

Hernease Davis (00:00:10):

Hello and welcome to episode three of this third season of the Project Space, a podcast featuring some of the remarkable artists who have participated in the Project Space Residency here at the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester, New York. The Project Space Residency has served both regional, national and international artists for many years, and the goal of the Project Space Residency is to provide time, space, and resources to artists who are experimenting with photo, film and media art. I'm Hernease Davis. I'm a photo-based artist and an assistant curator here at VSW. For each episode, I'll be in conversation with artists to discuss their background, their practice, and how the Project Space Residency has impacted their works. For this episode, I spoke with former resident Joshua Tonies twice due to technical issues with my very first audio recording with Joshua, but he was extremely generous to sit down with me for a second time that was free of audio issues.

(00:01:14):

This episode will be a bit of a hybrid, however, because there are portions of our first conversation that I felt compelled to keep, I'll say that for every interview, I ask each resident to answer the question, where are you from? And I leave it open to interpretation. Well, Joshua's answer during our first conversation was too wonderful not to include. So please bear with me and the audio quality for the first 12 minutes or so of our discussion. In our talk, Joshua refers to interactions he had with VSW staff, so you'll hear him mention Mary Lewandowski, our collections manager, Tara Meranda Nilson, curator and Director of Public Programs, and the managing editor of the VSW Press, Tate Shaw, editor of the VSW Press and Nilson Carroll, an assistant curator and preservation specialist here at VSW. Joshua also makes reference to Nilson's MFA thesis installation, as well as a salon event that was held during his time in residency called Queer Games Bundle.

(00:02:19):

Now, Queer Games Bundle is a part pop-up arcade, part poetry reading, part performance night organized by Nilson Carroll and Swampbabes. And Swampbabes is a DIY queer game art community that was started in Rochester. I've included links to that program as well as Nilson's website for visual reference. I've also included links in the show notes that will take you to Joshua's website, which has examples of all of his artworks we will discuss, as well as his VSW residency page where you can find the recording of an artist talk he gave while in residency. And stay tuned at the very end for an epilogue discussion with Joshua around a very special piece he made during his time in residency at VSW.

Joshua Tonies (00:03:06):

Hello, my name is Josh Tonies. I grew up in northern Ohio and I lived in midtown Akron, which for Ohio was like a dense urban environment, and we were encouraged to know our neighbors. We were involved in their lives. We played with the kids in the neighborhood. Around the time I turned 11, our family moved to this tiny town called Bath, Ohio. We lived on a plot of land that bordered the state park system, so it was very alluring, a beautiful forest in our backyard. There was a ravine behind our house, and me and my brothers would play out there. Very naively, I kind of was under the delusion that a lot of people had access to this, it was like a common experience, but being in a space like that where I got to spend a majority of my playtime in the environment, definitely informed my ideas about a wonder or curiosity of the natural world.

(00:04:08):

Growing up there was beautiful as a child, but I think as I got older and kind of came into my queerness, I realized it might not be the most welcoming or inclusive place. There were things about the natural landscape and being so close to nature that were reassuring and affirming. I don't want to characterize my experiences growing up there as being a victim of bullying or violence towards my homosexuality, but definitely it instilled in me this hyper-awareness or reflexivity of how I presented the tone of my voice,

my body language. I was constantly monitoring that and I think it definitely informed the way that I thought about reflecting my experience and as an artistic strategy as well.

[\(00:04:59\)](#):

From those experiences, I attended an art college in southern Ohio, Columbus College of Art and Design, and studied animation and art history. And really, I guess at that point I found my chosen family and became much more comfortable in a milieu where you're surrounded by all these artistic freaks where you're actually, you don't feel as unique as you did in the place where you started, which is reassuring. I felt less self-conscious in some ways. After completing my studies, I worked professionally in animation and realized it wasn't for me. I didn't really like working on other people's ideas as much. Also, the workflow is a little toxic. The idea of having a stable source of income and insurance, I was afraid to leave it, but ultimately did. I wound up moving to Pittsburgh and working for Pittsburgh filmmakers. I worked in the equipment office, essentially repairing cameras and checking out lighting kits and making use of their dark room and their animation equipment. And I also lived with another artist who's a painter, and his name is Adam Grassi. A lot of his work is about healing from trauma and the sort of expansive power of representing metaphysical or spiritual experience of the world. But during that time, I guess why I'm bringing up that artist in particular, we shared a studio. We co-created work and going to school, I had tricked my parents into going into an art college telling them I was going to work for Pixar. Like, oh, I'm going to have a real job after, don't worry. But I didn't really have a lot of points of reference for what life would be like as a studio artist who makes work that reflects the world and questions artistically our relationship to the natural world.

[\(00:07:02\)](#):

And I would say that the time that I was living in Pittsburgh, I was in my early twenties, and I was extremely vulnerable and open to experiences. And also I lived in a place where you could sort of afford to be an artist and have a studio. And over the course of around five years of living there, I began to meet curators and got invited into artist run spaces. And it led to meeting and working with other institutions and getting to travel. And I would say those five years that I lived in Pittsburgh were really very powerful for giving me the space to sort of sort things out and have enough evidence to really understand what I was after and where I was situated. And I would attribute a lot of that to the generous of Adam.

[\(00:07:50\)](#):

Eventually, I made it out to California. I went to UC San Diego for grad school. And at that point I had enough experience that I wanted to rethink how I was working and the ways in which I could exist as an artist. I definitely wasn't interested... up to that point, I was making paintings and dabbling with animation, and I was always afraid to work with animation. I didn't know really how to sell it. Around that time, getting to work in an institution, I was less skeptical about it and was kind of embraced the support and attention that you might get in a space like that to really not be obligated to make work that's successful or commercially viable. I kind of got to unpack the things that I wanted to and saw connections in my work over the past decade that I wanted to nourish and expand on. I would say a lot of that is making these ecological temporary studies of reflections of the natural world.

[\(00:08:51\)](#):

And definitely that's core to my practice now, finding ways of reflecting the abstraction of what I would call geologic time, my queerness and adaptability. And yeah, a lot of my work requires some amount of collaboration. Definitely makes use of a deeply poetic or lyrical way of referring to the natural world or a complex relationship to it. So I was a Project Space Resident in 2023 in April, and that was a really magical experience for me. For about four and a half years after my completion of my graduate studies, a lot of my energy went into teaching. I work at University of San Diego as, I guess the title is a visiting assistant professor. So in a space like that, I think there was this pressure immediately after finishing my MFA that I had to start teaching and sort of find some stability. And over time I realized, hey, you know what? I actually kind of figured a lot of this out. I probably don't need to spend so much time worrying

about my students. They're probably getting weirded out by how much energy I'm putting into this. I have enough prepared. Around 2018, I had met with this curator and was doing a lot of work with 3D scanning and a lot of the things that I was animating, they were plastic objects and finding ways of activating them to make them feel as though they were living in some way or biologic forms. And this is something that actually is continued and I can think really clearly about a work when I was at Visual Studies Workshop. That is essentially the Pokemon evolution of that work.

Hernease Davis ([00:10:37](#)):

I have to say, I love your answer to my questions and because as you're speaking, how you're talking about where you're from and wrapping it into your personal biography, but also where you're from, who you've been with, how you've been in community, is a part of how you would describe your practice or in the narrative of describing that practice and the word ecology, of course, because using that term ecology, but from what I remember and what I understand and what I've studied is that ecology is about environmental relationships and the complexity of how environmental stressors or even needs and compromises reflect in biodiversity or how plants grow or even how microorganisms thrive or how they don't thrive. It's like this life or death cycle that at the core of it is how do these organisms relate to one another?

([00:11:38](#)):

And so the way you describe yourself and where you're from and your practice, it's very ecological to me, especially thinking about relationships or your relationship to environment, how it shaped your outlook on reality. And I just have to say, I just kind of loved hearing you talk about that. Like, oh my gosh, this is Josh's practice. I don't know. What are your thoughts on that?

Joshua Tonies ([00:12:06](#)):

Absolutely. No, thank you so much for saying that. And it's very affirming actually to hear you say that because I was fortunate enough to, and maybe just to give a shout out to all moms that are mothers of artists or mothers of fiercely independent children.

([00:12:22](#)):

Thank you for your patience. But I will say that, yeah, my mom kept this book that I made when I was probably five or six years old. I think the title was Our Earth and was this crayon drawing of the Earth and then different... it was not an intentional, I don't want to overly intellectualize it because I was five years old, but there were different scales of how I thought about the natural world. And I don't know, I guess I think people create this artificial distinction about, oh, well, there's the human manmade world and the natural world, and maybe those are helpful as points of reference. And maybe that speaks to your observation about ecological minded or conscious work where you can really understand yourself in relationship to other factors or forces. And I think that's something that I'm still trying to reconcile, and it's something that's in a constant state of becoming for me.

([00:13:27](#)):

But yeah, one of the insights that I can speak to regarding the ecological conscious way of working is for me working with animation, working with time-based work is I feel like there's this abstraction of time that interrupts our ability to experience ecological or geologic time. This notion of the climate chaos that's happening now, or even just getting to think about the world as this system that's constantly moving, but maybe we don't really get to see the glaciers. Well, now we see them recede and we see them melt, so, bad example. But like mountains moving or the face of a rock eroding. We have enough evidence, our ability to document it. Maybe it spans beyond a lifetime, but we know that things are in place. And I guess for me, in my practice, I want to somehow render visible, even if it's in this very lyrical or poetic way, the sensation of geologic time. Maybe it's a form of estrangement to dislocate our preconceptions about a certain ecological subject. So we can really see it and it can reveal something to us or give us

some sort of wisdom or insight. So I think for me, in reframing the natural world using strategies of animation and abstraction, I hope that it can make it more tangible and experiential and emotional.

Hernease Davis ([00:15:10](#)):

So that was Joshua's introduction to open our recording. On the second try, I asked Joshua to share about why he applied for the residency and about his expectations coming into the Project Space.

Joshua Tonies ([00:15:25](#)):

Going into it. I never felt pressured that, okay, you said you were going to do this thing, and if you don't do that, we're going to evict you from the apartment. We're going to change the lock. No, which is great. So one thing that was really magical about being at VSW was there was a sincere interest and curiosity about not so much the outputs, what I was going to polish and have ready, the finished work, but more investigatory.

([00:15:53](#)):

And one thing that was extremely beneficial for me in my experience there was being given the opportunity to host an artist talk at the very beginning of my time there. I think when you explain something, when you're asked to describe something, you sort of have this point of reference, and in some ways you can sort of move around it because you're describing the shape of your ideas and your research. It also fostered a conversation with Tate and Mary and Nilson, and with Tara, it felt not only so welcoming, I think, in this holistic way, but they made connections in my work and talked about what I was doing in ways that I don't even know if in grad school you get these, you have your cohort of artists who you're working with or your trusted advisors who are looking into your work and imagining your limitations and potentials.

([00:16:50](#)):

I feel like there was just this immediacy. It removed a barrier that I think I had about having to perform at VSW in a particular way, and I felt like I was talking to a group of peers, colleagues that were like, Hey, we saw your application materials. We're interested in this, and you've created this moment for us to address and ask questions about how these things fit together. So that really helped set an intention with how I could not only use the physical space or the time, but also relationships with folks. I think, unfortunately, I think you might've been out of town when I gave the artist talk, but I want to include you as well. We had so many wonderful conversations before we had the official interview in my studio, which was lovely.

([00:17:35](#)):

So it affects your agency in ways that I think when I'm in my studio, I'm like, okay, I have my friends that I can call, or I have my two folks from grad school who would pick me up from the airport, like the people, the family, the good friends. So those people are great, and I love them. But yeah, suddenly you're in this different ecological space where, oh, we could have a conversation with Nilson up until this point, or the way that Mary thinks about video is so different from anyone whom I've ever spoken to. So it created a space of possibility that is, I can't even, it's invaluable. It's incredible. I think one of the most powerful things about being there, of course, having a beautiful studio and being able to walk there every morning and get amazing coffee was excellent. Getting to work with Tate. He essentially was the co-creator or the producer of these flip book animations of the stop motion work that I made allowed me to see my work in material terms that I'd never really, I flirted with printing still frames from the animation, but actually being able to make the work touchable in this way was really incredible for me. It affected the future work. So I'm showing those animations this Saturday in Los Angeles, and the staging of how I presented it during my open studio was very instrumental in how I could imagine putting the work together. It's called Phase Gallery is the name of the gallery,

(00:19:15):

And there was something about the way that the work was presented when I was creating them at Visual Studies Workshop, that being able to hold the stop motion animation as a flip book, and change your perspective of it, or sort of experience two different distortions of time, the way your visual field changes as you're holding the object and it moves, but also the speed with which you can play it back caused me to actually rerecord the stop motion animations off of monitors. And from a point of view of a camera that sort of moves across the image and changes its proximates, like how close or far away from the image it is, it sort of wanders. This is something that probably would be best served as a visual, but...

Hernease Davis (00:19:58):

Well, I kind of want to back up a little bit, and if you can actually introduce that series. Is it still titled Aberrant Phytology?

Joshua Tonies (00:20:06):

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Hernease Davis (00:20:07):

Okay. So also in introducing Aberrant Phytology, can you talk about how you did use that space while you were at VSW and how one might encounter it at Phase Gallery in LA?

Joshua Tonies (00:20:21):

Absolutely. So yeah, that body of work was part of the proposal process for my residency and "aberrance", that refers to something that strays away from its natural process or behavior. So, phytology is just sort of a fancy or poetic envelope for talking about these works, these animations of what appear to be plants growing in sort of the distortion of how we would relate to a time lapse.

(00:20:49):

So we see this compression of time. How long does it take for a plant to grow? Of course that varies. But being able to observe something like that, we can only observe it either through photographic distortion of time lapse or we have to trust or have some belief that every time we look at the rows in our garden that it's changing over time, that it's getting bigger or starting to open up and shift and scale. So to make these works, I was taking dollar store, these plastic photorealistic house plants that are very inexpensive to purchase and are made from PET plastic, which is a derivative of petroleum-based origin. So they're made from fossil fuels or fossilized, ancient matter essentially would use the reverse process. So you'd have the completed, show-ready aloe plants that's made of plastic, and then I would cut using a pretty heavy craft shears. I would cut away parts of them and photograph that and then reverse the process. So in the act of making these things, I was sort of, not dematerializing them, but sort of disintegrating them into this pile of debris.

(00:22:05):

And then in reversing the process, I also incorporated this image algorithm. When you're animating something, you take a bunch of photos of something that changes over time, and I was using an image interpolator that was creating photographs in between the photographs that I was taking. It's used to create fake slow motion or to smooth video.

(00:22:28):

And in this case, I was using something called Frame Flow, and there was another image interpolator called Dain. And these systems are designed to for, I'll put it in air quotes, like "restore" old film, and you can see them, if you look on websites like YouTube, you can watch a Melies or the Lumiere Brothers.

Yeah, they made these, well, okay, this is not history lesson, I'm sorry. But those films were recorded at maybe 14 frames per second. It was a hand cranked analog film process, and then people are using these interpolators to mechanically distort the video, so it looks smooth or it's playing at 60 frames per second. It's a very strange phenomenon, but the image interpolators are designed to understand particular rules about space.

(00:23:20):

And the vignettes, the settings that I was working with, they were just either large color fields, a background that just had one continuous color or maybe specific patterns that referenced tile or wallpaper. This is all to say the backgrounds that you choose for stop motion and incorporating these image interpolators, it's actually not designed to work that way. It's designed to track camera movements or understand changes in space. And so if there aren't those things, the AI system, this algorithm, it sort of malfunctions. It does things. It creates artifacts in the images. And once I saw that that happened, kind of opened up a way for me to think about these, and their artificiality and the uncanniness of them.

(00:24:04):

I think initially I was like, okay, I'm studying, I'm going to observe how these plants grow and then I'm going to try to recreate that. And then I was like, I don't think I'm actually animating these plants. I'm actually animating this ancient fossil fuel mediated through this really strange geopolitical... Okay, it's a grand statement, but realism is not what I'm going for here. I think I'm animating something else.

(00:24:29):

So the uncanniness and the ability for these things to become sort of campy and figurative in ways that really don't resemble plants at all became a focus and something that I latched onto with how I continued to work with them. I wanted to create some sort of distance. It's something that I try to incorporate into my practice, not so much chaos, but relinquishing some control over the material or giving space for the material to push back in particular ways. And there was something that felt so not simple, but binary or maybe almost it was too straightforward for me, where it was very clear how these things were being made when I was just cutting them and then playing the animation frames back where I was afraid, okay, is this just a punchline? Once you see that work and you're like, I understand how this is being made,

(00:25:19):

The movie, the animation doesn't become a window into thinking and reflecting and making connections, but it sort of presents itself as a facade, in ... like you're so aware of the process. So it added this space for the material to do something that I hadn't intended, and for it to push back in a way that gave different ways for people to read and to also undermine a system that's like, okay, I'm going to make these in-between frames, and then I'm like, oh, but I can break that system or befuddle it in some way. In some of the early works, the artifacts actually look like chemistry and people that were looking at them, they were like, oh, did you shoot these on 16 millimeter? Has this been processed in some way? I'll say one more thing.

(00:26:02):

This work kind of came after I had done all of these works with 3D scanning and using the program Blender. I went to school for animation, and I hated 3D animation. I completed my undergrad with doing hand-drawn animation. There was something really frightening about the mutability of simulated space, like Blender. Maybe my brain couldn't handle that abstraction, or I was just really depressed at the time. Probably a combination of both, but for some reason in my late twenties, learning to use those tools again was really exciting. But I kind of hit a point where it got, not boring, but I was like, I don't know if I have anything to say using this right now. And so working with stop motion and a physical process, photographic process, there was this excitement and uncertainty about how the material could work, and maybe you can create that as an artist for yourself just by adding elements of unfamiliarity to how you're

working. So maybe I could have done that with a computer, of course. I guess technically I incorporated a computer still into this process, But yeah.

Hernease Davis (00:27:09):

Oh my gosh, I have so many questions, Josh, because, well, I think of the interpolator also as a way of knowing that there's something off about it. There is a smoothness about how these plants grow, but there is something that is obviously off about it because they're sort of building up. If you can imagine a blade of grass, it's sort of you're building the tip, you're building it up into the tip of the blade, and that is not how plants grow or how any of us develop. And so there is this uncanniness with knowing, but then the smoothness of it gives it that weird feeling of knowing that something is quite off. Thinking about it as something that is smoothed out by AI and thinking about AI as a learning module, there is some kind of development that's going on in there. I think it's really interesting in considering this relinquishing of control.

(00:28:08):

We're recording this in spring and it's spring and Rochester. I've been thinking a lot about spring and things growing and people talking about, oh, my lilacs didn't come through this year. Or, why is that? It has been a very strange winter. There are some frost issues. So there is that chaotic element of weather, of climate. You can sort of see how different plants are affected, which ones are not affected, perhaps because of their position where they are, or they're protected, what's going on with their soil, who knows? And so it's sort of that growth, that chaos. I just kind of see that as sort of the interpolator in this, but also wondering about your interest in plants and developments in the first place. But can you talk about your interest in this material and even approximating plant life?

Joshua Tonies (00:29:12):

Yeah. First of all, I also am really fascinated by the differences between a spring from one year to another. So I was lucky enough to get to experience the onset of spring during my residency at VSW, and when it came back to California, people say there aren't seasons. I mean, there are seasons in Southern California, you just have to be around long enough to notice the cues or the subtle signals that happen. But I remember when I came back last year, my front yard, I have a pear tree that was full of flowers. I don't know if I can list all of my trees. It would be silly to do that. But things were proliferating. It was incredible in a month's time. So here we are, sort of a week or so past when I returned and my garden, I'll say that my front yard, which is mostly succulents and drought tolerant things, there's this expectation around how something will return or be resilient and that changes. But to get to your question about, you were asking me about my relationship to the materiality of plants or the why even choose to use them.

(00:30:22):

I love what you said about training AI to essentially teach it how something grows, but then I'm also explaining it in terms that are paranoid and hermetic and not really informed by scientific inquiry, but more kind of telling a fairytale to a computer in a way. I do think about the uncanny in my work, and I had a conversation with Farrah Karapetian, she came to a show that happened in San Diego. She's an artist that works with cameraless photography, and her work is very much an investigation of social histories and labor. But she was polite enough, generous enough to come see my work, and she was like, what's your relationship to the uncanny? And I was like, wow. Yeah. I always think about my work as maybe the word plausible, you know that it's not real, but there's a moment where you understand that it maybe could exist in certain conditions or that it's... Not speculative, I feel like speculative is something else, but plausibility. Some of that connects to my experiences with queerness and passing culture, growing up in the rural Midwest in maybe a milieu that's pretty socially conservative and being pretty feminine-presenting in voice and manner as a kid and thinking that I had an ability to hide it or, alright, whatever, you have the benefit of distance of time, but maybe this was really informing as an artistic

sensibility, I'm very aware of how certain things present themselves, and I think that this idea of not only teaching a computer to create the presentation of a plant growing, there's something about making it plausible. What are the minimum conditions or what is the breaking point where these things are believably growing, but there's something else? And we know that, but we understand that this is trying to, not sort of camouflage itself, but there's this awareness that, oh, this thing's trying to pass as this other thing. The house plant also, I could go on. I know this is the forum for it. We're in a podcast like, Josh, please just effing tell me about it.

Hernease Davis ([00:32:42](#)):

Please go on, yes.

Joshua Tonies ([00:32:43](#)):

People have, I won't say paranoid, but people have semi-private relationships to these objects that are derived from the natural world. Your ficus plant or your... not yours. What's [that plant] behind you right now?

Hernease Davis ([00:32:59](#)):

Oh no, I knew you're going to ask. I don't know.

Joshua Tonies ([00:33:04](#)):

That's alright. I'm not asking you to be a botanist or something.

Hernease Davis ([00:33:08](#)):

I used to know, but I don't remember the name. I keep forgetting.

Joshua Tonies ([00:33:11](#)):

But we have these semi-private relationships with these objects that we're custodians of. Could be like, watch it grow or like, oh no, it has this weird spot on it. Or Oh my God, the leaf is changing color. Am I a horrible person? I'm not putting that on you, but I'm saying for me, and these are things that maybe exist. They potentially exist in the natural world. We're bringing them indoors, we're protecting them, but we're also putting them in this precarious space. Growing up in Ohio, we had the orchids in our house, and it was this magical thing of like, wow, this will die if we put it outside or if it gets too hot or So there's something really charismatic about the subject of a plant that's indoors that I'm still obsessed with, that I think is really has a powerful poetic implication where we're stewards to this thing and maybe because you can actually touch this thing. Whereas the tree that's in my front yard, I touch it, I talk to it. I didn't give it a nickname, but I think about it weekly, maybe daily sometimes. But the object that's in my house for some reason, I feel more responsible for it. I think it's somehow very familiar to people, and it's a way of speaking about the complication of something being, that we have an agency over something or that we could possibly affect its ability to thrive.

Hernease Davis ([00:34:47](#)):

Well, yeah. I have a question because I know it was important for you to bring these animations into a domestic space, how they're installed, and so if you'd like to talk about that. But what came to mind also is talking about being stewards of these plants. And perhaps I'm wondering about even your own feelings of being safe or perhaps those who have stewarded you. I guess is there any kind of relationship with that that you'd like to share In terms of queerness?

Joshua Tonies ([00:35:21](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. I think definitely on the surface it is about our complex relationship with nature and history. I definitely think they're something about putting them into a domestic space and the fact that they exist in this sort of queer space of they're mimicking something, maybe they're bootleg in some way. So blurring the lines between what we perceive as real. It definitely reflects on my experiences of being queer or even I guess as a professor, creating spaces where young queer artists can thrive and feel safe to explore their identity. So yeah, maybe it is about adaptability in different contexts, and some of that's connected to passing, but some of it's also the sort of complication that we know that it's not real.

([00:36:14](#)):

I was concerned about the cartoonishness of the work when I was putting the work up in VSW. Everyone was so generous to share their plants from their workspaces. Thank you. And I was like, is this too campy? Maybe this should just have no plants. And Tara made a really compelling argument. I was referring to it as kind of a video garden, and Tara was like, you should feel confident not having any plants. I love the austerity of that, and I think that is a really strong position to take. And I think Nilson in its separate conversation was like, your work can't be too campy. I think you're censoring yourself. If you're uncomfortable about that, you need to lean into that more. So, not that I don't mean to position Nilson and Tara against each other, but No, just to say, yeah, I was like, yeah, right. I'm afraid to give myself permission to let this thing do the thing that it wants to do. And I love, not the audacity of it, but I think there is a subversive aspect of the work that I want to bring forward more.

Hernease Davis ([00:37:23](#)):

And again, I'll have examples of this work linked in our show notes so that people can see, because the installation at VSW is on your website, so it's really easy for people to click over and see how it was during open studios. I loved that space, and I was thinking about the camp aspect and the purpose of camp and wondering, in my head, I'm thinking about how it's a way to perform. Now I'm rethinking of it as this caring safe place where things can just exist however they're existing. There's another set of social arrangements, social contracts that exist and those things that perhaps make you feel less safe. You're in a space, in this case, like a domestic space. Now it's safe. It's kind of twisted on itself. Does that make sense?

Joshua Tonies ([00:38:20](#)):

Absolutely. Yeah. Thank you so much for saying that. Yeah, I think about the audacity or the flamboyance of the work and putting it into a domestic space. Part of it is maybe safe. Part of it's also maybe mocking the sort of normative middle class appearances of how things are supposed to work. So I love the complication of that, and I catch myself in a department meeting or even engaging in the safe spaces of academic milieu during critiques or the defense that I'm going to go to, the kinds of conversations that I'll have with a student individually. And then when I'm performing in front of my peers, I feel like there is, maybe this is a weird head game and everyone else is like, why is Josh so nervous? But it never escapes my awareness, this sort of self reflexivity of how I'm presenting in a particular space. And for some reason, putting that into my material practice is very freeing. I don't want to say it's healing, but I feel powerful in that way to mock it.

([00:39:29](#)):

And also, if I made a work that was like, fuck big oil, I think people would be like, yeah, of course. Big oil is going to be like, okay, who is this? We're going to eliminate this person, but not that I'm a conspiracy theorist or something, but just the flow of policy. And so it's like, how do we talk about something that everyone sort of already has a very crystallized impression of. I am really bad at being funny, humorous, but I think I'm good at creating these sort of charismatic and confusing scenarios in my work.

Hernease Davis (00:40:03):

Well, I think you're very funny, Josh. Just to say, I laugh quite a bit when we speak, and it actually comes in surprising ways because your delivery is so deadpan. I'm like, oh my gosh, Josh, you're hilarious.

Joshua Tonies (00:40:17):

It doesn't translate though. I mean, I'll say thank you so much for saying that, and not just for protecting my ego or something, but I know that's a sincere, I don't know why else you would say that.

Hernease Davis (00:40:25):

No, it's super sincere, but I will say that, yeah, if you were just like, fuck big oil, it sort of is, yeah, duh, and it kind of stops there. But what you're doing, it does involve this material, the plastic, the oil, the planet of course the uncanny, but we can go back to talking about ecology. And how you're creating this connection that goes beyond the duh, because I think that's where certain, oh, man, I don't want to say certain art fails, but I'll say that... I think that it's where some art kind of fails because it creates this criteria where there's an on and off, there's a yes and no, there's a good and bad, not a connection or a relationship, or not even implication. It's not even about implicating the viewer, but it is about creating these deeper levels of thinking around our relationship with these materials, be it plastic, be it digital, be it something that is "natural". Even thinking about what is natural, what is unnatural, canny, uncanny. I would be really disappointed if it was just a duh, and it's not.

Joshua Tonies (00:41:46):

Thank you. Yeah, it's also, I mean, this is probably like, not self pity, so take it for what it is. It's a very peculiar thing as I continue to exist as an artist, and I'll just say as I'm getting older, how can I say this in a way that's... okay, I'll put it this way. I feel like I'm able to communicate. I'm not able to communicate right now. I feel like I'm able to communicate in material terms in ways that are extremely rewarding. But I also, at this point in my life, I have the least amount of time to actually say something because of my other responsibilities.

(00:42:26):

So this is not to create pity, but I think it's maybe to speak to other colleagues that are maybe in a situation where they're balancing being a caregiver or being responsible for creating spaces for young artists in classrooms. I guess don't lose sight of what is important to you or feel undermined by that. I also feel like maybe my privileged position to think in these terms really comes from the holistic experience of not just having a studio and a trust fund or something like that, not vilifying people that have those opportunities and to undermine their brilliance, but just to say, yeah, it's something that I think about a lot and it's weird. It's not ironic, but it's just kind of like, wow, I have these ideas. I want to make this work, and I have the least amount of time to do it now. So spaces like Visual Studies Workshop enable the realization of things, not just work, but thinking and conversations that are just invaluable.

Hernease Davis (00:43:32):

So one of the things that I've been learning about with your work and even Nilson's work is the sensibility of new media. And it wasn't until... getting ready for this conversation after our first conversation that I realized, I'm like, oh, I don't really think about material past the medium or the form that your work takes. There was something that came up about girls, that body of work that you have, Kringla Heimsins?

Joshua Tonies (00:44:10):

Heimsins sounds right.

Hernease Davis ([00:44:12](#)):

Yeah. And I was just kind going through your website and saw that these were embroidered pieces, but the form that it takes is a projection, but it also deals with the viewer's perspective where it moves around, but it's based off of where you are as a viewer and that the material is also made of different currencies from all over the world. And one of the things that I really love about your installations in particular, and thinking about the installation that you made at VSW is sort of this relationship, this encounter that we have with your work where how some of it is based off of perspectives or you are showing different perspectives. And so we're talking in the [first] podcast about touchability. And so this is what I was thinking about when you mentioned that before, and now I'm bringing it back to the podcast now, where I was like, oh, my question was about how you are choosing material. So you've talked a lot about aberrant phytoLOGY, but in general, is there anything you'd like to share about the kinds of material you use and how do you deal with this touchability or this sensibility in these different forms that your works take, but also in the process?

Joshua Tonies ([00:45:26](#)):

I can say this, and I also relate to the, I feel like you probably are also very concerned with touchability in your work. You work with crochet, you work with photograms. When I think about your work, you're pushing the boundaries of those materials in certain ways and how they're installed or how people have access to them and not to flatten or be like, we're doing the same thing. I don't think we're doing the same thing, but I feel like your work does function in a, if I can say, takes on a kind of poetic or a lyrical expression of the material where we can't sort of just take it as it is. We have to reach out to it and understand it or have our own experience with it. And I think that's something that is really important to me.

([00:46:16](#)):

And I'll say this, I had an interview with this curator and writer, Elizabeth Rooklidge, and it was, the first part of it, before we started, we went on record. And now maybe, I hope I'm not abusing our, I think this is repeatable. It's nothing salacious. Sorry to disappoint everyone that's still listening. I'll say this. Yeah, she was like, Hey, I've been wanting to talk to you about your work for the longest time. But I think as a curator and as a writer and artist, I don't really ever talk about work that's based in technology or is digital. I talk about objects. And I felt so concerned, not disappointed, but like, oh, I was sad that, oh, is that the way that you superficially read my work as being concerned with technology, where I would like to think maybe I'm like, what is that called when you... body dysmorphia? I have material dysmorphia,

Hernease Davis ([00:47:17](#)):

Medium dysmorphia?

Joshua Tonies ([00:47:21](#)):

I'd like to think that the material process of my work is, maybe it uses, occasionally will make use of a computer or use software. Will use digital playback in some manner. But I grew up during the eighties and early nineties, and it was a time when things were going from analog to digital. So I have a physical memory of how touching a record and then MP3s or using even a vcr, you could open up the object and touch things and change the way that they worked, which I'm probably making a sweeping generalization, but now things are on screens and we don't really have access to understand, or it requires a greater level of expertise to manipulate the ways in which an image is generated on a computer screen or a sound is played back digitally.

([00:48:17](#)):

So I think just maybe I'm being romantic about something that's not really historically important, but having a memory of how analog tools work, I think it informs the way that I use digital tools and inescapably the material experience of color, of light, of sound, of movement. It has to be touchable, and by touchable, I mean it has to go beyond being a magic trick or some sort of slick presentation and somehow reveal itself in a way and sort of demystify, not become ordinary, but sort of leave a position of just being, yeah, I use the word magic trick, but I just mean... if all I'm doing is making special effects, then I don't know. I think I chose the wrong field to work in. But to get back to your question, yeah, material is usually a starting point for how I make a work. So with Kringla Heimsins, which I think translates to pretzel world or circle of the world, it's based on this Norse myth about the creation of the world, and that it's actually somehow this sort of cyclical time.

(00:49:33):

And so I made this panorama that's continuous out of international paper currency, which I had to scan. And then even during the time that I was making it, there was what's called machine vision. So if you try to scan a government document or paper currency a lot of times while displaying the pageantry of sovereignty, and that's a whole complicated thing. What gets on the dollar or what isn't in the frame, whose story is this? That's all there. But by putting these things next to each other, you have this very weird ecological geopolitical narrative of the natural world. And I think that the touchability or the ubiquity of an object like paper currency, it's kind of this strange, invisible thing that we maybe use all of the time. But then by enlarging it and changing our scale relationship to it or putting it into a timeline essentially made this endless scroll that moves, it sort of orbits based on how I was looking at the image. I was recording my eye movements and then sort of average them into this camera movement. But you asked about that work because yes, it employed a depth camera that could identify if someone walked in front of it, and then it would essentially orient itself around you so that you were the center of that image. So it acknowledged that it was being looked at. Which again, I guess you could say is not to flatten my work and be like, oh, it's about being seen or passing or being self-aware. But those things are definitely there as well.

Hernease Davis (00:51:07):

Yeah, yeah. Oh my gosh. There's another whole thing, a whole other conversation we can have that I love to have about modernism, but we're not going to talk about that. Or I'll just say briefly that some of my favorite work calls for you to bring yourself to it.

Joshua Tonies (00:51:26):

Absolutely. I mean, I think during my.. thank you for saying that. In the artist talk at VSW, I think I mentioned or started by referring to a work of Bridget Riley's, and this idea that the work is activated by looking, it is latent until you're kind of put into an experience of the work, which I guess maybe that's like, am I being really basic? And that's all work doesn't exist independent from experience, of course. But there was something so touchable about that work. Once you look at it, you see these spheres, and then when you look at it, there's this color that generates, or you see a grid or that it's only activated by looking. Definitely Aberrant Phytology was also using this sentiment. It was teaching a computer to create images, so it was activated by this form of looking or describing an image. And definitely the Kringla Heimsins also, it's sort of preoccupied with the viewer or by being seen.

Hernease Davis (00:52:34):

Yeah, yeah. Well, Josh, is there anything else you'd like to share or anything else that you'd like to address that I haven't asked anything about?

Joshua Tonies (00:52:44):

I can't really think of anything other than just thanking you for the opportunity. Being invited to talk about it is a huge value to me. It's something I got really, I know it sounds weird, but the fact that we had to rerecord, I was thrilled that I got to speak with you again because I feel like I get to learn more about how you think artistically, as a curator, as an artist, but also, yeah, you've shared a lot of beautiful insight into what I'm doing, and I live for that.

Hernease Davis (00:53:17):

And there you have it. For more information about Joshua and his work, please visit his website. Please also find reference links to the works of Farrah Karapetian, Bridget Riley, as well as a link to Joshua's exhibition in Los Angeles at PHASE Gallery, all in our show notes. Now, before we go on to our epilogue conversation with Joshua, we have a residency slash podcast update about the artist Ligia Bouton. Ligia was featured in season two and in the premier episode of season three, where we discussed her work honoring the astronomer Henrietta Swan Leavitt. In episode one of this season, Ligia shared the incredible story of how she initiated a public art proposal with the city of Boston to construct an installation honoring the work of Henrietta Swan Leavitt. Well, it's now on view. She has completed her public art installation entitled 25 Variable Stars, and you can experience it in person in the Kindle MIT subway station in Cambridge.

(00:54:20):

You can go and see her work right now at that subway station for the opening. Ligia gave a lecture at the Harvard Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics. Of course, the link to her talk is in the show notes. And if you haven't already, go back and listen to her previous two episodes to learn more. And then to learn more about the Visual Studies Workshop, please visit us at vsw.org where we have information about the Project Space Residency and our current artists in residence. And if you enjoyed this episode and are enjoying this podcast, please share it with your friends, family, loved ones, colleagues, the artists in your lives. We'd also love for you to leave us a five star review on Apple Podcasts and keep following VSW on Twitch and Instagram at the [visualstudiesworkshop](https://www.instagram.com/visualstudiesworkshop). And then feel free to send me an email at herneasedavis@vsw.org. This podcast is funded in part by the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of New York State Legislature. And finally, I'll leave you with that epilogue with Joshua Tonies. This is from our first session with the audio issues, but yet another portion I had to include here. Joshua speaks about a work he made while in residency. Talk about uncanny. This artwork had that kind of effect on us here at VSW in really wonderful ways. A still of this piece can be viewed on Joshua's VSW residency page. Here again is Joshua Tonies.

(00:55:52):

What I kind of wanted you to talk about how you used your space during open studios, and that includes this animation that you made called VSW Forever. But can you give a brief introduction of what is VSW forever?

Joshua Tonies (00:56:07):

Okay, sure. Yeah. So how do I not talk about this in a convoluted way? I wanted to make a work in response to the archive of VSW. I got a little overwhelmed when I had the opportunity to go through the stacks and then thought I could spend a whole month just reading and sorting through things, and I think I would be equally overwhelmed, but also inspired. I really loved the autochrome collection that was there. They're all of these incredible botanical, they look like Pointillist paintings, sensitized potato starch. They're incredible. But to speak to... how could I make a work that talked about the complex history of the space of Visual Studies Workshop?

(00:56:53):

I definitely am inspired by Nilson's interest in video games and conversations that I had with him about virtual reality and also learning that Nilson had done this for his thesis, this encompassing a game

experience of Visual Studies Workshop, but translated into the presentation of a video game form in a highly poetic way. I love that work. Oh my God, I got to, he shared it with me. I will say that I wanted to scan it to share with Nilson. I thought that they would really enjoy just to have it as a piece of ephemera. And while I was working on it, I had made this work during the lockdown, during the pandemic, I scanned my house and sort of turned it into ruins using a very similar material approach.

Hernease Davis ([00:57:39](#)):

Can you talk about how you scanned? Did you use a drone or was it some other device?

Joshua Tonies ([00:57:45](#)):

Yeah, yeah. So I used this process called photogrammetry, which in this case it used a drone. It was like a Mavic DJI something something... like a little recreational airplane that you can take pictures with. And I flew it around the Visual Studies Workshop and took about 300 photos, and I used the software called Reality Capture. It basically takes all of the photographs and calculates their measurements and then makes this creates a point cloud measurement of all of the positions of the camera. And then it assembles a very high detailed 3D object, a mesh of the thing itself. But rather than just reflecting Visual Studies Workshop, I thought it would be helpful to describe it in at a different scale of time. In doing that, I had covered it in this ivy and when Tara saw that work, they were like... can I swear on this thing?

Hernease Davis ([00:58:40](#)):

Oh, yes, totally.

Joshua Tonies ([00:58:42](#)):

Okay. Yeah. Tara was like, get the fuck out. Did you know about this, that the space was, it originally was covered with ivy, and then Tate was really helpful and went to the trouble of showing me photographs of, I believe it was poison ivy, right? Parts of it.

Hernease Davis ([00:59:01](#)):

I mean, I think there might been some?

Joshua Tonies ([00:59:03](#)):

Poison oak, yeah, poison oak.

Hernease Davis ([00:59:04](#)):

Yeah, I believe so. And I hadn't seen those photographs. So my relationship with the building itself, I'll say not with VSW, but the building itself, I'm post ivy, and so there's some people here who are pre ivy, being Tara and Tate and Jessica here, they all freaked out when they saw your innovation. Yeah,

Joshua Tonies ([00:59:22](#)):

Yeah. I'm not trying to pretend that I'm psychic or I think it was just a wonderful coincidence.

Hernease Davis ([00:59:27](#)):

Yeah,

Joshua Tonies ([00:59:28](#)):

Just the house, the animation that I made of my house, doesn't physically exist anymore. It'll eventually be multi-story high density, which is wonderful, luxury apartments, which is questionable, but that's like San Diego for you. And my intention of making the work about my house was not to overly sentimentalize, oh, this house and urban development and in densification we need it. And also just the idea that something could, like a house, could be a ruin. It just doesn't happen out here. It's like a fantasy image. But I think with Visual Studies Workshop, I really wanted to reflect the experience of that place as a place of wonder and covering it in ivy. It felt like it was protecting it or somehow enshrining it in this eternal quality. It could exist forever, which nothing lasts forever. Of course, that's just the nature of this. But yeah,

Hernease Davis ([01:00:23](#)):

You also set it in the midst of this epic sea storm. So if anyone has ever been here physically, the building's on Prince Street and University, there's a parking lot in the back. But if you took away the lawn and you took away the sidewalks and the parking lot, and it's almost as if the building is on this island that's surrounded by these splashing waves, and it almost looked like one of those epic video games. There's tinges of purple. It's almost like iridescent water. It's really beautiful, but also so epic.

Joshua Tonies ([01:01:02](#)):

Maybe to speak to the island, when you make a 3D scan, it has some boundary. Do you know what I mean? I could have tried to model the rest of the buildings or created some other place, but I love the fact that it was this island that, obviously it exists. And looking at the events and community that were there while I was there, whether they were in film screenings or at the artist talk or at the queer games bundle, there's a porousness of the space that it nourishes and is nourished by everything around it. But I guess as an artist and as a visitor, it was an island from, I think, the familiarity of my practice. And it was this place, I'm overly romanticizing now, but it was this miracle place that I had the afforded the time and the intellectual support and emotional support to really commit on this very deep level around the artistic questions that preoccupy me in a way that I could never possibly have realized in my 10 hours a week that I have.

Hernease Davis ([01:02:06](#)):

I love that. I think that's such a beautiful sentiment, and it's something that, again, it's very ecological. I love the way that you observe others in relationship with yourself, but also the VSW Forever. I think of it as such an elegance, and I say elegant in terms of, yes, ecology is convoluted, and it's beautiful and it's wonderful. And if you're able to synthesize that into an art piece in a way that what you see is this visual that translates and encompasses these complex relationships. And of course I have a different relationship with it, and you have a different relationship with it, that it is this continuation of how you, not necessarily memorialize, but how you process where you've lived. And I love that connection to this house that no longer exists, but that it isn't necessarily a sadness. There is loss in thinking about ecology this life and death and the reasons for things being there and how it affects the environment.

([01:03:13](#)):

And I think, I dunno if I've told you about this, but I have the first apartment that I had in New York City no longer exists. They tore that building down to build a luxury high rise. So it's still apartment living, but for a different class of people. It's a part of that change of that neighborhood that priced out a lot of people who were from there. So hearing about this happening to your home and even thinking about this building, just sort of how you're able to translate a lot of these things that you encountered while you're here during your residency in something that's connected to a previous home is, I think it's really beautiful.

Joshua Tonies ([01:03:53](#)):

Thank you so much. I mean, that's really uplifting to hear that you felt that from the work. And I really would love the work to have the potential to be affirming in that way. To remind people that these systems that are directly affected by us, they're not indifferent to us, but they're going to continue when we no longer exist. It's forever in my memory, but it's also, maybe it exists as not as a fantasy that way, but as this sort of artistic realm. I don't know. I am not anti-human or posthuman that, I don't mean it in a cynical way, but it's affirming to know that things will continue beyond my existence.