

NOT EVERYTHING DISAPPEARS

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Abstract

Not Everything Disappears is a short film about the work of artist Peter Malt at a psychiatric hospital in Berlin Germany in 1986. The film follows his daily activities as he paints the walls of the hospital while patients surround him. He is accompanied by his partner Jane, who films the painter's work and the interactions with the patients. At the start of the film, it is difficult to make out exactly what we are witnessing. There is a barrier between the painter and the patients, but as the film progresses the rhythms of the day-to-day activities reveal the patients participation in the daily creations by the painter. Slowly we begin to understand that the figurative abstract characters he paints are the patients in the hospital and their experiences. In the end the film reveals that more power seems to be given to the patients, over the span of the film, through the collaboration that has taken place. The observed has become the observer.

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
List of Figures.....	v
1. Introduction.....	1
2. Past Influences.....	4
3. Past Work.....	7
4. Thoughts on the process of making the film.....	10
5. Conclusion.....	13
6. Bibliography.....	15
7. Filmography.....	16

List of Figures

All images are by the candidate

<i>Grandma Watching Over Me</i>	7
<i>My Mother Not Giving a Flying Fuck</i>	8
<i>Untitled no. 1</i>	11
<i>Untitled no. 2</i>	11
<i>Untitled no. 3</i>	12

1. Introduction

"Not Everything Disappears" is a short film about the work of artist Peter Malt at a psychiatric hospital in Germany in 1986. The film follows his daily activity as he paints the walls of the hospital while patients surround him. He is accompanied by his partner Jane, who films the painter's work and the interactions with the patients.

At the start of the film, it is difficult to make out exactly what we are witnessing. There is a barrier between the painter and the patients, but as the film progresses the rhythms of the day-to-day activities reveal the patients' participation in the daily creations by the painter. We do not really hear directly from the painter as to what the purpose of his work is. Slowly we begin to understand that the figurative abstract characters he paints are the patients in the hospital and their experiences.

Peter's practice centers on acrylic painting and moves between abstraction and figuration, drawing on influences from Expressionism, Surrealism, and Informal Art. In the film, we witness his process which is intuitive, beginning without a fixed motif and allowing paintings to develop over a period of time. The film documents his process through fragmented cuts and a simple but deliberate weave of experiences. In the end the film reveals that more power seems to be given to the patients, over the span of the film, through the collaboration that has taken place. The observed have become observers.

Although the footage is somewhat observational, there is a sense of connection and intimacy present. We expect to see an anthropological study about an artist interacting with patients, but rather the film becomes about existence. This is because Jane, Peter's partner, filmed the progress of his work. We come to see the patients, mostly mentally disabled young children, as participants in his work and inspiration.

This footage has not been seen since Peter's work at the hospital was finished. Peter died of cancer in the late 1990's and he is survived by his partner Jane and daughter Pina.

Pina and I have become close friends over the years and she shared her dad's work with me but was never aware of this footage. Pina's mother Jane had the VHS cassettes but was not sure what the cassettes contained as they had been made many years ago, and she could not view them, as the technology was not available to her any more.

When I saw the footage I was in awe at the level of intimacy and connection present in the footage. I asked if it was possible for me to transfer the footage to digital and look more closely at it, and perhaps make it into a film. Both Jane and Pina agreed. I started the work on the film sometime in June of 2025 and after many rough cuts, I have come to this final cut.

For me, there is a settled sense of beauty in the work. Peter does not force himself, rather one senses a calm beautiful flow throughout the film, which was even present in the raw one hour footage that I received. But I felt I needed to put some additional shape to the experience and include some of my own images and text, which reveals subtly, my own experience in hospital.

It is difficult to find much information about the hospital and Peter's work in it as it no longer exists. However, we know that starting in the 1980's, Germany adopted a wholesome approach to art and mental health, which likely contributed to the mural commission over several weeks, which Peter was asked to take part in. From here onwards, I realized that this work needed to be a poetic documentation of Peter's work, rather than a conventional documentary.

This thesis situates *Not Everything Disappears* as a form of artistic research that operates through attentiveness rather than explanation. The film investigates how intimacy, care, and shared time can function as both method and meaning in moving-image practice. Rather than producing knowledge through categorization or interpretation, the work privileges duration, proximity, and uncertainty. In doing so, it asks how film might ethically

engage with histories of institutionalization and mental difference without reproducing hierarchies of looking. The project unfolds at the intersection of archival recovery, personal encounter, and poetic construction, proposing filmmaking as a practice of staying with—rather than resolving—what remains fragile, incomplete, or undocumented.

My role in shaping this material is inseparable from my own lived experience of neurodivergence and long-term engagement with psychiatric spaces. This positionality informs both the ethical stance and the formal decisions of the film. I do not approach the footage as neutral evidence, nor do I seek to complete its historical narrative. Instead, I work with it as a fragile inheritance—one that demands restraint, care, and listening. The film does not speak for the patients, nor does it attempt to reconstruct their identities. It remains attentive to presence rather than explanation, allowing gestures, silences, and repetitions to retain their opacity.

2. Past Influences

My work is deeply influenced by the Iranian filmmaker Sohrab Shahid Saless and the poets Forough Farrokhzad and Sohrab Sepehri. Shahid Saless, who was active from the 1970s through the 1980s, is widely regarded as a pioneer of Iranian New Wave cinema. His films are marked by an observational, slow-moving approach that privileges duration, silence, and the quiet rhythms of everyday life, an aesthetic that has strongly shaped my sensitivity to time, stillness, and contemplation.

One of the most important films that has influenced me and relates directly to *Not Everything Disappears* is *The House is Black* (1962) by Forough Farrokhzad. Forough Farrokhzad's poetry and films, in particular *The House is Black*, introduced a radical emotional honesty into Iranian culture, confronting desire, loss, and alienation with an intimate and uncompromising voice that continues to inform my engagement with vulnerability and inner life. *The House is Black* inspired me because it is not merely a documentary; it is a radical act of looking. Filmed in a leper colony in northern Iran, the work resists both sentimentality and voyeurism, offering instead a stark, poetic meditation on suffering, beauty, and the ethics of representation. In just over twenty minutes, Farrokhzad collapses the boundary between poetry and cinema, transforming documentary into an intimate, philosophical encounter with bodies that society has deemed unseeable.

The film opens with an invocation that frames disease as a universal human condition, immediately rejecting the notion that the subjects on screen exist outside the viewer's moral or existential world. From the outset, Farrokhzad insists that leprosy is not an aberration but a variation of human vulnerability. This framing is crucial: it disarms the viewer's impulse to others, to pity from a distance, or to turn away. Instead, we are asked to stay to look, to listen, and to recognize.

Visually, *The House Is Black* is uncompromising. Farrokhzad's camera lingers on faces marked by illness, on missing limbs, scarred skin, and altered expressions. Yet the gaze is never cruel. What could so easily become exploitative is counterbalanced by duration, proximity, and care. The camera does not steal images; it waits for them. Children recite lessons, men pray, women smile shyly at the lens. These moments of ordinary life puncture the assumption that suffering negates personhood. The residents of the colony are not reduced to symbols of disease; they remain complex, dignified, and alive.

Sound plays an equally vital role. Farrokhzad overlays the images with her own poetry, alongside verses from the Qur'an. This layering creates a tension between the spiritual and the corporeal, the abstract and the painfully concrete. Her poetry does not explain the images; it complicates them. Lines about beauty, creation, and love sit uncomfortably beside wounded bodies, forcing the viewer to confront the limits of aesthetic consolation. Beauty here is not redemptive in a simple sense—it is fragile, provisional, and often terrifying.

What makes *The House Is Black* so enduring to me is its refusal to offer resolution. There is no narrative of cure, progress, or moral uplift. The film does not argue that suffering leads to transcendence, nor does it promise salvation through art or faith. Instead, it proposes attention itself as an ethical act. To look without flinching, without hierarchy, without false hope. This is Farrokhzad's quiet but radical demand.

The film's historical context deepens its power. Made in early 1960s Iran by a woman poet working in a male-dominated cultural sphere, *The House Is Black* stands as an act of artistic defiance. Farrokhzad's sensitivity to marginality social, bodily, and emotional feels inseparable from her own position as a woman whose work persistently challenged moral and aesthetic norms. That she later adopted a child from the colony only underscores the film's porous boundary between art and life.

Ultimately, *The House Is Black* endures because it refuses to let the viewer remain innocent. It implicates us in the act of seeing and asks what responsibility follows. In doing so, Farrokhzad expands the possibilities of documentary cinema, not by aestheticizing suffering, but by insisting on a form of beauty that includes darkness, damage, and contradiction. The house may be black but it is inhabited, and it is unmistakably human.

Sohrab Sepehri, who was also a painter, approached poetry as a spiritual and perceptual practice; his writing emphasizes solitude, attentiveness, and a profound connection to nature. His quiet humanism, minimalist language, and his search for transcendence through everyday encounters deeply influence my own approach to observation, restraint, and poetic presence.

From Shahid Saless I have learned that slowness can be a form of ethical resistance. His refusal of narrative momentum creates space for the viewer to inhabit time differently—to notice the weight of repetition, the subtle shifts within stillness, and the emotional charge of waiting. This sensibility directly informs the pacing and editing of *Not Everything Disappears*, where meaning emerges gradually through accumulation rather than exposition. The film trusts the viewer to remain present without instruction, mirroring the way Shahid Saless allows life to unfold without interpretive closure.

Poetry, particularly in the work of Farrokhzad and Sepehri, has shaped my understanding of how interior states can be communicated without narration or explanation. Their writing affirms that vulnerability does not require confession, and that solitude can be generative rather than isolating. This poetic approach informs my use of fragmentation, repetition, and silence in film. In *Not Everything Disappears*, images function less as illustrations and more as verses—open, resonant, and incomplete—allowing emotional meaning to surface obliquely.

3. Past Work

I consider myself a multidisciplinary artist of Iranian descent. I have worked extensively in painting, but also video installation, film and image/text formats. My work focuses on explorations of neurodivergence, solitude, and the emotional weight of existence. My practice is rooted in abstract figuration, where fragmented dissolving bodies emerge from layered, gestural surfaces, evoking states of isolation, longing, and transformation. Through large-scale oil paintings I navigate the space between presence and absence, using texture, color, and form to articulate the complexities of internal experience. Painting functions as psychological self-portraits, revealing an interior landscape fractured by exhaustion, sensory overload, and emotional turbulence. These works demonstrate the recurring use of abstract figuration and fragmented bodies that inform the visual and ethical language of the film.



Grandma Watching Over Me (2023).



My Mother Not Giving a Flying Fuck (2023).

My work is deeply shaped by the lived reality of severe bipolar depression, chronic pain, and neurodivergence. These conditions not only inform my subject matter but also dictate my artistic process, one of endurance, urgency, and adaptation. Painting is both a necessity and an act of resistance, a way to materialize what is often intangible. Each work carries the tension between constraint and release, reflecting the struggle to express an internal world that resists easy articulation. Figures emerge and dissolve, their presence flickering between states of becoming and erasure. Bold, almost childlike colors and forms disrupt the darkness, externalizing the tension between despair and resilience. My work embodies a search for meaning within disarray, mirroring the way memory is reconstructed, distorted, and reshaped over time.

At the core of my practice I seek to create spaces of vulnerability and resonance, where the fractured, uncertain, and melancholic can exist without resolution. My work disrupts conventional narratives of selfhood and belonging, offering an unfiltered and

unfinished reflection of inner states while inviting viewers into a space of emotional recognition and confrontation. Through abstract figurative forms I navigate the tension between isolation and connection, self-perception and distortion, internal chaos and external control.

While painting remains central to my practice, film and video installation allow me to extend these concerns into time and duration. Where painting suspends the body in a single frame, moving image permits a sustained engagement with presence, gesture, and repetition. My transition into film is not a departure from painting but an expansion of its logic: both mediums operate as sites where internal experience becomes externalized through accumulation, erosion, and return. In this sense, *Not Everything Disappears* aligns with my painting practice as an exploration of psychic landscapes shaped by fragility, endurance, and care.

4. Thoughts on the process of making the film

The film has two sources. Firstly the primary archival tape which focuses on the patients, Peter's work and Peter and Jane's home life experiences. Secondly, near the middle of the film, we are introduced to a series of photographs taken by me while at a psychiatric hospital. Unlike the primary archival footage, the photographs are somewhat subdued and polished. The photographs give a muted or even antiseptic sense of being, while at the ward. However this alienating sense is abruptly halted by the subsequent text: "while at the hospital Jane and Peter got to know some of the patients...." With this line, intimacy returns. We are then introduced to just Jane and Peter at their home, in the shower and dancing to music, as if they are carrying the story of the patients with them. Images from their home spill onto the walls of the hospital: the dancing woman or the camel, from Peter's cigarette package. The lines become blurred between their private and public personas. Work and play become one. We come back to the boy in the hallway as he dances and whirls with paintings of different seasons, as if he is going through the seasons in his mind, while alone at the psychiatric hospital. The film ends with the simple shot of two emptied chairs at the table, presenting the death of Peter and a long shot of Jane who is pregnant. This shot gives the sense of the story being continued, and poignantly, the person who is to be born, is Peter and Jane's daughter, Pina, who gave me the footage.

The interruption of the film through the insertion of my photographs marks a deliberate shift in authorship and temporality. Unlike the archival footage, these images are composed, muted, and distanced. Their aesthetic restraint reflects my own experience of psychiatric wards as spaces of containment and suspension. This rupture makes visible the difference between witnessing from within a relationship and observing from outside it. The accompanying text anchors this moment ethically, asserting that Peter and Jane's engagement

with the patients was grounded in familiarity and care. This acknowledgment reframes the archival footage not as extracted material, but as relational history.



Untitled no.1.



Untitled no 2.



Untitled no 3.

5. Conclusion

Not Everything Disappears emerges as both an act of preservation and an act of care. What began as a set of forgotten images filmed without certainty of future use becomes, through the process of editing and reflection, a space where memory, vulnerability, and relational ethics are held open rather than resolved. The film does not seek to explain the psychiatric institution, the patients, or Peter Malt's work within a clinical or historical framework. Instead, it allows their presence to persist through gestures, glances, repetitions, and rhythms of shared time.

Central to the film is the quiet redistribution of power that occurs through collaboration. The patients are not framed as objects of study or as symbolic figures of illness, but as co-present beings whose movements and attention shape the unfolding work. As the film progresses, the distinction between observer and observed dissolves. The painter responds to the patients as much as they respond to him, and the camera held by Jane records from within a relationship rather than from a position of authority. In this way, the film resists dominant narratives of authorship and control, proposing instead an ethics grounded in attentiveness, proximity, and mutual recognition.

The interruption of the film's flow through the insertion of my own photographs from a psychiatric hospital introduces a temporal and subjective rupture. These images, more polished and distant, contrast with the raw intimacy of the archival footage. Their presence makes visible my position within the film not as a neutral editor, but as someone whose lived experience of psychiatric spaces informs the way this material is seen, shaped, and understood. The accompanying text, stating simply that Peter and Jane got to know some of the patients, becomes a crucial ethical axis. It affirms that care and connection, rather than extraction or representation, underpinned their engagement, mirroring my own reasons for bringing this work into the world.

The film's ending resists closure. The image of the empty chairs signals absence and loss, marking Peter's death without dramatization. The final shot of Jane, heavily pregnant, introduces continuity rather than resolution. The child she carries who would later entrust me with this footage embodies the persistence of memory across generations. Compassion, once extended within the hospital, moves forward in time, re-emerging through acts of sharing, witnessing, and artistic care.

Ultimately, *Not Everything Disappears* is not a film about illness or therapy, but about presence within fragility. It proposes filmmaking as a form of ethical listening, where images are not used to define or contain experience, but to remain alongside it. In allowing these moments to re-enter the world, the film insists that what was once overlooked, undocumented, or forgotten still holds the capacity to speak not loudly, but enduringly.

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