

The Silver Screen

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This is to certify that the Graduate Project Exhibition or Film Project prepared

By: Andrew Hoekstra \_\_\_\_\_

Entitled: The Silver Screen \_\_\_\_\_

Held at: 100 Bell Towers \_\_\_\_\_

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**Master of Fine Arts (Studio Arts – Sculpture and Ceramics)**

complies with the regulations of the University and meet the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

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Date and Year. June 30, 2025 \_\_\_\_\_

## Abstract

The work that makes up *The Silver Screen* revolve around how energy is transformed from one source to another, how presence gets preserved in an image or in a material object, and the possibility of energy expanding.

*Light emitted from a projector bulb is a concentrated source of electromagnetic radiation. It passes through a series of mirrors and lenses that focus it into a beam carrying both visual information and energy. When this beam hits the smooth surface of a silver screen, the light reflects back onto the audience with more intensity than if it were to simply be projected onto a dull surface.*

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### *Blast of Silence*<sup>1</sup>

In “The Aesthetics of Silence” Susan Sontag writes that “every era has to reinvent the project of ‘spirituality’ for itself.” This reinvention is not about transcending our world, but more about returning to it with attention. Silence makes this return possible.

Silence is not the absence of sound. It can happen through words, gestures, and materials. Rather, silence is a *sense*. It is felt when our relationship to the world is revealed through its inaccessibility.<sup>2</sup> It is akin to knowing that something exists as a secret and being excited by that realization. Silence is the moment when meaning is no longer easily grasped; when the familiar appears strange and what once seemed finite becomes uncertain and full of potential.

It is in this conception of Silence that Sontag explores aesthetic strategies that free us from our habitual ways of perceiving, with the intention of allowing us to experience the world more directly.<sup>3</sup> She cites Samuel Beckett and Jasper Johns as artists who work within their mediums to break familiarity: Beckett in pairing language down and having sentences trail off; and Johns who buries meaning beneath repetition and opacity. These ideas build on those written a year earlier in her essay “Against Interpretation.” Sontag ends that piece with a call to suspend the interpretation of art until we can experience reality more deeply.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The 1961 noir film *Blast of Silence* follows a solitary hitman moving through New York City days before Christmas. Stark and minimal, the film creates its atmosphere through silence where the tension builds not through action, but due to how much is withheld.

<sup>2</sup> Kant describes the sublime in *Critique of Judgement* as an experience when you confront something vast, such as the stars in the night sky, that exceeds comprehension. In this confrontation with the infinite, we come to recognize our own finitude, not as a limitation, but as a condition for awe.

<sup>3</sup> Viktor Shklovsky, in *Art as Technique*, uses the metaphor of plunging a hand into water. At first you feel the wetness and the temperature. But soon the water is experienced as natural. Familiarity erodes the ability to feel.

<sup>4</sup> In talking about the work of Donald Judd, Iman Issa brings up Judd’s advice for someone trying to understand his work: “Look, think, and then look again.” While the statement appears as a relatively simple request, Issa contrasts it with “as opposed to ‘look, nod, and then walk away, thinking they saw something when they saw very little, or perhaps nothing at all.’”

Although Sontag focuses primarily on literature, her ideas extend to sculpture. *Silence is to language as nothingness is to space*. Both are in relation to zero.<sup>5</sup>

The desire for art to change its audience is a core belief behind many twentieth-century avant-garde movements. The artists of the 20s and 30s believed in rupture and the power of negation to shock perception into new ways of seeing. But silence is a different kind of negation. It is not an assault but a retreat; not a violent erasure but a belief in allowing secrets to remain.

### *Offret*<sup>6</sup>

*Cowboys Milking* was an aluminum sculpture by Cady Noland from 1990. Made of polished aluminum and measuring 4 x 6 feet, it featured silkscreened images in black ink of two cowboys wrangling a cow, a photo of Robber's Roost cabin, and a block of text describing how the log cabin was used by Henry Plummer and his gang as a hideout in 1863. In the top corners of the piece two holes were drilled from which the artwork was hung.

In 2011 the work was scheduled to be auctioned. Sotheby's estimated its value between \$250,000 to \$350,000. This estimation was printed before a similar aluminum work of Noland's, *Oozewald* (1990), sold for 6.6 million (4.4 million over its estimated price).

Thirteen years later, the value of *Cowboys Milking* is uncertain.

Before the work went to auction Noland, speaking through her lawyer, invoked the *Visual Artists Rights Act of 1990* and disowned the piece. The reason for this dissociation was that one of the corners of the aluminum had been damaged and a conservator attempted to repair it without consulting the artist. In attempting to repair the sculpture, the uniform polished surface was altered.<sup>7</sup>

For Noland, the unsanctioned modification fundamentally changed the sculpture. What was vital in the piece no longer existed. As a result, Noland did not wish to be associated with the work.

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<sup>5</sup> Liz Magor was a guest critic in my first semester in the MFA program. One of the ideas she mentioned was how Mike E Smith, an American artist, makes sculptures using the logic of trying to add two things together to create zero. While Smith's sculptures are primarily made of everyday and banal materials they are often described as if they've tapped into something mysteriously charged.

<sup>6</sup> *Andrei Tarkovsky's final film, Offret, translated in English as The Sacrifice, is about a retired artist who offers everything he has (his home, his family, his voice), to God in an attempt to prevent the end of the world.*

<sup>7</sup> In the fall of 2024, I had a sculpture included in a group show titled *Altération Générale*. My piece consisted of a curved aluminum structure and a piece of wallpaper that came from a Hollywood bar that had closed and sold its inventory on eBay. While sanding the aluminum piece to get a satisfying finish, the work went in between states of "working" and "not working." The ability of the piece to function as a sculpture was directly tied to searching for the correct surface finish.

*Cowboys Milking* operates in the opposite trajectory as a readymade. Rather than transforming an everyday object into art, Noland stripped her sculpture of its status as an artwork, returning it to mere material. The disavowal of *Cowboys Milking* was a sacrifice. In refusing to let the piece circulate as a commodity, Noland removed the object from that world.

### *Chain Reaction*<sup>8</sup>

*Spinoza-Car* by Thomas Hirschhorn is not one of my favourite works of art. The way Hirschhorn writes about that piece is. For him, what unites the 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch philosopher and automobiles is that Hirschhorn is a fan of both. *That he loves both*. The act of love justifies putting the two discrete things together. In doing so he taps into the logic of being a fan: “*what links me to any other fan is not the shared object of love but the act of love, what I share is the commitment and admiration.*” More than just describing this one artwork, this commitment to share what he loves animates Hirschhorn’s entire career. This desire is motivated in part by the dream of making others care about the things you find important and in doing so intensify the bonds between individuals.

The works in *The Silver Screen* emerge from a similar logic. Each piece in the series consists of two sets of images:

- 1) Photographs taken from *American Auctions*, an online seller of objects claimed to have once been possessed by a star. A pair of Marilyn Monroe’s wine glasses (\$9,949), Michael Jackson’s cutlery (\$15,400), a guitar-shaped wall decoration owned by James Brown (\$2,200), a single button from one of Sigmund Freud’s suits (\$3,850). Ordinary, mass-produced items. But because of their proximity to someone special they have been transformed. They carry a residual charge, made more than what they were through the act of being touched.
- 2) Superimposed over top of these photographs are screengrabs from films from the silent era of cinema. These images are printed on clear film and suspended four millimeters above the photos, creating a subtle optical strangeness that is similar to cinema’s early attempts of expanding the flatness of the image into 3-dimensions. These images come from a folder on my computer that I add to while watching movies. I chose these frames intuitively while watching the movies— moments that stood out from the flow of other scenes.

The two sets of images are combined but never fully converge; they simply exist in proximity to each other, each maintaining its own presence, even when they appear to merge into something

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<sup>8</sup> The 1996 Hollywood film *Chain Reaction* presents fusion energy as a breakthrough so immense and destabilizing, that its very existence becomes a threat. This discovery of an energy that produces more than it consumes isn’t framed as a triumph, but as something too powerful to remain in the world, something that must be erased.

new. The result is an unstable image, caught between past and present, between material and ephemeral, between objects and energy.<sup>9</sup>

The works in the show are housed in custom aluminum frames polished to a mirror finish.<sup>10</sup>

### *The Way Things Go*<sup>11</sup>

Silence is not the opposite of expression but a precondition for experience to be perceived. It allows attention to deepen. It's in this silence that energy starts to become apparent.

When light bounces off a silver screen it's intensity seems amplified. It is that same reflected energy that is at play in the the works in *The Silver Screen*. The works are created from moments of unstable energy, between image and object, past and present, presence and distance.

Like a carefully balanced chain reaction, this energy unfolds through fragile connections and delays. Moments trigger other moments without ever reaching a conclusion. That's what I am principally interested in: where things don't close but are reflected, allowing something to be preserved of the original while also setting other things in motion.

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<sup>9</sup>In cinema, the cross-fade has always been a favorite of mine, a moment when the logic of time and space dissolves, and two images briefly coexist. It's in this overlap that something strangely beautiful can emerge, a seemingly impossible image.

<sup>10</sup> I am interested in how frames act similar to a fan that wants to vouch for one of their recommendations. As a way of putting weight behind the thing they believe is important.

<sup>11</sup>Peter Fischli and David Weiss's 1987 film *The Way Things Go* depicts the beauty that comes out of wanting to create a perpetual motion machine, where tires roll uphill, liquids ignite, and objects tip and crash into each other setting off more reactions.

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