A NOTE FROM THE CURATORS

Jonathon Rosen, Artist & Animator, Ed Valentine, Writer & Puppeteer

We are extremely proud to present the Third Annual MFA Visual Narrative Thesis Exhibition, “And Then. . .”

These driven, hardworking students have devised exciting and wildly diverse bodies of words and pictures while maintaining a focus on narrative.

The work you will see arose from the closely-held parts of our students’ own lives — using the connective tissues of their own histories, preoccupations, experiences and found stories. This process required a great deal of personal bravery and tenacity to find the voice and means necessary to achieve their own unique visions.

In these projects — and throughout this program — art and story are intimately interconnected. Whether hand-stitched collage, penciled drawing, gouache, faux-realistic notebook, pixelated video game, or fully-realized digital environment, each project incorporates a visual style absolutely and positively intrinsic to its tone.

As these stories developed, characters in the projects began to take on lives of their own. Some reached out, making connections to their heritage or history (Bruja and There, Once). Others looked around and questioned their sense of family or community (Landfall, Cadence’s Castle and The Sprout). And there were those that stretched themselves to make — or break — strong ties to other beings at great personal cost (The Weeping Trees, Aura and Spice of Life). Seen altogether, all of these characters (including the non-human ones) struggled to link with their own humanity.

The projects, which reflect deep connections between our students’ own history and artistry, now go out into the world to connect with you. We hope that you will find “And Then. . .” enlightening and enlivening, and we know their spark will continue to burn long after this exhibition.
The Weeping Trees originally belonged to Mrs. Green, a stout, old flower shop owner. One day, Mrs. Green notices the young willow’s poor health and nasty temper. To aid in the young willow’s physical and mental development and to establish a new friendship, Mrs. Green conjoins the young willow with an old oak by grafting their branches together. Soon, the trees face difficult circumstances and must work together as one to overcome a situation they would never have been able to survive on their own. The young willow and old oak learn to rely on each other, ultimately realizing how meaningful they have become to one another.

Rosa Chang’s The Weeping Trees is a mixed-media picture book filled with whimsical illustrations created using commonly found objects and recycled materials, such as old garments, cardboard boxes, and yarns. However, behind her colorful illustrations, Chang carefully unravels the deep subjects of abandonment, newfound friendship, acceptance, and revival through the adventure had by a young willow and sturdy, old oak.

Rosa Chang works towards finding a sustainable balance between humans and the natural world through her visual storytelling. She takes her inspirations from incarnation—a cultural term she grew up with in Korea—and is a firm believer of pursuing a non-wasteful lifestyle. Thus, it is no wonder that recycled materials are craftily stitched and assembled together alongside her pencil drawings and watercolor illustrations to create worlds of unexpected textures and media collaborations. To teach the importance of sustainable living, Chang has been actively teaching natural indigo dyeing and denim mending workshops to children and adults in New York City.
In *The Sprout*, Mallory Mudd is a plucky sprout who’s eager to fit in with a staunch society of gnomes. That’s no easy task considering her burgeoning powers often do more harm than good. Tension escalates between Mallory and her community when the neighboring trolls suspect she’s stolen their lucky unicorn, an act punishable by death. Looking to clear her name and save the gnomes from certain doom, she leaves the comfort of The Tunnels to track down the thief. She and her BFF Benny are faced with a slew of Squallyglen’s nastiest creatures, though nothing could have prepared them for what they discover at the end of the trail. Her journey not only challenges the limits of her abilities, but the very notion of who she is.

Liz Enright is a cartoonist who believes the best stories appeal to the ten-year-old within. An odd child herself, she latched onto books whose young characters thrived in spite of their differences. Through their eyes she explored hidden worlds, overcame dangerous adversaries, and learned that heroes come in all shapes and sizes. The zany, magical world of *The Sprout* is a love letter to those stories that changed her life. Before Mallory can master her powers and kick major Troll butt, she must learn to embrace her idiosyncrasies. After all, we can accomplish great things once we’re comfortable in our own skin.

Liz’s recent work includes editing the “Sweaty Palms Anthology,” a candid collection of comics about anxiety, and “Quench,” a short comic about coping with loss. Liz has drawn comics her entire life but *The Sprout* is her first graphic novel. To this day she’s inspired by the magic and whimsy of the world around her, just so long as she’s had her first cup of coffee.
In _Landfall_, Maya DeLewis is a stoic and stubborn paramedic who has built an emotional wall around herself following the loss of a beloved friend and mentor. One night, Maya crosses paths with a young, reluctant gang member named Tareen who both robs Maya's ambulance of drugs and inadvertently taps into Maya's little-known past with Hoodoo, an old folk-magic practice with which Tareen also has a history. When a hurricane strikes the island, Maya has a chance to help Tareen escape her tormented life in the gang, but she must decide if it's worth the risk of retaliation from Tareen's sadistic gang boss, Raven. As the stakes of Tareen's situation escalate, Maya's undeniable bond with Tareen begins to chip away at her stony exterior — but will Maya come far enough out of her emotional fortress to save Tareen from Raven's wrath?

Landfall is a multimedia graphic novel rooted in the author's own personal experiences as a paramedic and later, a resident of Galveston, Texas. It is also derived from her experience as an adult convert to Judaism, and the seemingly incompatible emotional intersections she stumbled upon between the EMS world and her own spiritual world. This uniquely, digital narrative experience weaves together illustration, photography, and video to tell the story of Maya's journey, not only through a menacing storm and an unexpected relationship, but also through the complex and neglected world within herself.

Landfall is Christina Mattison Ebert's first foray into film and video. She created this work as a multimedia piece because she felt that the most authentic way to represent her creative voice was to merge her background with illustration/design and her fascination with film direction as an art form.
Cadence’s Castle reflects Cadence’s day-to-day realizations and struggles of growing up in Missouri with two mothers, Mom and Jackie, all thoughtfully recorded in Cadence’s personal journal. At first Cadence, a naïve teen, seems absorbed in her own fantasy, escaping her everyday bullies by building castles and creating characters with her best friend Hallee. With the support and love of her mother and Jackie, a supposed roommate, Cadence believes that her family is normal; however, unable to escape the consistent bullying from her peers, she soon uncovers the real reason behind her classmates’ jeering.

Similar to the author’s experiences, Cadence battles with the fact that she is growing up in a world that refuses to accept her parents and their identity. Cadence artfully dodges the truth of her victimization—her parents’ sexual orientation—and constantly finds herself stuck in the closet with them, refusing to believe that her mother would mislead her. When faced with her mother’s darkest secret, the world Cadence had built begins to crumble, and Cadence’s biggest fear is realized. Armed with the truth, Cadence learns to accept her mother’s identity and face her everyday bullies.

Upon receiving her BA in Art Education, Cady Juarez started teaching children about the value of arts and culture. Her artwork ranges from mixed media, to writing, illustration, and children’s books, all typically showcasing cultural diversity, identity and strong female characters. Cady strives to create a variety of children’s books touching on her personal cultural identity mixed with Mexican mythology and morals. Cadence’s Castle is only the beginning, as Cady continues to pursue new works that explore self-reflection, the taboos of childhood, and queer and gender studies.
When Esther, a spirited young girl from a small Jewish neighborhood, gets labeled a witch, she goes against her guarded community and embraces being one. Esther enjoys the mystery and power that comes with being a witch. She also likes that the label will help ward off potential suitors her mother is so keen on her winning over. Besides hearing folk tales, Esther knows little about witches. She, however, realizes that they are women with a special connection to the natural world, feared by those that don’t understand them, yet in control of their own destiny. Esther resists following the familiar rituals of women before her or furthering their fears of the outside world. In trying to carve her own path, Esther loses sight of her traditional ties only to discover their significance.

Bruja examines themes of tradition and identity through the lens of a girl, and daughter of immigrants, growing up in 1960s Costa Rica. It highlights the idea that tradition and ritual don’t have to be an anchor that holds one back, but rather can be grounding and add meaning within different modes of living. By the same token, following blindly, and without question, will not lead to real progress of self or society. Though a work of fiction, Bruja is based on the real setting of downtown San Jose, inspired by myths about the surrounding landscape, and grounded in personal family history.

Coming from generations of Jewish immigrants from Syria, Panama, Poland, Russia, and Costa Rica, Michelle Nahmad invests in examining culture and exploring history in her design and illustration work. She combines elements of the handmade or analog with the digital, bringing old world and new world subjects and tools together.Originally from Miami, FL, she is currently based in Brooklyn.
Spice of Life is a narrative arcade about Unit 25, a culinary line robot, who desires to become human and overcome his societal shackles in a post-tech war world, which despises strong, independent, artificial intelligence that “don’t need no hu-man”. The stakes are piled high and tensions are mounting as news breaks on the first day that an A.I. has taken charge of a human establishment! People are pouring in, but this isn’t what Unit 25 imagined humanity would be like.

In this fast-paced, five-day story, players will become the eager and enthusiastic Unit 25! As an A.I. finally permitted to interact with human customers, the player will be able to make dialogue choices that affect the difficulty of game-play, learn about personal circumstances, and gain humanity, while utilizing speed to turn over orders and keep impatient customers happy. You thought being a human in food service is hard.

Mary Georgescu is an artist and maker living and working in New York as the owner and director of Haiduc, LLC—a company dedicated to pushing the conventional boundaries of storytelling through mixed media while preserving folkloric tales. As a 2017 recipient of the Playcrafting Game Writing Grant, Mary hopes to continue learning, growing, and giving back to the community of indie gaming storytellers with more unconventional arcade cabinets!
As a child, Rena Santillo had an active imagination inspired by the colorful heritage of her Filipino immigrant family, shared with her through the stories and art of her beloved grandmother. Her imaginary best friend, and even the demon most present in her nightmares, were parts of the world she created at home without fear of judgment. However, as Rena outgrows this safe bubble, she becomes ashamed of the stories and imagination that seem more childish than valuable, shutting them away completely to focus on her burgeoning architectural career.

The shock of her grandmother’s sudden death causes her childhood imaginary creatures to reappear and Rena panics, finding herself back at her family home and thinking she has lost both her career and her mind. Surrounded by objects, faces, and memories, not only embarrassing but now also painful, she begins to document her daily experiences in an attempt to regain control of herself. In doing so, she realizes the value of celebrating and sharing the memories she had once tried to bury.

Viewers can navigate Rena’s fragmented mental space alongside her by reading and listening to her blog, a mix of her own careful documentation, and unconscious—sometimes buried—memories. These become physical symbols collected and organized in Rena’s mind. The accompanying gallery installation draws inspiration from memory palaces and curiosity cabinets, inviting the audience to view Rena’s memory objects and form their own experience of her narrative.

Ella Romero is an illustrator and first-generation Filipino-American. There Once explores the traditions and idiosyncrasies of her family, its culture, and their effect on her. It is dedicated to her late grandparents, Carmen and Rafael, and to her mother Rowena—from whom she learned to love storytelling.
What drives the human need to seek comfort from others? Can we escape the suffering that comes with love? Can technology save us from our destructive desires?

Dr. Theo Aphasian is a neuroscientist; a brilliant and charming man whose life experience has led him to believe that the human race needs to evolve away from codependence. Feeling that personalized technology has pushed humans into the first step of independence, Aphasian commits to developing medical therapies to finally eliminate the need for codependency using advanced sound-wave therapy.

In 2036, you are a new recruit at the Internal Investigations Department of the ZeeWell Corporation, sent to investigate Dr. Aphasian's laboratory after a mysterious incident occurs involving his work, wherein thousands of people are either dead or have gone insane. People affected were only within a mile of ZeeWell labs and the epicenter is Dr. Aphasian's laboratory. Exploring the lab, you are tasked with finding out whatever you can to determine the cause of the disaster and discover the series of events that triggered it. A complex puzzle reveals itself, shedding light onto Aphasian's personal life, the real goals behind his work, the other parties with stakes in the technology, as well as the suspicious role of the ZeeWell Corporation.

Allowing the player to experience the game as both Dr. Aphasian and the investigator creates empathy for the characters in a way that takes advantage of the first-person video game medium. Environmental storytelling is utilized to maximum effect, as players explore just how much space and setting play an integral role in visual storytelling.

Thomas Slattery is a multimedia storyteller, who uses writing as a foundation to create character-driven animation, sequential art, games and other narrative work. He looks forward to exploring storytelling within new media, pitching creator-owned work and developing cutting-edge stories.