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Tatiana Istomina's Scary Stories: 'In Narrative Axis'

WENDY WEIL ATWELL on 17 October, 2015 at 00:01



What are your scary stories?

Artist Tatiana Istomina wants to know. She started “Scary Stories,” an ongoing participatory video program, in 2014, which uses drawing and storytelling to explore various concepts of fear. A selection of her videos is on view in “Narrative Axis,” a group show of eight artists at [Blue Star Contemporary Art Museum](#) through Nov. 8.

Istomina asked people to “share stories of anything scary in their own lives or in the lives of their community.” Then, for the second part of the project, she asked participants to draw on a digital drawing tablet while listening to other scary stories that she has collected. Istomina then edits the interviews and drawings to make them into short films.

When Istomina came to San Antonio for the opening in September, she interviewed eight people for this project, bringing her total to 51 participants to date. As one of the participants, after finishing, I asked Istomina about her project, which raises fascinating questions around society’s concepts of fear.

“As a whole, I think of this project as my own exploration of today’s America,” said Istomina, an artist and writer based in New York City. She grew up in Moscow, and came to the United States to study at Yale, where she received her PhD in geophysics in 2010. But along the way, she pursued her interest in art, because she had taken a drawing class the first semester that intrigued her. She received an MFA from [Parsons New School of Design](#) in 2011.



Photo by Jack McGilvray.

“Like climate scientists measuring temperature and other parameters in different locations, I am sort of measuring ‘social temperature’ in different places in the US; and my position as a foreigner is often helpful here – it gives me a certain distance and a permission to ask questions which Americans would find difficult to ask...,” she said.

For the project interview, I sat down in front of a camera and we began to talk. I wanted to know, what kind of scary did she mean?

Anything, she said.

My first instinct was to tell her about San Antonio’s urban legend of the ghosts of school children on the train tracks, or *chupacabras*, or the slumber party games like “Bloody Mary” and “Light as a Feather.” But if I was honest with myself, none of those stories came close my worst nightmare, which came true. I watched my father die of pancreatic cancer, helpless as he suffered and starved to death.

This eclipsed my other fears, so we talked about that, and she shared the story of losing her father. Our conversation turned to other scary topics, like was there anything I was scared of regionally? Which led to politics, and geography, and current events.

Sitting in front of her, telling her my ideas of scary, I wondered how this process might relate back to her original plan to be a scientist, because she’s very disarming and patient. It’s easy to talk to her, because she remains open, relaxed, and non-judgmental about the process. It turns out that her focus was data analysis.

“I am interested in how different bits of information, different events and incidents and emotions are connected to each other, in a single interview, and also between different interviews,” Istomina said.

In the second part of the process, she directed me to sit and listen to a recording of another person tell their own scary stories, and draw while I listened. There was no objective to the drawing component. I could draw anything I wanted with the drawing software, which featured every color and media, ranging from fine pencil points to calligraphy to paintbrush. The array of options reminded me of the process of creating a narrative, how we choose to direct it, and the paths we end up taking.

My fears change. When I first got married, I was scared of infidelity. When we had children, I started being scared that they might have an unforeseen accident or illness. Now, I’m scared of cancer and Alzheimer’s, both for my family and myself; and of

ISIS terrorists engaging in bio warfare.

I'm not alone. In Istomina's "Scary Stories," people talk about the horror of war, fear for their families, financial security, and global warming. Nobody talked about American's top fears — public speaking, needles, blood, clowns, or drowning. This may be because their stories were anecdotal. None of their imaginary fears come to pass, but instead, other unexpected events occur.

There seem to be two types of scary stories, the real and the inexplicable. In the real scary stories, such as my father's death, or a war story, the experience is factual; the horror comes to pass. But in the inexplicable scary story, there is an element of mystery, of wondering what actually happened. The storyteller shares an experience that is haunting in a manner in which no one will ever really understand what happened.

The story I got to listen to was the fabulous, eerie kind of story I wished I could have told. It was told by **Robert Levy**, who writes "unsettling" stories in New York, and his theme was how the supernatural is entering into technology.

Listening to people tell their stories reminded me how much of a frightening experience is about perception; what we perceive to be happening (something goes bump in the night). In hindsight, the reality can be so different from what we thought we were experiencing. The first effects of fear are physical, but a psychological component runs underneath this, like a strong current, driving the fear.

At Blue Star, three screens on the wall feature Istomina's films, which are edited recordings of the drawings that people made while listening to the stories being told. Viewers can put on headphones and listen to the stories while watching the drawings.

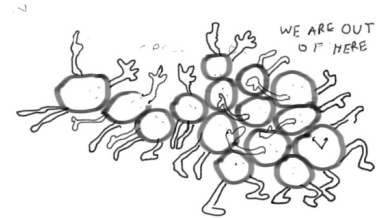
There is a mysterious, magical quality to these drawings, reminiscent of how supernatural powers can move the pointer on the Ouija board. The videos are the screen recordings, so they show the action of the drawing being made without the illustrator. This allows us to join in the process of imagining the invisible illustrator, and entering into the fictive space of the storyteller. It's a strange, dislocating effect that's very different from watching a horror movie, because it's engaging rather than passive.

When watching the videos, it's easy to tell when an artist is responding to the stories, versus someone like me, scribbling in circles. Some of the drawing responses possess an admirable precision, and what appears to be a clear objective. The illustrator has total command of the lines being drawn, and they are fulfilling a concept that is ultimately revealed. Whereas, when I draw, I stumble upon ideas as the drawing unfolds, partly due to lack of imagination and partly due to incompetence.

What do these repetitive patterns tell us about cognition, and how, mentally, when left unchecked, our thoughts perform a sort of conceptual doodling on a constant basis?

Istomina thinks of drawing as a natural response by people to make "sense of the world through motion, gesture and sign." She has structured the program to elicit participator's immediate responses, "because it reveals both the outer world and the inner

SMALLER SCALE



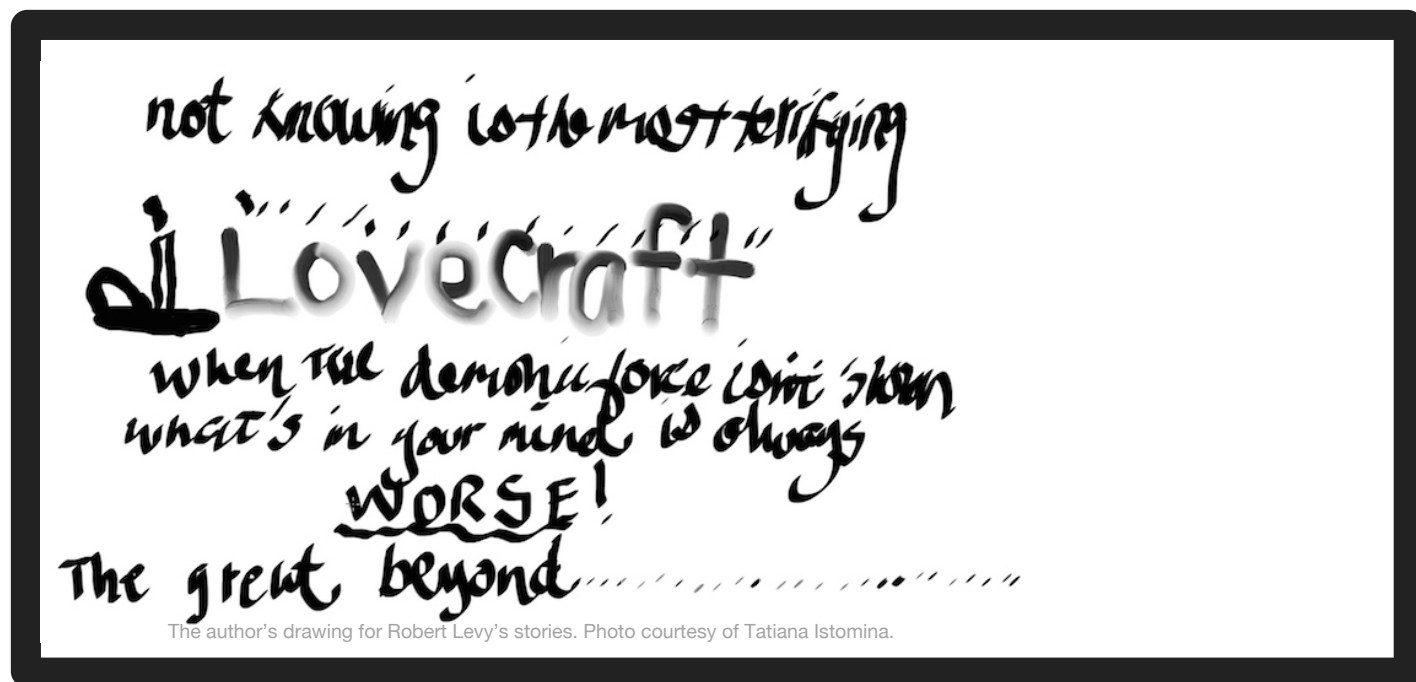
Project participant, New York artist Timm Mettler and his drawing for the story "Haunting in Manhattan." Photo courtesy of Tatiana Istomina.



Project participant, New York artist Jim Seffens and his drawing for the story "The demons of Ferguson." Photo courtesy of Tatiana Istomina.

world of the drawing person.”

There is so much for Istomina to learn in this project. She’s becoming aware of the “performative aspect” of the interviews and the importance of her role as interviewer. Yet she also plays the role of editor.



“My job is to preserve these moments and to create a lively interaction between the speech and the imagery,” she said. “Very often I have two or more people draw in response to the same interview; I overlay or combine different drawings together to make a richer experience for the viewer.”

Istomina continually adds to her collection, which can be found online [here](#).

“Narrative Axis” features a selection of works by artists participating in the Drawing Center’s Open Sessions Program. The collaboration was organized and inspired by artist Joey Fauerso, who heads the Drawing Program at Texas State University. Throughout the show, Blue Star is also offering free experimental and educational Drawing Labs run by artists Fauerso, Leigh Anne Lester, Sarah Fox and Alex Rubio.

**Top image: Attendees interact with the “Scary Stories” exhibit. Photo by Brian D. Caron.*

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WENDY WEIL ATWELL

Wendy Weil Atwell is a writer living in San Antonio, Texas. She received her MA in Art History and Criticism from the University of Texas at San Antonio in 2002. She has been actively writing reviews of art since then for various visual arts publications, both online and in print, including Art Lies, Glasstire, and ...might be good. Atwell is the author of The River Spectacular published in 2010.

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