





Paola Fernanda Guzmán Figueroa

On Family, Migration, and Longing

Academy of Fine Arts, University of the Arts Helsinki

Written part of my MFA thesis project

Time and Space Arts

05.04.2022

“Paola: Mommy say something to the camera, mom!”

Film, Video and Installation.

Film: 13:50 min, digital projection.

Filmed with super 8mm Canon 310XL camera, 16mm Bolex H16 camera, DV sony camera.

Sound design: Theo af Enehielm

Aquarium: Acrylic sphere (57cm diameter), water, led light, human hair, 2 water pumps.

Video *Viaje en el tiempo*: 9:53 min, tablet, screened on 13 cm diameter wooden circle frame

May 12th - June 6th, 2021

Project Room Gallery

Helsinki, Finland

“Returning to the Island”

Film, Video, and Installation.

Film *Returning to the Island*: 9:56 min, digital projection.

Filmed with super 8mm Canon 310XL camera, 16mm Bolex H16 camera, GoPro Hero 6.

Sound design: Theo af Enehielm

Video *My Aquarium*: 14:06 min, digital projection on Aquarium. Filmed with GoPro Hero6.

Aquarium: 50cm x 50cm x 10,5cm wide.

Glass Aquariums: 3 womb shape aquariums.

Dec 12th - Jan 2nd, 2021- 2022

Project Room Gallery

Helsinki, Finland

Supervisors
Salla Tykkä
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Examiners
Heidi Tikka
Mika Taanila

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SUMMARY

My artistic practice focuses on topics including migration, family and longing. I wanted to start my thesis project by questioning the reasons why I am away from my homeland and family. I left my country Colombia in 2013, and since then, I have been based in Finland. Living in Finland has accentuated questions about my existence and my relationship with my family. The distance between the two countries is wide and my thoughts have travelled back and forth continuously. Rather than exploring political and economical reasons, I wanted to find answers from my family's perspectives and experiences.

In my thesis research, facts like family celebrations and events are very meaningful. Since I left Colombia, I started filming different events, my house, and family dynamics every time I returned to visit my family. My work uses memories including the graduation party of my mother, the family journey from Bogota to Margarita Island, and the birth of my nephew. Similarly, video material collected during my trips to Colombia is also showcased.

In my project, these memories are connected by using aquariums, water, and hair, all recurrent elements in my artistic practice and work. I call these objects transnational objects because they have connected me to my roots while being in other geographical and time spaces. Aquariums entail the idea of belonging and are connected to water which is an element capable of transforming and transporting memories and objects in different spaces. Similarly, hair may be associated with connectivity and could also be related to memories as it is non-perishable and lasting throughout the time.

In this paper I will share and explore the process and emotions that inspired me to make my two final degree pieces *Paola: Mommy say something to the camera, mom!* and *Returning to the Island*. Both works were shown in the same gallery space but at different times of the year. I provide an in-depth description of the events contained in my work as well as details about the meanings of the objects I use. Moreover, I explain the creation and building of the different pieces and describe the thinking behind the final work. To conclude, I offer some reflections on the audience reactions to my work.

INTRODUCTION

A MANUAL TO GET AN OVERVIEW ABOUT MY ARTISTIC PASSION, WORK AND RESEARCH

It is 24th of August 2020, I am at Sea Life Helsinki filming with a Bolex Camera. It is the first time that I am using it by myself, I am shooting my first 3 minutes 16mm black and white film. The aquariums are placed in different rooms, and they also have specific and different shapes. There is one that catches my attention, it is round and has a "22" number on it. It becomes a mirror, I feel I need to start shooting here. I click on rec.

Aquariums have been a recurrent object in my artistic practice and work.

The idea of belonging or "being inside" has always come to my mind when thinking of an aquarium, to belong to a group, to belong to a system, to be inside of our minds, to be inside of a body, to be inside of a space. As it is connected to water, an aquarium has also allowed me to ponder ideas about someone's past, life changes, transitions, and self-observing. In the middle of these meanings, a deep sense of warmth and nostalgia have also shown up strongly. Nostalgia for the constant desire of trying to find answers from the past or just for the reviving memories that cannot happen anymore.

I wanted to start my thesis project by questioning the reasons why I am away from my homeland. Living in Finland has accentuated these questions. The distance between the two countries is wide and my thoughts have travelled back and forth continuously. Rather than exploring political and economic reasons, I wanted to find answers from my family's perspectives. My parents have always guided my siblings and me towards the idea of living abroad connected with better study and work opportunities and higher quality of life. My sister, Nathaly, was the first to depart from home. My brother David followed later and afterward; it was me.

In my thesis research, facts like family celebrations and events are very meaningful. One example is my mother's graduation from university in 2001. We had a Sony DV video camera in our family since 2000. I remember that my parents were very flexible with my siblings and me about who could use it. At the graduation ceremony, I was 9 years old and I was filming with our camera. One of the pieces that I filmed, which was very significant for my thesis project, was when I asked my relatives to send a message and congratulate my mother. I realized then that these messages were given in the past but had a strong meaning in the present.

¹ Sea Life Helsinki belongs to the amusement park Linnanmäki, it is a park where the main focus is aquarium attractions.

In this paper I will share and explore the process and emotions that inspired me to make my two final degree pieces *Paola: Mommy say something to the camera, mom!* and *Returning to the Island*. Both works were shown in the same gallery space but at different times of the year.



Paola: Mommy says something to the camera, mom! View of the Installation, Project Room Gallery, 2021
Photo: Paola Fernanda Guzmán Figueroa



Paola: Mommy says something to the camera, mom! View of the aquarium, Project Room Gallery, 2021
Photo: Paola Fernanda Guzmán Figueroa



Returning to the Island, view of the installation, Project Room Gallery, 2021. Photo: Paola Fernanda Guzmán Figueroa

CHAPTER I: THE PROCESS OF CREATION FOR MY FIRST PIECE “PAOLA: MOMMY SAY SOMETHING TO THE CAMERA, MOM!”

Since I left my homeland Colombia, it has been very recurrent that every time I go back there, I film with my cameras which I usually take with me for every trip: a GoPro, a Canon camera and/or any other camera that I have available. I have gathered a lot of material since I left. After 3 years, I started noticing how important the videos that I filmed at home were. There were elements that shifted and transformed. For instance, some of the rooms changed their decoration and purpose in the house where we used to live. I also started noticing new elements, there were more family photographs and albums. Moreover, the interaction with my parents while having the camera present became more and more flexible and relaxed. All these aspects started having a stronger meaning. Also, the fact that I was not going back to Colombia anymore to live but just to visit, made all the filmed material more relevant.

At the same time, I wanted to review again the family videos archive that we had. I remembered seeing them for my first BA thesis at school and there was so much material that I wanted to research more but it was not the correct moment for doing it. Now it was the time. I felt it was important for me to review them. I remembered my father's speech. I decided to take most of the films with me and watch them closely once again when I came back to Finland.

Right after I came back, there was an open call for a course in my department in Kuvataideakatemia. It was called “Luonnonvalossa kuvaaminen” which means “Filming in Natural light”.

At the same time, the process of my final work began. After reviewing the archive material from my family, I found a very important scene. It was the graduation of my mother in 2001, and I was holding the camera. I was asking all the guests to give a congratulatory message to my mom. It was a very emotional moment when I saw it. The first person that was shown greeting my mother was my father. I asked him to call my mom “my love” before he would say “congratulations”. After that, I asked my aunt Jaqui, then my cousin Ruby, then my older aunt Tránsito and in the end, my grandmother who we call “Nanita”. I, a 9-year-old, was behind the camera, directing my relatives to surprise my mom one day.



My love, congratulations!



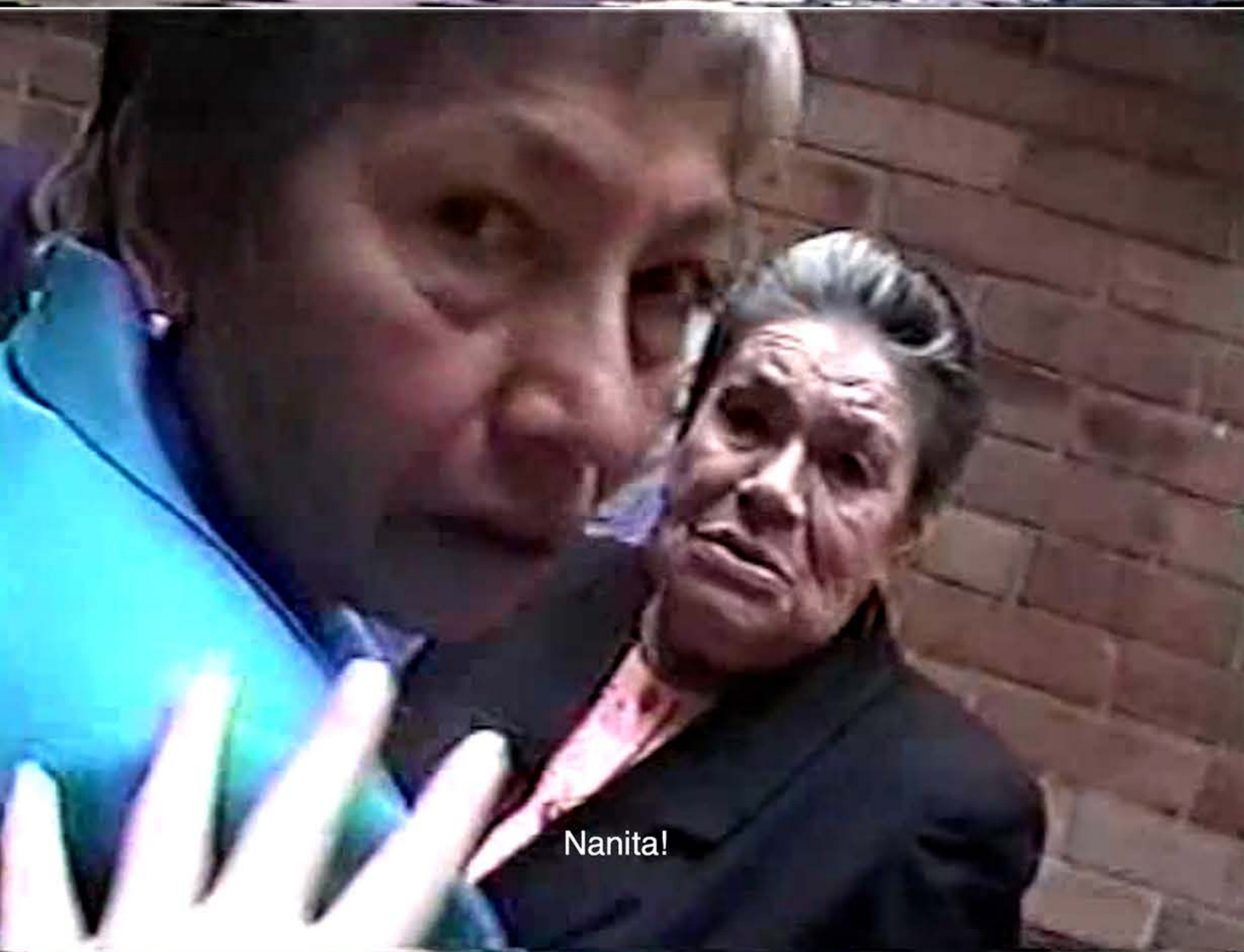
Now my aunti.



Congratulations beautiful sister!



Wish congrats to my mother.



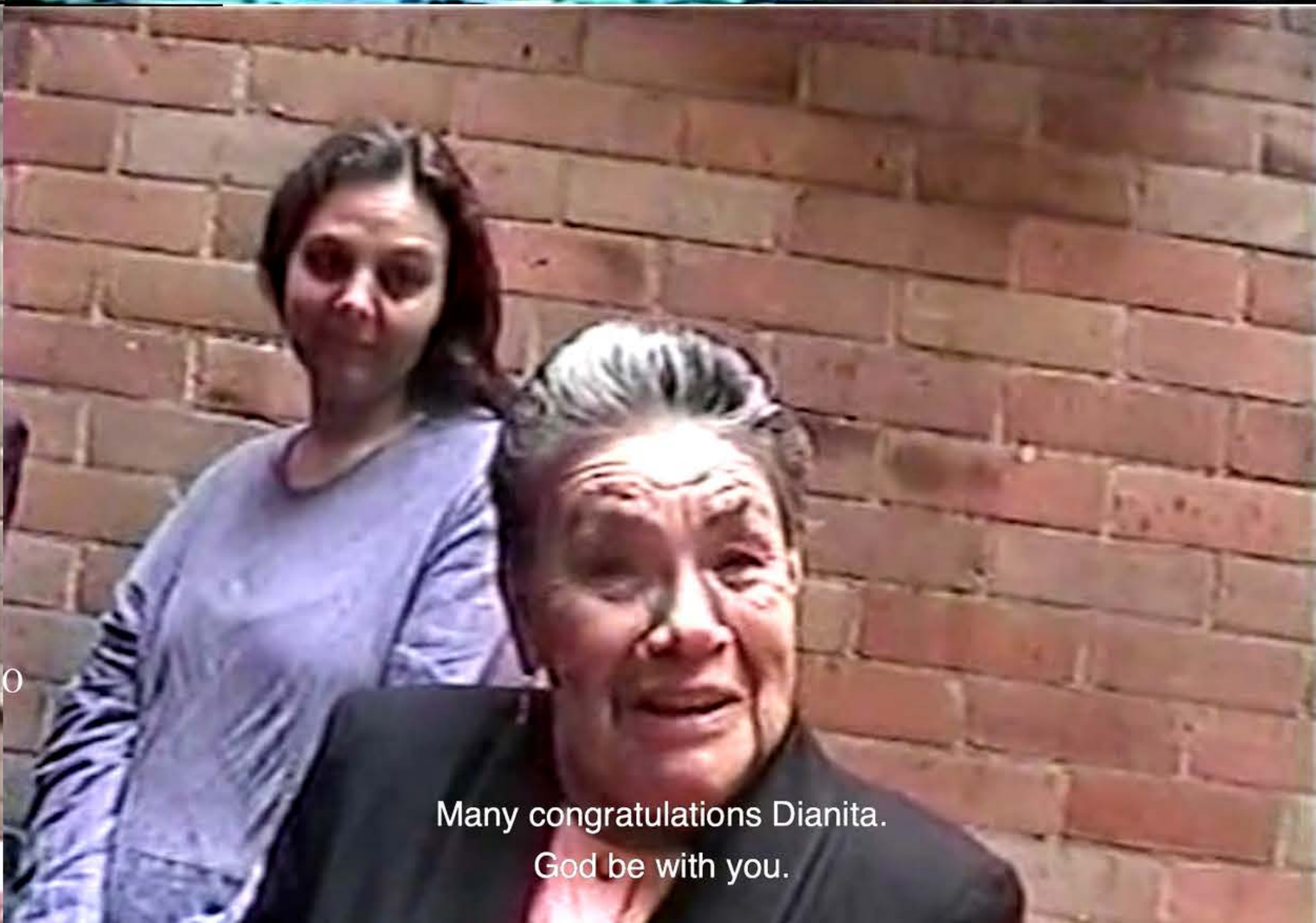
Nanita!



Many congratulations Dianita.



My aunti.



Many congratulations Dianita.
God be with you.

It was very powerful to see the order of the greetings. There was a very strong chain of women congratulating my mom. Their different ages, their different outfit, colours, and the way they were reacting to my question was delightful. The fact of finding this material was very emotional for me. I could understand the magic and the existence of the camera, it was bringing that past life to a very important present. Another scene that was very important for me was the moment when I am telling my parents to give a kiss to each other, and I am counting the seconds for them to kiss. That has a very strong sense of emotional approach.



Film shots from "Paola: mommy say something to the camera, mom!" 2001, Paola Fernanda Guzmán Figueroa

While I started the analogue film course, I was happy to be able to try out the analogue cameras for the first time. We were shooting with a canon super 8mm camera and a Bolex 16mm camera. It was exciting to see the whole process of shooting, developing and later on reviewing the film with the analogue projector.

The first film I tried out was a super 8mm black/white reversal film. We had free hands. I knew I wanted to film in a place where I had the possibility to use water, and also I wanted to use a material that has been recurrent in my artistic work since I moved away from Colombia, my hair. Since I moved away from Colombia, every time I cut my hair, I have had the need to save it. It is something that I feel I cannot lose; it has become material proof from the time I have been living away from Colombia. It is with me and will not change. It is a resource for me to observe the time that has passed. It is an inanimate element, but at the same time it carries information and history. I am adrenalized about the idea of bringing it to life, I want to animate it and bring it with me. It is one of the characters in my films.

For the super 8mm film, I wanted to film my hair, bringing it outside, but also, I wanted its character to tell a story and narrate a feeling. The hair had a role and its own voice. I also focused in using a space where the hair could interact and have movement. I thought that the idea of bringing it to a place where wind or water could move was important. I decided to start filming in the sauna, an intimate space, and I could use water in a wider area. I decided to start shooting the hose, because the hose was the element that was bringing the water.

While filming in the sauna, I realized how liberating it felt to film with a camera that did not have an option to review what you just recorded. Analogue filmmaking had a deeper meaning. Time was limited, I had 3 minutes to shoot and I needed to be patient and wait until I could develop the film in the darkroom, and see the results. By some means, I started to have a connection with the video camera when I was 9 years old at my mother's graduation. After a long period of time I could see and find the meaning of my recordings in the past.

At that point analogue filmmaking became a very strong method in my research.

Kim Knowles is specializing in experimental film-making and analogue practices. She writes "film's physical nature is precisely its draw-its organic materials are a reassuring reflection of our own bodies. In a world of complicated algorithms, mysteriously impenetrable black boxes, and intangible data, film is something we can understand, it can be touched, smelled, tasted and felt. Moreover, film is felt not just in the process of making but also in the experience of viewing- the restless silver grain, the chemical compound that makes up the image, shifts before our eyes as the rays of project light shine through and animate it" (Knowles 2019, 75).

I found that the aquarium and the recreation of it have many similar elements as the developing process of analogue filmmaking; both require liquids and circular movements. The aquariums usually have a pump that makes the water rotate. The same happens when you are developing a film in the lab, you must move the developer with a circular movement for the film to be exposed to the developer. All these actions and elements have naturally enabled me to undertake deeper analysis and explorations over the elements captured through the camera and in the darkroom. One of the closest examples has been the experimentation I have developed for my MFA solo show *Returning to the Island*. In this film, I have exposed my hair over the celluloid in the darkroom and I have developed it. They all, hair and celluloid, aquarium and developing tanks are talking the same language.

CHAPTER II: A CLOSE-UP IN THE STRUCTURE OF THE FILM “PAOLA: MOMMY SAY SOMETHING TO THE CAMERA, MOM!

Throughout my time in Finland, I have started to think more deeply about issues such as migration and the reasons why I am away from my country and my family.

There were two different moments and materials I found important for the construction of the film, one was the archive material from my mother's graduation party and the second was the material I started creating with the analogue film cameras. I sensed that both materials initiate a conversation with each other.

My mom was the main character as we celebrated her graduation. From her, I connected a memory that has followed me since I was a kid, and somehow here in Finland has taken a center stage in my artistic topics. It was about a trip we did with my parents and siblings to Venezuela in search for a better future in 1993, and when my mother decided to return to Colombia with my siblings and me. My dad stayed, so my mom had to travel alone with the three of us. I remember that my mom was always describing how crazy and adventurous our trip was while crossing both countries.

I wanted to explore this memory, so I decided to interview my parents and siblings about the trip. At that time, my brother David was 5 years old, and my sister Nathaly was 3 years old. I asked them about their memories, and they described many of their feelings and even descriptions from sounds, smells, and textures. Even though my sister Nathaly was 3 years old she had strong memories about the sea and her fear while waiting on the shore of the beach for my parents. My brother David also described scenes in the sea. He was afraid about the strong waves but little by little he learned how to swim on them. All these stories started to make sense and create important parts of my film.

In September 2020, I went for an exchange to Madrid. My studies were in film directing. I had the opportunity to practice fictional scenes with actors. Being there was very inspiring for the creation of my film. I knew I wanted to work with experimental documentary, but I was also tempted to create fictional scenes. In addition, speaking about my work in my mother tongue Spanish was very difficult in the beginning. I found it very personal to me. Somehow, I have gotten used to speaking about my artistic work in English, and that has created a certain layer of distance.

When I was in Spain, I had a very long call with my parents. We talked about the trip to Venezuela for the first time. I asked them about how they took the decision of leaving Colombia, and why we returned. It was mesmerizing to hear so many details that I wasn't aware of and did not know at all. I was also very impressed by the fact that I was there with them. My dad talked about life decisions because of new opportunities and his dream to be living on a beautiful island with all of us. He described how difficult it was when we arrived on the island and for political reasons the country's president at that time had been sent to jail because of corruption. The island was in a lockdown. My mother described how difficult it was for her to deal with it. There was not enough food and all schools and hospitals were closed. Then she decided to return with the three of us (siblings and me) to Colombia. My dad stayed, insisting on being in Venezuela. Finally, he returned to Colombia after 5 months.

For me, the fact of my mom making this trip by herself with my siblings and me was very meaningful, in the interview my mom and dad described:

Mom: I decided, I'll go back, so we decided with your father that I was leaving, but your daddy wondered "how are you going to leave alone with the 3 children, catching airplanes..."

Dad: Then we bought something like cords, that were supposed to be around your waists, right?

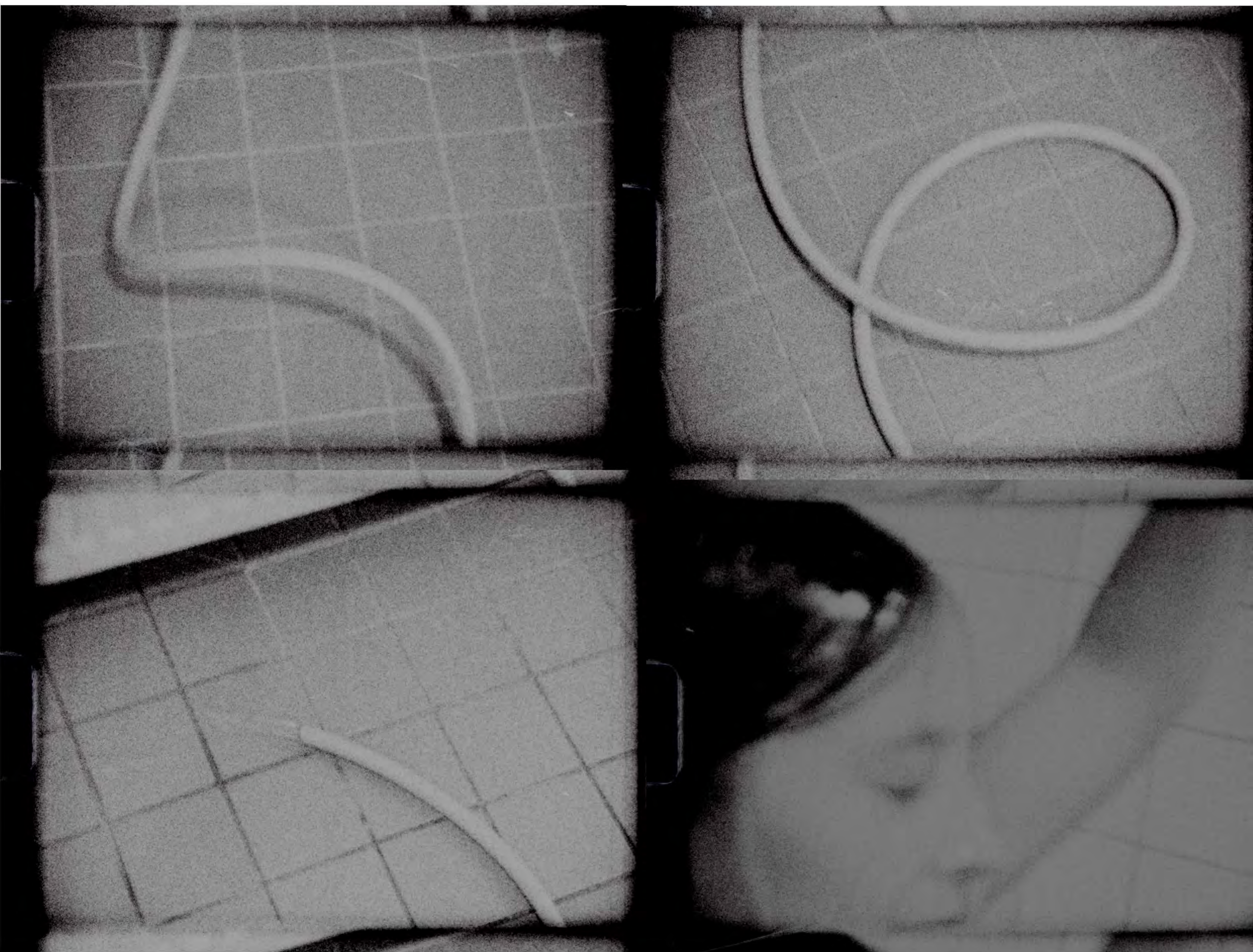
Mom: No, it was from the wrists, one cord attached to one wrist, and the other cord attached to the other wrist, and Paolita was on my baby carrier. They were coloured, one red and the other one yellow or something similar. I remember that they were like little telephone cables that could stretch.

This is a very important moment from the interview I did to my parents. This is the only moment that I have kept in my memory from what my mom was telling me about this trip when I was a kid. To hear about the voyage again with more details and from both my parents perspective was inspiring. I decided I wanted to use this scene in my film, narrated from my perspective. In addition, I wanted to create the same scene in Colombia, with my mom, me and my siblings.

I wrote the scene in first person. I wanted to be present in the place. This film was going to allow me to be in the past and feel what was happening in that moment when my mom had us attached to her chest and wrists. I wrote:

"My mother, Diana, and my father, Mauricio, my siblings, Nathaly and David, and I are in Venezuela. My parents are discussing our future and life. Now we are at the airport, my sister, Nathaly, is three years old and she is attached with a blue string to the left wrist of my mom. David, my brother, is five years old and he is attached with another string with yellow colour to the right wrist of my mom. I am one year old and I am attached to her chest. We are back in Colombia."

This scene had a strong connection with the first scene I shot in the sauna with the super 8 mm camera, the strings from my siblings' wrists were mirrored in that image, the strings were the hose and haircuts from my hair. The hose was leading me to the past. At the moment when I was facing the camera, and pouring the water from the hose on me, this was a very meaningful moment for saying that "I was attached to the chest of my mom".



Film shots from "Paola: mommy say something to the camera, mom!" 2020, Bolex Camera, Paola Fernanda Guzmán Figueroa

Later in the film, I wanted to portray the scene of my mother coming back to Colombia with my siblings and me. I travelled to Colombia after finishing my exchange studies in film directing in Madrid. I took the same super 8 mm camera I used for the beginning of the film, as I knew I wanted to portray and document the same scene. For me it was not a question to portray the scene in the exact same place as it happened. The focus in this scene was the characters. I planned that my mother was playing her role as our mother and it was the same for me, I was also playing myself. For my siblings, I wanted to find two kids that could represent them, my brother David with the age of 5 and my sister Nathaly with the age of 3.

Nowadays my parents live in a small natural settlement in the mountains of Colombia, it is called Siroma and it is situated in the region called Tolima. They moved 4 years ago. This place is very connected to nature, and it is completely different from Bogotá. In Siroma, my parents have created a new social circle, the people from “la vereda” (the village) are coming from different places of Colombia, some have been born there, some are from Bogotá, others are from Cali and so on. One of the persons that they have gotten to know is called Consuelo. She is a mother and head of household, she lives with two of her children, Eduard who is 12 years old and Erick who is 5 years old.

Every time I go to Colombia, I interact with them, and for this visit I thought that I could work with them. When I am there, they want to learn about the cameras I use and want to hear about my studies and work. I thought this was a great opportunity for them to try the cameras. I knew that Erick could represent my brother and Eduard could film the scene.



Erick and Eduard trying the cameras on the day of the scene, Paola Fernanda Guzmán Figueroa, February 2021



Erick and Eduard trying the cameras on the day of the scene, Paola Fernanda Guzmán Figueroa, February 2021



Photo documentation from the day of the scene, "Paola: Mommy say something to the camera, mom! Eduard Forero, 2021

In the “vereda”, my parents also have met people that offer services to them, a woman named Damaris offers beauty services like nail polishing. She is a mother of one small girl called Mariangel, who is 3 years old, and for my casting she was the perfect representation of my sister Nathaly.

The idea of having myself as the main voice of the film was connected with this representation of the real me in front of the camera. My persona, travelling in time, could understand better. Reviving the past could be easier by being present in a scene that was part of the memories in the family.

I planned the scene, I wanted us to walk all together at the same time, to an endless direction. I chose to attach us to each other with my own hair, instead of the original idea of the cords to the wrists from the trip from Venezuela to Colombia. The hair was very meaningful, it had a purpose, attaching us to each other and taking us to the past.

I asked Eduard to film the scene. For the film, it was significant that he could take the camera as it resembled when I was filming with the camera at my mother’s graduation. We were almost the same age.

First, we rehearsed the scene with the digital camera. Then, I explained the super 8 mm camera and after that, he shot it with us acting.



Photo documentation "Paola: Mommy say something to the camera, mom!" Eduard Forero, February 2021

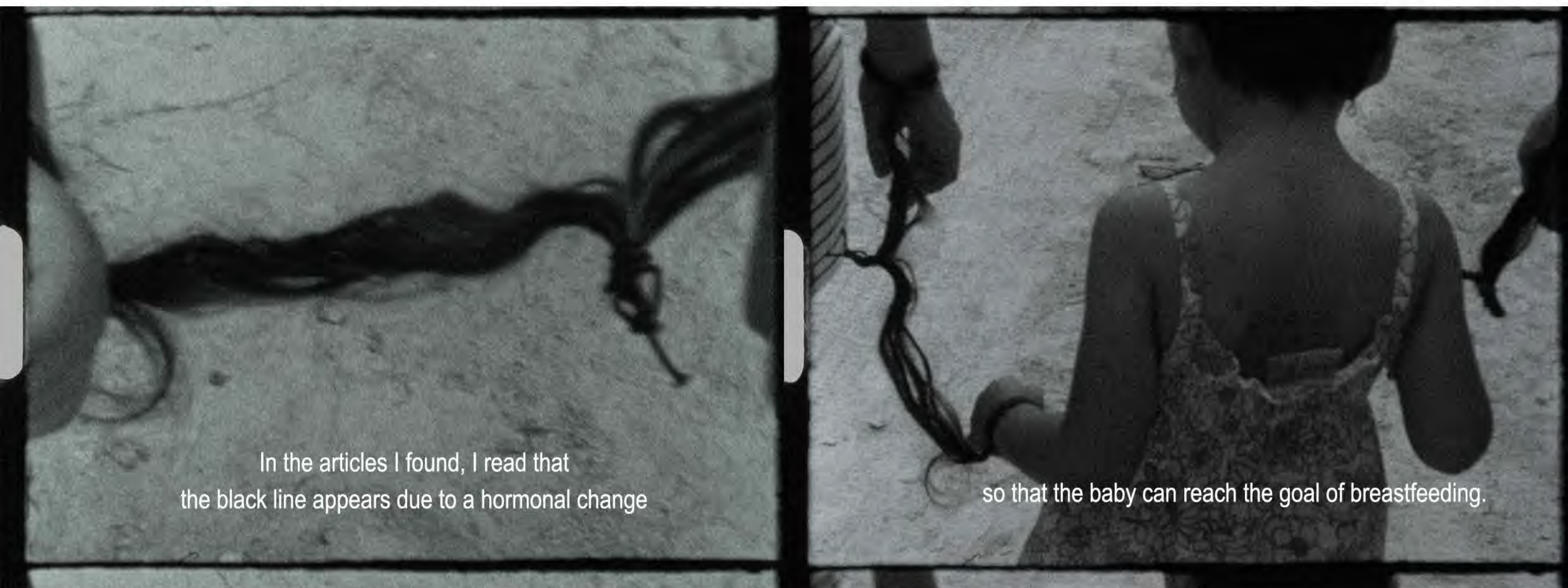


Shot from the original film "Paola: Mommy say something to the camera, mom!" Eduard Forero, February 2021

The construction of the shots from this scene was divided in two, one was a general shot where the four of us are visible; we are walking, we are leaving. The second shot was a close up, since it was important for me that we could visualize the black line from the hair that was attaching us to each other.

In this scene, I am talking about the black line that my sister had on her belly when she was pregnant, in the film I mention:

“When the baby was born, the line on my sister’s belly darkened a little more. In the articles I read, I found that the black line appears due to a hormonal change, and exists as a conduit mainly to facilitate darkening of the nipples so that the baby can reach the goal of breastfeeding, the black line acts as a path and direction from the mother’s womb to the nipple, thus the baby manages to find its nourishment and life center”



Shots from the film “Paola: Mommy say something to the camera, mom!” Eduard Forero, February 2021

I wanted to relate this meaning about the black line on the belly of my sister with my own past, and in relation to my mother and the feeling of being part of her.

The birth of my first nephew became a crucial part of my film. Both of my siblings are living in different countries, and even though we are separated by distance we are very connected to each other. In December 2020 we planned to be together, my sister Nathaly was coming from New York, and planned to have the baby in Colombia. And our brother David was coming from Vigo in Spain.

The whole process of my sister being pregnant was very new for me. Before my sister, I did not experience stories about pregnancy and motherhood so closely. It was so beautiful to hear and research next to her. In addition, we were in Colombia, together with our mother and grandmother, so it was also a very meaningful process for her pregnancy and labor. Their advice and ways of seeing pregnancy and motherhood were a new world to discover. I realized that one of the most significant moments was when my grandmother was making herbal baths for my sister. In the last weeks of her pregnancy, 2 baths per week were planned. The presence of water was essential, water connects, water has memory and this memory is also moving and shifting in relation to my present.



Shots from the film "Paola: Mommy say something to the camera, mom!" Paola Fernanda Guzmán, February 2021

Shots from the film "Paola: Mommy say something to the camera, mom!" Paola Fernanda Guzmán, February 2021

As previously mentioned, one of the elements that I have been using in many of my past works has been the aquarium. For this film, I wanted to use an aquarium to portray my hair. I wanted to film it falling inside of the tank and did not want to move it. I wanted the water to be an element for giving life and gravity. The image was very prominent and abstract. I decided to use the speech from my father in the graduation ceremony from my mother. I felt it was a letter he was sending to my mother and the image was letting us read it. The silence became part of the letter, the only way that my mother could communicate with my father when we left from Venezuela to Colombia was through letters and there was no telephone connection. In this way, there was not the presence of sound. The sound of his voice was off.

Filming in Sea Life was a big inspiration for the installation of the exhibition, and many of the shots that I filmed there were used in the film. It was relaxing to film there, normally it is allowed to film and take photographs inside the park and the only rule is to not use flash. I was happy to spend a longer time in Sea Life since I was using the analogue Bolex Camera, and that also allowed me to make a deeper analysis on the structure of the aquariums, their placement, and the whole architecture of the park. There was a series of aquariums that caught my attention as there were different numbers on them and they were rounded.

When I developed the material I shot, I found that the structure had a big connection with the shots I took in Colombia about my sister's pregnancy. I found there was a connection between the shots from the belly when my grandmother "nanita" was making the baths and the aquariums I shot in Sea Life.

CHAPTER III: CREATING SOUND FROM DIARY ATMOSPHERES IN COLOMBIA AND FOLIES

The sound design for my film was done by Theo af Enehielm. We have been working together on some other projects. Also, we are a couple. For this film, it was very important to integrate sounds from Colombia. Theo has been travelling with me to Colombia for the last 5 years, and as I am bringing my video cameras with me, he has been bringing his sound recorder equipment. When we reviewed some shots and ideas from my thesis film, Theo started gathering atmosphere sounds that could bring him towards my childhood. Nature sounds, city atmospheres, and even voices and dialogs from my relatives were some of the elements that caught his attention and presence for many of the images.

Also, it was a significant experience to create the sound for all the shots that happened at the beginning of the film (inside the sauna together with the hose and the haircuts). Since the super 8 mm camera does not record sound, we needed to do it a second time. After developing the film and scanning it and reviewing it, we decided to make the foley from the sounds in the same space. Even though the sound shots were becoming too planned, I wanted to make it as close to a documentary as possible. I placed the same elements in the space, and we started shooting. It was a second time experience, creating the same illusion and leaving silence in the moments that needed to be quiet.

CHAPTER IV: WORKING AT BLACK BOX, FINAL INSTALLATION

For my Kuvan Kevät exhibition I got the black box in Project Room gallery, it was the first time for me to exhibit a piece in that gallery. I was looking forward to trying out the elements I wanted to install. A sphere aquarium, the projection of the film and a small round video screen for my performance piece called Time Travel were the three elements that were relevant in my piece.

For the arrangement of the space, I wanted that people could feel welcomed inside the room. Usually, many black boxes or screening rooms in galleries are installed so that the audience that is viewing the film is showing the back to the incoming visitors. In my case, I wanted the opposite, it was important that the audience could also see the incoming visitors entering the room while viewing the film. It was a way for making people feel invited to my room. My film is about family liaisons and seeing the incoming visitors was a gesture that I found was connected to the dynamics in my family and that I wanted to refer to in the space.

The aquarium was working as a window and as a portal for connecting the outdoors with the indoors where the film was projected. My plan was to place the aquarium as the average high of a pregnant belly as I wanted to mimic the same language. Inside the aquarium was 60 litres of water, 2 water pumps and three different pieces of cut hair. The idea was that the hair was swimming in circles, the water pumps were giving life and movement to the hair, so the hair could start rotating.

Installation/Structure Plan



To have the aquarium placed in between the wall was a huge process of construction, technicians were also afraid about using water inside the exhibition place. I was also getting nervous but at the same time I was pushing my idea and giving reassurance that everything was going to be fine. Even though I had nightmares seeing the hole gallery full of water from my aquarium.



Photo documentation, process of construction: wall. Paola Fernanda Guzmán, May 2021

For me, it has been always relevant to include the space in a more immersive way. It is always difficult for me to just screen the film in the gallery without taking in consideration the space that is surrounding it. Being in Sea Life was a big inspiration for the making of this installation. In one part of the film there is a scene where my brother David is describing the swimming experience in Venezuela. Sea Life aquarium was a visual inspiration for my installation, I noticed how that aquarium became a window, and the number 22 was also leading me to a certain year and time.

For the film it was very important that people came in to see it at any moment, there was of course a beginning and end, but I tried to make the editing not so rigid inside a time line. The film had jumps between many years as the years that were in the film were 1993, 2001, and 2021. When editing the film, I jumped from one year to another in a more aleatory order, so the audience could also integrate in the narration of the film easier and without being present from the beginning or end. The film was projected in loop without credits.



Film shot, aquarium at Sea Life Helsinki , inspiration material. Paola Fernanda Guzmán, 2020



Photo documentation, aquarium on Installation "Paola: mommy say something to the camera, mom!". Paola Fernanda Guzmán, 2021



Photo documentation, Installation "Paola: mommy say something to the camera, mom!". Paola Fernanda Guzmán, May 2021

After installing the work, I started to notice how the haircuts inside the aquarium started to intertwine into each other. They were rotating constantly; it was like they were counting a time. It became almost like a watch, the timer of the installation, and was visually integrated into the space in a subtle way. I started noticing that it became also like a satellite.

As MOT Sanakirjat online dictionary defines satellite “An artificial body placed in orbit round the earth or moon or another planet in order to collect information or for communication” (2022).

The aquarium became a satellite, it was there orbiting the whole time of the installation. It was capturing and exporting information from both directions of the room, it was talking with the audience that was indoors and outdoors at the same time, and it was receiving and transmitting information. It was translating visually an image from both sides of the room, from the outside you could see the hair swimming, the three haircuts that were becoming the representation of my siblings and me, us three born from the same belly, us three attached from the cords to our mother when traveling from Venezuela to Colombia. Also, the image was flipped horizontally like an upside-down translation. When you were closer to the aquarium you could visualize the image from the film, but this one was flipped, it was like seeing it from a different angle and perspective.

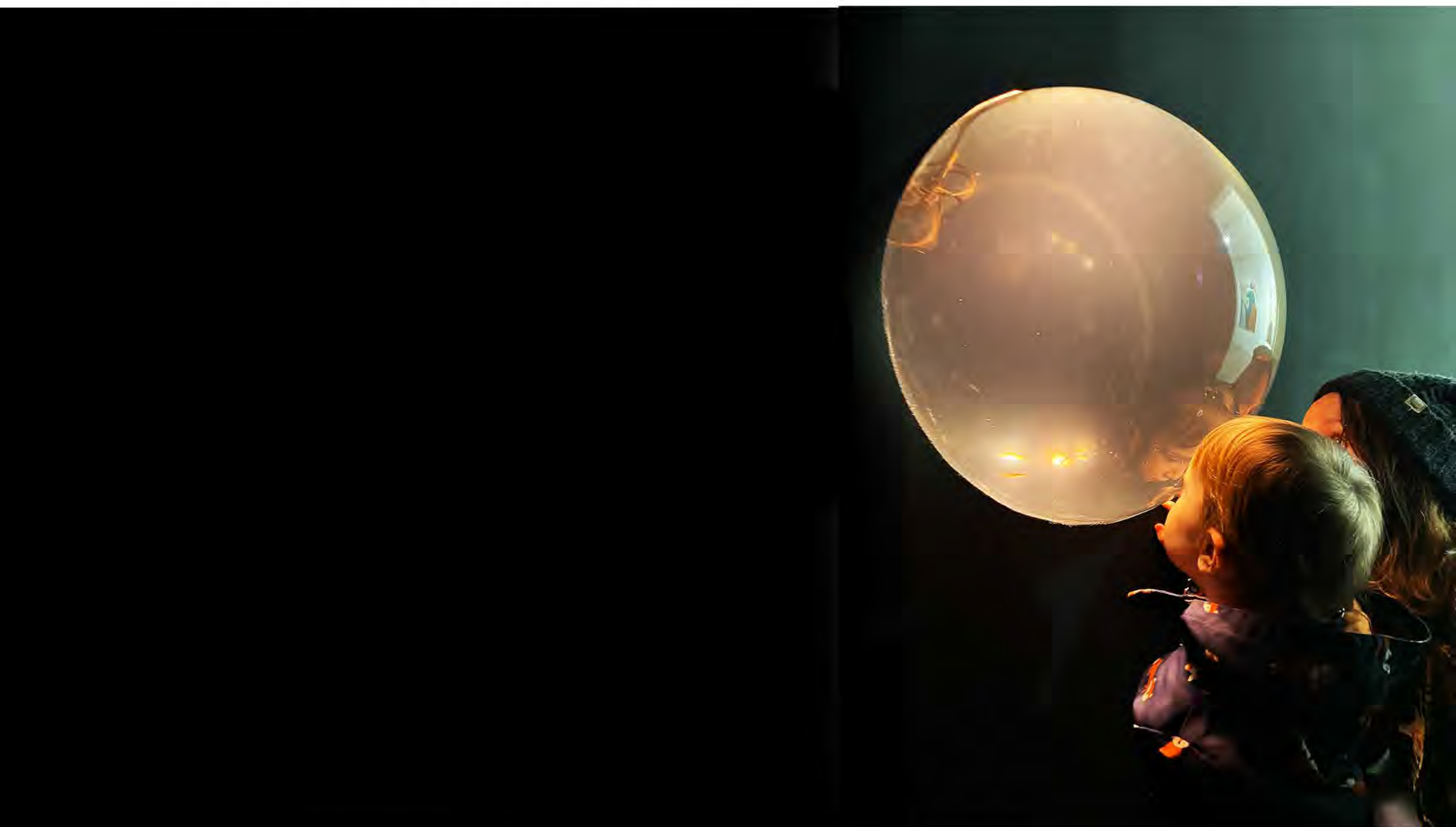


Photo documentation, Installation "Paola: mommy say something to the camera, mom!". Paola Fernanda Guzmán, May 2021

In the outdoors area of the room, there was my performative piece titled *Time Travel*. It was a performance documentation exhibited on a circular screen. In the video it was me transporting an aquarium, inside of the aquarium was water and my hair, I was the resource of energy to keep the hair moving inside of the aquarium. I was giving air through a hose and at the same time I was walking with it. I was in three different locations that are geographically very separate. The first location was Bogotá, I was walking in the neighbourhood where my parents and siblings used to live, there was cars passing by and few neighbours, the second location was in Madrid, many people were observing me, at some point I had many children walking behind me, it was a great moment of my performance, it was almost like a procession, they wanted to follow and be with me, they were also very quiet. The third location was Arabianranta in Helsinki, I was walking with the aquarium on the snow. It was very a challenging place to be, it was not so easy to move the aquarium and it was cold. After being in the three countries doing the same performance, I wanted to show it to people, the aquarium is my transportation medium, it was an important ceremony for me to be able to represent past life and wandering for the future. As is in many religious ceremonies, I wanted to be dressed for this occasion, I was bringing my past and my body to the public. I could give life to an element that was part of me and that will exist even though I die. This element was my own hair.



Photo documentation, Installation "Paola: mommy say something to the camera, mom!". Paola Fernanda Guzmán, May 2021

In the exhibition space, the documentation of the performance could be viewed outside the screening room. The piece was related to the other two but had its own independent space.



Shots performance, "Time Travel". Helsinki (1), Madrid (2), Bogotá (3) "Time Travel". Malin Hemmig (1), Belén Díez (2), Janne Mäkinen (3) 2021



My work was part of the group exhibition *Kuvan Kevät 2021*. On 18th of May 2021, Helsingin Sanomat published an article about the exhibition. Sanna Lipponen wrote about my work "On family, longing - and hair behind a convergent, transparent surface, hair floats slowly in the water. In the video recording of the performance, this same hair is being transported along the streets in an aquarium set on a table with wheels. The hair curls from one part of Paola Fernanda Guzmán Figueroa's (b. 1992) installation to another and is also repeated in her film *Paola: Mamita, dile algo a la Cámara, mami! / Paola: Mommy say something to the camera, mom! (2021)*. Guzmán Figueroa's way of dealing with family, immigration, and longing is intimate and humane. Surprisingly much is crystallized in the small, festive moments of the film, in which a cheerful voice of a child invites relatives to congratulate their mother and they turn towards the child, the camera, and sometimes towards the mother, at whom they point their words" (Lipponen 2021).

In *Mustekala*, a cultural online magazine, Athanasía Aarniosuo writes about my piece "It is easy to identify with Paola Fernanda Guzmán Figueroa's homesickness. When I got swine flu while living in Scotland, I called my mother and said I couldn't do without her. Mom came to me the following week, even though I had already recovered by then. Even in the face of difficulties, an adult seeks refuge, and the safest memory is often found in one's own parents and childhood. Guzmán Figueroa tells the viewer a story, not about sadness, but about love and affection. In her video installation, a small child invites guests to congratulate her mother. The mother's long curls of hair are a motif that is repeated in the video as well as in the uterus-shaped installation. The mother is missed because the mother enables and supports" (Aarniosuo 2021).

CHAPTER V: CREATING MY SECONDEXHIBITION “RETURNING TO THE ISLAND”

My second exhibition *Returning to the Island* was exhibited in the same space as my Kuvan Kevät exhibition. I had the same black box, but this time I wanted to take a different approach into the space. Still, very connected to my first work in terms of topics and characters. I exhibited two films, one was projected in an aquarium and the other was projected on the wall, there were three glass wombs that were spread in the room, the biggest glass womb was in constant rotation.

For this project, I wanted to work with the interview I did with my parents about our trip to Venezuela. In the film Paola: Mommy say something to the camera, mom! I did not use any of the voices of my parents in the interview, now it was the time for them to be heard. In my archive material, I have had a video documentation of the aquarium I had at home in Colombia from the year 2014. In that year, I was visiting my parents for the first time after moving to Finland. This trip was very symbolic for our relationship. I was the last one to leave home, my siblings Nathaly and David departed years before me. After coming back to visit my parents, I noticed how my aquarium that I had at home looked different. It had new fish and new structure. I notice how my parents were giving their attention to it as if the aquarium would be one of my siblings or me. I decided I wanted to film it, from the inside and outside.

I was using my GoPro camera and asked my dad to put the camera inside the aquarium. It was a very meaningful shot; we were both in the shot and then my father's hand was placing the camera inside the aquarium. This video lasts for around 30 minutes, it was magical to watch it after some years and see the activity in it. The view from the shot is the fish swimming, and at the same time the house is also visible, the colours of the walls, the movements in the house and changes of light. One of the moments of the video is when my father passes by many times, he is taking objects back and forth from the room I was sleeping in when I was living with them. It was extremely enchanting finding this after years of being filmed.

In addition, the structure of the objects that were placed inside the aquarium were curiously strange. There was not so much logic in how they were placed, it was almost like the house inside the aquarium was keeping up and almost falling sideways. It was humorous to see it and very meaningful in connection to the story of the island in Venezuela, when we arrived there was a collapse, economically and political.



Shots "My Aquarium". Paola Fernanda Guzmán & José Mauricio Guzmán, 2014

I wanted to work with this video and found that the interview about Venezuela was very connected. It was like a little treasure that you find, you just need to get closer to listen. The fish became my parents, they both telling me all about our adventurous trip after 28 years.



Detail shot "My Aquarium". José Mauricio Guzmán , 2014

For the second film *Returning to the Island* I wanted to experiment with different elements that I have started to research and develop in the last months of my MFA studies. I have always wanted to see the city with a layer of water, I decided to take a small plastic bag full of water and started strolling around the city and looking at the same time through the small plastic bag full of water. I took my phone and recorded images through the bag.

I decided to create a film piece out of this. I saw myself as a character rambling in the city trying to find something through the layer of water. I filmed places that are personally important for me and are connected to my daily life but also have a deep connection with my subconscious. For example, the Helsinki Metro and the beach in Arabia district have been places that have marked my life. Specially the beach, there I have always felt inspired when I think about my traveling path. Water connects, water has memory, and this memory is also moving and shifting in relation to my present. Since childhood, my siblings and I have experienced changes facilitated by water. When I am close to the shore of the beach here in Helsinki, I feel more connected to my past and family.



Shot from the film "Returning to the Island", Laura Lohiata, 2021

The shots of me walking in Helsinki became important scenes of the film *Returning to the Island*. They were a key material for the narration of the film. I was constantly looking for something which I finally found. It was my father swimming in the Atlantic sea, I was swimming and trying to catch him, when I finally catch him, he says:

Dad: The beach is so delicious, even though it is a dark beach. It doesn't matter, it is delicious. It is like a swimming pool, and here we could spent all the time. Until 6pm.



Shots from the film "Returning to the Island" Paola Fernanda Guzmán, 2016

In the material my mother is also swimming together with my father, they are both enjoying the water and my father is proposing to build a cottage next to the see. I find these scenes, very connected to the story I wanted to investigate, us moving to a new island looking for a new direction in life. I was amazed seeing the film material and the comfort of my parents in front of the camera.

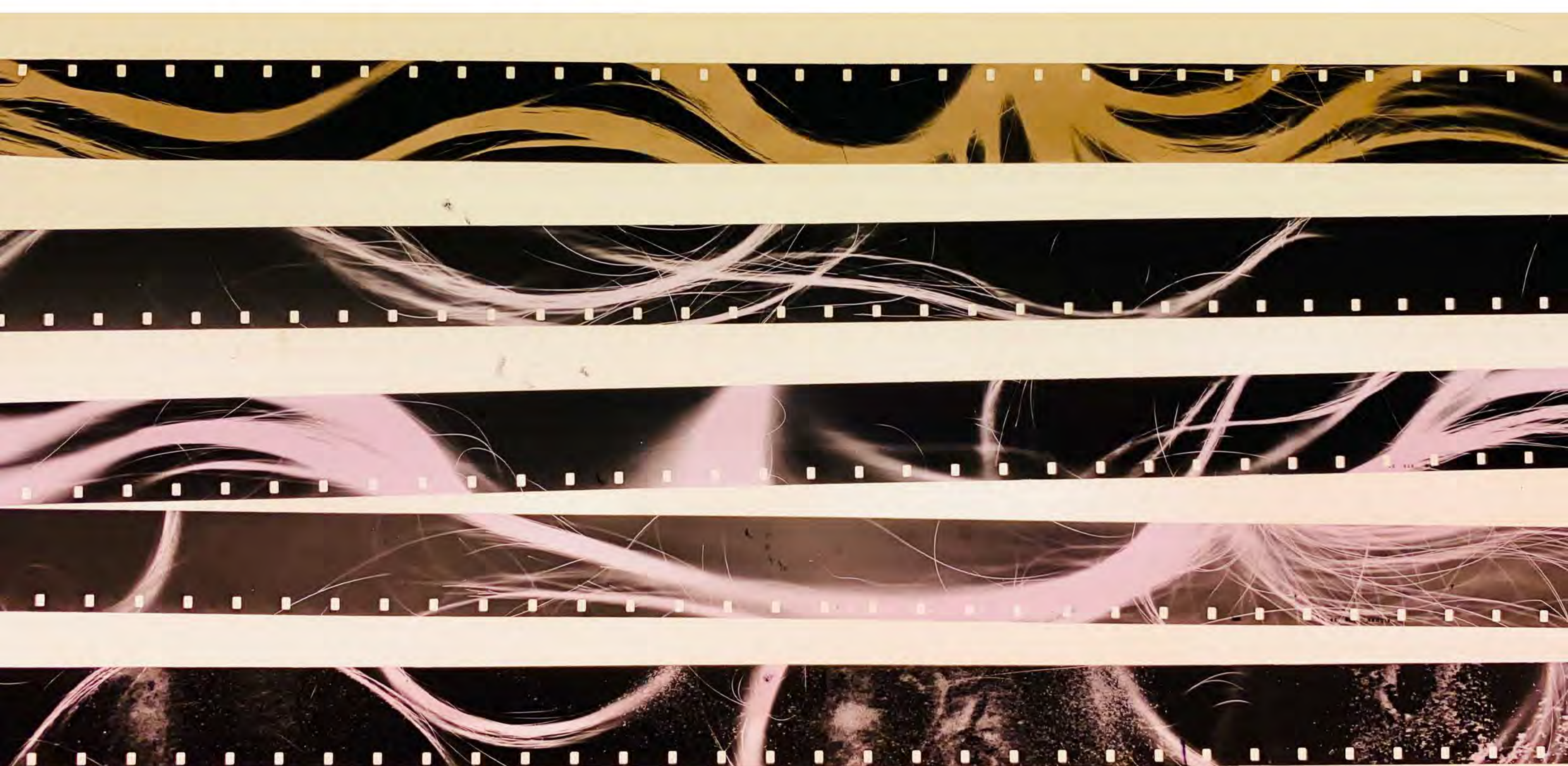


Shot from the film "Returning to the Island" Paola Fernanda Guzmán, 2016

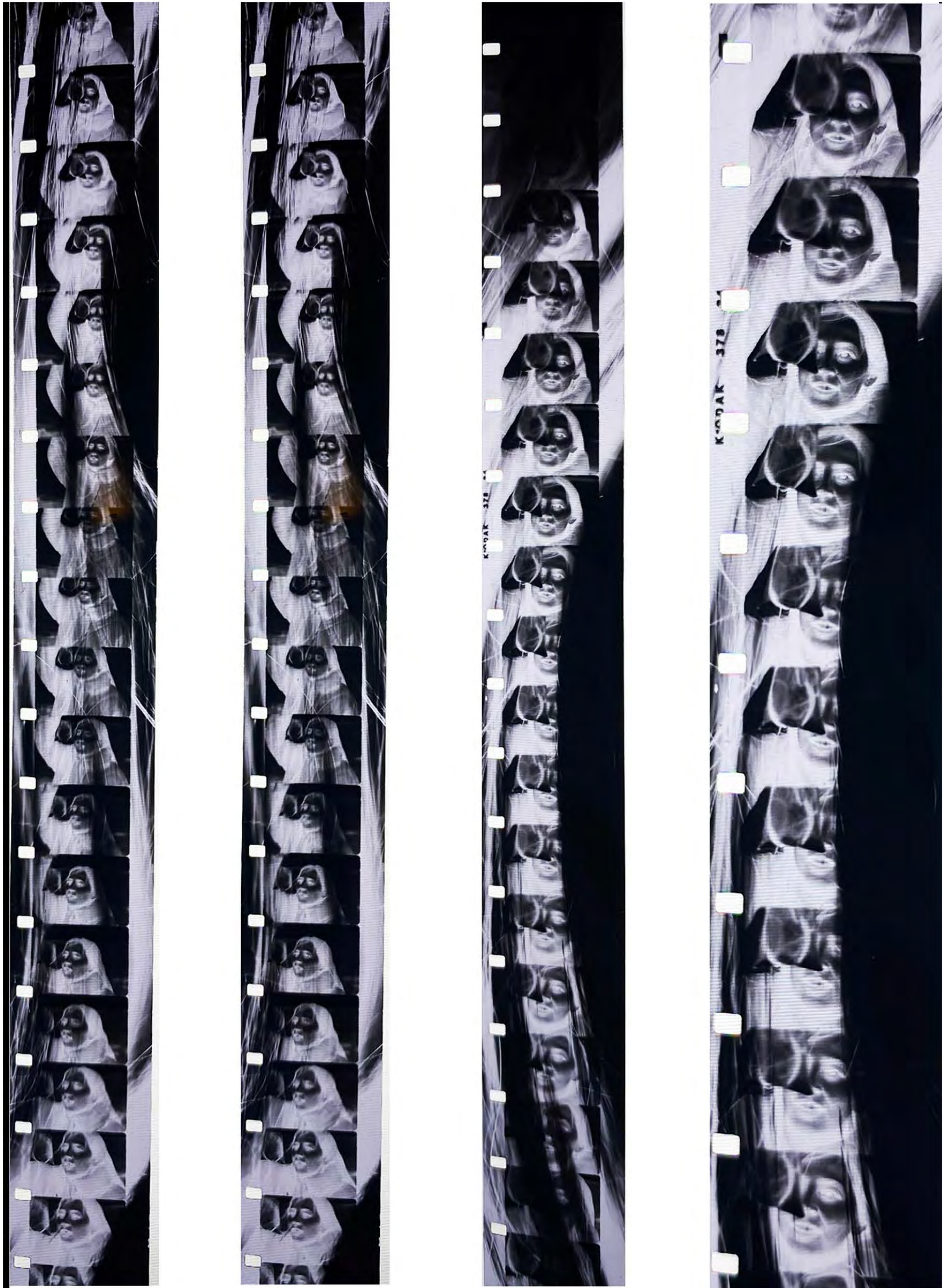
For the film, I also experimented with my hair that I have saved for the last 4 years. First, I created photograms. I exposed my hair on the emulsion 16mm film, I started finding new meanings that started to communicate deeply to the film and the hair as a material object. It was a language of meaning that I cannot explain myself and that the experimentation was allowing me to feel and create.

In the book *Experimental Filmmaking: Break the Machine*, Kathryn Ramey talks about experimenting with celluloid. It is an inspiring book about the importance of challenging the analog medium for creating footage through experimentation including drawing, painting, burning, performing with the film, etc. In this part of the text, Kathryn Ramey explains the importance of experimenting and this description is similar to my feelings while creating photograms out of my hair. She describes that “in fact, before movies, there were painted magic lantern slides, kinoscopes and other optical toys. Animation precedes photography in the history of cinema. Photography and realism became dominant because that was the spectacle that the public most desired. But before realism there was fantasy and it is from this fantasy, this abstraction, that direct animation or the application of paint, pens and a host of other devices to the surface of the film, is drawn. Both subtractive (destroy) and additive techniques (create) are all considered direct animation because they occur at the surface of the celluloid”(Ramey 2016, 33).

Later, I also developed the idea of exposing my hair on the emulsion. I decided to expose the hair over a film that I had shot before so after developing, images were visible through the exposed hair.



Photograms with my hair, 16mm Print Film. 2021



Photograms with my hair and exposed material, 16mm Print Film. 2021

The sound design of the film *Returning to the Island* was made by Theo af Enehielm, we planned to create an atmosphere where water and beach were the leading sounds in the film. Theo proposed using “washed” sounds for the experimentation parts with the photograms. I liked it a lot and found a strong connection. This part also became more dramatical by using higher sound levels and different tones and speeds.

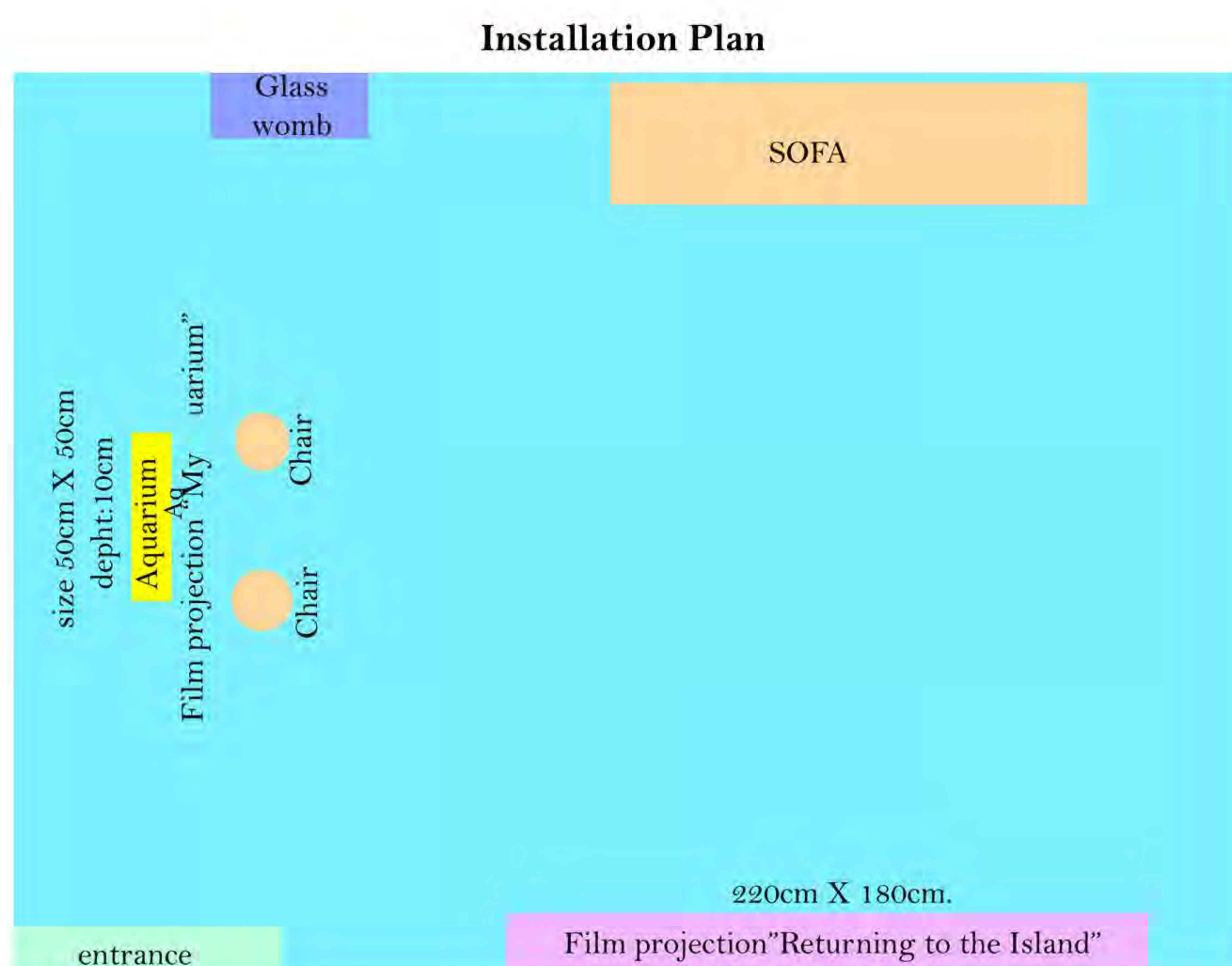


Photograms with my hair and exposed material, 16mm Print Film. 2021

CHAPTER VI: INSTALLATION, CREATING THE TURQUOISE BLUE ROOM FROM COLOMBIA TO FINLAND

The exhibition *Returning to the Island* happened in December 2021. At the time my parents were traveling from Colombia to visit me and see for the first time my artworks exhibited in Helsinki. It was a crucial moment for me since they are significant characters in many of my works.

The exhibition was showcased in the same room as I had exhibited my final work at Kuvan Kevät in May 2021. It was a big challenge for me to rethink the space since I wanted to show two films and install different aquariums. I decided to transform the room, while I was editing the film *My Aquarium* I realized that my house in Bogotá where the fish aquarium was placed could have a connection with the room at the installation space in Helsinki. There was a very strong blue colour on the walls in the house. This was a very distinct characteristic to the house. The aquarium was situated there, the space had a powerful connection to the sea and it was turquoise blue.



Room space: 7m X 10m

Even though my exhibition was in the same space as the Kuvan Kevät exhibition I wanted to challenge the atmosphere of the room, the topics were still related to family, distance, and wombs but still, it was another chapter of my work. The room was completely black, from the ceilings to the floors, I wanted to transform it into the blue turquoise as my home in Colombia. A friend helped me to paint it. It took around 12 hours, we painted first in a white tone and then in a blue turquoise.

I wanted the audience to feel inside of an aquarium, inside of *My Aquarium*. The floor of the room was the same tone as the colour of the sand of the fish aquarium and the chairs were orange as some of the goldfish from the aquarium. The audience were the fish from the aquarium, and the walls were keeping them inside the water atmosphere.



Photo documentation "Returning to the Island" Installation process. Paola Fernanda Guzmán, 2021

The film *My Aquarium* was projected on the aquarium that has been part of other works I have exhibited before. It worked as an aquarium and as a canvas for screening the film. Two chairs were placed in front of it and people could view the film and hear the interview with my parents. I wanted to make it intimate, while you could see the fish swimming you could hear my parents talking about the trip we did to "Isla Margarita" in Venezuela, it was like if they would have become one of the fishes that were inside the aquarium. It was a very intimate way of displaying and watching a film, the audience needed to get closer to hear their voices.

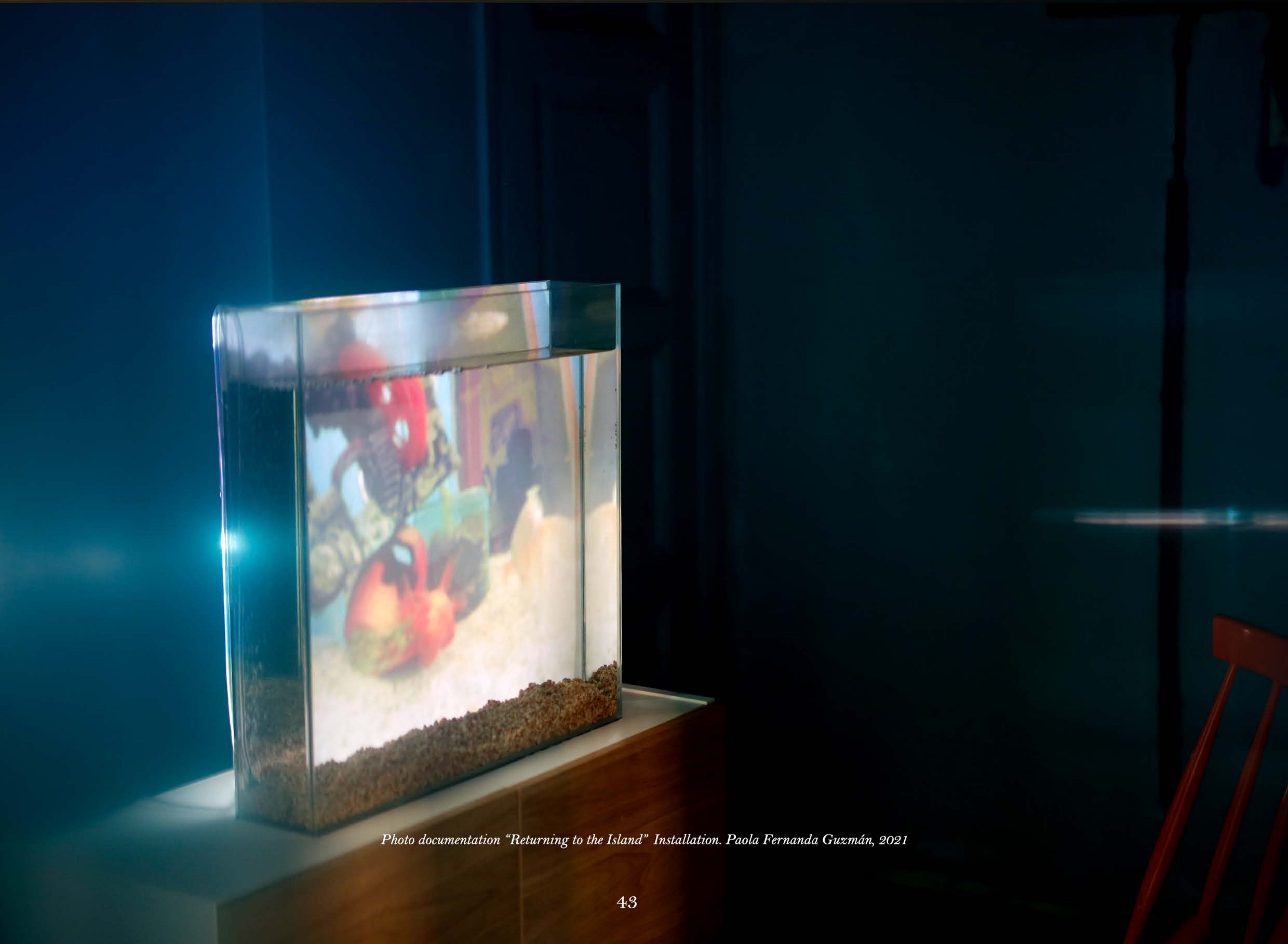


Photo documentation "Returning to the Island" Installation. Paola Fernanda Guzmán, 2021

For the second film, I decided to project on the blue wall. It made the film blend into the space, the colours where still visible and the black and white changed softly to a more cyan tone. The audience could sit on an orange sofa to view it. In the film, I was the main character. Me wandering around Helsinki looking through a plastic bag full of water and finally finding my past.



Photo documentation "Returning to the Island" Installation. Paola Fernanda Guzmán, 2021

I also built three glass wombs and wanted to place them around the space but did not want that they would obtain much attention. They were three as my siblings and me. There was one that was rotating constantly, it was the big glass womb. This was the womb that was representing me, as I say in the end of my film *Paola: Mommy say something to the camera, mom!* It was a visible shape of the feeling I had for being close to my mother. It was rotating, like a satellite, in a very similar way to my first exhibition in May. There was sand around the wombs, also small hair was coming out.



Photo documentation "Returning to the Island" Installation. Paola Fernanda Guzmán, 2021

CHAPTER VII: FAMILY VISITS RETURNING TO THE ISLAND EXHIBITION AND MY PARENTS DEINSTALL THE EXHIBITION WITH ME

On 31st of December 2021, my parents, sister and her family came to visit *Returning to the Island*. We were together, when we were getting closer to the exhibition my mother said to me “I can hear my voice, and your dads voice too”. They knew I had work about and with me but did not know what to expect. The whole exhibition took them by surprise, it was an important moment for them and for me. I worked so much building the exhibition, and seeing them there was like a dream, they could see and sit in front of something I had done with their conversations, and stories, it was about us as a family.



Photos with my family “Returning to the Island” Installation. Heikki Laakkonen, 2021

My dad was very surprised when he was seeing the shots in the sea together. He mentioned that he could not remember me with a camera in that moment. We were both very happy with the natural quality in that shot. My parents know that I film them and work with my cameras and sound in Colombia but this was the first time they could see my work and what I do, it was very interesting to hear their questions about cameras and techniques and to hear questions they had not asked me before. Questions like “how was the process of developing the film or even the experiments with the hair” were some of them.

Towards the end of the exhibition my parents were with me and they expressed their wanting to help me and support me in the dismantling of the whole exhibition. I needed to reverse the colours and turn the blue box into a complete black box. We started painting the room with my mom and we finished placing the black carpet with my dad. It was something that I will never forget, being separated from them has been difficult for me. I miss them a lot, they have always supported me so much, to have them in Helsinki helping me with an exhibition was the most beautiful act that could happen. Also, it was very symbolic and meaningful for me that I could transform the room into a black box with them, it was like leaving a black canvas where I could film and exposed light and images again. They were leaving me with open hands to continue creating, a black box and the beginning of a film.



Photo documentation, painting the room back to black with my mom. José Mauricio Guzmán, 2022

CHAPTER VIII: ARTISTS THAT HAVE INSPIRED MY ARTISTIC WORK AND RESEARCH

Jean Painlevé and Geneviève Hamon (1924-1972 active) are two filmmakers that has truly inspired my practice in analogue filmmaking and the underwater world. The majority of their films are shot underwater. Their films were very inspired by the surrealistic wave and the uncanny and unpredicted were in their focus. In their films, the sea beings become more than what we can see. Their interest in strange animal worlds reinvented meanings of the human beings, similar to the shapes from of my swimming hair. The Octopus(1928) and The Vampire(1945) are films that have indeed inspired my work.

Moreover, Maya Deren (1917-1991 active) is an important reference for me since she was one of the pioneers for experimental cinema, and she was herself part of her films. For her, the function of film was to create an experience. In many of her films, she combined her knowledge from dance and performance. Her topics are connected to existence. Her films are also inside of the surrealism awakening and the unconscious mind. I consider her films very close to a ritualistic experience about human existence. Her expressions and characters provoke the subconscious in a similar way as the presence of my hair takes me to indescribable places.

The project “Mechanics of conformity” is a current investigation in Finland with a focus on hair as material for research by the artists Rosamaria Bolom, Edwina Goldstone, Sepideh Rahaa and Arlene Tucker. They describe how “Our collective project investigates the excess, absence, cutting, covering, growing, coloring and grooming of hair as both the materialization of individuality and of conformity. As an artistic medium and mediator of meaning, hair can communicate a sense of self and otherness. In this sense, it can either uphold or upset conventional distinctions between divisions of gender, race, region and religion. (OBJEKTI 4 exhibition webpage 2018).

From these issues, hair epitomizes a global yet subjective social and personal significance” (Mechanics of Conformity (MOC), Part II with Bolom, Goldstone, Rahaa and Tucker 2018). This collective has produced four different pieces, one of them is made by Sepideh Rahaa and it is called “Entangled – ME & HAIR” (is an ongoing project where Rahaa is addressing her personal identity and relation to hair, where hair plays a significant role in her daily life interacting with others in the society, how we connect and disconnect based on our appearance. Artist has used series of life memories and experiences conveying the core concept through performing art, poetry and video” (OBJEKTI 4 exhibition webpage 2018).

In addition, Sepideh’s work and research is connected from the material and physical perspective of hair, taking topics more broadly concerning identity and societal relations. It is an interesting project because her topic is connected to hair as my work. Her work provided me with more specific grounds related to the materiality and meanings.

CONCLUSION

I had the opportunity to guard both of my exhibitions. Spending time in the exhibition space and observing the visitors was an exquisite experience. Indeed, I found it very meaningful for my work to hear comments and experience reactions from some of the visitors who opened themselves in surprising ways. We talked about topics like family and the relationship with their own parents and relatives. One classmate had a very impactful reaction. After she saw my piece, she came to me and hugged me and started crying. She expressed to me how meaningful it was to watch this film. Rather than expressing her feelings and thoughts with words, her physical reactions (crying and hugging) revealed very well the way in which the film, *Paola: mommy say something to the camera, mom!* had impacted on her.

Many people also mentioned the importance of bringing the topics about family and family dynamics in Finland because these are topics hardly explored and discussed by the arts in this country. After reflecting on this fact, I realized this aspect may have had an impact on my desire to focus even more on this topic. When compared to my country Colombia, family dynamics and the relationship between children and parents are different in Finland. In this country, children leave home when they turn 18, and communication between parents and children is not as strong as in the Colombian context.

Certainly, family dynamics are different everywhere and it is hard to generalize. Nevertheless, Finnish people seem to be more independent and communicate seldomly with parents once they have left home. Several people who approached me to give feedback on my project shared stories and personal experiences related to these facts, so I felt privileged and grateful to have the opportunity to hear these personal stories and reflections from the audience. In the end, I came to realize family is as important everywhere, regardless of culture and country. It is not a surprise that people felt identified with my work since everyone has his/her/their own connections and memories with family.

In addition, two of my films, *Paola: Mommy say something to the camera, mom!* and *Time Travel*, will be part of an exhibition called “Experimental Film and Video 2022” at Czung Institute for Contemporary Art (CICA) Museum, in South Korea. The exhibition will be held from June 22nd to July 24th, 2022.

I am also continuing investigating and developing my artistic research on topics related to societal relations connected to family by using fish aquariums. I am planning to start an exploration using analogue film as a medium to document aquariums from amusement parks, I plan to document their structure and make interviews with the aquarists. I will use my family's video material from our first trip to the Colombian Atlantic sea in 2001. I will research and explore deeply the photogram method in which I will continue my explorations by exposing my hair on a 16 mm print film celluloid using different light elements and different developing methods in the darkroom.



Shot from upcoming Film, “Behind the scenes-aquariums”, Paola Fernanda Guzmán. 2022

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