is a process I believe is endless. The act of creating feeds creative ideas. Rather than being obsessed with perfection, which causes me to seize up, I found finishing quickly and moving on, was a more effective process for me.
It was around this time that I watched a discussion between authors George R.R. Martin (Game of Thrones) and Stephen King:6

**George R.R Martin (GM):** How the fuck do you write so many books so fast. I think Oh, I’ve had a really good 6 months I’ve written 3 chapters. You’ve finished 3 books

**Stephen King (SK):** Here’s the thing, there are books and there are books. I get out there and I try to get 6 pages a day. When I’m working I work 3-4 hours a day, and I try to get 6 pages and I try to get them fairly clean. So if the manuscript is 360 pages long that’s basically 2 months’ work.

**GM:** And you do hit 6 pages a day?

**SK:** I usually do.

**GM:** You don’t ever have a day where you sit down there, and it’s like constipation and you write a sentence and it’s like you hate the sentence and you check your email and, you wonder if you had any talent after all, and maybe you should’ve been a plumber. Don’t you have days like that? (Youtube June 2016; 50:27)

In reviewing this conversation, I realized I was obsessed with perfection which had immobilized me. Much like George R.R. Martin, this prevented me from moving forward on any projects. I wanted to be more like Stephen King, who just sat down and got the work done. With this in mind I started my daily animation project which forced me to focus on the work at hand and not be overwhelmed by this quest for perfection. These daily videos didn’t need to be perfect but they did need to be “fairly clean” as King put it. When I shifted to King’s approach I found it liberating. Finished not perfect became my new mantra. I also posted daily to Instagram. This made me accountable to produce a new video every day of the week. It also made me realize how an audience could relate to my work in an online space in ways it could not in a gallery.

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6 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=66k0DQ_fkFk
In January of 2016, after delivering 100 daily videos I decided I wanted to do some slightly more sustained projects, take some of the outcomes that excited me and could be taken further. I began experimenting with rotoscoping (an animation technique where drawings are done over existing footage) and started a project that seemed to be a combination of the processes of both Martin and King. My goal was to create an animation consisting entirely of watercolour paintings. (Fig 16, Fig 17) (Feheregyhazi 2016) I again took the Stephen King approach and set new goals for myself. My strategy was to produce 40 paintings a week that would be converted to 12 frames a second of animation, which would eventually yield about 3 seconds of animation a week. After diligently working 3 months on 236 paintings I found I was working at about half the rate I had initially planned. Even though I was working with consistency and I knew I would eventually hit my goal of a short film, it was going to take years for that one story to come into being. I came to the realization I was focusing again on perfecting my delivery instead of focusing on my narrative, and getting my story out.
For the past few years I’ve thought of myself as a ‘filmmaker’. However, when I really think about it story-teller is a more apt description. I wanted to be able to tell a story and have that story unfold and progress at a rate that would prevent me from obsessing. Illustration in watercolours seemed like the logical choice. I had been painting and telling stories about eggs with legs (Andrei Fehereghazi 2013) (Fig 18, fig 20) for the few years leading up to starting my Masters, (in certain circles people had started referring to me as the Egg man), so it seemed like the logical choice to come back into my practise now.

People often ask me “Why the egg?” First, early on I created an animated film about the birth of the Easter Bunny (Andrei Fehereghazi 2011) (Fig 19). I decided that since the Easter Bunny laid eggs, it would then follow that the Easter Bunny itself would be born from an egg. I had also concluded that such a birth would require the bottom half of a chicken, since bunnies don’t lay eggs. For a good portion of the film the Bunny was half hatched, represented as an egg with chicken legs and bunny ears. When I finally fully hatched the egg, I found that no character design I came up with could compare to the potential of what might be inside the egg. The first time I ever painted an egg was during my undergraduate degree. I created a couple paintings where I tried to visually represent time. The most successful painting of this series was one that represented time at the beginning of the universe, when past, present and future all exist at a single moment. To represent this, I painted an egg with a small bump in it. Just like a seed, to me, the egg represents boundless potential.

I believe the endless potential of the egg can be the catalyst to engage the audience’s imagination. Seeing an egg, the audience inevitably asks the question, and imagines ‘what’s on the inside.’ The egg offers ambiguity; when no answer is given, they can choose for themselves what they think is on the inside, they can imagine whether what is inside will be revealed, or they may accept the egg as a character, and possibly even feel empathy for this little creature.
In my teen years I read a influential book named 'Understanding Comics' (1994) by Scott McCloud, after someone suggested to me that this was the book to read if I wanted to make comics. Many things from the book have stuck with me through the years, but nothing more than what McCloud describes as “amplification through simplification.” (McCloud, 1994)(30). McCloud writes “The more cartoony a face is, for instance, the more people it could be said to describe. The fact that your mind is capable of taking a circle, two dots and a line and turning them into a face is nothing short of incredible! But still more incredible is the fact that you cannot avoid seeing a face here. Your mind won’t let you!” (McCloud, 1994)(31) (Fig 21)

Humans have a very ‘me’ centric view of the world, allowing us to imprint ourselves, or at least characteristics of ourselves, onto pretty much anything with icons of what could be described as eyes and a mouth. A perfect example of this is the viral video talking boat. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=38v51JvIv0A. In the video we see a boat with one of the flaps on its cover flapping in the wind while being driven down the highway (Fig 22)(Scott Kosman Youtube Dec 2013). Above the flap are two smaller flaps, where eyes might be on a smiley face. It’s being filmed by the car that’s following it and the person in the car is saying “bwrabwrabwrabwrwa,” giving a voice to this inanimate object with an out of control flap. Humans seemingly have the ability, and desire to add human characteristics to almost anything we see. Though seemingly ridiculous, we can look at a car’s headlights and think, “that car looks happy” or “that car looks angry,” even though the headlights look nothing like eyes. We give the car a personality, and potentially even emotional characteristics that are humanlike. The simplicity and otherness of the object, such as stick figures, allow the viewers to super impose themselves or someone close to them on the simplified image.

Fig 14 (McCloud, 1994)

Fig 22 (Youtube Dec 2013)
In 2007 I directed a film that I co-wrote with my friend Brigid Ward. The film was called Eugene and it was about a gay military bicycle that immigrated from Birmingham, England to Saskatoon, Saskatchewan (Feherghazi and Ward). I thought it would be a charming film where a story was told about this bicycle's journey and where viewers would develop empathy towards the bicycle and its situations. The footage in the film involved bicycles being staged and unmoving, or moved by their humans. What I didn’t account for was the degree to which people would connect with the character of Eugene. People experienced all types of emotions when they watched the film depending on their own experiences. Since the bicycle didn’t resemble a person in the slightest anyone with a similar experience could place themselves in the shoes (or tires) of Eugene. I was profoundly intrigued by the extent to which this simple form allowed people to place their own wants, desires, fears, emotions and experiences onto Eugene.

This brings me back to my interest in the Egg. What I love about the Egg is its ability to take on and reflect the desires, and experiences of those around it. It’s a blank canvas with endless potential. My illustrated story using the egg is titled ‘The Tale of Prehistoregg.’ The main character is an egg and is voiceless and gender neutral. It’s neutrality has the potential to allow anyone who’s reading or listening to the story to place themselves in the shoes of the character. It also permits me as the storyteller to have the characters Prehistoregg encounters transpose their own hopes and dreams onto it. My character, Giraffadon, wants a little brother. To him Prehistoregg is male and needs looking after (Fig 24) (Feherghazi 2016). My character Bernard is in need of protection and love, so to him Prehistoregg is a strong female who can protect him from the dangers of the world (Fig 23) (Feherghazi 2016). The audience may either be able to see qualities of themselves in Prehistoregg or the qualities they’re looking for in a best friend. The hope is that this leads them to a deeper connection and identification with the story of Prehistoregg and potentially even become a part of the narrative. McCloud states that “this combination allows readers to mask themselves in a character and safely enter a sensually stimulating world (McCloud, 1994)(43).”
I’ve noticed that, in the context of film and television, the main character often tends to be the least interesting. Sometimes this can perhaps be attributed to bad script-writing, though I would argue there are times when the writer does this deliberately to allow the viewer to imprint themselves on that character and journey to a different world. One of my favourite examples of this is the character of Ashitaka in the animated film ‘Mononoke Hime,’ by Hayao Miyazaki (1997). Ashitaka (Fig 25) (Miyazaki 1997) for the most part is a fairly bland character, especially when compared to San (Princess mononoke) (Fig 26) (Miyazaki 1997), Lady Eboshi (Fig 27) (Miyazaki 1997) or the Forest Gods. But Ashitaka is arguably the protagonist of the film since there aren’t many scenes where he isn’t on screen. So why did Miyazaki choose to make this relatively dull character the main character? I would say it was to allow Ashitaka to be a type of tour guide. In the world of Mononoke there’s a girl raised by wolf gods, fighting with various other animals in a battle against the encroaching iron mine run by Lady Eboshi, a fair leader who embraces human outcasts and gives them a place to feel useful. Two opposing groups battle with each other. Characterizing one of these groups as the protagonist, Miyazaki would characteristically automatically make the other an antagonist. So how do you resolve this problem? One suggestion would be to create a somewhat bland 3rd party to act as a go-between, a character who does not take sides, through whom the audience can experience the world. That character is Ashitaka. In Mononoke the world and environments itself at times takes on the role of a character. Due to the industrialization of Lady Eboshi’s mine, the environment begins to change and some of the forest gods become cursed. One of these gods, having lost its sanity, curses Ashitaka, which is the catalyst for his journey to begin. Through his journey to find a god who can remove this curse and save his life, Ashitaka brings us through the world that Miyazaki has created. The forest is filled with spirits and has a life of its own. Since Ashitaka can best be described as ‘nice,’ the audience can journey with him, share and experience the world, and empathize with the various opposing forces.
The audience’s experience has always been very important to my artistic practice. I want my work to reach out to everyone. This doesn’t mean that I expect everyone to enjoy my work, but I don’t want my work to discriminate against or target any specific audience. For example, the film ‘Spirited Away’ by Hayao Miyazaki,\(^{11}\) (2001) was viewed and loved by children, teens, adults, and critics alike. Not only did it win over audiences with an original story and engaging visuals, but it also received critical acclaim by winning both ‘The Golden Bear’ for best film at the Berlin International Film Festival (2001) and the Academy Award for best animated film the same year (Oscars.org 2003). Miyazaki proves that a well told story is universal. What I take from Miyazaki’s work is that it is less about targeting an audience and more about allowing the audience to find the work. With this in mind the Gallery by its very nature, for the most part only feels accessible to a specific audience, which eliminates a large swath of people who might otherwise see and engage with the work. My goal is a diverse audience, and in the future I most likely would not see the gallery as my only venue. My work I believe can be digital, printed, or installed in a more public space and still retain the same experience that it would have if shown in a gallery. This is why I’ve also created a website that allows an audience to engage with the work digitally (prehistoregg.com).

Over the two years of my masters I have changed focus and medium several times. This led to the realisation that I am without a doubt a storyteller before I’m anything else. With this in mind I’ve decided to focus mainly on telling a story through illustration and written word. By allowing myself the opportunity to create and share a story quickly, I can experiment and explore routes I would be forced to ignore if I was animating. I love animation as a process and final product, but due to how time intensive the animation process is, it eliminates potential experimentation in story arcs and world building. The endless potential of the egg, allows me to explore and experiment with various story potential as they present themselves. This is the type of freedom my art needs right now, and is something I wish I had realized at the beginning of these two years of growth. In order to pursue animation, I need something worth animating. Using the quick non-precious nature of watercolours allows me to examine and develop the story as I create the work. Eventually I would like to animate the world of prehistoregg, but that time is not until the narrative has been explored as illustrated works. Ultimately by using the simplified form of the egg, a well told story, and watercolours, I hope to create a story that is both engaging and pulls the audience into my strange little world as much if not more than a meticulously crafted animation. If I can build a narrative that allows the audience to bring some of themselves into the world of Prehistoregg, It will not only serve to create a richer world, it will bring life to the world I have created in ways I couldn’t achieve on my own. By using a digital platform to tell the story, there will be more of a push and pull between the audience, the world, the story, and me as the creator. The goal is to make everyone feel welcome in the world of Prehistoregg.

I believe I have accomplished this with the use of watercolours, the language of illustration and cartooning. This has allowed me to create characters that people can imprint themselves onto while becoming engaged with the narrative I have created, a narrative that also allows them to look at their own lives through new eyes.
Work Cited


